

The World Needs This Medicine
Siddhartha Buddha's Life and Teachings

Homage to Thay: We offer our deep gratitude to our teacher Thich Nhat Hanh for his deep understanding and clear explanations of the Buddha's life and teachings.

BK: Take the Arrows Out

As a wounded healer, like you, I've been trying to train myself to strengthen my dreams, to be slow to judge and quick to bless. But with the recent, and not so recent challenging people and events it has not been easy. I've caught myself spinning off, hardening around certain individuals and groups of people.

I tried analyzing, I tried logic, but I couldn't *think* my way out of my confusion and anger.

Then I read this, from Thay: "When the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked all would be lost," he said. "But if even one person on the boat remained calm and centered, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive."

I decided I'd try to get myself calm and centered in this world's rocky boat. So. I sat in meditation. And I walked in meditation. And I breathed. And after awhile—well, after several days—I smiled because I had a little insight: that it was the very people and events who were challenging me that were the *motivation* I needed to go to the Buddha's teachings to find compassionate ways to *respond* to the challenging, difficult, —we can say outrageous—speech, behavior, and beliefs.

Since all of the teachings of the Buddha focus on transforming suffering in ourselves so that we can offer happiness to others, it is important for us to learn to respond to

outrageousness with clarity that doesn't just *liberate* us from suffering but *transforms* the very way we see our fellow human beings.

We know that it is not just *others* who speak or act outrageously.

Do you sometimes respond outrageously when you're angry with —-(fill in the blank.)

Do you sometimes respond outrageously when you feel overwhelmed by —- (fill in the blank.)

How do you respond to *others'* outrageous words, actions, beliefs that you experience *directly*?

For example, drivers on the freeway?

How do you respond to others' outrageous words, actions and beliefs that you experience *indirectly* through the media?

For example:

mass shootings and Politician's outrageous speech and behavior

I'd like to offer 6 practices that can help us respond in appropriate ways—with strong dreams, slowness to judge and quickness to bless— to *our own* outrageousness as well as the outrageous words and behaviors we experience from others, both directly and indirectly.

1. Acknowledge when we are disturbed by our own or others' outrageousness. This is not easy for us because we hurt when we pay attention to our own difficult behavior and words or to the mean speech and actions of others. But since we can't transform something that we don't acknowledge exists, we must train ourselves in mindfulness. One way to do that is to listen to the messages our body/mind sends us.

For example: When I saw on the news teenagers fleeing their high school in Florida with their hands held high, I felt a tightening in my belly. That *edgy feeling* is the first

message our body/mind sends to make us aware that something is not “right.” Maybe you feel it in your shoulders or throat or chest. If we pay attention to that edgy message, since we are not yet very invested in the situation, we can easily respond to it in an appropriate way. “Appropriate” means a response that benefits us and others, that cultivates understanding, compassion and equanimity. If we ignore that message, our body/mind sends a stronger message.....

Our *whole body tightens*. Our jaws, shoulders, neck, arms, hands tighten. If we acknowledge the message we can still fairly easily respond with kindness. But if we ignore the message....

We begin to *talk to ourself*: we blame, shame, condemn, accuse the other. We justify our own point of view. We feel self-righteous.

It is more difficult to stop the momentum—the anger, the fear. But if we do to bring our attention to the message, we can stop and begin to heal.

If we do not acknowledge our suffering, we will....

Say something *out loud*, something that is not coming from our heart but from our suffering: from our anger, fear, disgust, self-righteousness, arrogance. If this loud message from our body/mind finally gets our attention we can stop. But if we ignore this message, too, we....

Act out in some unwholesome—maybe malicious— way.

Anywhere along the way we could choose to become mindful and stop, even transform our strong emotions. But if we don’t acknowledge the messages that our body and mind send us, we end up responding with words or actions that are without compassion or empathy, without kindness or understanding. And of course, the suffering is not transformed.

Those who speak or act outrageously are stuck in one of the last 2 steps— outrageous speech or action. Their body/mind sent *all* of the messages— from edginess to outrageousness, but they—like we do sometimes— ignored the messages and ended up suffering and *causing* suffering.

So first we acknowledge our suffering.

2. Be aware of your tendency to overreact to outrageousness. The Buddha tells us that nothing can survive without food. Are you feeding the outrageous ones with your reaction to them?

Do the outrageous ones who act or speak in such provocative ways depend on our overreacting to them? Is that one of the reasons for their outrageousness?

Do you at some level like the excitement, the drama that happens when you indirectly observe these outrageous events? After the mass shooting in Florida in February, an NRA spokeswoman said, “Many in legacy media love mass shootings. You guys love it. I’m not saying that you love the tragedy, but I am saying that you love the ratings. Crying white mothers are ratings gold.” Do you help, maybe not so crudely so cruelly, but do you at some level help make “ratings gold”?

Thay says when you are angry or fearful or feeling some other strong emotion to say nothing. Get still, our teacher says, sit on your cushion or chair, or do walking meditation. Bring your attention to your in-breath and out-breath. Allow your attention to your breathing calm your body. Let it put your mind at ease.

So be aware if you are overacting to outrageousness.

3. It is too easy and not helpful to dismiss an outrageous person as “crazy” or “a monster.” Instead, you must reflect on the possible reasons for the outrageous behavior/speech/beliefs so that you can cultivate understanding.

For example, what are some of the forces that have led to the racism and misogyny that we’ve listened to and observed?

My list includes: fear, ignorance, economic causes such as loss of jobs, wanting to be with what is familiar, family beliefs/ history; desire to exploit others, low self-esteem, peer pressure, lack of empathy, desire for power.

When we manage to understand someone we don’t like, especially a difficult person, an outrageous person —including ourselves—it gives us a chance to discover the sweet child within.

Cultivate understanding.

4. Be mindful of your own dualistic thinking as well as the dualistic thinking of the outrageous ones. Because of our ancient evolutionary history, neuroscientists tell us that our minds are *programed* to organize ourselves into tribes—us vs. them—so even after all these eons— it easy to think of ourselves as separate from others. But we know we can never come together in peace if we think we are separate; if we think Neo-Nazis and the KKK and the terrorists and the outrageous politicians and the AK-15 enthusiasts are not in us; if we think we are not in them.

Be aware of dualistic thinking.

5. Remember that outrageousness comes in beautiful as well as ugly packages. What is more outrageous than a full moon? Trees turning brilliant yellow, red, orange and gold? Friends who spend a week-end together looking deeply within? A young man who urges us to take the arrows out?

When our lives get out of balance, we feel hopeless and helpless if we forget to look for and listen for the outrageously *beautiful*.

Our teacher says: When we live in mindfulness miracles are everywhere.

Be aware of the outrageously beautiful.

6. We do not want to be frozen by outrageous events and people any more than we want to over-react to them. Our aspiration is to use *whatever* comes to us as a teaching, a tool for creating the slowness to judge—understanding— and the quickness to bless—compassion— in ourselves and in all beings—-even those human beings who act in horrific, vulgar, offensive, disgusting ways; even if they are spewing the language of hate and fear, even if they destroy whole cities of people, even if they re-load and re-load and re-load their automatic rifles; even if they hold high office.

If we *fight* back with our own words of anger, hate and fear, or with sticks or rocks or guns we might feel relief, satisfaction, maybe even pride for a little while but that is not the lasting freedom we want for ourselves and all beings.

MLK Jr.: "The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind."

Only if we speak and act with compassion and understanding—if we are slow to judge and quick to bless— can we transform our own anger and fear; stop these mass murders, and end violent demonstrations, racism, hatred, and outrageous speech.

Each of us can do—must do—something. Some of us will decide to spend more time and energy training ourselves in the practices of understanding, compassion, openness, inclusivity. Some of us will write letters to our President or to people in Congress, to the NRA or to companies that are harming living beings or contributing to the suffering of our earth. Some of us will send messages of love, kindness and equanimity on social media. Those of us who are activists might organize peaceful demonstrations. Some of us will offer songs or poetry, beautiful works of art or inspiring stories. Others of us will organize compassionate meditations, days of mindfulness, retreats, get-togethers, parties.

In her poem, *Clearing*, Martha Postlewaite also offers this guideline for taking action:

“Do not try to save the whole world or do anything grandiose.

Instead, create a clearing in the dense forest of your life and wait there patiently, until the song that is your life falls into your own cupped hands and you recognize and greet it.

Only then will you know how to give yourself to this world so worthy of rescue.”

The Buddha said, “You see *me*, you see my teachings. You see my teachings you see me.” So today let’s see how studying the life of the Buddha can help us “create a clearing in the dense forest of our life.” What we can learn about our own inward journey—and about moving out into the world with our medicine— by studying the Buddha’s life? What was *his* spiritual aspiration? What were his *strong dreams*? *Where* did he seek answers? What joys did he experience? What frustrations and obstacles did he encounter and how did he respond to them? What did he let go of?

No one can tell with any certainty the story of the Buddha's life because there are few recorded details.

Not having his biography is disappointing—it would be really helpful to know with certainty how he lived. But since we don't, in our story today I will use what we do *know* and imagine the rest.

We know that when he was sixteen, Siddhartha married his cousin, Yashodhara who was also sixteen. Notwithstanding the stories you might have heard about these two teenagers—that Siddhartha didn't know there was such a thing as sickness, or old age or death; that Yashodhara was gorgeous and a great dancer—I offer this version which *I think might be the true story*:

After their marriage, these two kind, compassionate, caring teenagers worked together for thirteen years to help the people in nearby villages—caring for the sick, helping those who suffered in their old age, consoling those who grieved.

As they worked together, over the years the two youngsters began to feel the tug to be of service in *different* ways. Yashodhara wanted to start a family—to make a contribution to the world in a focused personal way by raising children. Siddhartha was pulled to find answers to questions he'd been asking about suffering since childhood. Eventually, the two sensitive young people agreed on a deal: Yashodhara would have a baby and Siddhartha would “Go Forth.”

In the 6th century BCE in India and in a few other countries Going Forth was a very popular practice for seekers. The times were difficult—people were changing from an agricultural society to an urban society, there was economic upheaval, the caste system was being questioned, probably politicians were groping women and writing dumb tweets.....so some men—and a very few women—left their families for “the holy life.” People didn't regard these renunciants as dropouts; they thought of them as spiritual pioneers, seekers who were “Going Forth” in order to find ways to bring an end to suffering for all people.

In time the baby was born. A boy. Siddhartha and Yashodhara, looking at him in parental awe, must have said,—the way we all do: “Oh he’s so beautiful.” And of course he was. So *maybe* Siddhartha began to have second thoughts about Going Forth. It is likely that he meditated on the situation.

Maybe I should stay home and take care of my wife and beautiful baby boy. *Maybe* I should do as my father asks and become the next warrior king of our realm. I could conquer new lands and be rich. Famous. Powerful. *Maybe* I should....but Oh I so want to find the end to suffering.

Maybe Siddhartha’s uncertainty is the reason he named his baby boy Rahula. Which means fetter. Hinderance. Ball and chain. Shackles.

In my imagination when the time came for Siddhartha to Go Forth, he went to his wife’s room to say—maybe he was going to say good-bye or maybe he went to say he had changed his mind, that he was not Going Forth, that he was going to stay.

I picture Yashodhara laying still next to the sleeping baby. She heard Siddhartha lift the curtain and she thought, “If his eyes meet mine, he’ll lose his nerve and stay. And he wants so much to go.” So she rolled over, pretending to sleep, hiding the sleeping Rahula from his view.

I imagine Siddhartha pausing, and with tears in his eyes—joy? sadness? both?—he bowed to the two of them and he left the room.

Early the next morning Siddhartha cut off his hair, put on a robe and—this part is on record— joined the large crowds of wandering men who called themselves ‘forest monks.’

Having let go of his “fettters” he became the forest monk, Gotama and began seeking answers to, as Guy Noir says, “Life’s Persistent Questions.”

Gotama studied with the best teachers in India. One taught him to “look for holiness everywhere.” Years later, “looking for holiness everywhere” became the Buddha’s

teaching that we call “mindfulness.” The teacher asked Gotama to stay and be his assistant but Gotama felt he had learned all he could from that teacher, so he left—to continue seeking elsewhere.

He found another teacher who taught that enlightenment could only be attained through direct experience. Years later, when he became the Buddha, this was at the heart of his teachings. “Don’t believe me,” the Buddha always warned. “Believe only your own experiences.”

After learning what he could, Gotama abandoned his second teacher and continued his journey.

The next teacher taught Gotama to observe the five prohibitions which we now call the Five Mindfulness Trainings.

Gotama was a very good student but he was not satisfied with the teachings so he abandoned his studies and, continuing his search, joined five forest monks who were practicing asceticism, a popular practice with some of the Going Forth crowd. It was based on the belief that extreme austerity was the way to acquire wisdom because it reduced “useless impediments”—like clothes, shelter, sleep, food. Gotama fasted, eventually eating almost nothing. He held his breath until he felt violent pain and fell senseless to the ground. He wore no clothes or wore robes made of rags he scavenged from graveyards or garbage heaps. When he slept, he slept sitting up, in the open in the forest.

His hair fell out, his skin became black and withered.

Finally Gotama realized that asceticism was also not going to reveal the end of suffering. He abandoned his 5 friends and the practice of asceticism.

After six years, we can imagine that Gotama was feeling a little bit discouraged. So he stopped. “I will look inward,” he thought. “I will be still and listen to my own wisdom.”

We are told that Gotama meditated for forty-nine days and forty-nine nights.

When he knew he was close to attaining enlightenment he found a sal tree and as he sat down under it he said to himself, or maybe he said it out loud, there was no one around to record the event, “I will sit here until I achieve enlightenment.”

Gotama wasn't just breathing and smiling under that holy tree. He was still seeking—questioning himself. This questioning has been personified over the eons into the character, Mara. Mara—Gotama's doubting mind—first questioned whether he was worthy to seek enlightenment, then tempted him with sex, fame, money, power—as his father had done years earlier.

Gotama sat solid and still through it all, and as we know, when the sun rose, he attained enlightenment. He became the the One Who Is Awake: the Buddha.

Like the Buddha's journey, ours is not a straight nor smooth path. He took and we take detours. He ran down blind alleys. We do too. He bumped into obstacles that he himself created as well as obstacles created by others.

We do the same.

And we make things worse by the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and our journey. That second arrow!

Sometimes we get so exhausted that we want to give the whole thing up.

Like the Buddha, we doubt ourselves.

And a some point, we find joy and ease on our journey and we think, ah ha, now I am home, my journey is finished. I can rest.

And then we discover, just like the Buddha did, that the journey inward, this journey into ourselves never ends.

Remember the Buddha said,

See me, see my teachings. See my teachings, see me.

So let's look briefly at one of the Buddha's teachings: His first teaching after his enlightenment which was also his last teaching. In fact, he said that all of his teachings were The Four Noble Truths.

This is how the Maggga-Vibhanga Sutra described one of those times when the Buddha taught the Four noble truths:

"In the town of Savathi every child knew the name of the illustrious Buddha and every house was ready to fill the alms bowls of Gotama's silently begging disciples. Near the town was Gotama's favorite abode, the Jetavana grove, which the rich merchant Anathapindika, a great devotee of the Illustrious One, had presented to him and his followers.

"The Illustrious One spoke in a soft but firm voice, taught the four main points, taught the Eightfold Path; patiently he covered the usual method of teaching with examples and repetition. Clearly and quietly his voice was carried to his listeners--like a light, like a star in the heavens."

In the first noble truth, the Buddha's insight was that we don't find *permanent* happiness or satisfaction in *anything* we experience. The pleasures we seek evaporate quickly and leave us craving for more. (We'll see in a moment that this is exactly what 21st century evolutionary biologists teach now, 2,550 years later.)

"You will," the Buddha said, "experience dukkha." The most popular translation of dukkha is "suffering." But by "dukkha" the Buddha also meant stress, discomfort, disappointment, dissatisfaction, annoyance as well as deep pain and suffering.

"*Why* do we experience unhappiness? *Why* do we suffer?"

Those evolutionary scientists I mentioned earlier say that evolution points to the answers.

What evolution did, they say, though of course not consciously, was “design” human brains to *do* what would assure the continuity of humans into the future and to *not* do what would interfere with that goal.

So here are three “strategies” evolution “uses” to keep our human species alive:

1. Since we are animals, and animals seek pleasure, evolution makes achieving its goal—moving our human species into the future—be pleasant. For example, humans need to eat so natural selection assures that eating feels pleasant to us. Humans need to reproduce so sex feels pleasant.
2. But the pleasure humans feel *has to be* temporary because if —for example—after eating, humans are satisfied forever, we wouldn’t be motivated to eat again. And if the bliss from having sex lasts a life-time, there wouldn’t be many baby humans going into the future.
3. Evolution makes sure that the human brain focuses more on the fact that pleasure will accompany the things that help our genes continue into future generations than on the fact that our pleasure will last only a short time. In other words, it is important that we experience pleasure, that the pleasure be impermanent and that we forget the impermanence part.

That is the Buddha’s first noble truth: you will experience discomfort.

Why? Because if you don’t the human species will disappear.

We are *programed* to be uncomfortable, dissatisfied; we are *programed* to suffer! It’s unfair, but natural selection is not interested in making us happy. It is only interested in our continuation.

Lucky for us though, the Buddha *is* interested in making us happy. He acknowledges that discomfort is *not optional* but he says— and the 21st century scientists confirm— your heart-mind (The Buddha didn’t separate the two) which is programed to be

dissatisfied is also programmed to understand, analyze, remember, plan and love. This is the second noble truth: you can figure out *why* you're in love, or angry, or hungry and you can figure out what to *do* about it.

Understanding the causes of our dukkha—Noble Truth #2— leads naturally to the third noble truth: With our heart-mind we can train ourselves not to grasp for or cling to— anything: appreciation, ease, chocolate. And we can train ourselves not to *resist* disagreeable situations, even pain. If we are aware that we are grasping or clinging or resisting, we have a brain with a heart that will help us create a way to stop.

The Buddha proposed this question:

“Suppose there were a bronze cup of beverage possessing a good color, smell, and taste, but it was mixed with poison, and a man came who wanted to live, not to die, who wanted pleasure and recoiled from pain. What do you think, would that man drink that cup of beverage, knowing: 'If I drink this I will incur death or deadly suffering'?”

Of course we answer “no” to that question like the monastics listening to the Buddha did. But. Sometimes we *do* know the beverage in the bronze cup is poisonous and we drink from it anyway. It's not the *truth* that's painful but the *consequences* of *acknowledging* the truth.

If I acknowledged the truth that sugar is harmful to me I'd have to stop eating brownies. If we fully acknowledged the truth of climate change we'd have to change some of the comfortable ways we live.

The Buddha then asks if we'd drink from a foul-tasting cup (containing, he said, among other things, fermented urine) if we knew it would heal us. Well, I will admit that I hate cough syrup so much I'd rather cough all night than take the nasty stuff.

The pleasure/pain reflex programmed in us by natural selection is so strong that it overrides our reasoning and makes us act against our own welfare. Our freedom lies in our ability to use the more evolved parts of our brain to override those primitive elements.

The third Noble Truth assures us that we can *do* something about our dukkha. In fact, we can actually *use* our dissatisfaction— our suffering— to *transform* our suffering. We can use our suffering to cultivate our happiness. Pretty radical, revolutionary teaching!

I'm thinking that there were just three noble truths for a period of time before the Buddha realized that we human beings needed *a little bit more* guidance.

So he gave us the fourth Noble Truth which describes an eight- fold path that protects us from suffering and leads us to our happiness.

Although the Buddha talks about the eight as “right”—Right View, Right Thought and so on— in this case “right” does not mean the opposite of “wrong.” Rather “Right View” means more like Skillful View. Then: Wholesome Thought. Beneficial Speech. Kind Action. Virtuous Livelihood. Nourishing Effort. Natural Mindfulness. Beneficial Concentration.

According to the Maggga-Vibhanga Sutra, the Buddha's Dharma Talk on the Four Noble Truths and the Eight-Fold Path ends simply: “That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the monks delighted at his words.”

Sing: I have arrived. I am home. The Realms of the Mind



May the fruit of our study of the Buddha's life and our study and practice of the Four Noble Truths, including the eight-fold path *delight* and benefit us—which includes our teacher and all beings.

Terry Cortés-Vega, True Virtuous Action
Dharmacharya
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For Discussion: What did Buddha do when he ran into blind alleys? How did he respond to his disappointments? What can we learn from his journey that will guide us on ours?