



OpenEye

Mindful Space

See for Yourself

Steady Heart + Mind

The Heart of the Matter

- Thich Nhat Hahn

My desire for achievement has led to much suffering. No matter what I do, it never feels like it's enough. How can I make peace with myself?

The quality of your action depends on the quality of your being. Suppose you're eager to offer happiness, to make someone happy. That's a good thing to do. But if you're not happy, then you can't do that. In order to make another person happy, you have to be happy yourself. So there's a link between doing and being. If you don't succeed in being, you can't succeed in doing. If you don't feel that you're on the right path, happiness isn't possible. This is true for everyone; if you don't know where you're going, you suffer. It's very important to realize your path and see your true way.

Happiness means feeling you are on the right path every moment. You don't need to arrive at the end of the path in order to be happy. The right path refers to the very concrete ways you live your life in every moment. In Buddhism, we speak of the Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. It's possible for us to live the Noble Eightfold Path every moment of our daily lives. That not only makes us happy, it makes people around us happy. If you practice the path, you become very pleasant, very fresh, and very compassionate.

I am busy from early in the morning until late at night. I am rarely alone. Where can I find a time and place to contemplate in silence?

Silence is something that comes from your heart, not from outside. Silence doesn't mean not talking and not doing things; it means that you are not disturbed inside. If you're truly silent, then no matter what situation you find yourself in you can enjoy the silence. There are moments when you think you're silent and all around is silent, but talking is going on all the time inside your head. That's not silence. The practice is how to find silence in all the activities you do.

Let us change our way of thinking and our way of looking. We have to realize that silence comes from our heart and not from the absence of talk. Sitting down to eat your lunch may be an opportunity for you to enjoy silence; though others may be speaking, it's possible for you to be very silent inside. The Buddha was surrounded by thousands of monks. Although he walked, sat, and ate among the monks and the nuns, he always dwelled in his silence. The Buddha made it very clear that to be alone, to be quiet, does not mean you have to go into the forest. You can live in the sangha, you can be in the marketplace, yet you still enjoy the silence and the solitude. Being alone does not mean there is no one around you.

Being alone means you are established firmly in the here and the now and you become aware of what is happening in the present moment. You use your mindfulness to become aware of every feeling, every perception you have. You're aware of what's happening around you in the sangha, but you're always with yourself, you don't lose yourself. That's the Buddha's definition of the ideal practice of solitude: not to be caught in the past or carried away by the future, but always to be here, body and mind united, aware of what is happening in the present moment. That is real solitude.

Making Friends with Ourselves

- Pema Chodron

Whenever we practice meditation, it is important to try to refrain from criticizing ourselves about how we practice and what comes up in our practice. This would only be training in being hard on ourselves! I want to emphasize the importance of maintaining an atmosphere of unconditional friendliness when you practice and as you take your practice out into the world. We can practice for a lot of years—I know many people who have practiced for countless years, decades even—and somewhere along into their umpteenth

year, it dawns on them that they haven't been using that practice to develop lovingkindness for themselves. Rather, it's been somewhat aggressive meditation toward themselves, perhaps very goal-oriented. As someone said, "I meditated all those years because I wanted people to think I was a good Buddhist." Or, "I meditated all those years out of a feeling of I should do this, it would be good for me." And so naturally we come to meditation with the same attitudes with which we come to everything. I've seen this with students time and time again, and it is very human.

Rather than letting this be something to feel bad about, you can discover who you are at your wisest and who you are at your most confused. You get to know yourself in all your aspects: at times completely sane and openhearted and at other times completely messed up and bewildered. We are all at times a basket case. Meditation gives you the opportunity to get to know yourself in all those aspects. Judging ourselves for how our practice is going or what might be coming up for us during meditation is a kind of subtle aggression toward ourselves.

The steadfastness we develop in meditation is a willingness to stay. It may seem silly, but meditation actually isn't too unlike training a dog! We learn to stay. When you're thinking about what you're going to have for lunch, you "stay." When you're worried about what's going to happen on Monday, you "stay." It's a very lighthearted, compassionate instruction. It is like training the dog in the sense that you can train the dog with harshness and the dog will learn to stay, but if you train it by beating it and yelling at it, it will stay and it will be able to follow that command, but it will be extremely neurotic and scared. As long as you give a very clear command in the way that the dog was trained, it will be able to follow it. But add in any kind of unpredictability or uncertainty, and the poor animal just becomes confused and neurotic.

Or you can train the dog with gentleness. You can train the dog with gentleness and kindness, and it produces a dog that can also stay and heel and roll over and sit up and all of these things—but the dog is flexible and playful and can roll with the punches, so to speak. Personally, I prefer to be the second kind of dog. This staying, this perseverance, this loyalty that comes with meditation—it's all very gentle or compassionate

in its motivation. This gentle approach to yourself in meditation is called maitri. This is translated as "lovingkindness," or just "love." In terms of meditation, we learn to be kind, loving, and compassionate toward ourselves.

I teach about maitri a lot, and it is often misunderstood as some kind of self-indulgence, as if it is just about feeling good and being self-concerned. People will often think that that's what I mean by maitri. But it's somewhat subtle what maitri is and what it isn't. For example, you might say that taking a bubble bath or getting a workout at the gym is maitri. But on the other hand, maybe it isn't, because maybe it's some kind of avoidance; maybe you are working out to punish yourself. On the other hand, maybe going to the gym is just what you need to relax enough to go on with your life with some kind of lightheartedness. Or it might be one of your 65 daily tactics to avoid reality. You're the only one who knows.

So it's important to be clear about what maitri means and not to come away with a misunderstanding of maitri as some kind of indulgence, which actually weakens us and makes us less able to keep our heart and mind open to ourselves and the difficulties of our life. I often use this definition: maitri strengthens us. One of the qualities of maitri is steadfastness, and that's developed through meditation. So through boredom, through aches, through indigestion, through all kinds of disturbing memories, to edgy energy, to peaceful meditation, to sleepiness, it's steadfastness. You sit with yourself, you move closer to yourself, no matter what's going on. You don't try to get rid of anything—you can still be sad or frustrated or angry. You recognize your humanity and the wide gamut of emotions you might be feeling.

When we cultivate maitri toward ourselves, we are also generating equanimity. Equanimity means we are able to be with ourselves and our world without getting caught in "for" and "against," without judging things as "right" or "wrong," without getting caught up in opinions and beliefs and solidly held views about ourselves and our world. Unconditional friendliness is training in being able to settle down with ourselves, just as we are, without labeling our experience as "good" or "bad." We don't need to become too dramatic or despairing about what we see in ourselves.
