

Transforming Feelings Thich Nhat Hanh

The first step in dealing with feelings is to recognize each feeling as it arises. The agent that does this is mindfulness. In the case of fear, for example, you bring out your mindfulness, look at your fear, and recognize it as fear. You know that fear springs from yourself and mindfulness also springs from yourself. They are both in you, not fighting, but one is taking care of the other.

The second step is to become one with the feeling. It is best not to say, "Go away, Fear. I don't like you. You are not me." It is much more effective to say, "Hello, Fear. How are you today?" Then you can invite the two aspects of yourself, mindfulness and fear, to shake hands as friends and become one. Doing this may seem frightening, but because you know that you are more than just your fear, you need not be afraid. As long as mindfulness is there, it can chaperone your fear. The fundamental practice is to nourish your mindfulness with conscious breathing, to keep it there, alive and strong. Although your mindfulness may not be very powerful in the beginning, if you nourish it, it will become stronger. As long as mindfulness is present, you will not drown in your fear. In fact, you begin transforming it the very moment you give birth to awareness in yourself.

The third step is to calm the feeling. As mindfulness is taking good care of your fear, you begin to calm it down. "Breathing in, I calm the activities of body and mind." You calm your feeling just by being with it, like a mother tenderly holding her crying baby.

Feeling his mother's tenderness, the baby will calm down and stop crying. The mother is your mindfulness, born from the depth of your consciousness, and it will tend the feeling of pain. A mother holding her baby is one with her baby. If the mother is thinking of other things, the baby will not calm down. The mother has to put aside other things and just hold her baby. So, don't avoid your feeling. Don't say, "You are not important. You are only a feeling." Come and be one with it. You can say, "Breathing out, I calm my fear."

The fourth step is to release the feeling, to let it go. Because of your calm, you feel at ease, even in the midst of fear, and you know that your fear will not grow into something that will overwhelm you. When you know that you are capable of taking care of your fear, it is already reduced to the minimum, becoming softer and not so unpleasant. Now you can smile at it and let it go, but please do not stop yet. Calming and releasing are just medicines for the symptoms. You now have an opportunity to go deeper and work on transforming the source of your fear.

The fifth step is to look deeply. You look deeply into your baby--your feeling of fear--to see what is wrong, even after the baby has already stopped crying, after the fear is gone. You cannot hold your baby all the time, and therefore you have to look into him or her to see the cause of what is wrong. By looking, you will see what will help you begin to transform the feeling. You will realize, for example, that the suffering has many causes, inside and outside of the body. If something is wrong around the baby, if you put that in order, bringing tenderness and care to the situation, the baby will feel better. Looking into your baby, you see the elements that are causing him or her to cry, and when you see them, you will know what to do and what not to do to transform the feeling and be free.

This is a process similar to psychotherapy. Together with the patient, a therapist looks at the nature of the pain. Often, the therapist can uncover causes of suffering that stem from the way the patient looks at things, the beliefs one holds about oneself, one's culture, and the world. The therapist examines these viewpoints and beliefs with the patient, and together they help free the patient from the kind of prison he or she has been in. But the patient's efforts are crucial. A teacher has to give birth to the teacher within his or her student, and a psychotherapist has to give birth to the psychotherapist within the patient. The patient's "internal psychotherapist" can then work full-time in a very effective way.

The therapist does not treat the patient by simply giving him another set of beliefs. She tries to help him see which kinds of ideas and beliefs have led to his suffering. Many patients want to get rid of their painful feelings, but they do not want to get rid of their beliefs, the viewpoints that are the very roots of their feelings. So therapist and patient have to work together to help the patient see things as they are. The same is true when we use mindfulness to transform our feelings. After recognizing the feeling, becoming one with it, calming it down, and releasing it, we can look deeply into its causes, which are often based on inaccurate perceptions. As soon as we understand the causes and nature of our feelings, they begin to transform themselves.

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