

Five Steps to Mindfulness

“Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in.” Mindfulness can transform your life. Meditation master Thich Nhat Hanh teaches five exercises to help you live with joy.

By Thich Nhat Hanh | August 23, 2010

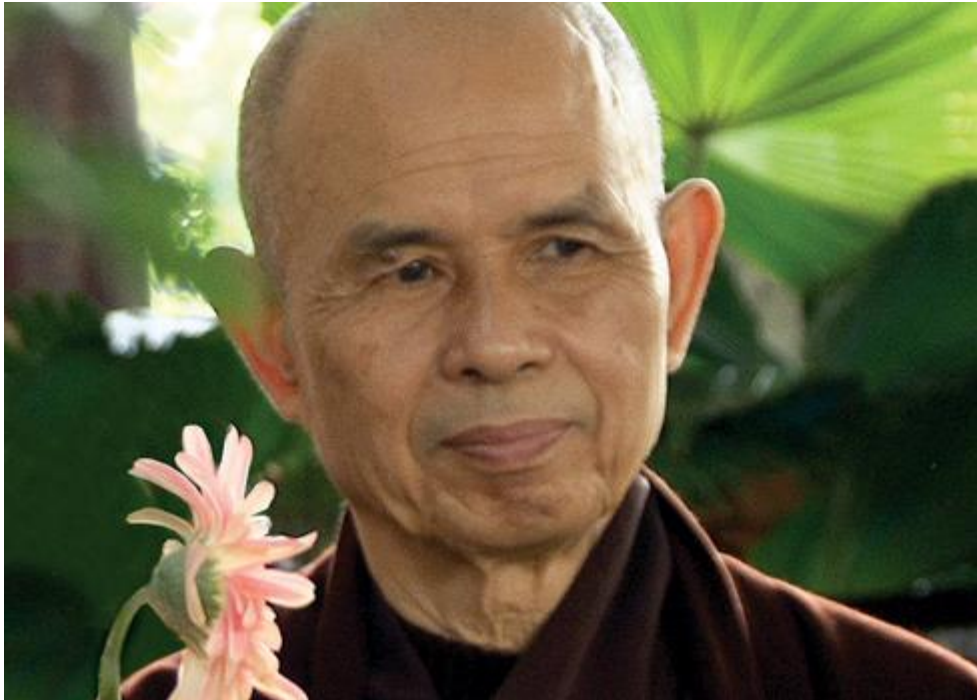


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Our true home is not in the past. Our true home is not in the future. Our true home is in the here and the now. Life is available only in the here and the now, and it is our true home.

Mindfulness is the energy that helps us recognize the conditions of happiness that are already present in our lives. You don't have to wait ten years to experience this happiness. It is present in every moment of your daily life. There are those of us who are alive but don't know it. But when you breathe in, and you are aware of your in-breath, you touch the miracle of being alive. That is why mindfulness is a source of happiness and joy.

Most people are forgetful; they are not really there a lot of the time. Their mind is caught in their worries, their fears, their anger, and their regrets, and they are not mindful of being there. That state of being is called forgetfulness—you are there but you are not there. You are caught in the past or in the future. You are not there in the present moment, living your life deeply. That is forgetfulness.

The opposite of forgetfulness is mindfulness. Mindfulness is when you are truly there, mind and body together. You breathe in and out mindfully, you bring your mind back to your body, and

you are there. When your mind is there with your body, you are established in the present moment. Then you can recognize the many conditions of happiness that are in you and around you, and happiness just comes naturally.

Mindfulness practice should be enjoyable, not work or effort. Do you have to make an effort to breathe in? You don't need to make an effort. To breathe in, you just breathe in. Suppose you are with a group of people contemplating a beautiful sunset. Do you have to make an effort to enjoy the beautiful sunset? No, you don't have to make any effort. You just enjoy it.

The same thing is true with your breath. Allow your breath to take place. Become aware of it and enjoy it. Effortlessness. Enjoyment. The same thing is true with walking mindfully. Every step you take is enjoyable. Every step helps you to touch the wonders of life, in yourself and around you. Every step is peace. Every step is joy. That is possible.

During the time you are practicing mindfulness, you stop talking—not only the talking outside, but the talking inside. The talking inside is the thinking, the mental discourse that goes on and on and on inside. Real silence is the cessation of talking—of both the mouth and of the mind. This is not the kind of silence that oppresses us. It is a very elegant kind of silence, a very powerful kind of silence. It is the silence that heals and nourishes us.

Mindfulness gives birth to joy and happiness. Another source of happiness is concentration. The energy of mindfulness carries within it the energy of concentration. When you are aware of something, such as a flower, and can maintain that awareness, we say that you are concentrated on the flower. When your mindfulness becomes powerful, your concentration becomes powerful, and when you are fully concentrated, you have a chance to make a breakthrough, to achieve insight. If you meditate on a cloud, you can get insight into the nature of the cloud. Or you can meditate on a pebble, and if you have enough mindfulness and concentration, you can see into the nature of the pebble. You can meditate on a person, and if you have enough mindfulness and concentration, you can make a breakthrough and understand the nature of that person. You can meditate on yourself, or your anger, or your fear, or your joy, or your peace.

Anything can be the object of your meditation, and with the powerful energy of concentration, you can make a breakthrough and develop insight. It's like a magnifying glass concentrating the light of the sun. If you put the point of concentrated light on a piece of paper, it will burn. Similarly, when your mindfulness and concentration are powerful, your insight will liberate you from fear, anger, and despair, and bring you true joy, true peace, and true happiness.

When you contemplate the big, full sunrise, the more mindful and concentrated you are, the more the beauty of the sunrise is revealed to you. Suppose you are offered a cup of tea, very fragrant, very good tea. If your mind is distracted, you cannot really enjoy the tea. You have to be mindful of the tea, you have to be concentrated on it, so the tea can reveal its fragrance and wonder to you. That is why mindfulness and concentration are such sources of happiness. That's why a good practitioner knows how to create a moment of joy, a feeling of happiness, at any time of the day.

First Mindfulness Exercise: Mindful Breathing

The first exercise is very simple, but the power, the result, can be very great. The exercise is simply to identify the in-breath as in-breath and the out-breath as out-breath. When you breathe in, you know that this is your in-breath. When you breathe out, you are mindful that this is your out-breath.

Just recognize: this is an in-breath, this is an out-breath. Very simple, very easy. In order to recognize your in-breath as in-breath, you have to bring your mind home to yourself. What is recognizing your in-breath is your mind, and the object of your mind—the object of your mindfulness—is the in-breath. Mindfulness is always mindful of something. When you drink your tea mindfully, it's called mindfulness of drinking. When you walk mindfully, it's called mindfulness of walking. And when you breathe mindfully, that is mindfulness of breathing.

So the object of your mindfulness is your breath, and you just focus your attention on it. Breathing in, this is my in-breath. Breathing out, this is my out-breath. When you do that, the mental discourse will stop. You don't think anymore. You don't have to make an effort to stop your thinking; you bring your attention to your in-breath and the mental discourse just stops. That is the miracle of the practice. You don't think of the past anymore. You don't think of the future. You don't think of your projects, because you are focusing your attention, your mindfulness, on your breath.

It gets even better. You can enjoy your in-breath. The practice can be pleasant, joyful. Someone who is dead cannot take any more in-breaths. But you are alive. You are breathing in, and while breathing in, you know that you are alive. The in-breath can be a celebration of the fact that you are alive, so it can be very joyful. When you are joyful and happy, you don't feel that you have to make any effort at all. I am alive; I am breathing in. To be still alive is a miracle. The greatest of all miracles is to be alive, and when you breathe in, you touch that miracle. Therefore, your breathing can be a celebration of life.

An in-breath may take three, four, five seconds, it depends. That's time to be alive, time to enjoy your breath. You don't have to interfere with your breathing. If your in-breath is short, allow it to be short. If your out-breath is long, let it be long. Don't try to force it. The practice is simple recognition of the in-breath and the out-breath. That is good enough. It will have a powerful effect.

Second Mindfulness Exercise: Concentration

The second exercise is that while you breathe in, you follow your in-breath from the beginning to the end. If your in-breath lasts three or four seconds, then your mindfulness also lasts three or four seconds. Breathing in, I follow my in-breath all the way through. Breathing out, I follow my out-breath all the way through. From the beginning of my out-breath to the end of my out-breath, my mind is *always* with it. Therefore, mindfulness becomes uninterrupted, and the quality of your concentration is improved.

So the second exercise is to follow your in-breath and your out-breath all the way through. Whether they are short or long, it doesn't matter. What is important is that you follow your in-breath from the beginning to the end. Your awareness is sustained. There is no interruption. Suppose you are breathing in, and then you think, "Oh, I forgot to turn off the light in my room." There is an interruption. Just stick to your in-breath all the way through. Then you cultivate your mindfulness and your concentration. You become your in-breath. You become your out-breath. If you continue like that, your breathing will naturally become deeper and slower, more harmonious and peaceful. You don't have to make any effort—it happens naturally.

Third Mindfulness Exercise: Awareness of Your Body

The third exercise is to become aware of your body as you are breathing. "Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body." This takes it one step further.

In the first exercise, you became aware of your in-breath and your out-breath. Because you have now generated the energy of mindfulness through mindful breathing, you can use that energy to recognize your body.

"Breathing in, I am aware of my body. Breathing out, I am aware of my body." I know my body is *there*. This brings the mind wholly back to the body. Mind and body become one reality. When your mind is with your body, you are well-established in the here and the now. You are fully alive. You can be in touch with the wonders of life that are available in yourself and around you.

This exercise is simple, but the effect of the oneness of body and mind is very great. In our daily lives, we are seldom in that situation. Our body is there but our mind is elsewhere. Our mind may be caught in the past or in the future, in regrets, sorrow, fear, or uncertainty, and so our mind is not there. Someone may be present in the house, but he's not really there, his mind is not there. His mind is with the future, with his projects, and he's not there for his children or his spouse. Maybe you could say to him, "Anybody home?" and help him bring his mind back to his body.

So the third exercise is to become aware of your body. "Breathing in, I'm aware of my body." When you practice mindful breathing, the quality of your in-breath and out-breath will be improved. There is more peace and harmony in your breathing, and if you continue to practice like that, the peace and the harmony will penetrate into the body, and the body will profit.

Fourth Mindfulness Exercise: Releasing Tension

The next exercise is to release the tension in the body. When you are truly aware of your body, you notice there is some tension and pain in your body, some stress. The tension and pain have been accumulating for a long time and our bodies suffer, but our mind is not there to help release it. Therefore, it is very important to learn how to release the tension in the body.

In a sitting, lying, or standing position, it's always possible to release the tension. You can practice total relaxation, deep relaxation, in a sitting or lying position. While you are driving your car, you might notice the tension in your body. You are eager to arrive and you don't enjoy the time you spend driving. When you come to a red light, you are eager for the red light to become

a green light so that you can continue. But the red light can be a signal. It can be a reminder that there is tension in you, the stress of wanting to arrive as quickly as possible. If you recognize that, you can make use of the red light. You can sit back and relax—take the ten seconds the light is red to practice mindful breathing and release the tension in the body.

So next time you're stopped at a red light, you might like to sit back and practice the fourth exercise: "Breathing in, I'm aware of my body. Breathing out, I release the tension in my body." Peace is possible at that moment, and it can be practiced many times a day—in the workplace, while you are driving, while you are cooking, while you are doing the dishes, while you are watering the vegetable garden. It is always possible to practice releasing the tension in yourself.

Walking Meditation

When you practice mindful breathing you simply allow your in-breath to take place. You become aware of it and enjoy it. Effortlessness. The same thing is true with mindful walking. Every step is enjoyable. Every step helps you touch the wonders of life. Every step is joy. That is possible.

You don't have to make any effort during walking meditation, because it is enjoyable. You are there, body and mind together. You are fully alive, fully present in the here and the now. With every step, you touch the wonders of life that are in you and around you. When you walk like that, every step brings healing. Every step brings peace and joy, because every step is a miracle.

The real miracle is not to fly or walk on fire. The real miracle is to walk on the Earth, and you can perform that miracle at any time. Just bring your mind home to your body, become alive, and perform the miracle of walking on Earth.