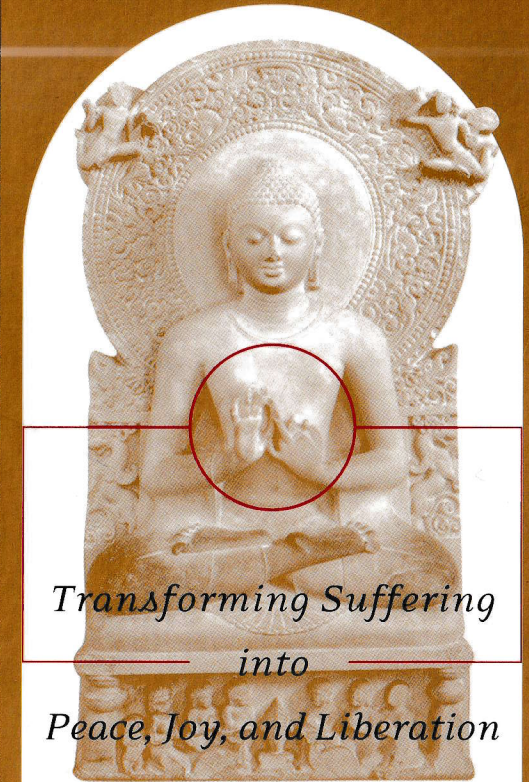


The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching

"Thich Nhat
Hanh writes
with the voice
of the Buddha."
—Sogyal Rinpoche



*Transforming Suffering
into
Peace, Joy, and Liberation*

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Right Diligence

Right Diligence (*samyak pradhana*), or Right Effort, is the kind of energy that helps us realize the Noble Eightfold Path. If we are diligent for possessions, sex, or food, that is wrong diligence. If we work round-the-clock for profit or fame or to run away from our suffering, that is wrong diligence also. From outside, it may appear that we are diligent, but it is not Right Diligence. The same can be true of our meditation practice. We may appear diligent in our practice, but if it takes us farther from reality or from those we love, it is wrong diligence. When we practice sitting and walking meditation in ways that cause our body and mind to suffer, our effort is not Right Diligence and is not based on Right View. Our practice should be intelligent, based on Right Understanding of the teaching. It is not because we practice hard that we can say that we are practicing Right Diligence.

There was a monk in Tang Dynasty China who was practicing sitting meditation very hard, day and night. He thought he was practicing harder than anyone else, and he was very proud of this. He sat like a rock day and night, but his suffering was not transformed. One day a teacher¹ asked him, "Why are you sitting so hard?" and the monk replied, "To become a Buddha!" The teacher picked up a tile and began polishing it, and the monk asked, "Teacher, what are you doing?" His master replied, "I am making a mirror." The monk asked,

¹ Master Huairang (667–744).

"How can you make a tile into a mirror?" and his teacher replied, "How can you become a Buddha by sitting?"

The four practices usually associated with Right Diligence are: (1) preventing unwholesome seeds in our store consciousness that have not yet arisen from arising, (2) helping the unwholesome seeds that have already arisen to return to our store consciousness, (3) finding ways to water the wholesome seeds in our store consciousness that have not yet arisen and asking our friends to do the same, and (4) nourishing the wholesome seeds that have already arisen so that they will stay present in our mind consciousness and grow stronger. This is called the Fourfold Right Diligence.

"Unwholesome" means not conducive to liberation or the Path. In our store consciousness there are many seeds that are not beneficial for our transformation, and if those seeds are watered, they will grow stronger. When greed, hatred, ignorance, and wrong views arise, if we embrace them with Right Mindfulness, sooner or later they will lose their strength and return to our store consciousness.

When wholesome seeds have not yet arisen, we can water them and help them come into our conscious mind. These seeds of happiness, love, loyalty, and reconciliation need watering every day. If we water them, we will feel joyful, and this will encourage them to stay longer. Keeping wholesome mental formations in our mind consciousness is the fourth practice of Right Diligence.

The Fourfold Right Diligence is nourished by joy and interest. If your practice does not bring you joy, you are not practicing correctly. The Buddha asked the monk Sona, "Is it true that before you became a monk you were a musician?" Sona replied that it was so. The Buddha asked, "What happens if the string of your instrument is too loose?"

"When you pluck it, there will be no sound," Sona replied.

"What happens when the string is too taut?"

"It will break."

"The practice of the Way is the same," the Buddha said. "Maintain your health. Be joyful. Do not force yourself to do things you cannot do."² We need to know our physical and psychological limits. We shouldn't force ourselves to do ascetic practices or lose ourselves in sensual pleasures. Right Diligence lies in the Middle Way, between the extremes of austerity and sensual indulgence.

The teachings of the Seven Factors of Awakening³ are also part of the practice of Right Diligence. Joy is a factor of awakening, and it is at the heart of Right Diligence. Ease, another Factor of Awakening, is also essential for Right Diligence. In fact, not only Right Diligence but also Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration need joy and ease. Right Diligence does not mean to force ourselves. If we have joy, ease, and interest, our effort will come naturally. When we hear the bell inviting us for walking or sitting meditation, we will have the energy to participate if we find meditation joyful and interesting. If we do not have the energy to practice sitting or walking meditation, it is because these practices do not bring us joy or transform us, or we do not yet see their benefit.

When I wanted to become a novice monk, my family thought that a monk's life would be too difficult for me. But I knew it was the only way I could be happy, and I persisted. Once I became a novice, I felt as happy and free as a bird in the sky. When it came time for chanting sutras, I felt as though I had been invited to a concert. Sometimes on moonlit nights, when the monks were chanting the sutras standing by the crescent pond, I thought I was in paradise listening to angels. When I could not attend morning chanting because I had another task, just hearing the words of the *Shurangama Sutra* coming from the Buddha Hall brought

² *Vinaya Mahavagga Khuddaka Nikaya* 5.

³ The Seven Factors of Awakening — mindfulness, investigating phenomena, diligence, joy, ease, concentration, and letting go. See chap. 26.

me happiness. Everyone at Tu Hieu Pagoda practiced with interest, joy, and diligence. There was no forced effort, just the love and support of our teacher and brothers in the practice.

At Plum Village, children participate in sitting and walking meditation and silent meals. At first, they do it just to be with their friends who are already practicing, but after they taste the peace and joy of meditation, they continue on their own because they want to. Sometimes it takes adults four or five years of practicing the outer form before they taste the true joy of practice. Master Guishan said, "Time flies like an arrow. If we do not live deeply, we waste our life."⁴ Someone who can devote her life to the practice, who has a chance to be near her teacher and friends in the practice, has a wonderful opportunity that can bring her great happiness. If we lack Right Diligence, it is because we have not found a way to practice that is true for us, or have not felt deeply the need to practice. A mindful life can be wonderful.

Waking up this morning, I smile.

Twenty-four brand new hours are before me.

I vow to live fully in each moment

*and to look at all beings with eyes of compassion.*⁵

Reciting this gatha can give us energy to live the day well. Twenty-four hours are a treasure-chest of jewels. If we waste these hours, we waste our life. The practice is to smile as soon as we wake up, recognizing this day as an opportunity for practicing. It is up to us not to waste it. When we look at all beings with eyes of love and compassion, we feel won-

⁴ From "Encouraging Words," in Thich Nhat Hanh, *Stepping into Freedom: An Introduction to Buddhist Monastic Training* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1997), pp. 89-97. Guishan (771-853) was one of the great Tang Dynasty meditation masters.

⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Present Moment Wonderful Moment*, p. 3.

derful. With the energy of mindfulness, washing the dishes, sweeping the floor, or practicing sitting or walking meditation are all the more precious.

Suffering can propel us to practice. When we are anxious or sad and see that these practices bring us relief, we will want to continue. It takes energy to look into suffering and to see what has brought about that suffering. But this insight will lead us to see how to end our suffering, and the path needed to do so. When we embrace our suffering, we see its origins, and we see that it can end because there is a path. Our suffering is at the center. When we look into the compost, we see the flowers. When we look into the sea of fire, we see a lotus. The path that does not run away from but embraces our suffering is the path that will lead us to liberation.

It is not always necessary for us to deal directly with our suffering. Sometimes we can just allow it to lie dormant in our store consciousness, and we use the opportunity to touch the refreshing and healing elements within us and around us with our mindfulness. They will take care of our pain, like antibodies taking care of the foreign bodies that have entered our bloodstream. When unwholesome seeds have arisen, we have to take care of them. When unwholesome seeds are dormant, our job is to help them sleep peacefully and be transformed at the base.

With Right View, we see the way we need to go, and our seeing gives us faith and energy. If we feel better after practicing walking meditation for an hour, we will have the determination to continue the practice. When we see how walking meditation brings peace to others, we will have even more faith in practice. With patience, we can discover the joys of life that are all around us, and we will have more energy, interest, and diligence.

The practice of mindful living should be joyful and pleasant. If you breathe in and out and feel joy and peace, that is Right Diligence. If you suppress yourself, if you suffer dur-

ing your practice, it probably is not Right Diligence. Examine your practice. See what brings you joy and happiness of a sustained kind. Try to spend time with a Sangha, brothers and sisters who are creating a field of mindful energy that can make your practice easy. Work together with a teacher and with a friend to transform your suffering into compassion, peace, and understanding, and do it with joy and ease. That is Right Diligence.

Right C

The practice of Right Concentration is to cultivate a mind that is one-pointed. The Chinese term for concentration means, in the Taoist sense, neither too high nor too low. Another Chinese term, *shunyata*, means "the abode of true mind."

There are two kinds of concentration: active and passive. In active concentration, the mind is focused on something happening in the present moment. This is the subject of a poem by a Buddhist monk¹:

*The wind whistles in the bamboo,
and the bamboo dances.
When the wind stops,
the bamboo grows still.*

The wind comes and the bamboo dances,
the wind goes, and the bamboo lets it go.

*A silver bird
flies over the autumn lake.
When it has passed,
the lake's surface does not tremble
to hold on to the image of the bird.*

¹ Poem by Vietnamese Dhyana Master