

Opinion How Thich Nhat Hanh taught the West about mindfulness

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“Breathing in, I see that this body is not me. Breathing out, I am not caught in this body. I am life without limit. I have never been born and I will never die.” The man who taught this, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, has died at age 95.

Aside from the Dalai Lama, Hanh was arguably the best-known Buddhist in the Western world. He came to the West in 1961 to teach Buddhism and comparative religion at Princeton and Columbia universities, and attained wide attention through his opposition to the Vietnam War and friendship with Martin Luther King Jr., who called him an “apostle of peace.” Hanh went on to become an author (selling more than 3 million books in the United States alone), started a school of Buddhism largely for Westerners that attracted thousands of adherents, and led seminars at institutions including the World Bank, Google and Harvard University.

Hanh’s greatest contribution to Western thinking was to inject the idea of mindfulness: to be fully conscious in the current moment. He believed mindfulness was the secret not just to happiness but to being authentically alive.

Humans have a remarkable ability to exist outside the present moment. Indeed, the quintessential humanness of the mind is the ability to re-run past events and pre-run future scenarios. This is a great blessing, of course, as it allows us to learn maximally from our experiences and effectively practice for the future.

But it is also a curse. Hanh explains this in his 1975 book “The Miracle of Mindfulness”: “While washing the dishes, one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing the dishes.” Why? If we are thinking about the past or future, “we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes.” We are either reliving a past that is dead or “sucked away into the future” that exists merely in concept. Only to be mindful, therefore, is to be truly alive.

So simple — but, of course, devilishly hard, as any beginning meditator can attest. The trick, Hanh taught, is practice in everyday activities, such as, well, washing the dishes. But it also requires mastery of a second concept that, like mindfulness, was also mostly unfamiliar to Westerners before Hanh’s work: non-attachment.

Our attachments distract us from being truly present in our lives. Attachments to what? Most obviously, to possessions. In “The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching” (1999), Hanh tells the story of the Buddha and a group of monks “eating lunch mindfully together,” when a local farmer bursts in and agitatedly asks them if they have seen his cows, which have run away. He adds that this has added to his misfortune because his sesame crop has just been devoured by insects. After the farmer leaves, the Buddha turns to his monks and says, “Dear friends, do you know you are the happiest people on Earth? You have no cows or sesame plants to lose.”

But attachment goes deeper than mere possessions. In an observation particularly trenchant to the current moment in America, he wrote, “Humankind suffers very much from attachment to views.” A dedication to being *right* distracts from attention to others in the present moment. Similarly, Hanh talked of attachment to anger and anxiety, noting that holding on to these emotions is entirely voluntary. Let them go; after all, they are merely phantasms from the past or future.

Perhaps it strikes you as ironic that the sage who declared, “I will never die,” has died. But there is no contradiction here. Hanh taught the Buddhist understanding that death is an illusion. Consciousness begins before biological life starts and continues after it ends: “Birth and death are only a door through which we go in and out.”

The big challenge, as Thich Nhat Hanh saw it, is not to be alive after biological death — his or yours. It’s to be alive right now.