

Healing the child within

THE CRY WE HEAR FROM KEEP IN OUR HEARTS, SAYS THICH NHAT HANH, COMES FROM THE WOUNDED CHILD WITHIN. HEALING THIS INNER CHILD'S PAIN WILL TRANSFORM NEGATIVE EMOTIONS.

In each of us, there is a young, suffering child. We have all had times of difficulty as children and many of us have experienced trauma. To protect and defend ourselves against future suffering, we often try to forget those painful times. Every time we're in touch with the experience of suffering, we believe we can't bear it, and we stuff our feelings and memories deep down in our unconscious mind. It may be that we haven't dared to face this child for many decades.

But just because we may have ignored the child doesn't mean she or he isn't there. The wounded child is always there, trying to get our attention. The child says, "I'm here. I'm here. You can't avoid me. You can't run away from me." We want to end our suffering by sending the child to a deep place inside, and staying as far away as possible. But running away doesn't end our suffering; it only prolongs it.

The wounded child asks for care and love, but we do the opposite. We run away because we're afraid of suffering. The block of pain and sorrow in us feels overwhelming. Even if we have time, we don't come home to ourselves. We try to keep ourselves constantly entertained—watching television or movies, socializing, or using alcohol or drugs—because we don't want to experience that suffering all over again.

The wounded child is there and we don't even know she is there. The wounded child in us is a reality, but we can't see her. That inability to see is a kind of ignorance. This child has been severely wounded. She or he really needs us to return. Instead we turn away.

Ignorance is in each cell of our body and our consciousness. It's like a drop of ink diffused in a glass of water. That ignorance stops us from seeing reality; it pushes us to do foolish things that make us suffer even more and wound again the already-wounded child in us.

The wounded child is also in each cell of our body. There is no cell of our body that does not have that wounded child in it. We don't have to look far into the past for that child. We only have to look deeply and we can be in touch with him. The suffering of that wounded child is lying inside us right now in the present moment.

But just as the suffering is present in every cell of our body, so are the seeds of awakened understanding and happiness handed down to us from our ancestors. We just have to use them. We have a lamp inside us, the lamp of mindfulness, which we can light anytime. The oil of that lamp is our breathing, our steps, and our peaceful smile. We have to light up that lamp of mindfulness so the light will shine out and the darkness will dissipate and cease. Our practice is to light up the lamp.

When we become aware that we've forgotten the wounded child in ourselves, we feel great compassion for that child and we begin to generate the energy of mindfulness. The practices of mindful walking, mindful sitting, and mindful breathing are our foundation. With our mindful

breath and mindful steps, we can produce the energy of mindfulness and return to the awakened wisdom lying in each cell of our body. That energy will embrace us and heal us, and will heal the wounded child in us.

Listening

When we speak of listening with compassion, we usually think of listening to someone else. But we must also listen to the wounded child inside us. Sometimes the wounded child in us needs all our attention. That little child might emerge from the depths of your consciousness and ask for your attention. If you are mindful, you will hear his or her voice calling for help. At that moment, instead of paying attention to whatever is in front of you, go back and tenderly embrace the wounded child. You can talk directly to the child with the language of love, saying, "In the past, I left you alone. I went away from you. Now, I am very sorry. I am going to embrace you." You can say, "Darling, I am here for you. I will take good care of you. I know you suffer so much. I have been so busy. I have neglected you, and now I have learned a way to come back to you." If necessary, you have to cry together with that child. Whenever you need to, you can sit and breathe with the child. "Breathing in, I go back to my wounded child; breathing out, I take good care of my wounded child."

You have to talk to your child several times a day. Only then can healing take place. Embracing your child tenderly, you reassure him that you will never let him down again or leave him unattended. The little child has been left alone for so long. That is why you need to begin this practice right away. If you don't do it now, when will you do it?

If you know how to go back to her and listen carefully every day for five or ten minutes, healing will take place. When you climb a beautiful mountain, invite your child within to climb with you. When you contemplate the sunset, invite her to enjoy it with you. If you do that for a few weeks or a few months, the wounded child in you will experience healing.

With practice, we can see that our wounded child is not only us. Our wounded child may represent several generations. Our mother may have suffered throughout her life. Our father may have suffered. Perhaps our parents weren't able to look after the wounded child in themselves. So when we're embracing the wounded child in us, we're embracing all the wounded children of our past generations. This practice is not a practice for ourselves alone, but for numberless generations of ancestors and descendants.

Our ancestors may not have known how to care for their wounded child within, so they transmitted their wounded child to us. Our practice is to end this cycle. If we can heal our wounded child, we will not only liberate ourselves, but we will also help liberate whoever has hurt or abused us. The abuser may also have been the victim of abuse. There are people who have practiced with their inner child for a long time who have had a lessening of their suffering and have experienced transformation. Their relationships with their family and friends have become much easier.

We suffer because we have not been touched by compassion and understanding. If we generate the energy of mindfulness, understanding, and compassion for our wounded child, we will suffer much less. When we generate mindfulness, compassion and understanding become possible, and

we can allow people to love us. Before, we may have been suspicious of everything and everyone. Compassion helps us relate to others and restore communication.

The people around us, our family and friends, may also have a severely wounded child inside. If we've managed to help ourselves, we can also help them. When we've healed ourselves, our relationships with others become much easier. There's more peace and more love in us.

Go back and take care of yourself. Your body needs you, your feelings need you, your perceptions need you. The wounded child in you needs you. Your suffering needs you to acknowledge it. Go home and be there for all these things. Practice mindful walking and mindful breathing. Do everything in mindfulness so you can really be there, so you can love.

The Energy of Mindfulness

The energy of mindfulness is the salve that will recognize and heal the child within. But how do we cultivate this energy?

We can divide consciousness into two parts. One part is mind consciousness and the other is store consciousness. Mind consciousness is our active awareness. Western psychology calls it "the conscious mind." To cultivate the energy of mindfulness, we try to engage our active awareness in all our activities and be truly present with whatever we are doing. We want to be mindful as we drink our tea or drive through the city. When we walk, we want to be aware that we are walking. When we breathe, we want to be aware that we are breathing.

Store consciousness, also called root consciousness, is the base of our consciousness. In Western psychology it's called "the unconscious mind." It's where all our past experiences are stored. Store consciousness has the capacity to learn and to process information.

Often our mind is not there with our body. Sometimes we go through our daily activities without mind consciousness being involved at all. We can do many things by means of store consciousness alone, and mind consciousness can be thinking of a thousand other things. For example, when we drive our car through the city, mind consciousness may not be thinking about driving at all, but we can still reach our destination without getting lost or having an accident. That is store consciousness operating on its own.

Consciousness is like a house in which the basement is our store consciousness and the living room is our mind consciousness. Mental formations like anger, sorrow, or joy, rest in the store consciousness in the form of seeds. We have a seed of anger, despair, discrimination, fear; a seed of mindfulness, compassion; a seed of understanding, and so on. Store consciousness is made of the totality of the seeds, and it is also the soil that preserves and maintains all the seeds. The seeds stay there until we hear, see, read, or think of something that touches a seed and makes us feel the anger, joy, or sorrow. This is a seed coming up and manifesting on the level of mind consciousness, in our living room. Now we no longer call it a seed, but a mental formation.

When someone touches the seed of anger by saying something or doing something that upsets us, that seed of anger will come up and manifest in mind consciousness as the mental formation of anger. The word "formation" is a term for something that's created by many conditions coming together. A marker pen is a formation; my hand, a flower, a table, a house, are all

formations. A house is a physical formation. My hand is a physiological formation. My anger is a mental formation. Varieties of seeds can manifest as mental formations. Anger is just one of them. In store consciousness, anger is called a seed. In mind consciousness, it's called a mental formation.

Whenever a seed, say the seed of anger, comes up into our living room and manifests as a mental formation, the first thing we can do is to touch the seed of mindfulness and invite it to come up too. Now we have two mental formations in the living room. This is mindfulness of anger. Mindfulness is always mindfulness of something. When we breathe mindfully, that is mindfulness of breathing. When we walk mindfully, that is mindfulness of walking. When we eat mindfully, that's mindfulness of eating. So in this case, mindfulness is mindfulness of anger. Mindfulness recognizes and embraces anger.

Our practice is based on the insight of nonduality—anger is not an enemy. Both mindfulness and anger are ourselves. Mindfulness is there not to suppress or fight against anger, but to recognize and take care of it—like a big brother helping a younger brother. So the energy of anger is recognized and embraced tenderly by the energy of mindfulness.

Every time we need the energy of mindfulness, we just touch that seed with our mindful breathing or mindful walking, smiling, and then we have the energy ready to do the work of recognizing, embracing, and later on looking deeply and transforming. Whatever we're doing, whether it's cooking, sweeping, washing, walking, or being aware of our breathing, we can continue to generate the energy of mindfulness, and the seed of mindfulness in us will become strong. Within the seed of mindfulness is the seed of concentration. With these two energies, we can liberate ourselves from afflictions.

The Mind Needs Good Circulation

We know there are toxins in our body. If our blood doesn't circulate well, these toxins accumulate. In order to remain healthy, our body works to expel the toxins. When the blood circulates well, the kidneys and the liver can do their job to dispel toxins. We can use massage to help the blood circulate better.

Our consciousness, too, may be in a state of bad circulation. We may have a block of suffering, pain, sorrow, or despair in us; it's like a toxin in our consciousness. We call this an internal formation or internal knot. Embracing our pain and sorrow with the energy of mindfulness is the practice of massaging our consciousness. When the blood doesn't circulate well, our organs can't function properly, and we get sick. When our psyche doesn't circulate well, our mind will become sick. Mindfulness stimulates and accelerates circulation throughout blocks of pain.

Occupying the Living Room

Our blocks of pain, sorrow, anger, and despair always want to come up into our mind consciousness, into our living room, because they've grown big and need our attention. They want to emerge, but we don't want these uninvited guests to come up because they're painful to look at. So we try to block their way. We want them to stay asleep down in the basement. We don't want to face them, so our habit is to fill the living room with other guests. Whenever we have ten or fifteen minutes of free time, we do anything we can to keep our living room

occupied. We call a friend. We pick up a book. We turn on the television. We go for a drive. We hope that if the living room is occupied, these unpleasant mental formations will not come up.

But all mental formations need to circulate. If we don't let them come up, it creates bad circulation in our psyche, and symptoms of mental illness and depression begin to manifest in our mind and body.

Sometimes when we have a headache, we take aspirin, but our headache doesn't go away. Sometimes this kind of headache can be a symptom of mental illness. Perhaps we have allergies. We think it's a physical problem, but allergies can also be a symptom of mental illness. We are advised by doctors to take drugs, but sometimes these will continue to suppress our internal formations, making our sickness worse.

Dismantling Barriers

If we can learn not to fear our knots of suffering, we slowly begin to let them circulate up into our living room. We begin to learn how to embrace them and transform them with the energy of mindfulness. When we dismantle the barrier between the basement and the living room, blocks of pain will come up and we will have to suffer a bit. Our inner child may have a lot of fear and anger stored up from being down in the basement for so long. There is no way to avoid it.

That is why the practice of mindfulness is so important. If mindfulness is not there, it is very unpleasant to have these seeds come up. But if we know how to generate the energy of mindfulness, it's very healing to invite them up every day and embrace them. Mindfulness is a strong source of energy that can recognize, embrace, and take care of these negative energies. Perhaps these seeds don't want to come up at first, perhaps there's too much fear and distrust, so we may have to coax them a bit. After being embraced for some time, a strong emotion will return to the basement and become a seed again, but weaker than before.

Every time you give your internal formations a bath of mindfulness, the blocks of pain in you become lighter. So give your anger, your despair, your fear, a bath of mindfulness every day. After several days or weeks of bringing them up daily and helping them go back down again, you create good circulation in your psyche.

The Function of Mindfulness

The first function of mindfulness is to recognize and not to fight. We can stop at any time and become aware of the child within us. When we recognize the wounded child for the first time, all we need to do is be aware of him or her and say hello. That's all. Perhaps this child is sad. If we notice this we can just breathe in and say to ourselves, "Breathing in, I know that sorrow has manifested in me. Hello, my sorrow. Breathing out, I will take good care of you."

Once we have recognized our inner child, the second function of mindfulness is to embrace him or her. This is a very pleasant practice. Instead of fighting our emotions, we are taking good care of ourselves. Mindfulness brings with her an ally—concentration. The first few minutes of recognizing and embracing our inner child with tenderness will bring some relief. The difficult emotions will still be there, but we won't suffer as much anymore.

After recognizing and embracing our inner child, the third function of mindfulness is to soothe and relieve our difficult emotions. Just by holding this child gently, we are soothing our difficult emotions and we can begin to feel at ease. When we embrace our strong emotions with mindfulness and concentration, we'll be able to see the roots of these mental formations. We'll know where our suffering has come from. When we see the roots of things, our suffering will lessen. So mindfulness recognizes, embraces, and relieves.

The energy of mindfulness contains the energy of concentration as well as the energy of insight. Concentration helps us focus on just one thing. With concentration, the energy of looking becomes more powerful and insight is possible. Insight always has the power of liberating us. If mindfulness is there, and we know how to keep mindfulness alive, concentration will be there too. And if we know how to keep concentration alive, insight will also come. The energy of mindfulness enables us to look deeply and gain the insight we need so that transformation is possible.

[Thich Nhat Hanh, <https://www.mindful.org/healing-the-child-within/>]