

# **The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching Study Guide**

**The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching by Nhat Hanh**

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## Plot Summary

Thich Nhat Hanh gives us a simply written, beautiful guidebook to Buddhism in *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*. With each set of practices, we are assisted in understanding the concepts of mindfulness, as well as the seeds that manifest as good and bad feelings and events. A thorough explanation of how our mental formations and perceptions can deceive us and prevent us from feeling the ever-present and available feelings of joy and happiness is provided in this book, along with anecdotes and stories. Thich Nhat Hanh was born and raised in Viet Nam during war time and has experienced suffering like all people. However, he has learned to transform suffering into joy with simple mindfulness and the knowledge of the sources of unhappiness. He does not encourage people to become Buddhists, or to adopt a new set of religious dogmas, but instead, suggests that we stay within our own faith and simply practice with the tools that were given to us by the Buddha. He does not want to sell a religion, but instead seeks to help people, individually and collectively, learn how to find peace. Peace and joy can only come through mindfulness, and a journey through the layers of mindfulness are present in this book. The fact that joy is always available in the present moment is something that Hanh emphasizes. His preferred practice of walking meditation, breathing and practice are vehicles through which we can recognize and attain the state of paradise that otherwise seems elusive.

Hanh's simple, though not simplistic, style of writing makes it more palatable to incorporate unfamiliar terminology into our reading. Without inundating the reader with ancient and obscure Sanskrit terms, he includes them for our information, and goes on to explain them in plain English. Hanh is a master of gentle, patient prose and his writing encourages us to have faith, hope and consciousness of our selves in order to have a better life and perpetuate a better life on earth. The complexities of Buddhism are attainable and understandable within Hanh's prose, and he sheds light on the true practices of Buddhism without insisting on dogma. Reading this book makes one wish to be part of Hanh's Sangha, or practice group. He is a pure, pleasant, smiling and upbeat presence in a world of manufactured negativity and suffering. He makes it seem possible for all of us to be like him, with the proper actions and practice.



# Chapter One through Chapter Four

## Chapter One through Chapter Four Summary and Analysis

Hanh explains that Buddha was a man who suffered, and that we can enter his heart now only because we suffer. However, Buddha taught the transformation of suffering, and the use of suffering to liberate ourselves. He stresses that although we live in a ocean of suffering, it is important to be happy about the positive things that also exist simultaneously. He notes that he grew up with great suffering during a time of war, but suffering must be embraced and used for growth. He suggests going to the Buddha and showing him your pain, embracing suffering and letting it reveal the way to healing.

Siddhartha Gutama sat under a bodhi tree and vowed not to get up until he understood how to alleviate suffering. He was enlightened with the knowledge that we are all one being and interconnected. He taught the Four Noble Truths of the existence of suffering, the possibility of restoring well-being, and the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to well-being. He claimed to have gone to the end of the path of suffering and gained freedom. This put into motion the wheel of Dharma, which teaches the Middle Way. Austerity is not the only correct practice, and extremes in anything should be avoided. He then taught the four Noble Truths, which are relevant today. He also taught to engage in the world rather than try to escape it. The Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma has to do with recognizing suffering and transforming it into "mindfulness, compassion, peace and liberation."

After experiencing perfect awakening, the Buddha had to find ways to express it in words. The four "wonderful," or "holy" truths involve suffering. The first is that suffering is bitter and we need to acknowledge its presence. The second is the origin of suffering, or finding out what we ingested physically or spiritually that caused it. The third truth is the cessation of creating the suffering by changing what we are doing, that healing is possible. The Fourth Noble Truth is the path that leads us away from suffering, called the Noble Eightfold Path. The eight right practices are having the right view, thinking, speech, action, livelihood, diligence, mindfulness and concentration.

It is vital to keep our bodies, hearts and minds open to truth rather than comparing the teachings to what we already believe. Buddha's teachings are transmitted through Source, Many Schools, and Mahayana Buddhism. The teachings were divided in several ways over time and for four hundred years were transmitted orally until they were written by an arrogant monk who had memorized them all. Many people misunderstood or misinterpreted the teachings, and Hahn gives an example of a misinterpreted passage. To find the truths within all the translations and branches of Buddhism is a complex process of comparison. In 1 or 2 B.C., a bodhisattva was put forth by the Mahayana, and Buddhism continues to be revised and refined. The Buddha said, "My teaching is like a finger pointing to the moon. Do not mistake the finger for the moon." It is said that if you try to explain every word of the sutras, you slander Buddha

in past, present and future, but if you miss one word, you risk speaking the words of "Mara," or the temptress. The teachings are meant to awaken our true self and "not merely add to our storehouse of knowledge." Buddha did not want to contribute to theory with words or notions. As with an archeological find, we must try to repair the damage to the teachings.



# Chapters Five and Six

## Chapters Five and Six Summary and Analysis

We must not turn the words of Buddha into doctrine or ideology, like some who have tried to prove suffering on earth. We suffer from suffering; we suffer when composite things fall apart, and we suffer from change. Many have embraced suffering for two thousand years as the primary principle of Buddhism, but Buddha taught us to recognize joy and suffering. To place suffering at the same level as impermanence and non-self is an error, since suffering is not a mark of all things in the same way. It is our attachment to things that are impermanent that causes suffering; the thing itself is not suffering. Buddha taught of nirvana, where our ideas and concepts are extinguished; Hahn hopes scholars and practitioners will "not make too great an effort to prove that everything is suffering."

Another misunderstanding is that our suffering is caused by craving, since "other afflictions, such as anger, ignorance, suspicion, arrogance and wrong views can also cause pain and suffering," ignorance perhaps being "responsible for much of our pain." Hahn explains that sometimes the first thing on the sutra's "list" was the one that became the focus of the sutra; we need to stop trying to prove anything in our practice.

Looking deeply in meditation is important, but stopping to do so is fundamental. Like being on a horse and not knowing where it is going, we are powerlessly affected by habitual running, at "war within ourselves" and easily starting war with others. Mindful breathing, walking, smiling and looking can stop the constant state of agitation we are in. Our habit energies bring about damage. Hahn suggests smiling to our habit energies, acknowledging them and with mindfulness, not allowing them to dominate. Forgetfulness is the opposite of mindfulness.

Calming is learned by breathing in and out and stopping our activities, becoming solid like a tree. We can learn calming by recognition, acceptance, embracing, looking deeply and insight. We need to allow ourselves to rest like an animal in the forest as a precondition to healing. Worrying is not restful or healing. Even spiritual practice should be restful to allow healing of body and mind. If we cannot stop and do these things the course of our destruction, individually and globally, will continue.



# Chapter Seven

## Chapter Seven Summary and Analysis

We must practice the twelve turnings of the wheel of Dharma to understand the Four Noble Truths. The first turning is Recognition that something is wrong; we try to escape and deny rather than recognizing suffering and determining its basis. We need to treat our suffering with love and kindness, and "recognize, acknowledge and identify it." The second turning is Encouragement—or looking deep into the suffering to understand it like a doctor who runs tests to make a diagnosis. The third turning is realization, or understanding and identifying the suffering, and naming all its characteristics.

Buddha said we feed our happiness or suffering with four nutriments: edible food, sense impressions, intention and consciousness. Not eating mindfully causes suffering, as well as smoking, drinking and toxins, which also affects our children. If we destroy living beings or the environment with what we eat, we are eating the flesh of our children. We absorb toxins through our sense impressions, especially through exposure to the media. Being mindful will help us know what we are "ingesting," and what poisons to avoid. The Buddha advises us to post a sentinel at the door of each of our senses. We must also keep our intentions and volitions positive, and whatever we think will make us happy can often be obstacles to happiness. We need to "cultivate the wish to be free of these things so we can enjoy the wonders of life that are always available—the blue sky, the trees, our beautiful children." Three to six months of mindfulness and enjoying the present moment brings real happiness. Hahn relates the story of a farmer who is distraught over losing his cows, and Buddha tells the monks they are fortunate because they do not own cows. He suggests we release our cows to be truly happy and look strongly into our volitions to see if they are the cause of our unhappiness, being mindful of the "intention-food" we are consuming.

The fourth nutriment, consciousness, is composed of "all the seeds sown by our past actions and the past actions of our family and society." We can nourish it with love, compassion, joy and equanimity, because what it consumes becomes the substance of our lives. An image of a man being stabbed three hundred times by sharp knives is analogous to how we deal with our consciousness.

Looking deeply into our suffering and writing down what nutriments we are feeding to sustain takes courage and mindfulness on the part of us, our friends and teachers. Seeing the cause of our suffering eases it, and we can be encouraged that real happiness is possible by changing the nutriments, or habits. Mindfulness can make us stop our destructive ingestions and protect ourselves, and seeing the nature of suffering can show us the way out of it. Mindful walking, breathing, sitting, eating, looking and listening help us face suffering and heal ourselves. Only at sixty years old could Buddha do what he wanted "without going against the path," or practice the "action of non-action," stage of realization that must take place from within. He tells of Nhat Dinh, who



chose to live simply in peace and joy, doing what he pleased regardless of precepts. Hahn warns us to be careful because there must first be genuine insight.

# Chapter Eight

## Chapter Eight Summary and Analysis

Hanh feels we need to be mindful of our well-being and happiness, and understand what it is that nourishes our joy. When we appreciate our senses, our ability to smile, we can find conditions for happiness that are already available. In the first stage of the Third Noble Truth, we are not aware of freedom and happiness. Recognition of peace and joy, that well-being is possible, is the first turning. The second turning, to encourage ourselves to find peace and joy, involves recognizing the miracles of being alive. "We can put an end to our suffering just by realizing that our suffering is not worth suffering for," by facing the difficulties, and developing new happiness. Embrace and smile to suffering; since suffering and joy are both impermanent, transform garbage into flowers like an organic gardener. The third turning is the realization that suffering and joy are not two different things, and this stage brings true joy. The Fourth Noble Truth is recognizing that the Eightfold Path of Right View, Thinking, Speech, Action, Livelihood, Diligence, Mindfulness and Concentration can lead us out of suffering. In the second turning we encourage ourselves to learn, reflect and practice. Transforming by changing our behavior and practicing can bring suffering to an end and increase freedom.

The third turning of the Fourth Noble Truth is the recognition that we are practicing to transform our difficulties and ceasing to ingest pain-causing nutriment. All practice, including a meditation koan, should be focused on transforming suffering, to clearly see it, how it manifests, its contents and roots. Suffering, its recognition, making, and the path out of it are all intertwined, as are the Four Noble Truths, since looking into one allows us to see the others.

Being afraid to touch our suffering keeps us from realizing the path to "peace, joy and liberation." "The Buddha said, 'The moment you know how your suffering came to be, you are already on the path of release from it.'" Hanh suggests reframing the fourth Noble Truths, replacing "cessation" with well-being, as 1) Well-Being, 2) Noble Eightfold Path that Leads to Well-Being, 3) Suffering and 4) Ignoble Eightfold Path that Leads to Suffering. Thus, living the ignoble Eightfold Path will create suffering, while the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path in daily life will transform it.



# Part Two Chapter Nine

## Part Two Chapter Nine Summary and Analysis

Buddha taught the Eightfold Path up until his death. Hanh asks his readers to use our intelligence to apply this path in our daily lives.

The first practice, the Right View, is a deep understanding of the four Noble Truths of suffering, the making of it, the fact that it can be transformed, and its transformation. Shriputra says it is also knowing the four kinds of nutriments we have ingested.

In our consciousness we have wholesome or unwholesome seeds, or roots that we can identify with mindfulness, and water them accordingly. Hanh uses an example of feelings toward our parents, and provides examples of wholesome and unwholesome seeds, such as craving, anger and violence. Right view requires "selective touching" of these seeds. The practice of the Five Mindfulness Trainings addresses the "goods" we ingest.

Our views are perception at the top and mind, or spirit at the bottom. The perceptions always have a mark, sometimes illusory. Buddha said, "Where there is perception there is deception," and that most of our perceptions are erroneous. Hanh explains that when we perceive something, it is us, that the idea that our consciousness is outside the thing perceived must be removed because you cannot have perception without the thing being perceived.

Our perceptions are affected by everything subjective in our lives, positive and negative. We need to know the source of our perceptions and see them deeply to become free of them and be able to see things as they are. Right View is a living insight, touching reality, that fills us with peace and love. We cannot teach this to our children, but can encourage Right View. It cannot be taught, but is already in us; mindful living is the water for wholesome seeds. When we are caught in our perceptions we lose the true reality, and as long as there is "no idea," there is no wrong conception. Rightness and wrongness are subjective and, actually, all views are wrong; no point of view is the absolute truth. "Right view is the absence of all views."

Hanh notes that Image Teaching is through stories or ideas, while Substance Teaching is taught through the way we live. Buddhism is a practice to help eliminate wrong view. Practicing Right Mindfulness allows us to see the Buddhahood in everyone and ourselves. This, the Mother of All Buddhas, is the "energy of love and understanding that has the power to free us," and the eight practices of the Noble Eightfold Path each nourish the other.



# Chapter Ten

## Chapter Ten Summary and Analysis

Right thinking leads to right view, which is at the foundation of thinking. Right thinking, the speech of our mind, makes our speech clear and leads to the path of Right Action.

Conscious breathing is an important link between mind and body. Mindful breathing helps us find peace and solidity and helps us "stop being preoccupied by sorrows" and anxieties, helping us be in the present and notice whether our thinking is useful.

Vitarka and vichara are the initial thought and development of it, respectively. By the second stage of meditation, neither are present. Hanh suggests write the words, "Are you sure?" where they can be seen, and "What am I doing?" to remind us to release thinking and be in the present moment. He uses the example of being present and mindful while washing dishes, which gives the work merit. Another reminder, "Hello, habit energy," reminds us to find moments to contemplate and be mindful, and acknowledge our habitual thinking and acting. "Bodhichitta" is our mind of love that motivates mindful living. Right thinking leads to Right Diligence.

Buddha suggests we replace unwholesome thoughts by living in a wholesome environment with those who practice mindful living. Non-thinking allows us to enter reality fully. Right Thinking and Right View, living deeply in the present, is where we can touch the seeds of joy and peace and transform our suffering.



# Chapter Eleven

## Chapter Eleven Summary and Analysis

"Right Mindfulness is at the heart of Buddha's teachings." This is what brings us back to the present moment. We are always giving our attention to something, and it often takes us from the moment; right mindfulness accepts without judging; we must find ways to sustain appropriate attention. Smriti, the Sanskrit word for mindfulness, means "remember"; we need to remember to return to the present moment and touch the beauty around us. The second Miracle of Mindfulness is to make others present. The Third Miracle of Mindfulness is to nourish others, and the fourth is to relieve the other's suffering. Hanh offers a lovely example of nourishing a loved one and relieving her suffering. If we sit stably and mindfully with someone who is dying, we provide a mantra. The first four miracles of mindfulness belong to the first aspect of meditation, shamatha — "stopping, calming, resting, and healing."

The Fifth Miracle of Mindfulness is looking deeply (vipashyana), or observing the object of attention while also seeing your "own storehouse full of precious gems." The Sixth Miracle of Mindfulness is understanding, which comes from within and is the foundation of love. The Seventh Miracle of Mindfulness is transformation of our suffering as well as the suffering of the world.

The Discourse on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness notes four objects for mindfulness practice: body, feelings, mind and objects of the mind. Hanh recommends also the discourses on the Full Awareness of Breathing and Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone. The Four Establishments of Mindfulness create a place of refuge for ourselves and others. It is important to love and make peace with our bodies, observing them while being fully in them, noting each position and movement, or "mere recognition." Recognize and smile to every aspect of our bodies, scanning it with mindfulness and smiling to it, which can be healing.

See the earth element, or solidity, in our bodies, breathing out, smile to the earth element, realizing there is no boundary between us and the universe. Recognize the water element, the fire element (or heat), seeing all as inside and outside, and everywhere. Practice, as we breathe, "I know I am breathing in" and "I know I am breathing out." Hanh offers the following exercises set to the in and out breaths: In/Out; Deep/Slow; Calm/Ease, Smile/Release, Present Moment/Wonderful Moment. He also suggests counting each full breath, and notes that conscious breathing is a joy.

Mindfulness of feelings is next; identifying them as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral and observe it while mindfully breathing. Our feelings are us and we are them; clinging or rejecting them can transform them into healthy nourishment. Greeting feelings calmly, recognizing them, getting to know them and embracing them, even anger, with Right Mindfulness eases suffering.



The third establishment is mindfulness of the mind and mental formations, which is anything made of something else. Some formations can be both wholesome or unwholesome. Unwholesome mental formations are afflictions, obscurations, leaks or setbacks. Basically they are greed, hatred, ignorance, pride, doubt and views and from those arise anger, malice, hypocrisy, malevolence, jealousy, selfishness, deception, guile—all the way to distraction and lack of attention. There are fifty-one kinds of mental formations, including feelings for us to recognize, each of which has a seed already in our deeper store consciousness, and each object of the mind is a perception. Collective and individual consciousness cannot be separated. A perception is a sign or image in our minds. When observing dharmas, five kinds of meditation can help: counting the breath, observing interdependent rising, observing impurity, observing with love and compassion and observing different realms. There are eighteen elements, which Buddha said could be looked at as six elements, from which all physical phenomenon is made up: happiness, suffering, joy, anxiety, letting go and ignorance. Anxiety is from the inability to dwell in the present; letting go is ongoing. Another list of six realms are: craving, freedom from craving, anger, absence of anger, harming and non-harming, as well as three further realms: desire, form and formless. Two Realms are the conditioned and unconditioned. Hanh advises to practice contemplating interdependence, impermanence and compassion. If we look deeply we will see the nature of the cosmos. We must practice mindfulness all day to transform all mental formations and stay in the present moment. The heart of Buddhist meditation is the practice of mindfulness, which is the practice of precepts. We cannot be part-time Buddhas. Only understanding makes true love; with mindfulness we can change the world and bring happiness.



# Chapter Twelve

## Chapter Twelve Summary and Analysis

The Fourth Mindfulness Training describes the affirmation to speak truthfully and non-judgmentally, not cause division and discord, and resolve all conflicts. Although technologically sophisticated, our communications are blocked. Right Speech is speaking truthfully, not with a forked tongue, not cruelly or slanderously and not exaggeration so that speech arises from the seed of Buddha. Right speech is based on Right thinking and is clear and unedited. Rather than speaking from our suffering, we must speak from Right Mindfulness and deep listening to avoid harmful thoughts. Deep, compassionate listening and loving speech can transform us, and nourishes both speaker and listener and can be healing to families, "restoring harmony love and happiness." The therapy of one hour of deep, quiet listening can bring relief to suffering, and is what psychotherapists try to practice. Mindful breathing and meditation can help us do compassionate listening.

Truth must be spoken in a way that is acceptable and not harmful. We need to learn to speak only with love and calmness. Speaking each person's individual language, like Bodhisattva, or writing a letter using Right speech, can benefit sender and receiver. We need only to understand that the other person has suffered for compassion to be born. Writing is a "deep practice" and should be done knowing our words will affect other people. Hanh suggests a gatha to remind us to use right speech on the telephone.

Silence puts us in touch with essence, and allows us to look deeply, giving us the ability to see the miracles in everyday events. Hanh advises us to leave a job where we are not allowed to speak truthfully. "To practice social justice and non-exploitation, we have to use Right Speech."



# Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen

## Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen Summary and Analysis

Right Action means to do everything connected with the body nonviolently and in mindfulness, to stop killing and "begin saving and helping," with reverence for life. Generosity, sharing, cultivating love and kindness, and living simply, taking no more than our share, is Right Action. The Third Mindfulness Training is about sexual responsibility, for ourselves, our children and the species. The fifth Mindfulness training is associated with ingesting healthy foods and only those that preserve peace, well-being and joy without damage to our selves or society. Hanh discourages drinking of any alcohol in the interest of ourselves and others, using mindful consumption to stop the course of "destruction for our body, our consciousness, and the collective body and consciousness of our society." Right Action is related to Right Livelihood, or earning a living in non-destructive ways. "The basis of Right Action is Right Mindfulness."

Right Diligence or Effort involves preventing unwholesome seeds and returning them, finding ways to water and nourish the wholesome seeds that have already risen. Embracing seeds of unwholesome quality, such as greed, hatred, ignorance and wrong views, they will lose their strength and return to the store consciousness, according to Hanh. Watering and keeping wholesome mental formations is the fourth practice of Right Diligence. Joy is the most important, finding the middle way between extremes. Joy and ease come with right diligence and mindfulness training. Hanh recommends a morning gatha to remind us to live fully each day, not wasting our day, and being mindful with love and compassion. Suffering can sometimes make us want to practice mindfulness; sometimes if the suffering lies dormant it will be healed by mindful actions. When they are left dormant, we need to help them sleep and be transformed at their base.

Walking meditation and mindful living brings joy and peace, but one should examine his or her own personal practice to see what brings sustained happiness, sharing time with those who are also creating a field of mindful energy. Working with joy and ease to transform suffering is Right Diligence.





# Chapter Fifteen

## Chapter Fifteen Summary and Analysis

A one-pointed mind is the goal of right Concentration, which is active or selective, described by Hanh in poetry. In active concentration we accept whatever comes along, dwelling in the present and remaining clear. Selective concentration is focusing on one object, ignoring everything else. Concentration is not to ignore suffering but to be deeply present. It leads to happiness and right action and provides quality of life. The first four of the nine levels of meditative concentration are the Four Dhyanas involving the form realm. The next five are of the formless realm. "Worldly concentration seeks to escape. Supramundane concentration aims at complete liberation." Samadhi, or concentration, is also absorption. When we are absorbed in the moment, we become the moment, and transcend sensual pleasures and craving, becoming happier in a realm lighter than the gross, heavy realm of desires. After the fourth level of dhyana, we experience a deep reality and see the impermanent nonself and "interbeing nature of the phenomenal world." At the fifth level of concentration we experience that space "inter-is" with the everything else. At the sixth level we experience that consciousness is also everything else, like space. The seventh level is nothingness, and goes beyond "signs," realizing that everything is contained in everything else. The eighth level recognizes that all is produced by our perceptions, and our perceptions become wisdom. The ninth level is cessation of ignorance, or insight.

When emerging from the seventh level, our suffering is intact, but at the ninth level of arhat, the "internal formations in the store consciousness are purified." The biggest internal formation is the ignorance of "impermanence and nonself." Together they create greed, hatred, confusion, and produce manas, "which always discriminates self from other." In other words, ignorance of impermanence and nonself are what create the illusion of separation. In the sixth level, the Wisdom of Wonderful Observation, our minds still observe phenomena, but with the understanding of interbeing, resulting from the first five levels which become the Wisdom of Wonderful Realization. At each level the others are functioning, but with freedom from ignorance. Nirvana, Impermanence and Nonself are one.

The Buddha taught Concentration on Impermanence, Concentration on Nonself, and hundreds of others. "According to the Lotus sutra, we have to live in the historical and ultimate dimensions of reality at the same time." One does not need to fly to India to be with the Buddha, but we can walk in peace with and touch the real Buddha at home through walking meditation. "Live every moment of your life deeply, and while walking, eating, drinking, and looking at the morning star, you touch the ultimate dimension."



# Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen

## Chapters Sixteen and Seventeen Summary and Analysis

Finding a way to earn a living that does not conflict with love and compassion can either bring joy or suffering. This means not "dealing in arms, in the slave trade, the meat trade, the sale of alcohol, drugs or poisons; or making prophecies or telling fortunes." We must try to be minimally harmful to others and the environment. Composing or performing art can be right livelihood. Right livelihood is collective—the butcher no more at fault than the meat eater. More than just how we earn a paycheck, right livelihood is involved in everything we do. We must try to work in a profession that does not create more harm, such as arms or weapons, but supports our compassion. Letting the telephone be a reminder of mindfulness, and living each part of our day in mindfulness is practicing right livelihood. Practicing wrong-livelihood and donating large amounts out of guilt and fear is not right-livelihood.

Each element of the Noble Eightfold Path is contained within the others, and contains the Noble Truths of suffering. When we recognize suffering and look deeply into it—the first and second Noble Truths—we are practicing Right View and Right Thinking, as well as Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. We will see layers of causes and conditions, and can now stop ingesting the nutriments causing our suffering by practicing Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood, with Mindfulness Training as a guide. When Right Mindfulness is practiced with Right Diligence, Right Concentration will allow us to practice Right View. The interbeing is true for all of Buddha's teachings.

The Two Truths are relative or worldly, and absolute. Through these truths we recognize that joy and suffering are one. Without fully experiencing relative joy, one "will not know what to do when you are face-to-face with absolute joy." Rather than trying to transcend them, we must acknowledge the existence of suffering and joy. Once we begin to practice, the "world of dust" and nirvana are the same. Suffering and joy depend on perception; Buddha's Four Noble Truths were presented as "relative," but Hanh says these were not his deepest teachings. In Buddha's poem, all conditioned things is relative, and complete silencing is the extinction of all concepts.

Buddha recommended citing the five remembrances, which basically remind us of the changing nature of life, and that our actions and consequences are the only things we own, but these are relative truths. Hanh compares life to a wave, which although each is different, is ultimately only water, as ultimately, life is absolute truth, inter-embraced with relative truth. "Liberation is the ability to go from the world of signs to the world of true nature."

Up and down, old and young, are all relative and all of nature is inter-being. Dying is not a problem because we continue with the following generation. "What is essential is to be our best while we are here." All formations are impermanent, but the self is only



nonhuman elements, and can only survive with other species. To touch reality we must know that inanimate objects are also alive, and that we have never been born and will never die—like the wave that takes different forms, but is always water. We must remove notions of permanence and death to be truly happy. The fourth Noble truth is cessation of suffering, enjoying the present moment. We can practice as though Buddha is with us, dwelling deeply in the present. "...all dharmas (phenomena) enter one dharma, and one dharma enters all dharmas. The path of suffering leads out of suffering, and is a holy path."

We must remove our concepts that prevent us from seeing the Buddha. A flower is made up of non-flower elements, which makes it truly a flower. Nirvana means extinction of concepts. Meditation helps us move beyond concepts. The Two Truths is also a concept, but also a tool to help us penetrate reality.



# Chapter Eighteen

## Chapter Eighteen Summary and Analysis

The three dharma seals of Buddha's teaching are impermanence, nonself and nirvana. Impermanence is not merely a philosophy, but must be practiced and nourished in daily life. Impermanence and nonself are the same, impermanence related to time and nonself to space. Impermanence itself does not cause suffering, but the desire that it not be so does. Practicing impermanence helps us cherish what is around and inside us. Impermanence makes transformation possible; if we live mindfully we appreciate fully every moment, knowing everything is impermanent, touching the "foundation of reality." Being and nonbeing are only notions. Hanh says nothing is ever lost or gained.

Nonself says that everything is connected with everything else, and nothing is separate. Having the insight of nonself can help us suffer less and enjoy more. We only think we are separated by race and religion, but everything is interbeing, and we are what we perceive. Even our senses have no separate existence, but must "interbe" with everything else. "When we touch one thing we touch everything," and if we touch them deeply enough we touch the reality that is free from permanence, impermanence, self and nonself.

Nirvana is the ground of interbeing, is extinct of concepts, and is not separate from impermanence and nonself. Everything appears to be born and die, but there is neither in the true nature of reality. Just as a piece of paper once existed as a tree, sunshine, water and other elements, we existed before our birth, which is only a continuation. Burn the paper and it will transform into smoke, heat and ash and its death is only a moment of continuation. No birth and no death "liberates us from fear and sorrow." Nirvana is the extinction of all ideas of birth, death, extinction and non-extinction.

The eight concepts of birth, death, permanence, dissolution, coming, going, one and many are considered "No's of the Middle Way" and destroying these concepts through practice is to touch Nirvana. Nirvana is available at every moment in every thing and is not the absence of life, but "is pacifying, silencing or extinguishing the fire of suffering." That which "we seek does not lie outside of ourselves." To leave out any of the Dharma Seals, Holy Truths and Noble Eightfold Path is not true Buddhism, and we must dig deeply into our own lives to touch them.

Other criteria are the Two Relevances, Four Standards of Truth and four Reliances. The relevances relate to essence and circumstance; the Four Standards of truth are the worldly, the person, healing and the absolute. The Four Reliances are to rely on the teaching and not the person, the second is to rely on Buddha's discourses and not on those whose means are relative truth; the third is to rely on the meaning and not the words, and the fourth is to rely on the insight of looking rather than differentiation or discrimination.



# Chapters Nineteen and Twenty

## Chapters Nineteen and Twenty Summary and Analysis

The Three Doors of Liberation, opened by the Three Dharma Seals, are emptiness, signlessness and aimlessness. We must realize that everything is empty of a separate self, all is interbeing, or "Interdependent Co-arising, impermanence, and nonself" in order to "dissolve false boundaries." Emptiness, which goes beyond existence and nonexistence, is called "wondrous being." Emptiness must be practiced, not just as philosophy. The Second Door of signlessness means that signs are deception and illusion, and are more about the perceiver than the object perceived. We need to look beyond the appearance of signs to their signless elements, or Tathagata. We need to learn signlessness in regard to our children, teaching no-fear, no-blame, peace and harmony.

Looking beyond signs means losing fear of losing specific manifestations, such as people or flowers. Living being means to remember there is life in everything, and we must treat insentient beings as if they were living. Life span is an illusion because we have never been born and we never die. The Third door of Liberation is aimlessness, aprnihiita, meaning that there is no agenda but to be, since everything we want to become, we already have. All elements of happiness are here and there is nothing to attain, since aimlessness and nirvana are one. Rather than having a means to the end of our day, we find joy in the chores of the day and in our present moment. Worry will eventually make us sick. Mindfulness allows us to help others by allowing us to be a refuge of happiness. We need only be happy in the present.

Buddha said we must practice the Dharma, or the Way of Understanding and Love, called Dharmakaya. Anything that helps us wake up is part of Dharmakaya. If we are awake we can hear the Dharma in all aspects of nature, through words, action and nonaction. Buddha felt his Dharma body, which is everlasting, was more important than the physical body. The Sambhogakaya is the fruit of Buddha's practice, or our body of enjoyment. "Every time we touch something beautiful, in harmony and peace, we touch the Sambhogakaya Buddha."

Skahyamuni Buddha was a human, but the living buddha is still available as an embodiment as a sun ray, trees, birds, bamboo, yellow chrysanthemums. We each have a dharma body, an enjoyment body and a physical body deep within, which can be discovered through walking meditation and mindfulness. When we touch them we will suffer less. "The buddha depends on us to live mindfully, to enjoy the practice, and to transform ourselves, so we can share the body of the Dharma with many other living beings."



# Chapters Twenty-One and Twenty-Two

## Chapters Twenty-One and Twenty-Two Summary and Analysis

The Buddha, Dharma and Sangha (community) are the three jewels of refuge in Buddhism. Buddhism does not ask for blind faith, but provides real faith in the refuges we are able to take as we live and practice. Relying on the Buddha within we are, ourselves, the Buddha. Like the relationship of a plant and the earth, when we take refuge in Buddha, Buddha takes refuge in us.

Returning to self by mindfully walking, breathing, sitting and eating, is a safe place based on real experience. While Dharma is compassion, understanding and love, to realize it we need a Sangha, or community and elements which support our practice. Holiness is within us when we live in harmony, or when a community sits, breathes, walks and eats together in harmony. Dharma and Sangha are doors to heart of Buddha. A mindful, peaceful liberated community is a true Sangha; The three elements "inter-are," and each jewel contains the other two. There are 84,000 Dharma doors; Sanghas are the Buddha we need in this century. Hanh offers a chant that combines the three jewels and refuges in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

Love, compassion, joy and equanimity are the four immeasurable minds which, when practiced, grow until they embrace the world. Hanh advises us to reserve our own religion as we practice Buddhism. Maitri, is the intention and ability to offer joy and happiness with understanding, or love. The primary meaning of love is friendship; when we understand someone, we cannot help but love them. Karuna, the second aspect of love, is compassion, or the intention to transform suffering, which is developed by mindful breathing, deep listening and deep looking. "We need to be aware of the suffering, but retain our clarity, calmness, and strength so we can help transform the situation. The ocean of tears cannot drown us if karuna is there."

Joy, or mudita, is the third element of love. Hanh defines this as a joy "that is filled with peace and contentment." Upeksha, or equanimity, allows us to have an overview of the situation, unbound by one side or the other, seeing everyone as equal, including ourselves. It also means that true love requires freedom of oneself and the beloved.

In many sutras, Buddha says that if you "practice the Four Immeasurable Minds along with the Four Noble Truths and Noble Eightfold Path, you will never again descend into the realms of suffering."



# Chapter Twenty-Three

## Chapter Twenty-Three Summary and Analysis

The Five Aggregates—form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness, make up a human being. These contain everything inside and outside of us. Form, or rupa, includes our body and five sense organs. Hanh suggests meditating mindfully on each body part and smiling to that part, embracing each element with mindful tenderness and compassion. We need to recognize the impermanence and interbeing of the body.

The second aggregate is vedana, or feelings, which Hanh likens to drops that form a river, each impermanent and without substance. We need to watch them go by and observe the nutriments that have brought them about, replacing them with healthier nutriments.

The third aggregate is perception, which are often erroneous and include noticing, naming and conceptualizing. Incorrect perceptions cause unpleasant feelings and are conditioned by the afflictions in us of ignorance, craving, hatred, anger, and jealousy when we perceive without insight into impermanence and interbeing. "All suffering is born from wrong perceptions." Mindfulness can help us see the errors in our perceptions and bring true vision.

The fourth aggregate is forty-nine mental formations, (fifty-one, excluding feelings and perceptions). Each time a "seed is touched," it manifests in a mental formation, which is impermanent and without real substance. We must practice nourishing and developing "wholesome mental formations and transform unwholesome ones" to have freedom, non-fear and peace.

The fifth aggregate is consciousness, or store consciousness, the basis of all our mental formations. Each time a seed is watered, it manifests into a mental formation. This aggregate contains all the others and they contain it. We need to transform both the collective and individual aspects of consciousness, practicing within a Sangha to transform afflictions. All aggregates "inter-are," and each river contains all of the other four. They can be the source of suffering unless their impermanent and interdependent natures are understood. "When we observe the impermanent, nonself, and interdependent nature of all that is, we will not feel aversion for life. In fact, this knowing will help us see the preciousness of all life." When we grasp and become attached to things, suffering is not from the aggregates but from the grasping. To contemplate the five aggregates is to understand the emptiness of self and become liberated from suffering.



# Chapter Twenty-Four

## Chapter Twenty-Four Summary and Analysis

Our true home, and paradise, are in the present moment. The Five Faculties are powers that can help us generate the energy in ourselves to be in paradise, like we experienced as children. The first is faith in something reliable, and something which we understand instead of ideas or dogma. The second is diligence, which strengthens faith. The third is mindfulness, which allows us to look deeply into the truth; the fourth is concentration, which leads to insight and faith. The fifth power is insight or wisdom, which is the understanding that results from the other powers. When all five are working, they create energy for practice and happiness. Practicing the five powers is like cultivating the seeds in the store consciousness, which all exist, whether wholesome or not.

The appellation "Buddha" means to wake up in a deep way. We all have the seed of Buddha nature within us, and must not look outside ourselves for happiness. The Never-despising Bodhisattva bowed to everyone because he saw them as a future Buddha. The sixth power is the capacity for happiness; happiness is infectious. Hanh mentions Kshitigarbha who goes to the deepest suffering and brings light and laughter to others.

We need to practice joy in everyday things. When we realize that we have the conditions for happiness within us, regardless of the conditions around us, we do not need to go anywhere else. We need to learn to understand and navigate the anger and sadness like we pick a rose and deal with the thorns. We need to breathe and meditate to deal with feelings of pain, and water the seeds of happiness, taking the time to notice all of the beauty that naturally surrounds us. "Mindfulness helps us regain the paradise we thought we had lost." We can acknowledge our habit of running away by recognizing it, which makes it lose power over us, and live in the paradise of our true home, "which is already filled with light and power."





# Chapter Twenty-Five

## Chapter Twenty-Five Summary and Analysis

A paramita is a practice that allows us to swim or row from the shore of fear and depression to the shore of well-being, and is translated as "perfection" or "perfect realization." The first of six paramitas, dana paramita, is giving and offering joy and love to others. We can offer our mindful selves, our stability, our freedom from affliction and craving, our freshness, our peace and our space to others in order to bring them happiness and to bring it also to ourselves. When we give these things they grow in abundance in ourselves, and this can be applied globally, as well. Hanh says "what you give is what you receive, more quickly than the signals sent by satellite."

The second, shila paramita, is perfection of the five mindfulness trainings. The first of the five is protection of the lives of humans, animals and nature; the second is to prevent exploitation by humans of nature and others, and generosity; the third is to protect children and adults from sexual abuse and preserve happiness; the fourth is deep listening and loving speech, and the fifth is mindful consumption. Practicing these five is love and giving the gift of life that can be the "correct medicine for the malaise of our times."

The third petal, kshanit paramita, is inclusiveness. If our hearts are small, every small word or deed has the power to make us suffer, but if our hearts are large with understanding and compassion, suffering is transformed. Hanh tells a story of a monk who complained of being pushed down and ignored by another. When the offending monk explains his practices and speaks of how the earth, water and fire accept whatever is thrown at them, good or bad, the complaining monk admits he has lied and begs for forgiveness. The accused monk shared the responsibility of the incident with his accuser.

When we experience anger we need to practice inclusiveness. Hanh tells a story of Thich Nhat Tri, a student whom he ordained, who cried when an American soldier spit on him. Hanh explained that the soldier believed monks were communists and enemies, and in believing this, are victims, as well. Hanh spoke with Robert McNamara who subsequently resigned and wrote a book, confessing that the Vietnam war was a mistake. "Understanding is the only way out."

A second injustice hurts more than the first. "Fear or hatred, born of ignorance, amplifies your pain." Hanh encourages us to practice deep looking which leads to understanding, which leads to love and acceptance.

All mental formations are in the store consciousness and when they are watered, manifest in the mind consciousness. We need to selectively water the positive seeds in ourselves and others. Buddha suggests replacing an unwholesome mental formation with another. We can invite only pleasant seeds to come up in ourselves and others,



and especially mindfulness. The fourth practice is to try to keep a wholesome seed as long as possible once it has manifested, allowing them to transform at their base. Hanh offers a diagram of how seeds of affliction, once manifested, can be embraced by manifestations of mindfulness. The fifth crossing-over is dhyana paramita, the perfection of meditation, or stopping to come home to the present moment and living deeply. "Doing everything mindfully is the practice of meditation, as mindfulness always nourishes concentration and understanding."

The sixth petal is prajna paramita, the perfection of understanding that is free from concepts and views. Understanding will make both parties happy and is the fruit of the practice. The example of a wave that takes form and then flows back into water helps us look deeply into the nature of nirvana, touching the reality of no-birth and no-death. We are always dwelling in nirvana, just as the wave is always water and when we touch the ground of our being we can experience the happiness of no-fear. Prajna Paramita is the Mother of all Budhas and is present in all other perfections.

Each of the paramitas is included in and part of the others, and practicing one deeply is to practice all six. Mindfulness can be practiced now, and one can step over to the shore of freedom.



# Chapter Twenty-Six

## Chapter Twenty-Six Summary and Analysis

Mindfulness, investigation of phenomena, diligence, joy, ease, concentration and letting go are the seven factors of awakening or enlightenment, which Buddha taught reside within us. "Mindfulness always arises in the context of a relationship with ourselves, other people or things." Awakening is always available to us and needs only "favorable conditions." Investigation and allowing things to reveal themselves expands our boundaries. Energy is the result of feeling meaning in our lives; looking deeply lets us see the miracle of life. The fourth step, ease, is a release of stress and restful letting go. Joy, the fifth factor, "comes from touching things that are refreshing and beautiful, within and outside of ourselves." Concentration used for escape or negative means is not healthy, but when it is used to shine light on suffering it helps us develop understanding. Practicing equanimity transforms our habit energies and recognizes the sameness of everything and everyone. These seven factors are "limbs of the same tree" and when practiced, lead to emancipation, since they are the practice of love.



# Chapter Twenty-Seven

## Chapter Twenty-Seven Summary and Analysis

The Twelve Links of Interdependent Co-Arising is the foundation of Buddhism. Unlike cause and effect, the "egg is in the chicken, and the chicken is in the egg," neither being independent of the other. Everything requires many other conditions to exist. One school of thought defined twenty-four "necessary and sufficient conditions for something to arise." The Sarvastivada school defined four conditions, the first being the cause, seed or root, which requires creative force, concurrent condition, seed condition of the same kind, associated condition, universal condition and ripening condition. The second is the condition for development which can either help or hinder the growth of our seeds. Continuity, the third condition, requires consistent and continuous practice. The fourth kind of condition requires an object in our perception to have a subject. In other words our anger or despair is connected to someone or some thing. This teaching is "deep and subtle" and although it implies cause and effect, is much more complex.

Of the twelve links, the first is ignorance, old age and death. The second is volitional action—"formations, impulses, motivating energy or, with lack of understanding, anger or irritation. The third is individual, collective, mind and store consciousness, which may be filled with "unwholesome and erroneous tendencies" connected with ignorance. The fourth is name and form, or the mental and physical elements. The fifth link consists of the six senses that come into contact; the seventh link is feelings, the eighth is craving, the ninth is grasping, the tenth is "coming to be," the eleventh is birth, and the twelfth link is old age and death. Each link is interconnected with the other and each "conditions" the next. Ignorance leads to volitional actions, which lead to consciousness, which is connected to mind-body, and so on.

Artists illustrate the Twelve Links of Interdependent Co-arising to depict ignorance, volitional actions, consciousness, mind-body, contact, feeling, craving, sex, coming to be, giving birth, old age and death. These teachings have been offered in different configurations, but, "The Buddha never wanted us to understand the Twelve Links in a linear way, " but to know they "inter-are." Although Buddha taught birth and death first to get in touch with suffering, ignorance is now taught first, even though there is no first or last. Other theories evolved after Buddha's death. They held that ignorance and volitional actions belong to the past; birth, old age and death to the future, and all other links belong to the present, but Hanh reminds us they are all in the present and future.

We need to be able to transcend other theories, which all contain some degree of misunderstanding. Hanh feels gratitude toward these philosophers. but reminds us that everything is both cause and effect. He illustrates by saying leaves are not just the children of the tree, but are also the mother as they nourish it. We must see the chain in a non-sequential way, connecting each link with the eleven others. Ignorance is simply lack of light or understanding, but leads to volitional actions. Volitional action can also be understood as "a way to be present in order to help."



Aware that we contain both ignorance and consciousness, watering the wholesome seeds will transform ignorance into wisdom. Great Mirror Wisdom is present in our store consciousness and is the outcome of helping others through volitional action. Using our will and our consciousness to alleviate suffering makes the consciousness manifest in ourselves and others. A bodhisattva will have unpleasant feelings when she sees suffering, but they will not give rise to craving or aversion, but to concern and willingness to act. Likewise a pleasant feeling does not create a formation, and does not create an attachment. We must keep the consciousness of Manas, the discriminator since it needs to be transformed and not thrown away. Wonderful Observation Wisdom transforms this into equality, which gives rise to the Great Mirror Wisdom, which can transform into Wonderful Observation Wisdom. With a clear mind, Wonderful Observation Wisdom, our store consciousness becomes Great Mirror Wisdom. Hanh wanders at length here about mind/body consciousness, ignorance and transformation conditions and how they relate to the five aggregates, and how within Buddha, even contact does not result in attachment. He also discusses the positive side of the Twelve Links when practiced with mindfulness, accepting all positive and negative with neither attachment or aversion, but with respect. The Pure Land, or Wondrous Being is the "basis for being born without getting caught in wrong ideas about birth and death," and seeing the element of continuation. Studying the Twelve Links is a way to diminish our ignorance and increase our clarity.

Buddha cautioned that being and nonbeing are just constructs of the mind, with reality "somewhere in between." We do not destroy being to reach non-being; nirvana is in birth and death. Buddhist practice is not for escaping life, for each of the twelve links there is a positive and negative; in a deluded world there is suffering and affliction, and in a clear mind is the wondrous nature of reality. We need only to change our minds, individually and communally. "The mind of the people is the basis of paradise," and the Twelve Links of Interdependent Co-Arising can be based on true mind rather than deluded mind.



# Chapter Twenty-Eight

## Chapter Twenty-Eight Summary and Analysis

Happiness and beauty lie in our hearts. A wise person who is suffering looks for a way to be free from it and how it came about. When people do not seem to love and understand us, we must be more loving and understanding. We are co-responsible for suffering. We can apply the teachings through our actions. We can learn mindful living, develop understanding and compassion and alleviate suffering. We can look deeply into the Five Aggregates, and remember the reality of no-birth and no-death.

We need quiet refuge, peace in our schools, quiet rooms in hospitals and City Halls. Hanha asks professionals to help us create institutions that will promote collective awakening. It is irresponsible to elect unhappy people to legislate our affairs. To enter the heart of Buddha, we must enter our own hearts, be present and touch impermanence. We bring our ancestors' habit energies, as well as our own into our practice, but learn new habits through mindful living. Hanh asks us to practice transformation by deep looking and deep touching, and to realize them.

# Part Four - Discourses

## Part Four - Discourses Summary and Analysis

Thich Naht Hahn offers anecdotes about the Buddha that illustrate the material contained in this book. Primarily they consist of Buddha teaching a student some aspect of the practice of Buddhism, and illustrating it through colorful stories using some Indian terminology.

The Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma discusses the middle way and the Noble Truths. Basically, the lesson is that as soon as insight and understanding of the noble truths, their aspects and stages are realized, the liberation of the mind is unshakeable and results in the last birth and no more becoming. This highest Wheel of Dharma being set in motion creates an immeasurable splendor in the world.

The Discourse on the Great Forty is Buddha teaching a student about right and wrong thinking, speech, action, livelihood, diligence, mindfulness, concentration, understanding and liberation. There are twenty factors that are wholesome and twenty that are not. This Dharma teaching has been set in motion and cannot be turned back.

In the Discourse on the Right View, the Lord explains the roots of wholesome and unwholesome seeds and how they are transformed by understanding the Noble Eightfold path, as well as the three leaks that originate where ignorance originates.



# Characters

## Buddha

Siddharta Guatama went searching for a way to end suffering. After years of meditation and practice, he spent the night under a Bodhi tree, resolved not to get up until he was enlightened. He experienced a "profound breakthrough" and became a Buddha. With his new awareness and capacity for love and understanding, he roamed for forty-nine days in peace and, perhaps, bliss. He eventually returned to the Deer Park to discuss his experience with his colleagues. He tried to explain to them the nature of relativity, that nothing can exist alone, but everything is interwoven. He also realized that each person has the capacity to be enlightened. He proceeded to teach the Four Noble Truths, The Noble Eightfold Path and other sutras. The Wheel of Dharma, or the Way of Understanding and Love, was set into motion when he attained total liberation. Primarily he taught the middle way, the Four Noble Truths, engagement in the world and the Noble Eightfold Path, including Right Speech and Right Livelihood. His primary goal was to teach the alleviation of suffering through embracing it and allowing its transformation. His teachings, although re-interpreted and deconstructed many times, are basically the same as when he delivered them. They emphasize the impermanence of everything, mindful living, meditation and alleviating suffering. His teachings are not to be taught as doctrine or dogma but, instead, are to be taught as practices for an enlightened life.

Over the centuries, buddhism has been re-interpreted and translated into many languages and formats. Buddha originally provided his teachings orally and they were transcribed many years later. Thus, there is always the possibility of misinterpretation. However, the basic understandings are still alive, and since there is not doctrine or dogma required in Buddhism, they remain fairly untainted.

## Thich Nhat Tri

The first disciple that Thich Nhat Hanh ever ordained, Nhat Tri was a young monk who worked on rescue missions with Hanh, helping flood victims in West Vietnam. Upon Thich Naht Hanh's request, Tri went to live in a poor hamlet to learn the problems of the rural people and to help those less fortunate. He was part of Hanh's School of Youth for Social Science, which eventually had 10,000 workers helping to improve social standards. Hanh tells the story that one day, while walking on the street, Tri was spit on by an American soldier. Tri cried, his feelings hurt and angry. Thich Nhat Hanh helped him, holding Tri while he wept. Tri, in his anger, wanted to go back and deal with the insult, but Hanh helped him to transform his anger to understanding. He explained to Tri that if Tri had grown up in the U.S. like the American soldiers, he might just as likely have wrong beliefs about who the monks and the Vietnamese were. By getting Tri to understand the American's pre-conditioned thinking, he was able to dissolve his anger. This is part of the process of eliminating suffering, involving looking deeply in to a matter





rather than allowing the matter to give rise to more negativity. Tri was eventually kidnapped and probably killed shortly after this incident. Hanh mentions him with love and compassion in his tone, and was clearly fond of Tri.

## **Sona**

A student of Buddha's who was a musician, Sona was asked what happens if the strings are not adjusted just right on his instrument. The lesson was that we need to practice in the Middle Way between the extremes of austerity and sensual indulgence.

## **Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara**

A teacher of Buddhism who says there is no suffering, no cause of suffering, no cessation of suffering, and no path. He teaches in terms of absolute truth as compared with Buddha's teaching in terms of relative truth.

## **Levoisier**

A French scientist, Levoisier is quoted by Hanh as saying, "Nothing is born, nothing dies."

## **Miss Lien**

Thich Naht Hanh's fifth grade teacher, Miss Lien wrote on the blackboard, "Never wear high-heeled shoes. You might twist your ankle."

## **King Prasenajit**

This was a close friend of the Buddha, who told him, "When I look at the Sangha, I have faith in the Buddha and the Dharma."

## **Maitreya**

Maitreya is the Buddha of the twenty-first century, and is the Buddha of Love. Hanh says this Buddha may well be a community rather than an individual.

## **Ananada**

Ananda was the Buddha's attendant and closest student, and one to whom he supposedly offered many teachings.



## **Robert McNamara**

US Secretary of State in the 1960s, McNamara met with Thich Nhat Hanh, who discussed the fact that the Vietnam war was a huge mistake. McNamara subsequently resigned his post and wrote a book about the war.

## **Bodhidharma**

Bodhidharma was the founder of Zen Buddhism in China who built temples all over the country. When Emperor Wu asked him how much merit he had earned in this, Bodhidharma said, "None whatsoever."



# Objects/Places

## Dharma

The way of love and understanding, often characterized by a wheel that was initially set in motion by Buddha.

## Sutra

A teaching or lesson in the practice of Buddhism

## Store Consciousness

Store consciousness is described as, "The field in which every kind of seed can be planted—seeds of suffering, sorrow, fear and anger, and seeds of happiness and hope. When these seeds sprout, they manifest in our mind consciousness, and when they do, they become stronger"

## Sangha

A group of supportive friends who practice Buddhism and support others in their practice.

## bodhisattva

A student of Buddhism

## Samahdi

Absorption in the present moment, beyond the realm of materiality and form.

## Mindfulness

The practice of being conscious at every moment of the present moment, and taking joy in the mundane activities of life. Right mindfulness is at the heart of the teaching and can be likened to "remembering," or coming back to the present moment.



## **Nirvana**

Nirvana is described as "the ground of being"; the substance of all that is. In the state of nirvana, there is a "total silencing of concepts" and the "extinction of all notions" and ideas, and complete release from the Eight Concepts, which are birth, death, permanence, dissolution, coming, going, one and many.

## **Meditation**

The practice of sitting quietly or walking mindfully, recognizing thoughts and feelings and smiling to them, focusing on our breathing and being fully aware of our selves.

## **Buddha**

"A Buddha is someone who lives in peace, joy and freedom, neither afraid of nor attached to anything."

## **Tu Hieu Pagoda**

The location where Thich Nhat Hanh lived and practiced as a young monk.

## **Plum Village**

Thich Nhat Hanh's place of residence where he teaches and where his sangha resides.

## **Tassajara Zen Mountain Center**

A Zen center in California where Thich Naht Hanh first tasted and looked deeply into the nature of peanut butter cookies.

## **Lumbini**

The birthplace of Buddha.

## **Durian**

A fruit of southeast Asia that was offered to Thich Naht Hanh, and one which he strongly disliked. He uses this story to illustrate that love requires understanding, as well as deep looking.



# Themes

## Everything is Impermanent

Impermanence is a theme repeated many times throughout this book. Its premise is that all things, whether physical or non-physical, are temporary. Hanh uses most often the example of a wave in the ocean. The wave takes form only temporarily before it returns to non-form, and even though it existed for that moment, it has always been water. In the same way, we, as humans, have taken temporary form and exist for now in one state, but inevitably will transform into another. We and everything around us, are all part of the universal energy whatever form we might take temporarily. This analogy is also used as it pertains to everything from mountains to mental formations; all is ceaselessly in flux and constantly changing from form to formlessness, over and over again. Impermanence is the nature of the universe in which we live, and conscious awareness of impermanence is an important aspect of Buddhist practice. Hanh feels that if we can practice living with the awareness of impermanence, it will not only remove our fear of death, but will make us more alive and appreciative of the present moment, which is the road to true enlightenment. Nothing in the universe is static and, therefore, we can know that our suffering is impermanent, as well as everything else. Understanding impermanence can help us end our attachment to physical things, as well as understanding the nature of the universe.

## All is One and One is all

Perhaps the most important teaching in this book is that each of the Buddhist teachings, and in fact, everything in the universe, is inter-dependent on everything else. Hanh uses illustrations of a flower, which is not simply a flower but requires water, soil, sunshine and air to grow, and then when it dies, becomes part of the earth and nourishes other flowers. He speaks of the page from which we read that was once a tree, which, in order to be a tree required other elements such as sunshine and water and, in turn, fed other elements such as the air and the earth. Other illustrations are evident in the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path, where right view, thinking, mindfulness, speech, action, diligence, concentration and livelihood all contribute, one to the other. Likewise, Hanh says that we all contain wholesome and unwholesome seeds. We are not simply one way or another, but in one single person the entire universe resides, and vice versa. Throughout the many layers of teachings contained in this book, we are reminded that there cannot be one without all the others, and all the others contain the one. The most interesting aspect of this teaching is the concept that we, as humans, are also just one large being, connected by energy. Therefore, every thought and act has an effect, even if unseen, on everyone else in the universe, as well as every thing. Although this seems abstract, when the point of view is embraced that everything is connected by a massive network of energy, it makes sense. It also becomes easier to grasp the idea that we create our own life experiences with our thinking, since thought affects everything



around and in us. Thus, taking responsibility for our own experiences motivates us to do the work of perfecting our thinking and our spiritual lives.

## **Suffering As a Means to Liberation**

Hanh believes that the way out of suffering is through suffering. Using Buddhist teachings, he encourages us to look deeply at our suffering to gain an understanding of its roots, being careful not to avoid it or ignore it. Once we understand the basis of the suffering, we can embrace it with love and compassion. When it is embraced with love and compassion, the suffering has no more power since it has been transformed. Hanh says that we each contain all the seeds of suffering as well as joy within us. When our negative seeds are watered, or focused upon, they grow into thought forms that bring about suffering. However, by watering positive seeds, the negative ones can be transformed and the suffering alleviated. This applies to personal suffering as well as to suffering of others in the world. Contrary to some theories, Buddha did not prescribe suffering as a way to enlightenment, but showed us the way to deal with our suffering to transform it to love and understanding. Hanh stresses that ignoring our suffering is not the way to deal with it, but to look at it, touch it and discover its deepest seeds within ourselves so that we can replace them by nourishing others that are more positive and wholesome. Part of the practice of Buddhism can be learning not to nourish unwholesome thought patterns that cause suffering, as well as not nourishing them in others. In turn, we can also learn to ask others not to water our own unwholesome seeds, knowing that we contain all of the positive and negative forces in the universe.

## **Action is the Key to Enlightenment**

Enlightenment does not just naturally occur in human beings. We are born with seeds of negativity that come through the generations from our ancestors, and the environment in which we live is not conducive to spiritual enlightenment. However, in Buddhism, the proper actions practiced consistently can bring about enlightenment. The mental exercises of stopping, calming, resting, touching our suffering and realizing well being, as Hanh describes in the first part of the book are a beginning. However, the Noble Eightfold Path, in the richer depths of Buddhist practice, is all about actions. Each aspect of the path requires right action. Right view, thinking, mindfulness, speech, action, diligence, concentration and livelihood require us to actively investigate our behaviors and our thinking, as well as our daily habits, what we say, how we focus, and even what we do for a living. If we live passively, anyone can water our negative seeds that turn into thought forms, and our inattention will surely lead to suffering. However, even when the Buddha tells us to practice aimlessness, it is not laziness, but a focused absence of goals that takes action and resolve. Mindfulness is not work, but it is not passive. It takes practice and intention to train ourselves to be in the present moment. Buddhism is not something that can happen to us, but something we must be dedicated to doing in order to attain enlightenment.



# Style

## Perspective

Thich Nhat Hanh's perspective is his own. He writes from his own experiences and his own learning and background. However, it is important to remember that Hanh's perspective is quite open and considerably enlightened compared to most. His perspective is omnipotent, although he does not try to be God. His work is one of teaching by examples and simplified lessons from Buddhism. He offers the information freely and without any demands; he does not expect or want people to follow any doctrines of Buddhism, but only to practice what Buddha taught as a path to enlightenment. He speaks entirely through his Buddhist beliefs, since he lives them daily. As an enlightened being, Hanh is able to offer his own personal experiences and learning, since helping others on their paths is part of his own work as a Buddhist. Hanh grew up in Vietnam during war time and saw much suffering as a young person. His views have been affected by those experiences, certainly, and he does not claim that they have not affected him. However, he also tells us that the Buddha was a real man who suffered, and that we all have the capacity and all the power to transform ourselves into enlightened spiritual beings. Although he is Vietnamese and English is his second language, his grasp of English is succinct and solid, and his ability to clearly deliver his eastern philosophies to the western world is impressive. He is an important teacher for these times.

## Tone

Hanh's tone is light, simple and to the point. It is difficult to find other words to explain his teachings, since he uses the leanest, most practical prose available, and does not embellish with complex descriptions or wording. Since he is a true Buddhist, his manner is happy and light. As he believes in impermanence and the power of love, his writing is compassionate, non-judgmental and almost carefree. He does show a concern for social injustice, but feels these teachings hold the answers. His teachings weave, as do the Buddhist lessons, with all being interdependent on the other, as well as standing alone. Hanh's meditations include smiling to oneself and considering a flower and a tree; although he has clearly not led a privileged life, he has taken his suffering in stride and transformed it, as he teaches, into understanding. He is warm, but not sentimental. He clearly conveys a love for the family structure and wholesome living. He is concerned about the state of the world, but knows that we can only change our selves in order to make a difference. Hanh's tone is not intense, but is solid, definite and confident, with an air of humor and compassion.

## Structure

This book is 275 pages, divided into four major parts, with a total of twenty-eight chapters and four discourses. The chapters are unevenly sized, some being quite short and some, such as Chapter Twenty-Seven, being quite lengthy. There are ten figures consisting of diagrams and illustrative drawings. Everything in Buddhism seems to be related to numbers. Hanh describes the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Two Truths, Three Dharma Seals, Four Immeasurable Minds, Five Aggregates, Twelve Links of Interdependent Co-arising, just to name a few. In Part Three, many of these are presented sequentially. Hanh includes some Sanskrit terminology, as well as a few Chinese characters in his writing, but understanding them is not required, as they are fully explained within the text. The book flows fairly well, and the discourses at the end are timeless stories of the Buddha, himself, which Hanh offers as a follow-up to his own explanations. With so many numbered teachings, it would be a challenge to write any book about Buddhism without doing it in perfect sequence, since one main lesson often branches into many sub-lessons. However, Hanh keeps a fairly cohesive sequence without rambling away from his point, offering non-linear teachings, in an understandable format.





## Quotes

"I grew up in a time of war. There was destruction all around—children, adults, values, a whole country. As a young person, I suffered a lot. Once the door of awareness has been opened, you cannot close it. The wounds of war in me are still not all healed. There are nights I lie awake and embrace my people, my country, and the whole planet with my mindful breathing," p. 5.

"The Buddha said many times, 'My teaching is like a finger pointing to the moon. Do not mistake the finger for the moon,'" p. 17.

"Our suffering is us, and we need to treat it with kindness and nonviolence. We need to embrace our fear, hatred, anguish and anger. 'My dear suffering, I know you are there. I am here for you, and I will take care of you.' We stop running from our pain. With all our courage and tenderness, we recognize, acknowledge and identify it," p. 29.

"Mindfulness helps us look deeply into the depths of our consciousness. Every time one of the fifty-one mental formations arises, we acknowledge its presence, look deeply into it, and see its nature of impermanence and interbeing. When we practice this, we are liberated from fear, sorrow and the fires burning inside of us," p. 75.

"Words and thoughts can kill. We cannot support acts of killing in our thinking or in our speech. If you have a job in which telling the truth is impossible, you may have to change jobs," p. 93.

"The object of the seventh level of concentration is nothingness. With normal perception, we see flowers, fruit, teapots and tables and we think they exist separately of one another. But when we look more deeply, we see that the fruit is in the flower, and that the flower, the cloud, and the earth are in the fruit. We go beyond outward appearances or signs and come to 'signlessness,'" p. 108.

"Look in the light of inter-being and you will see the all in the one and the one in the all. Don't think that form exists outside of feelings or that feelings exist outside of form," p. 182.

"When we observe the impermanent, nonself and interdependent nature of all that is, we will not feel aversion for life. In fact, this knowing will help us see the preciousness of all life," p. 182.

"Right livelihood is a collective matter. The livelihood of each person affects everyone else. The butcher's children might benefit from my teaching, while my children, because they eat meat, share some responsibility for the butcher's livelihood," p. 115.

"In Vietnam, we say that if one horse is sick, all the horses in the stable will refuse to eat. Our happiness and suffering are the happiness and suffering of others," p. 147.



"Be yourself. Life is precious as it is. All the elements for your happiness are already here. There is no need to run, strive, search, or struggle. Just be. Just being in the moment in this place is the deepest practice of meditation," p. 153.

"Someone asked me, 'Aren't you worried about the state of the world?' I allowed myself to breathe and then I said, 'What is most important is not to allow your anxiety about what happens in the world to fill your heart. If your heart is filled with anxiety, you will get sick, and you will not be able to help,'" p. 154.

"During the Buddha's last months, he always taught, 'Take refuge in yourselves, not in anything else. In you are Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Don't look for things that are far away. Everything is in your own heart. Be an island unto yourself,'" p. 163.

"For love to be true love, it must contain compassion, joy and equanimity. For compassion to be true compassion, it has to have love, joy and equanimity in it. True joy has to contain love, compassion and equanimity. And true equanimity has to have love, compassion and joy in it. This is the interbeing nature of the Four Immeasurable Minds," p. 175.

"One day, Nhat Tri was walking on the streets of Saigon, when an American soldier standing on a military truck spit on his head. Brother Nhat Tri came home and cried and cried. Being a young man, he was tempted to fight back, and so I held him in my arms for half an hour in order to transform that feeling of being deeply hurt. I said, "My child, you were not born to hold a gun. You were born to be a monk and your power is the power of understanding and love," p. 203.



## Topics for Discussion

What is the point of working toward enlightenment?

In what way can the practice of Buddhism be beneficial to those around us?

Discuss mindfulness, and how a busy person might practice this daily.

Discuss the importance of the Twelve Links of Interdependent Co-Arising. Why does Hanh devote such a long chapter to this?

In what ways can remembering the nature of impermanence change our daily lives?

What is the first and primary step toward alleviating suffering?

How might we touch nirvana? Is it available to us?

Discuss the concept of continuation, as Hanh describes it on page 138, using the example of the sheet of paper.

Discuss the concept of positive and negative seeds in our subconscious, and how they are watered. What do they become?

Hanh describes a boating accident and how it relates to misperception (page 179). Discuss an event such as this in your own life.