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Mindfulness Reminds Us What Health Care Is For

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Abstract

Could clinicians help people more if they were buddhas? This article considers what the late Thích Nhất Hạnh meant in his call to “become buddhas” and applies Nhất Hạnh’s mindfulness practices to managing crises and anxiety in health care settings. This article also considers recovery strategies, techniques for becoming calm, and reminders about why stillness matters for compassionate practice in health care.

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We need a collective awakening. One buddha is not enough. All of us have to become buddhas in order for our planet to have a chance.

Thích Nhất Hạnh¹

Crises, Anxiety, and Mindful Practice

Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh called for us all to become buddhas at this moment of planetary crisis.² The question we wish to address is this: *Why, during crises, is it useful for individuals to become buddhas?* A short answer is that, because crises provoke anxiety, which, in turn, impedes individual and collective decision making, mindfulness is needed to calm us to improve our thinking. In what follows, we develop a series of ideas: (1) this is a time of crisis, (2) crisis provokes anxiety, (3) anxiety impedes decision making, and (4) mindfulness can promote calm and help us recover. We apply these ideas to ourselves and to the systems within which we work.

This Is a Time of Crisis

More than 2 years of the COVID-19 pandemic have taken a toll on the United States and revealed stark problems with the state of the nation. Prior to January 2020, many might have thought that our country understood and used science; that our health care system was strong enough to manage a pandemic; that we were all committed to democracy; and that we had made progress in eliminating inequity. Instead, we have lived through a tumultuous period of devastating climate consequences, bitter political partisanship with profound attacks on democratic processes, and **inequity playing out** in the number of bodies in refrigerator trucks. These crises reveal deep ecological trouble and disruption in our social, economic, political, and natural interconnectedness.

Crisis Provokes Anxiety

Although it is tempting to minimize, project, or deny the difficulties of this moment, there is a thrum of deep eco-anxiety in many of us as the truth presses in on us: our way of life is unsustainable.³ It is understandable that high levels of anxiety accompany a crisis of this proportion. It is not one or another policy that must change but rather our “way of life”—our intertwined social, economic, cultural, and political ways of living.

Anthropologist A.F.C. Wallace studied the sudden taking apart of a way of life—what he called “mazeway disintegration”—noting how profoundly difficult it is.⁴ While a disaster of one or another kind might provoke a temporary upheaval, after which “things will go back to normal,” a crisis that calls on us to change our way of life—that is, *not* to go back to normal—strikes deeply at the roots of collective security. Wallace noted that, in such circumstances, there were 2 ways forward that societies had taken: totalitarian government or religious revival. Nhât Hanh’s call that we all become buddhas opens a third path, that of mindfulness, rather than a devotion to a particular religion or political party.

Anxiety Impedes Decision Making

There is an old saying in African American neighborhoods that holds that “a scared man can’t gamble, and a jealous man can’t think.” This folk wisdom applies to collectives as well. We see fear operating to limit our ability to see the big picture. In studies of collective consciousness, Wallace and Fullilove⁵ noted that there are a number of threats to collective thinking, among them inattentive blindness, which the American Psychological Association defines as “a failure to notice unexpected but perceptible stimuli in a visual scene while one’s attention is focused on something else in the scene.”⁶ In the COVID era, for example, people are focused on fighting about masks and ignoring that the larger problem of ecological mismanagement has created conditions for many new pathogens to arise.⁷

We also see jealousy in partisan efforts to make “my side to win.” There are many examples of these efforts—from the gerrymandering of election maps to the January 6th attack on Congress. Partisanship has **impeded progress** on legislation to address threats to all Americans and all humans. For example, the defeat of the proposed Build Back Better legislation is one example of failure to address climate change, although the Inflation Reduction Act, signed into law in August 2022, contains many of the same provisions but with less funding.⁸ Calming the nerves of the nation to enable problem solving in the spirit of solidarity is essential at this time.

Mindfulness

Calms anxiety. Thich Nhât Hanh encountered the Vietnam War as a young monk and learned to practice mindfulness under dire circumstances. He went into many dangerous situations—not as an armed combatant but as a person prepared to help with rebuilding the nation. His deep connection to the universe, his respect for the interrelatedness of all life—our *interbeing*—gave him a perspective on life that was often absent in a time of war. In this current period of reckoning, the pathologization of anxiety—such as the manipulation of anxiety to further the aims of totalitarianism—is a real and present danger. For example, the former president of the United States, in calling Covid “the Chinese virus,” ratcheted up anxiety and **intergroup hatred**.⁹ By calming ourselves, we prepare ourselves better to face the scale of our problems and engage with others compassionately.

Increases focus. Stephen Covey's famous book, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*, includes the habit "Begin With the End in Mind."¹⁰ Community organizer Ernest Thompson spoke of this direction-finding task as "finding what you're for."¹¹ When used to guide strategic planning, the articulation of values and goals has a particularly important role to play in times of frequent disaster. Pulled in many directions by the rapidly changing demands of the moment, people can become "ambulance chasers" rather than strategic actors, and they will quickly become worn-out and discouraged. Guided by their values and standing on a platform of action, they are much more likely to achieve their stated goals and to improve the overall situation.

Creates awareness of interrelatedness. Nothing about changing our way of life will be quick or easy. In 1967, the Reverend Dr Martin Luther King Jr laid out the scope of the work we have to do:

Now let me suggest first that if we are to have peace on earth, our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Our loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective. No individual can live alone; no nation can live alone, and as long as we try, the more we are going to have war in this world. Now the judgment of God is upon us, and we must either learn to live together as brothers or we are all going to perish together as fools.¹²

From the perspective offered by King, what we must be *for* is a world perspective in which we understand our interrelatedness with all living beings. Nhât Hahn calls this "interbeing."

Applications to Health Care

The diverse and vast set of organizations that makes up the American health care system could play an important role in calming the mind of the nation, but, at present, health care as a system seems to deliver care according to clinical standards and plays only limited roles in communities' well-being. Even when hospitals offer wellness programs, they offer them as services to individual patients. This individual-care model is insufficient at this time of reckoning when millions are in distress. Deep ecologists aren't the only ones who understand that unimagined horrors are lurking that will require all the sangfroid we have or can muster. In this particular catch-22, we, as clinicians, could help create collective calm by implementing a community-level mindfulness approach, but we'd have to believe we should step outside of our small sphere of influence.

In summary, the Swedish environmentalist Greta Thunberg has pointed out that we have to act now, building a new way of life, even if we don't have a blueprint for how to do that.¹³ We can begin by pausing and finding stillness, settling the mind and body so that we see beyond the turbulence and the distractions. Within this space, we become more discerning—noting our values, listening to and respecting ourselves and one another—thus enabling our co-creation of a platform for truth telling, recovery, and survival.

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