

Why We Shouldn't Be Afraid of Suffering

Instead, we should fear not knowing how to handle our suffering, according to Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh.

By [Thich Nhat Hanh](#) JUN 28, 2017



We should not be afraid of suffering. We should be afraid of only one thing, and that is not knowing how to deal with our suffering. Handling our suffering is an art. If we know how to suffer, we suffer much less, and we're no longer afraid of being overwhelmed by the suffering inside. The energy of mindfulness helps us recognize, acknowledge, and embrace the presence of the suffering, which can already bring some calm and relief. When a painful feeling comes up, we often try to suppress it. We don't feel comfortable when our suffering surfaces, and we want to push it back down or cover it up. But as a mindfulness practitioner, we allow the suffering to surface so we can clearly identify it and

embrace it. This will bring transformation and relief. The first thing we have to do is accept the mud in ourselves. When we recognize and accept our difficult feelings and emotions, we begin to feel more at peace. When we see that mud is something that can help us grow, we become less afraid of it.

When we are suffering, we invite another energy from the depths of our consciousness to come up: the energy of mindfulness. Mindfulness has the capacity to embrace our suffering. It says, *Hello, my dear pain*. This is the practice of recognizing suffering. *Hello, my pain. I know you are there, and I will take care of you. You don't need to be afraid.*

Now in our mind-consciousness there are two energies: the energy of mindfulness and the energy of suffering. The work of mindfulness is first to recognize and then to embrace the suffering with gentleness and compassion. You make use of your mindful breathing to do this. As you breathe in, you say silently, *Hello, my pain*. As you breathe out, you say, *I am here for you*. Our breathing contains within it the energy of our pain, so as we breathe with gentleness and compassion, we are also embracing our pain with gentleness and compassion. When suffering comes up, we have to be present for it. We shouldn't run away from it or cover it up with consumption, distraction, or diversion. We should simply recognize it and embrace it, like a mother lovingly embracing a crying baby in her arms. The mother is mindfulness, and the crying baby is suffering. The mother has the energy of gentleness and love. When the baby is embraced by the mother, it feels comforted and

immediately suffers less, even though the mother does not yet know exactly what the problem is. Just the fact that the mother is embracing the baby is enough to help the baby suffer less. We don't need to know where the suffering is coming from. We just need to embrace it, and that already brings some relief. As our suffering begins to calm down, we know we will get through it.

When we go home to ourselves with the energy of mindfulness, we're no longer afraid of being overwhelmed by the energy of suffering. Mindfulness gives us the strength to look deeply and gives rise to understanding and compassion.



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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.