

Thich Nhat Hahn, a Buddhist Zen master of Vietnamese origin, is a human rights activist and a renowned organizer of retreats on the art of mindful living. Thây (‘teacher’), as he is generally known to his followers, also pioneered “engaged” Buddhism during the Vietnam War when he gave a call to interlink meditation practices and social activism. Since then, he has been engaging spirituality in community-building, peace-making, and deep ecology. He has written over one hundred books which include popular titles such as *Being Peace* (Parallax Press, 1996), *The Art of Power* (HarperOne, 2007), *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (Beacon Press, 1996), *Present Moment Wonderful Moment* (Parallax Press, 1990), and *Calming the Fearful Mind* (Parallax Press, 2005). Nominated in 1967 for the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King Jr., Thich Nhat Hanh has perfected his weltanschauung through practical experience at his three centres known as Plum Village (Southern France), Green Mountain Dharma Center (Vermont, USA), and Deer Park Monastery (California, USA). Environmental activists, yoga teachers, psychotherapists, care-givers, community workers, and artists irrespective of gender, class, race, religion, and nationality approach him for cultivation of mindfulness, wholesomeness, inner tranquility, and spirituality.


Study of human mind has always been an important subject in Buddhism. For instance, the opening verse of the *Dhammapada* says: “Mind precedes (all) states, (that have) mind as a master, (and are) produced by mind. If (one) either speaks or acts with a corrupted mind, then suffering follows him, like the wheel (following) the foot of the bearer (i.e., ox).” The underlying goal of this book by Thây, as the title shows, is also study of human mind. Through the presentation of the basic teachings of Buddhist applied psychology, Thây points out that our mind is a field in which every kind of seed is sown on a daily basis through our thoughts, words, and deeds, and “what these seeds generate becomes the substance of our life” (p. 25). Thus, he points out, one can cultivate either paradise or hell in one’s own mind (p. 54) by sowing unwholesome and/or wholesome seeds (p.26).
Further, consciousness receives and is impregnated with all the experiences and perceptions that come to us and then become seeds in our store consciousness. Each of these seeds is stored there, unmanifested, until the conditions for its manifestations are present (p.33). He further points out that as a result of the manifestation of unwholesome seeds in our consciousness, our mind distorts our perception and we are tricked into believing that our perception of reality is correct. This leads us to erroneous conclusions about things around us. Hence “all our suffering arises from our failure to recognize things as they are” (p.30). In other words, whether we have happiness or not depends on the seeds that are stronger in our store consciousness (p.45). These seeds remain hidden deep in a person’s consciousness and he/she becomes aware of them only when they mature and manifest in that person’s mind consciousness. “If there are strong seeds of unhappiness, anger, discrimination, and delusion, he will suffer greatly, and it is likely that through his actions he will water these unwholesome seeds in others. If his seeds of understanding, compassion, forgiveness, and joy are strong, not only is he capable of true happiness but he will be able to water the seeds of happiness in others.” (p.46). However, when the seeds are dormant, we cannot see them (p.58) and we can recognize and nourish the wholesome seeds within ourselves as well as in others by practicing mindfulness (pp.26-27). Thây believes that each seed in our store consciousness is both individual and collective at the same time: “The collective is made of the individual, and the individual is made of the collective” (p.41). According to him, “the collective aspect of seeds in our consciousness also comes from our ancestors and from all those who have gone before us. The seeds in our consciousness contain the experiences, ideas, and perceptions of many people throughout space and time” (p.43). The conceptual base laid out by Thây in *Understanding Our Mind* has some commonalities with Carl Jung, according to whom, the emotions and experiences of suffering and happiness in our minds also reflect collective consciousness (p.43).

According to Thây, each of us is an aggregation of our actions which in turn are both the cause and result of seeds in our store consciousness. Each of our actions sows seeds in our consciousness, and our store consciousness preserves and maintains these seeds. When we die and transform from one form of being to another, the seeds of our actions as well as the seeds that we receive from our ancestors, friends, and society, travel with our store consciousness across generations (pp.38-49). “Our seeds carry the habit energies of thousands of years.... Because of habit energies, we are not able to perceive things as they truly are. We interpret everything... in terms of our habit energy. If you crumple a sheet of paper, it is difficult to make it lie flat again. It has the habit energy of being crumpled. We are the same” (p.49). However, it is possible for us to change our habit energies which are the fruit of our behavior, formed by the environment in which we live as well as our reactions to things. Thây points out that through the practice of mindfulness, we can observe our habit energies and begin to transform them (p.50). Moreover, through the practice of mindfulness we can create new and more
functional habit energies (p.51). “We have to recognize, embrace, and transform our negative habit energies and train ourselves to have more positive habit energies... These positive habits need to be cultivated, because our negative habits always push us to do and say things that bring suffering to ourselves and others” (p.52).

Following the Mahāyāna tradition, Thây points out that each of us possesses the inherent quality of enlightened mind (i.e. Buddha nature) and what we need to do is nurture this quality (p.26). If we do that, we can reach the field of things-in-themselves, the world of suchness (tathatā). However, the nature of our mind is obstructed (parikalpita). This means that “we build a world full of illusion for ourselves because of the distorted way we perceive reality... To get to that reality, we have to let go of the images we create in our consciousness” (p.57). Thus, we need to correct the tendency to discriminate and think dualistically, so that the reality of ourselves and then the reality of the world may have a chance to reveal itself (p.57). By practising Right Effort (samyāka vyāyāma, part of the Noble Eightfold Path) we can recognize and water the wholesome seeds in ourselves and others. By doing so, we can also prevent the unwholesome seeds that have not yet manifested from manifesting and to help the unwholesome seeds that have already arisen in our mind consciousness to return to store consciousness. Similarly, by practising Right Effort we can water the wholesome seeds in our store consciousness that have not yet arisen (pp.46-47). “A few weeks or months of practicing in order to transform can help ripen the wholesome seeds in us and bring about a new life... (and put us) on the path of maturation” (p.67).

Thây says that not only mental formation but physical and physiological formations also are manifestations from seeds in our store consciousness (p.118). Moreover, as our store consciousness is always flowing and changing, it can be transformed and when we transform the seeds in our store consciousness, it is transformation at the base (p.71). Moreover, our store consciousness cannot exist by itself alone and its true nature is neither individual nor collective, but simultaneously individual and collective. “After removing notions of complete individuality and complete collectivity, we can begin to see the real nondual nature of store consciousness” (p.77). “We should strive to learn to identify all the positive and negative seeds in us... (and)... in our relationship” (p.80). Thus, if we refrain from watering the negative seeds of a person we love and only water his/her positive seeds, then it will bring about positive change in the other person, and these positive changes will come back to you in the form of greater joy, peace, and happiness (p.80). Speaking deep-ecologically, Thây points out that we know that “we have lungs for breathing in and out. But when we look more deeply, we can see that the mountains and forests are also our lungs. Without them, we could not breathe in and out either.... We see that our body is the body of the cosmos, and that the cosmos is our own body. This insight is only possible when we see through notions of inside and outside, self and other ” (p.83).
Thây points out that our habit energies, delusions, and craving come together and create a tremendous source of energy (he calls it *manas*) that conditions our actions, speech, and thinking. This manas hinders the functioning of the store consciousness and gets in the way of transforming the seeds. The mode of perception of manas is always false... creating and maintaining erroneous perceptions (p.91). “Our mind is enslaved when it is picked up and embraced as a ‘self’ by manas” (p.93). “The nature of manas is delusion, ignorance, and discrimination. It is imprisoned in its delusion and its craving for duration and satisfaction. Manas seeks to satisfy craving, even when doing so might be unhealthy. It drives us in the direction of attaining pleasure, but it often turns out to be the kind of pleasure that does not actually bring happiness. But because manas does not see where it is going, the fruits of its journey are often more painful than happy, more sad than joyful” (p.114). Manas “is born from the blocks of ignorance that are present as seeds in our store consciousness. It is always there, grasping the idea of self and the idea of nonself. It is always discriminating: this is me, this is mine, this is self; that is not mine, that is not self. With or without our conscious awareness, that is the work of manas, and it works continuously” (pp.98-99). “Self-view is the false view that the self is independent and eternal, that it exists apart from other factors of existence. Self-pride is the attitude that we are better, more intelligent, more beautiful, or more important than others. Self-love is when we love ourselves excessively, when everything we say, do, or think, shows how caught up with ourselves we are” (pp.111-12). The way to help manas stop grasping at the notions of self and non-self is for us to practice deep-looking into the impermanent and interdependent nature of reality (p.99). By doing so, we can work toward transforming the seeds in our store consciousness so that they manifest in a wholesome way and not as the false perceptions of manas (p.104). “The goal of meditation is to make a change at the root of manas and the store consciousness” (p.106). Thây calls it transformation at the base which can take place only through the light of mindfulness. Through mindfulness, we can turn and go in the direction of awakening and “transform the nature of manas a little bit each day and release our store consciousness more and more from its grip” (p.106). “When we use our mind consciousness to generate the energy of mindfulness by practicing mindfulness... we water the seed of mindfulness that is already present in our store consciousness. When we use the energy of mindfulness to touch other seeds, we help those seeds transform” (p.107).

When our mind consciousness is able to perceive things directly, it is capable of touching the realm of suchness, points out Thây. And the way to train our mind consciousness in correct perception is through mindfulness. “This is why it is so important to train our mind consciousness in the habit of mindfulness” (p.121). “Just as store consciousness is the base of manas, and manas is the base of mind consciousness, the five sense consciousnesses are based in the sixth consciousness, mind consciousness... The senses from which these five consciousnesses arise are... ‘gates’... [A]ll dharmas... enter our consciousness...
through sensory contact with them. For this reason, it is important to learn how to guard these gates into our consciousness, to choose wisely what we allow to enter and become seeds. The way we do this is through mindfulness” (p.145).

He further points out: “With the daily training of looking deeply, of using our mindfulness to shed light on the interdependent nature of things, we can get rid of our tendency to perceive things as permanent and having a separate self. With this illumination, we see that the world of birth and death, the world of samsāra, has the same ground as the realm of suchness, nirvāṇa. Samsāra and suchness are not separate from each other. They are two dimensions of one reality. If we are able to look deeply into even a single formation belonging to the world of samsāra, we can break through and touch the ground of suchness. The purpose of meditation is to touch the ground of no birth and no death, the realm of suchness” (p.197). Thây further points out that as long as we run away from birth and death, we can never reach the realm of birthlessness and deathlessness. To do so, he says, we need to stop and look deeply into our mental formations, our notions of self and other, birth and death, ignorance and awakening. Only then can we see their true self-nature of interdependence. He calls it ‘interbeing’ (p.210). “When we live mindfully, observing deeply what is in us and around us, we realize the nature of Interdependent Co-Arising, the interpenetration of all things” (p.210). Thây writes, “when we are able to touch our habit energies and transform the roots of violence, despair, fear, and anger in our store consciousness, transformation at the base occurs. We begin by recognizing the internal knots and latent tendencies in order to transform them. We have to train ourselves in the way of looking with the insights of nonself and interbeing. Day and night we have to water the seeds of understanding in our store consciousness so that it will grow and help us to see the nature of interbeing in everything we see and touch” (pp. 227-228). If we succeed in doing so, then we can transform “the garbage of the afflictions into flowers of well-being, solidity, and freedom” (p. 211) and become bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas are beings who have penetrated into the reality of no birth and no death (p.244) handling “enlightenment and afflictions in the same way a skillful gardener handles flowers and garbage– without discrimination” (p.246).

Thich Nhat Hahn is a wonderful teacher and this insightful book is a must if the reader is curious about his/her mind and its ability to transform his/her world.
The writing is simple and clear, and Thây provides examples from daily life to illustrate what he is trying to convey. Though the subject matter of this book might appear a bit complex to some of the readers (especially the concepts of interbeing, manas, store consciousness, and suchness etc. as well as some Sanskrit terms), but as pointed out by Thây himself, one does not have to have a degree in psychology or know anything about Buddhism to enjoy this book (p.12). This life changing book is highly recommended for those who are interested in Buddhist transformational psychology or the interdependence of everything. The wealth of knowledge that this book contains can be understood and experienced better if it is read slowly. Each of the fifty chapters needs to be examined first before one moves on to the next. Thây actually advises the reader to go slowly and not to be daunted by the complexity of some of his concepts (p.12). In fact, the pleasure in reading this book does not lie in simply going through it but patiently letting the words settle down in one’s mind and then returning to it. In addition to the people interested in Zen, this book would be of great value to those who are interested in related areas, if for no other reason than that it explains some extremely complex concepts in the most rigorous and engaging style. Each sentence is incredibly well thought out. The beauty of this book particularly lies in the simplicity and lucidity with which Thây’s has written all his books. Finally, it is a book on consciousness that is practical, precise, and transformational. This book would also prove useful to those who want to understand meditative techniques. For those seeking to ultimately transcend themselves, Thây’s explanation of human mind is certainly the ultimate how-to guide. Above all, this is a kind of work whose merits are likely to stand for a long time to come.

K.T.S. Sarao is currently Professor of Buddhist Studies, University of Delhi. He has researched and taught in England, France, Austria, Taiwan, Canada, Australia, Singapore, and S. Korea.