THICH NHAT HANH

# For A Future To Be Possible

## *Commentaries on the Five Mindfulness Trainings*

with

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Revised Edition

*"At the foundation of each of these trainings is mindfulness. Mindfulness ensures a safe and happy present and a safe and happy future. I believe these Five Mindfulness Trainings are medicine for our time. I urge you to practice them as they are presented here, or go back to your own tradition and shed light on the jewels that are already there..."*

—from the Introduction

The Five Mindfulness Trainings—protecting life, acting with generosity, behaving responsibly in sexual relationships, speaking and listening deeply and mindfully, and avoiding substance abuse—are the basic statement of ethics and morality in Buddhism. In *For A Future To Be Possible*, Zen master and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh and fourteen prominent co-authors discuss these Five Mindfulness Trainings and offer insights and challenges for how they might play an important role in our personal lives and in society. Nhat Hanh calls the Five Trainings a "diet for a mindful society," and he hopes that this book will launch a discussion, transcending sectarian boundaries, on how we can agree upon and practice moral guidelines that will allow us to sustain a compassionate and sane life together.

*"Thich Nhat Hanh has written a strong version of the Five Buddhist Mindfulness Trainings; it will inspire us and our difficult end-of-the-Twentieth-Century world. His thinking has gone through fire—war in and outside of Vietnam, the destruction and building of communities, the conditions of life in the East and in the West. These are the precepts of Buddhism as they have evolved through the most exacting tests."* —Maxine Hong Kingston

*"These mindfulness trainings are an appropriate standard of behavior for nations, institutions, and corporations, as well as for individuals. We must ask no less of our country than we ask of ourselves."* —Patricia Marx Ellsberg

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# *Precepts*

David Steindl-Rast

Precepts fascinate me. Not the task of keeping them; that's not what I mean, but their variety throughout the world. The moral precepts of different ages and cultures display a rich texture of human diversity which I find captivating. My thrill reminds me of my mother's button box, when I was five; or of the seashells I bring home from a morning walk on the beach and arrange on the tabletop by size and color and shape. It's a basic human fascination with sameness in difference and difference in sameness.

My friend Graham Carey tapped the source of this thrill when he surprised his children one Christmas with a home-made book, later published as *The Tail Book:* page after page, nothing but animal tails, from fox to lizard, from lion to swallow, from the peacock's fan to our own almost invisible tailbone. Children never fail to find delight in variations. And the child in us never tires of them either, be they Mozart's variations on "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" or Mother Nature's endless variations on the night sky. That's one reason why I find the worldwide diversity of precepts and taboos so thrilling.

The hitchhiker with his skullcap and earlocks whom I took along, one day in New England, nervously eyed the Swiss army knife with which I was about to slice the cheese and apples we shared. What else had I been cutting with this knife? Meat? I admired the mindfulness with which he kept

utensils used with milk products separate from those used with meat, following orthodox Jewish precepts. I respected that same mindfulness and dedication when we had to drive fast to get him to a friend's house before sundown, that Friday night, when his Sabbath rest began.

The same preoccupations with keeping precepts struck me on the other side of the world, in New Zealand. Aotearoa, as the Maoris call it, the "Land of the Long White Cloud," is one of the few places where a native population has never been defeated by the white conquerors. *Pakiha* (the whites) live side by side with Maoris, but they are often unaware of their neighbors' taboos. I remember the deep distress of a Maori woman, when her new Pakiha neighbors hung dish towels ("tea towels" they call them down-under) next to T-shirts on the clothesline to dry. Never, never must things that have to do with food come in contact with clothes.

In India, even the best-intentioned tourist may cause an uproar in the crowd by inadvertently walking counterclockwise around a holy image. Turning one's left shoulder towards something sacred would be far worse in Calcutta than offering someone one's left hand for a handshake in London. Of course, the line between sacred precepts and social conventions gets blurred here. Yet these two areas may be more deeply connected than we think. By looking more closely at those precepts, taboos, and conventions that seem arbitrary to us, we may be able to catch sight of something below the surface, a common ground for the great variety of phenomena. By listening closely to the confusing variety

of precepts we may begin to hear a theme of which they are variations.

Here we must confront the decisive question: is there a common theme expressed in the dazzling variety of precepts all over the world? My answer is yes, and the theme is a sense of belonging.

We might call it "outlandish," when someone uses the left hand for a handshake instead of the right. Precisely: that's not what one who belongs to our land does. One of our own wouldn't do that. For worshippers in India counterclockwise circumambulation is equally outlandish, but with the added dimension of religious sanction. Every act of worship strengthens the bonds that connect us with the Ultimate. At the same time, it strengthens the bonds that connect us with those who worship as we do. Worship is—according to the root meaning of the word—an expression of reverence for what is most worthy of honor. It is not restricted to a theistic, not even to a narrowly religious context. It gives, on the other hand, religious weight to anything we do with a view to our ultimate values. In this sense, following religious precepts is an act of worship.

For Maoris, their rootedness in tradition is an ultimate value. It connects them with their ancestors and with all that their ancestors held holy—Earth, Sea, and Sky, all creatures who share this world with us, and all the invisible Presences in this Earth home of ours. The keeping of any taboo strengthens the bonds of belonging to that home of all, which Gary Snyder so aptly calls the Earth Household.

Our orthodox Jewish friend has a much smaller community in mind, the narrow circle of those who worship like

him. Primarily, however, he doesn't have humans in mind at all, but God. Yet where did he learn God's precepts, if not in a community? And is it not through bonding with that community that he belongs to God? And is not that sense of belonging the bliss he is following through meticulous mindfulness in daily practice? From what seems to others mere social convention, all the way to love of God and neighbor, the precepts are all of one piece for orthodox believers, for they are so many different expressions of ultimate belonging.

With this belonging goes a separation from all those who don't belong. In fact, the many precepts of separating—milk products from meat products, eating from all other body functions, and countless similar taboos in different traditions—all express and emphasize the theme of separating from those who do not belong. This is the shadow of the theme of belonging. The positive theme of every moral code that ever existed could be summarized in the words: this is how one behaves towards those to whom one belongs. Beyond this circle of belonging are the outsiders. Moral code differs from moral code not in its essence, not at all, but only in how exclusively or inclusively we draw the circle of belonging.

We have reached a threshold in human history, today. From now on morality must either be all-inclusive or it becomes immoral. In our world there is no more room for outsiders. And our sense of belonging must include not only humans, but animals, plants, and all the inanimate furniture of our Earth Household. Nothing will do any more, but the widest possible horizon of belonging.

That is why we see two momentous moral changes happening in our time. All precept structures based on exclusiveness are breaking down, belonging to the past. A new appreciation for precepts based on a universal sense of belonging is fast gaining ground, belonging to the future. Of all our religious precepts only those will survive which are the expression of limitless belonging, but those will indeed survive. They will be shaping the future if there is to be a future.

More and more people are beginning to realize that the survival of our planet depends on our sense of belonging—to all other humans, to dolphins caught in dragnets, to chickens and pigs and calves raised in animal concentration camps, to redwoods and rainforests, to kelp beds in our oceans, and to the ozone layer. More and more people are becoming aware that every act that affirms this belonging is a moral act of worship, the fulfillment of a precept written in every human heart.

This is ultimately why precepts fascinate me, those falling into disuse as well as those that will last as long as humans are human: they are variations on one and the same theme, a theme that challenges the human heart anew in every age. What fascinated me at the outset was the amazing diversity of precepts. What thrills me on second thought is the one great challenge that speaks with such diverse tongues, the challenge to say "yes" wholeheartedly, a limitless "yes" to belonging.

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