

**Extracts from a Dharma Talk by Bhikshu Thích Chân Pháp Ân
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With the outbreak of war in the Middle East, these past few days have been disturbing for the whole world. It's very painful to see the killing on both sides. I ask myself: “Is it possible for humans to have peace?”

As humans we are very fortunate in the sense that we have awareness, we're able to think logically, rationally. But, still, we allow our emotions to control us, and often we are unable to overcome painful feelings. Our behavior can be destructive for ourselves and others. Is being peaceful possible? Is it possible to offer peace to ourselves and to other people around us?

Almost 30 years ago, at a retreat in the US with our teacher Thay, I shared that because of the deep suffering of the Vietnam War I had depression for years. Friends asked if I wished the war in Vietnam had happened somewhere else in the world. I said that it didn't really matter because whether the war was in Vietnam or somewhere else, it was a collective manifestation of human consciousness, the collective destructive energy within humanity.

When we are angry, we contribute to this collective destructive energy. When we suffer from fear, anxiety, depression, and sadness, we contribute to this collective energy. Many of us are suffering deeply but we do not know we are suffering. Then we spread our suffering. We cause ourselves suffering and we will cause other people suffering.

That's the significance of the Buddha's discovery of the Four Noble Truths, or the truth as perceived by the Enlightened or Noble One. And what did the Enlightened One perceive? Enlightened people realize that they suffer. They recognize that, as human beings, we suffer and that they themselves - the enlightened people - are suffering. When we are *really* aware of this, we begin to wake up and feel we have to do something about this suffering. Often, however, we do not wake up. We don't see that we're in a state of suffering. The enlightened person wakes up to the fact that he or she is suffering – that's very important.

In Buddhism, to know that we are in a state of suffering is enlightenment. We all suffer, regardless of whatever conditions we have. We do not feel satisfied. We sit and, in a few minutes, we want to change our position. We have to move to reduce a sense of unease within us.

Take the analogy of a lake. We see that most fish move all the time. The few that stay stationary are enlightened ones. But most fish are not enlightened so they keep moving. Where are they going? The lake is so small. Only the fish that keep moving feel the boundary of the lake. The fishes that stay still do not, so they are liberated, they're free.

The Buddha, the Enlightened One, woke up to the root of our suffering. And what is that? We are a dynamic living system which means that often we are in a state of movement and

perturbation. There is some disturbance in our body, our mind all the time. As a dynamic system, we want to reach some kind of harmony, some kind of balance within us. We seek a balanced, harmonious state. The Buddha called it craving. The root of suffering is craving, craving for stability, for... something.

In the Plum Village tradition, we invite a bell of mindfulness to sound at various intervals. It is a technique or practice that helps us to return to the state of the stationary fish. We are moving, the bell sounds, and we stop. We come back to our inbreath and outbreath. We learn to be at peace with our breathing.

“Aware of my inbreath, I breathe in; aware of my outbreath, I breathe out. It is so wonderful to breathe in; it is so wonderful to breathe out.” After a few breaths taken with awareness, we calm down our physiological and mental craving.

Our breathing has two cycles: the in-cycle and the out-cycle. As human beings, we have two parts to the autonomic nervous system that regulates our physiology. The in-cycle of breathing activates the *sympathetic nervous system*. We take in oxygen, and we are ready for action; ready for running or whatever. The sympathetic nervous system activates a part of us called “*doing*”. The out-cycle of breathing activates our *parasympathetic nervous system*. That is the part of our nervous system that helps us relax. It activates a part of us that is *being* – just being there, relaxed. So, we have the in-cycle and the out-cycle, plus our awareness of breathing.

The physiological craving within us comes from a disharmony or “dis-synchronization” between these two aspects of our breathing – either too much of the sympathetic, or too much of the parasympathetic. When we shine the light of awareness on these two cycles, something amazing happens. The energy of love that comes out of this awareness begins to embrace the inbreath and the outbreath. The cycles begin to synchronize with each other, to come into balance and harmony. We begin to have a sense of well-being within us.

The more we train ourselves to be aware of our inbreath and outbreath, the more our feeling of uneasiness – that we are lacking something, that we need to search for something to secure our happiness and well-being – begins to calm down, begins to transform. Peace is the feeling that comes when we have a deep sense of well-being within us, when we feel rooted in the here and the now. So, is being peaceful possible? According to the Buddha, yes. But we need to train ourselves. It is not something that is given to us automatically. We have the *potential* to be peaceful. But we need to make it a reality.

Thay has said: “There is no way to peace, peace is the way”. Peace is not a state we reach, but a training, a way of living in which we learn to harmonize our two cycles of breathing so that, physically, we can sense that the two parts of our nervous system are synchronized.

With the outbreak of war early last year between Russia and Ukraine, and now war in the Middle East, there is an urgency for us to practice peace. The whole world needs to practice

being peaceful. The problems and crises of the world cannot be solved by one group of people. It requires a global effort. The whole world needs to practice being peaceful. It's so crucial at this time of war that the Buddha's teaching is communicated to people around the world because states of being unstable, out of harmony, being disturbed are always present within us. We need to practice calming them. The Buddha said that it's possible to do so when we know how to cultivate the energy of awareness. It is also called the energy of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is the capacity to be fully present for what is going on within and around us here and now. Often, the disharmony between our inbreath and outbreath gives rise to disharmony between our body and mind. Just like our inbreath and outbreath, they are not synchronized. Our body is here, and our mind is travelling somewhere else. There is this tension within us. Our body says: "Please come back." But our mind says: "Wait a minute, there is something more interesting out there." The body says: "I'm in pain." The mind says: "Don't worry. I'll come back later."

It's the same in our relationships. The disharmony between our body and mind gives rise to disharmony in our environment, our family, our society, our nation, other nations, and in the whole world. That's how it works. From a very small disturbance within our body and our mind, it radiates out and manifests bigger, bigger... to different relationships and, ultimately, to the whole world. Sometimes our beloved ones suffer very deeply but we are not there, we are not mindful. Our mind is somewhere else. We do not pay attention to the suffering going on in our family with our partner, our son, our daughter. We are not there for them. We are busy with different projects, business. Individual disturbances gradually spread out to become a collective disturbance that gives rise to collective suffering.

If we wish to change the situation, the Buddha advises us to start by training our mindfulness. First, learn to come back and to establish harmony in our breathing: "Aware of my inbreath, I breathe in; aware of my outbreath, I breathe out. Coming back to my breathing, feeling my breathing and feeling very happy with my breathing. Letting my mind calm down and releasing all the tension in my mind." Then: "Aware of my body; feeling my body and letting go all of the tension in my body..." We practice like this all day.

Sometimes we wish to live only for ourselves. We are not sensitive towards other people and their needs. This changes when we learn to establish harmony in our breathing. The energy of mindfulness helps to create harmony in our body and our mind. Then, we begin to radiate compassion and learn to embrace our environment – our friends, our family, our society. That is what the whole world needs to learn now. We need to embrace each other, to love each other and bring each other up to humanity's next stage of evolution. Our existence is much more meaningful when we can exist with other people around us. It is so beautiful when Israelis could live peacefully alongside the people of Gaza. And it is so beautiful when the people of Gaza could live peacefully alongside Israelis.

Like a garden with many flowers, life needs variety, variation, completeness. We need to train ourselves in that way of thinking. And that's called mindfulness. It's the energy that does not exclude anything. It's the energy that embraces everything and is happy with everything. It's what the word "mindFUL" means. Literally, the mind is "full". Many times, our mind is fragmented, divided. We live in a world of division. The practice is to make our mind full, to be complete, to be whole. With this type of mind, we do not exclude anyone. We learn to embrace everything. When we practice this way, our mind is full and becomes very peaceful.

According to the Avatamsaka Sutra, the mind of the Buddha expanded out and embraced the whole cosmos – multiple universes, infinite universes. That is the scale of the Buddha's mindfulness. Because of that, according to the Avatamsaka Sutra, the Buddha remained at his place of enlightenment – Bodhgaya in India. He remains there for infinite time (in other words, he didn't go around teaching the Dharma). The full mindfulness of the Buddha – this aspect of the Buddha – is called the dharmakaya, or the absolute body of the Buddha. It is everywhere, it does not move, it is there from the beginningless of time and will continue to be there until the end of time. The Buddha's energy of mindfulness is complete, is full, is expansive, is immense, is great and extends to the whole universe. So, his "absolute body" (dharmakaya) remains. The Buddha continues to be in this absolute concentration for infinite time. He doesn't move.

There is another aspect of the Buddha's body that goes round India to teach, and that's called the "nirmanakaya" or responding body; the body that is responding to the needs of living beings. So, the Buddha manifests in the form of a human and goes round and teaches. But, according to the Avatamsaka Sutra, there are infinite nirmanakaya bodies teaching the Dharma in different Buddha lands, different Buddha world systems. There is an infinite number of Buddhas.

We, too, have our dharmakaya: the degree of our mindfulness, the outward expansion of its energy. The more we practice mindfulness – when our mind is full and expanded – the energy of mindfulness becomes greater and greater, and we have the capacity to embrace all differences; we have the capacity to include everything in our lives. We don't want to eliminate anyone; we don't discriminate against anyone.

The constant movement of the fishes I mentioned earlier is like a craving for our idea, our opinion, our perspective to be fulfilled. We have a certain idea about life, and we want everyone to follow our idea. We have an opinion, and we want everyone to follow our opinion. The fish moves so that the opinion can be fulfilled. We want to force other people to follow our opinion, our idea. So, the fish within us is moving to force other people to follow our own way of life. But with the practice of mindfulness, it's okay. We let the other person be the way he or she is. We allow them to be themselves. We allow them to live. We allow them to manifest, and we allow co-existence between us and that other person. It's possible to have different perspectives and to live together. It's possible to have different opinions and to live together. That is mindfulness.

With the great degree of mindfulness he reached, the Buddha has the capacity to embrace everyone. He made a very beautiful declaration: “The world can be at war with me, but I have stopped all war. I am not at war with anyone.” In other words, the Buddha is saying: “I am not in conflict with anyone in the world. My mind is completely empty. I’m completely at peace. I am peace.” The Buddha was able to reach this state because of practicing in a way that allowed his mindfulness to grow infinitely.