

TEACHINGS

THICH NHAT HANH

Fear of Silence

While we can connect to others more readily than ever before, are we losing our connection to body and mind? A Zen master thinks so, and offers a nourishing conscious breathing practice as a remedy.

By Thich Nhat Hanh

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I have the impression that many of us are afraid of silence. We're always taking in something—text, music, radio, television, or thoughts—to occupy the space. If quiet and space are so important for our happiness, why don't we make more room for them in our lives.

One of my longtime students has a partner who is very kind, a good listener, and not overly talkative; but at home her partner always needs to have the radio or TV on, and he likes a newspaper in front of him while he sits and eats his breakfast.

I know a woman whose daughter loved to go to sitting meditation at the local Zen temple and encouraged her to give it a try. The daughter told her, "It's really easy, Mom. You don't have to sit on the floor; there are chairs available. You don't have to do anything at all. We just sit quietly." Very truthfully the woman replied, "I think I'm afraid to do that."



We can feel lonely even when we're surrounded by many people. We are lonely together. There is a vacuum inside us. We don't feel comfortable with that vacuum, so we try to fill it up or make it go away. Technology supplies us with many devices that allow us to "stay connected." These days, we are always "connected," but we continue to feel lonely. We check incoming e-mail and social media sites multiple times a day. We e-mail or post one message after another. We want to share; we want to receive. We busy ourselves all day long in an effort to connect.

What are we so afraid of? We may feel an inner void, a sense of isolation, of sorrow, of restlessness. We may feel desolate and unloved. We may feel that we lack something important. Some of these feelings are very old and have been with us always, underneath all our doing and our thinking. Having plenty of stimuli makes it easy for us to distract ourselves from what we're feeling. But when there is silence, all these things present themselves clearly.

Practice: Nourishing

When feeling lonely or anxious, most of us have the habit of looking for distractions, which often leads to some form of unwholesome consumption—whether eating a snack in the absence of hunger, mindlessly surfing the Internet, going on a drive, or reading. Conscious breathing is a good way to nourish body and mind with mindfulness. After a mindful breath or two, you may have less desire to fill yourself up or distract yourself. Your body and mind come back together and both are nourished by your mindfulness of breathing. Your breath will naturally grow more relaxed and help the tension in your body to be released.

Related: Dropping Distraction

Coming back to conscious breathing will give you a nourishing break. It will also make your mindfulness stronger, so when you want to look into your anxiety or other emotions you'll have the calm and concentration to be able to do so.

Guided meditation has been practiced since the time of the Buddha. You can practice the following exercise when you sit or walk. In sitting meditation, it's important for you to be

the first line of the meditation below silently to yourself, and with the out-breath say the second line. With the following in-and out-breaths, you can use just the key words.

Breathing in, I know I'm breathing in.

Breathing out, I know I'm breathing out.

(In. Out.)

Breathing in, my breath grows deep.

Breathing out, my breath grows slow.

(Deep. Slow.)

Breathing in, I'm aware of my body.

Breathing out, I calm my body.

(Aware of body. Calming.)

Breathing in, I smile.

Breathing out, I release.

(Smile. Release.)

Breathing in, I dwell in the present moment.

Breathing out, I enjoy the present moment.

(Present moment. Enjoy.)



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Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–2022) was a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, author, and peace activist who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King Jr.



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