

BROTHER PROMISE

HEAL THE SYSTEM

*Suggestions for
Frustrated Youth*



HEAL THE SYSTEM

Suggestions for Frustrated Youth

by Brother Promise

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Thank you Albert, Alexis, Amandine, Asha, Br Pháp Biểu, Br Pháp Mãn, Br Thiện Hòa, Denisse, François, Madelyn, Milou, Miranda, Mom, Nate, Nicole, Pierre, Skyler, Sr Mẫn Nghiêm, Steven, Taylor, Valérie, Will, and my other wonderful friends whose continuous encouragement and feedback have made this book possible.

Your help has meant so much to me, and for that I'll be forever grateful.

I wasn't sure I would survive this.

In my darkest moments, it seemed life only had three options for me: psychiatric hospital, prison, or suicide.

*I was mad at the world.
Mad at... "the system."*

*And yet, I could barely see
what it was in society that I was so mad at.
Fired up and confused, I didn't know what to do or where to start.*

My sister recommended that I attend a mindfulness retreat for young people at a Buddhist monastery called Plum Village. That week changed me deeply. I touched what peace, joy, and togetherness actually meant. I shed tears of relief and healing every day. At last, something that made sense.

A year later, at age 19, I came back to Plum Village to ordain as a monk. During the last twelve years, I have been meditating on the wounded teenager in me, and the more I meditate, the more I understand that this teenager indeed had good reasons to struggle.

As a monk, I have had the chance to meet hundreds of young people, listen to their stories, struggles and dreams, and to see them transform. These stories, as well as my own, encourage me to learn more about the global situation of youth, the state of the world, and the ways we can each effect positive change.

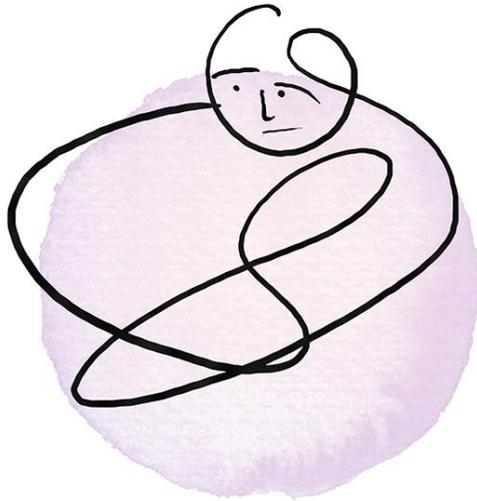
I pray that this book will comfort and inspire you on your path.

Brother Promise

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Strong Emotions



I won't pretend to know how you feel inside.

I'll just say, I know life can be tough- even excruciating. In my teenage years, I used to wake up feeling so down that I doubted I could make it through another day. My parents were getting a divorce, the

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communication between my siblings was crumbling, my relationship with my girlfriend was nerve-wracking, school bored me to death, society failed to inspire me, and I just felt lost in a bad dream that people called “the world.”

“Why do I have to suffer like this? Why me?” The more I grappled with these questions, the more confused I became.

I know what it is to stand on the brink of madness. As a teenager, I was assailed by compulsive thoughts of hatred. I thought about killing people. I thought about killing myself. In those wild moments - and there were many - I would urge myself not to do anything, reflecting,

*“Everything passes in life
and this strong emotion too will pass.”*

I only found respite from my emotions when engrossed in art, playing chess, and coding. I soared and explored the ethereal spheres of the intellect, fascinated, but every time I landed back in reality, it was brutal. My passions helped me to survive but not to heal, and I just had to do something about my extreme mental distress.

I went to a psychiatrist and asked, *“How can I take better care of myself?”* He seemed taken aback by this simple question. After staring at each other, probably both wondering who was the most ignorant of the two, he offered me pills for lack of real answers. A few months later, I stopped seeing him and threw the pills away, thinking, “I need true healing, not a chemical crutch. Let me see what *I* can do.”

I am not recommending you to go off any medication here, of course. I

am simply telling you my story.

I took up martial arts classes, which allowed me to safely explore my fears and violence and to grow more confident. I exercised more, to release excess energy. I opened up about my issues to close family and friends who, despite their fears and inability to guide me, did their best to love me as I was.

I am glad I did all of these things because they really helped me. But it was at Plum Village that I finally saw the light at the end of the tunnel of suffering.

I am sure you've noticed that when we allow our strong feelings of anger and frustration to take control, we tend to do things we quickly regret, like shouting unintelligible words or sending objects flying across the room. On the other extreme, suppressing or ignoring our pain doesn't solve anything. We only become more tense and depressed.

What I have learned in the monastery is,

*Between unfiltered expression and blind suppression,
there is a third way to relate to our emotions:
loving attention.*

Please try this out now. Pay attention to your natural, nasal breathing. As you breathe in naturally, feel what it feels like to be breathing in: fresh air entering your nostrils, your lungs and belly expanding. As you breathe out effortlessly, feel what it feels like to be breathing out: your belly and lungs collapsing, warm air leaving your nostrils.

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Every time you get distracted (and you *will* get distracted) gently bring your mind back to the sensations of the in and out breaths. Be patient. You are not controlling your breath. You are just *following your breath as it is*.

Once you can sustain your attention on a few consecutive breaths, you might notice your breathing pattern naturally growing deeper, slower, quieter, and more rhythmical. As your breathing pattern changes, your whole nervous system relaxes and makes you already feel better.

Now, offer yourself a gentle smile. I know you can do it! Spread your lips very lightly and allow your eyes, brain, and entire nervous system to soften even more with tenderness.

At this stage, you can allow your feelings to flow within the warm embrace of your awareness. When your painful feelings are seen and accepted as they are, *compassion* is born and begins to heal you.

To help you cultivate loving attention, not only in difficult moments but as often as possible, I suggest that you write the following reminder somewhere visible:

*Breathe deeply,
smile gently,
and love yourself.*

Loving attention helps our emotions to flow in healthier ways, with less anxious freezing and less overreacting. Loving attention gives us space to see the situation more clearly, and time to consider our response

more wisely.

Approaching our feelings with curiosity and kindness, we begin to understand that,

All of our emotions are trying to help us.

Anger, for instance, tries to restore healthy boundaries. Desire wants to help us survive as an individual and as a species. Fear does its best to keep us safe and sound. Sadness allows our pain to flow and water our seeds of empathy. Boredom encourages us to experience life more fully and meaningfully. And *frustration speaks to us about our unmet needs.*

I believe we young people are endowed with an extra dose of frustration for a good reason: *to bring humanity forward.* Our future depends very much on our relationship to frustration. Not neglecting it and not letting it run amok, we can mindfully unpack our frustration and hear its message.

In our lives and in the world we share, which of our true needs are still waiting to be met?

A Kind Presence



Life is worth living – wakefully and compassionately.

When we use electronics and other distractions to numb our loneliness and anxiety, reality eventually catches up with us, oftentimes with the sad news that the void inside us has grown wider. I experienced this

again and again, during the time I was “surviving but not healing.”

Fortunately, my teacher Thich Nhat Hanh and my monastic brothers and sisters have taught me how to come back to myself and reconcile with myself. Practicing mindful breathing, I *fill myself with my own presence and my own kindness*, so that I don't have to search outside myself so much. I think less, and relax more into who I am.

I am confident that, with a little training, you will be able to do the same. Form a habit of turning off your device (or even better, program it to turn off automatically) nine hours before waking up so as to give yourself enough time to wind down and get the sleep your brain desperately needs. Make a bit of time for yourself every day, without electronics or distraction.

Learn to enjoy simple things such as lying down, looking at the sky, listening to the birds singing, walking in the forest, or feeling the sunshine. Allow nature to fill you, to nourish you and embrace you. Taking time out like this is great. As my teacher likes to say, “time is so much more than money- time is life.”

If you want to train your capacity of being present for each moment of life, perhaps the single most helpful thing you can do is to *train in mindful breathing*.

Although you can practice mindful breathing in any position, you may like to start by sitting down comfortably, with your back straight but relaxed and your neck a straight continuation of your spine. You don't need to sit in the full lotus position or do anything fancy with your hands. Just sit normally, on a chair if you find it more comfortable, upright and relaxed.

Close your eyes and mouth and breathe only through your nose.

*Feel the in-breath as it happens naturally.
Feel the out-breath as it unfolds effortlessly.*

If you get distracted, gently notice that you've gotten sidetracked and feel the breath again. Try not to control your breath, and simply attend to it, just the way it is. What is it like to be breathing? How does it feel to be alive?

We are not used to really being in the present. We all tend to worry, plan, imagine, regret and reason compulsively. So although the practice of mindful breathing is simple to understand, it is not always easy to do. When I was first introduced to mindful breathing, I would often become frustrated with myself for being easily distracted. But I have learned to be patient, to forgive myself and to just keep on practicing. With time and training, things do get easier- guaranteed!

Your breath is a reflection of your physical and mental state. When you are tense, sick, angry, agitated, or afraid, you tend to mouth breathe. Your breath is shallow into your chest, fast, erratic, and noisy. This is stress.

By closing your mouth and paying attention to your in and out breaths, you allow them to naturally and progressively grow deeper into your belly, becoming slower, quieter and more steady. As a result, your heart rate slows down. Your body relaxes. Your nervous system switches from the sympathetic (the short-term, survival mode) to the parasympathetic (the long-term, happiness mode). Your mind becomes more peaceful, concentrated and accepting.

The benefits of mindful breathing do not stop there- they are just getting started. If you practice diligently, you will know how to make use of the peace and clarity of mind you've gained to transform your relationships- beginning with your relationships to yourself.

To do this, I suggest you begin by *talking kindly to yourself*. As a teenager, I went through psychosis. I was so divided inside, tense and afraid. I had compulsive thoughts of self-hatred. Believe me when I say: *I've come a long way. And I know it is possible to heal*. With a good intention, proper training, time, and preferably with the support of people you trust, I am certain you can heal too.

Here is a little exercise you can do: take your own hand, very gently and mindfully, and say to yourself,

"I love myself and accept myself as I am."

Allow these words to penetrate each cell in your body. Observe how your breath becomes calm and how time seems to slow down. Repeat one more time, "I love myself and accept myself as I am." Repeat this sentence as many times as necessary, calmly and patiently, because the aim of this exercise is not to work with your conscious mind, but to reach and heal your subconscious.

For many of us, this exercise can be very challenging, not because it is complicated, but because it sheds light on the many obstacles we have set up in our relationship with ourselves. "This exercise is ridiculous." "I am wasting my time." "This might work for others, but not for me." If you recognize a part of you reacting like this, please smile at it and still

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practice the exercise, “I love myself and accept myself as I am.”

If this was your very first declaration of love to yourself, congratulations! If you shed a few tears, this is a good thing. It means you went deep into the exercise. Practice it regularly.

Starting a mindfulness practice is like coming home after many years of wandering. There is so much to clean up now! But you are willing to clean, however long it might take you, because you know that your body and mind are your only home.

The key to success, in mindfulness as in anything else, is creating a *sustainable routine*; maybe three minutes of sitting meditation first thing in the morning and, if you feel like a hero, another three minutes at night. It is important to aim *very low*, at least in the beginning, but aim for *consistency*.

When your mindfulness routine is established, you can slowly expand it. Not just by sitting in meditation for longer stretches, but by *bringing mindfulness to your daily activities*.

Every time your phone rings, take a mindful breath and smile before picking up. When walking, enjoy your breath and the sensations of walking. When eating, make time to eat peacefully, aware of each mouthful of food you take. At night before sleep, lie down on your back, put your hands on your lower abdomen and enjoy breathing in and out naturally and deeply.

*Whenever you remember,
bring awareness and kindness into what you are doing.*

You are taking care of your body and mind. You are making your home more beautiful. And when your home has presence and kindness in it, it will become possible for you to offer presence and kindness to those who come to you. But remember: *you have to start with yourself. You can't share what you don't have.*

Here is a little reinterpretation of Leo Tolstoy's famous story: once upon a time, there was a king who was troubled by three questions: *"Who is the most important person on Earth? What is the most precious thing in life? And when is the right time to seize an opportunity?"*

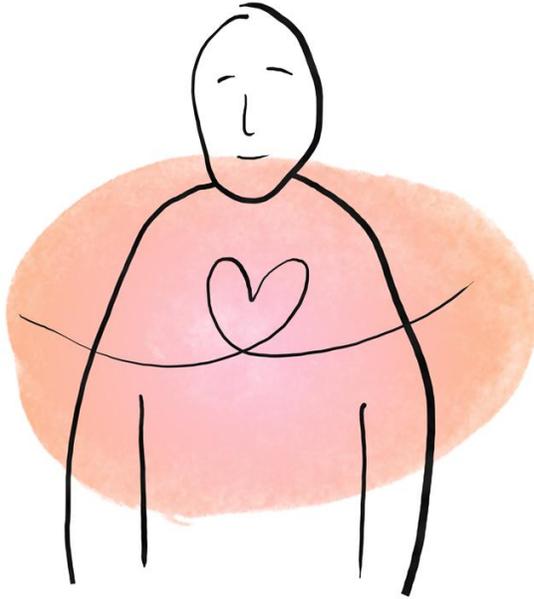
He asked all the religious teachers and eminent scholars of his kingdom, but found their answers too abstract and complicated. Out of desperation, one day, he asked a maidservant... who surprised him with the wisest answer: *"The most important person is whomever you are with. The most precious thing in life is kindness. And the right time will always be the present moment."*

While establishing a good direction for your life, please do not forget to appreciate the people by your side and the conditions of happiness you already have. Because,

Life is a journey, not a destination.

Every moment is precious and deserves your loving attention.

From Victim To Actor



An empowered life begins with a change in mindset.

I used to think I couldn't change the world since I am so small and the world is so big. Meditation helped me realize I am already changing the

world.

*We are all changing the world
with each thought, word, and action
- whether we want to or not!*

There is no real barrier between the world and ourselves; we are in the world and the world is in us. The system is in us and we are in the system. Therefore to change the system is to change ourselves, and to change ourselves is also to change the system.

Every time I complained, whether about the government, my parents, or anyone else, I reinforced a worldview in which I was a powerless victim. Refusing responsibility made me feel miserable. On top of that, the only thing I contributed when complaining was... indignation.

Meditation taught me that we can do so much better than that. We can focus on what we *do* want as opposed to what we don't. We can choose a new, healthier way of living, both as a shining example for others and as the foundation for further social and political action.

Changing the world does not need to be a struggle. We can be the calm water of compassion which puts out the fire of hate, the gentle light of understanding which dispels the darkness of ignorance. We can, as Mahatma Gandhi beautifully put it, 'be the change we want to see in the world.'

As a teenager, many of my friends joined angry riots and fought rival groups and police officers. "*F*** the system!*" they yelled. But violence only seemed to make the system stronger by amplifying the need for

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repression. I did not want to go down the path of violence, as I found it counterproductive to both personal well-being and social change. I thought, "We may be angry for good reasons, but anger doesn't have to become our *raison d'être*, our driving force."

In dealing with society's issues, reacting with hatred is not the solution but conforming blindly is not the solution either. Between the two extremes of fury and passivity, a wiser approach emerges, and calls us to identify the ills of our society and to address them in a calm and systematic way. This is why I say: "*Heal the System.*"

Our relationship to authority might have a lot to do with our relationship to our parents.

Our father and mother may have a difficult time releasing their images of us as a child to see the young adult we have become. They are often torn between their wish to see us grow and their need to know we are safe. They don't always know what to do- it's not like they've raised loads of kids before us, or that we came to them with a manual!

On our side, we often feel like we need space and freedom. And though it might be difficult to admit, we also still appreciate their comforting presence from time to time. We want to prove ourselves and prove to them that we are on our way to adulthood. We are becoming independent; we are becoming someone. This is wonderful.

Through meditation, I remembered that when I was a child, I used to see my parents as guardian angels who were always ready to protect and support me. Because I was so young, I didn't understand the challenges and difficulties they were going through. As I grew up, hurt and disappointment settled in. It was painful to see the idealized images I had held of my parents crumble- until I realized this made way

for a new perspective: loving them as the real people they have always been.

I knew I had become an adult the day I deeply understood that my parents were just human beings doing their best.

No more resentment, only understanding. This didn't prevent me from feeling frustrated or disappointed with them from time to time, but it did allow me to look at them with fresher, more loving eyes. I gave them the freedom to make mistakes, just like I was asking them to give me the freedom to make mistakes. It is such a wonderful feeling to know that my parents have been loving me to the best of their ability.

To shed our victim mindset is to let go of our fears. We are afraid of our own creativity, of growing up, of being rejected and lonely. While these fears have their place and purpose, it is not in our interest to let them rule our lives. We want to be true to ourselves, living the life we want to live.

Becoming a monk was not an easy decision for me. I remember sitting on my bed as a lay person in Plum Village, paralyzed by fear as I tried to write the first word of my monastic aspiration letter. Did I really understand what I was heading into? Was I truly ready? And what would my relatives think?

Breathing deeply, I came to terms with the fact that I could not predict or fully control the future. One thing I became sure of, however, was that if I wanted to be happy, I needed to follow my heart.

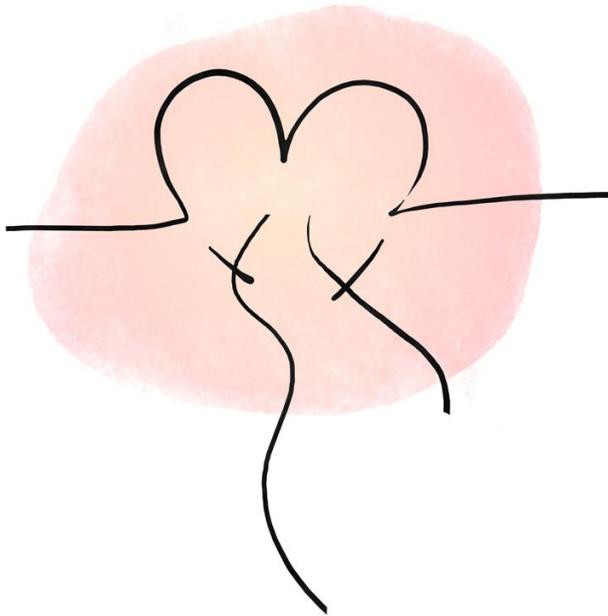
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To move forward, we need to know ourselves.

The more we know ourselves, the better we can respect ourselves. We don't have to waste our time doing things we don't like with people we don't feel connected to.

We can be the agents of our lives- people who understand and pursue what truly matters.

Finding Our Place



We each have a place in this world.

Alienation and lack of purpose are the diseases of our time and I suffered tremendously from them. As a teen, I couldn't see much meaning in what we were taught at school and what society had to

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offer. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, but I at least knew what I did not want: to pursue studies from sheer peer pressure, to end up with a job I hated, and to live a life full of regrets.

After high school, I took a year off. I needed time to think. I explored my passions. And I got in people's way. They told me to move, to “just do something”, calling me unreasonable and *maladjusted*.

*When everyone is running the rat race,
it takes courage to pause...*

*but to pause is the only way to realize
that most people don't actually know where they are going.*

In stillness, we discover that everyone shares our loneliness, feelings, and needs. We can see the world's problems more clearly; and we can find creative solutions towards positive change. As Dr. Martin Luther King beautifully said, “it may be that the salvation of the world lies in the hands of the maladjusted.”

“Where is my place in this crazy world”, “what can I do for a living”, and “what will make me happy” are important questions you may have. Please relax: I am not going to talk to you about shaving your head and becoming a Buddhist monk or nun; I only want to share with you *general guidelines* I have seen to be effective in my life and in the lives of friends.

First,

*You don't have to make a decision for the whole of your life.
That would be way too stressful and totally unnecessary.*

In a constantly changing world, your place cannot be a fixed point for you to choose. I believe your place is rather something for you *to wake up to*.

*Your place is where
what you love
meets
what the world needs.*

I invite you to do a powerful exercise on this topic. You will need a quiet place, two sheets of paper, and a pen.

On the first sheet, take time to list all the things you love in life, freely and openly. The main obstacle in finding what we love is our social conditioning. We have received beliefs from the media, our parents, teachers and friends about who we are, who we should be, and what is “reasonable,” and we have allowed these beliefs to define and confine us.

Your inner child is still alive inside you and he or she still knows how to dream. Ask her about the things she loves. Ask him what fulfills him. Who would you like to be if you could just be anyone? What would you most likely do if money was not a problem?

Please do not worry about whether you have “talent” or not, because love precedes talent. Once you find something you are passionate about, you will easily focus on it, spend time doing it, persevere through difficulties, and eventually develop skill.

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That being said,

*It doesn't matter whether you'll ever become
number one in your field or not.
What matters more is
to do the number one thing you love.*

It is crucial for each of us to stay connected to ourselves and do the things we really love. But beware: to *only* do what we love without any regard for others is to lock oneself in the prison of self-obsession. Fortunately, it is an easy prison to escape from: one only needs to approach its gates and, with a sincere heart, pronounce the password, “How can I help?”

On the second sheet of paper, you will list what the world needs. Notice I said “needs” and not “wants” because people can desire all sorts of harmful things. Think about *physical* needs like water, food, safety, nature, shelter, and medicine; *emotional* needs like joy, belonging, and being valued; and *spiritual* needs like purpose, beauty, understanding, and transcendence. Observe your immediate environment, educate yourself on the situation of the world, and write down your insights.

Once you are done writing, hold the two sheets side by side, and ask yourself: “*Where can what I love meet what the world needs?*”

This is about feeling good *and* doing good.

Remember,

*You don't need to solve all of the world's problems.
One good action, done regularly with a sincere heart,*

is enough.

Once upon a time, a fire broke out in a forest and all of the animals ran away. But a little hummingbird flew to the nearest river, took a drop of water in his beak, flew back over the forest and dropped it on the raging fire. And on and on he went, back and forth.

Some of the animals witnessing the scene were dumbfounded. They asked him “What are you doing?” The hummingbird did not answer. He just kept at it, drop by drop. They insisted several more times, “What are you doing?” The hummingbird finally turned around, looked at them, and calmly said, *“I am doing my part.”*

There are so many people in the world right now who, like our hummingbird, are doing their part. There are those who plant trees, making life more beautiful by providing oxygen, food and shelter for countless species. There are those who bring mindfulness and peace education into our school system because they see the need to equip future generations with a spiritual dimension. There are those who teach natural healing, those who save seeds. There are those who assist others to heal psychologically, those who help prison inmates find themselves again. There are those who make documentaries or write articles on positive solutions to heal society and the Earth. There are those who fight for the rights and dignity of underrepresented and marginalized people. There are those who work to protect the animals, those committed to respect for the land. There are those who develop easier, more sustainable ways of growing food, and those developing environmentally friendly technologies to recycle waste. There are those committed to social justice, those committed to building healthy communities, those who mediate peace talks. There are those who work for the forgotten, the elderly, the disabled, and the poor. There

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are those who go to areas in need to provide access to safe water, teach farming techniques, and offer children better education. There are those who teach about the benefits of a whole-food plant-based diet for health, for the animals, and the environment. There are those who develop compassionate, sustainable business models, and strive to bring values to the corporate world. There are also those who work so-called “little” jobs like babysitting, cleaning, and cooking with great hearts. They are polite, kind and knowledgeable in their field. They never miss an opportunity to smile and create harmony around them.

Your place is not my place because you and I love different things and live in different environments. Your place today is not necessarily your place tomorrow, since both you and the world are subject to change. But your place will always be where what you love meets what the world needs.

My friend, you are important.

I don't say this in the sense that you are more important than your neighbor but in the sense that *you are alive*. Your ancestors, the air, the water, the sunshine, and countless other conditions have come together to shape you the way you are. Your mere existence proves that you belong and that the world needs you.

Where there is a need, there is a job, and if you can't find it, you might have to create it. It might just be that nobody thought about it before you. Do not be afraid to try out alternative ways of living. Reach out to inspiring people and communities and see what you can learn from them.

A better world starts with better thinking- that is, *creative* thinking. We want to look afresh at the beliefs we hold about ourselves, others, society, and life on Earth. As Albert Einstein said, “We cannot solve a problem with the same mindset that created it in the first place.”

When you align yourself with your spiritual values, your family and friends might react at first with fear or criticism. Please hear them and reassure them, with patience and empathy. Know that they will need time to accept your decisions and that your most valuable asset in convincing them will be your newly found happiness.

When you can find joy in helping the world, life becomes real and beautiful.

The True Heroes



Our ideals can pull us down or raise us up.

We as a society have created far too many fake heroes. We are hypnotized by physical beauty, power and talent, and oblivious to the importance of virtue. We applaud those who step on others to rise

alone to the top, not seeing that the only way to become truly great is to lift others up.

Before admiring anyone, I ask myself, "Do I really want to be like them? Can they love themselves? Do they feel connected to life? Are they helping the world?"

In my definition, heroism begins with a daily commitment to spiritual training. Our habits define us. Knowing this, heroes organize their lives in a way that will help their kind-heartedness and understanding to flourish.

*A true hero knows
sensitivity and action.*

A hero makes use of both and keeps them in balance. She can feel the world's pain without being paralyzed by it. He can realize projects without betraying his inner goodness. Heroes reconcile the material and the spiritual, infusing life with meaning and meaning with life.

Creating heroes is not a purely individual matter. As a society, we want to empower boys and men with the emotional awareness they need to lead fulfilling lives, and to empower girls and women with better education and social opportunities so that we can all benefit from their visions of success.

A hero lives with purpose.

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She knows her time on Earth is limited and wants to make the best use of it. He chooses a cause that is close to his heart and will make a difference. To keep her motivation alive, she contemplates the benefits of realizing her dreams and the harm of giving them up. He doesn't wait for everyone to cheer him on to pursue his beautiful aspirations. She does not need to be known- she only needs to know who she is.

A hero is not perfect. He makes mistakes too, but tries to learn from them. She does not necessarily accomplish great things but accomplishes things with great meaning. He knows the value of kindness, courage, and compassion. When feeling down, she allows herself to rest and heal before standing up again, because she is aware that she is the world and that she deserves her own kindness too.

Whenever they bring a smile to someone's face, they get the "helper's high." Every time they contribute to others' well-being, they are filled with gratitude. They understand that taking care of themselves is the basis for taking care of others and that taking care of others makes their life beautiful.

We can admire without idolizing. We can celebrate other people's qualities and allow ourselves to be inspired on our path. And still we want to keep in mind that they, as human beings, have their own share of flaws and challenges and need our support, too. Nobody needs fans, but everybody needs friends.

*There is a stream of life
yearning to flow through you.*

Open your heart and let it in. Recognize the conditions of happiness

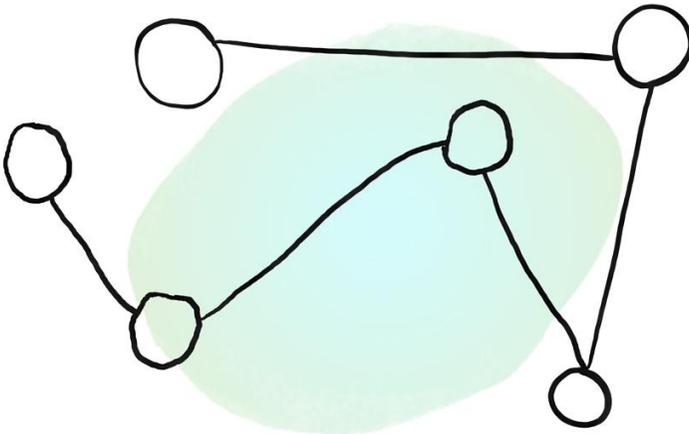
that you already have, so that they may nourish you and refresh you. The secret is: do not keep things for yourself,... lest your water stagnate and become undrinkable. Let it flow out, through giving, helping, and supporting others, to the extent that feels natural and comfortable. Only when receiving and giving are in balance can your stream of life flow beautifully.

A hero is committed and compassionate, but also *curious and critical*. She learns from traditions but doesn't accept anything on face value. He knows how to question what he currently believes in. Her eyes are set on *the healing truth*, ever open to learn more about the ways she can prevent suffering and create long-lasting happiness.

A hero is *concrete*. He is not interested in empty philosophies that have nothing to do with the real problems he and the world face. She sees the world in all of its beauty and tragedy. He is passionate about life, learns from life, and works for life.

Our world needs true heroes.

The Information Age



A strong mind is a mind wisely fed.

A report by Common Sense Media, a San Francisco-based non-profit that tracks young people's technology use, found that teens aged thirteen to eighteen spend *almost nine hours a day on media*.

Many groups strive to influence our subconscious beliefs to push us into doing things that will fulfill their own interests: the ultra rich, the food industry, the pharmaceutical industry, politicians, corporations, and so on. In truth, these people in “power” are just human beings struggling to find their way to happiness. We do not need to be angry at them, nor do we need to be afraid. As the captains of our minds, our only duty is to be skillful in navigating the sea of information.

The media spreads beliefs and behaviors, but it is our own natural drive for belonging that pushes us to adopt them. This is because, from an evolutionary perspective, belonging is a matter of survival. Propaganda pioneer Edward Bernays knew this well: “Humans are fearful of solitude. They are more sensitive to the voice of the herd than to any other influence.”

It took repeated exposure for our ancestors to feel safe in a particular territory or with a particular person, animal or plant. This familiarization process, though often useful in the real world, can be deceiving in the virtual one: seeing a presidential candidate every evening on our living room TV screen does not make him or her part of our family; watching another advertisement for fast food does not make it any healthier; hearing the same message over and over doesn't make it more factual.

TV puts people to sleep and tells them what to dream.

Along with *repetition*, another powerful tool major media sources use to influence the masses is *emotional triggering*. As statesman and military leader Napoleon remarked, “There are two ways of moving men: interest and fear.”

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When we feel good about ourselves, we are not swayed by the wild promises of the advertising industry. We let them do their business and we keep on doing ours- that is, living happily and purposefully.

Evolution wants us to stay alert of potential sexual partners. Let us thank our ancestors for having brought us to where we are. Then, let us raise the question: In this technology driven world, how much of our evolutionary conditioning is still helping us?

Watching porn is not helping us to survive as a species. As a teenager, it also never helped me feel self-confident or connected, and I have been happier without it. I encourage you to learn about the suffering of porn actors, the harmful effects of pornography on the brain, and the concrete steps you can take towards a porn free life.

Remaining attentive to danger is an important skill to have in real life. But how much sense does it make for us to remain hypnotized by bloody video games, violent movies, and soul-crushing news?

We want to be selective in what we watch.

Under the influence of craving, we lose our compassion. Under the influence of fear, we lose our clarity. So let us not consume like robots, powered by our own addictions and controlled by the system.

Just like we need to nourish our body with proper food for it to be healthy, we need to feed our mind with the right kind of stimuli for it to be strong, clear, and compassionate.

*Your mind is a precious diamond, a wonder of creation.
Do not let anger, craving, fear, and discrimination
stain it.*

Keep it shining!

Educate yourself. Read; watch documentaries; listen to inspiring people. Stay alert and critical. When learning from individuals, ask yourself if they are truly happy and worth emulating. When looking into scientific data, see whether those who financed the study have a vested interest. When bringing your attention to the world's problems, look for the solutions- and for the solutions that *you* can apply.

Many people know how to help themselves and help the world. We can learn from them. We can experiment, we can do better and we can have fun doing it. We are in the information age.

*The most precious type of knowledge
is the knowledge of self-help.*

Self-help here includes everything from “how to take care of your health” to “how to repair your bicycle” to “how to plant a tree.” It is the information that can help us improve the quality of our life on our own without having to spend a lot of money or rely on others. It is the type of knowledge that makes us more independent and free.

Money, once shared, is divided; knowledge that is shared is multiplied. By sharing real solutions to life's problems, we allow for potentially endless sharing. We can touch and improve people's lives in ways we'd

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never expect.

Next time you want to share something on your favorite social media platform, please ask yourself:

*“Is this going to contribute to my friends' happiness
and help us progress towards a better world?
Or will this pollute their minds with
more distraction, greed, anger, and despair?”*

Artists play critical roles in shaping the collective consciousness. To me, the less conscious type of artistic creations are those which only bring out violence, craving, fear and discrimination in people. Enough of that! The second best type of art only heals the artist herself. Art is then only a way to vent one's feelings; though the viewers or listeners can feel connected with the artist, they are not necessarily helped to rise above the pain they share.

The best artistic creations are those which awaken *the true, the good and the beautiful* in people's hearts. A true artist is a healer. He has something to give. She brightens the collective consciousness. They renew people's faith in humanity.

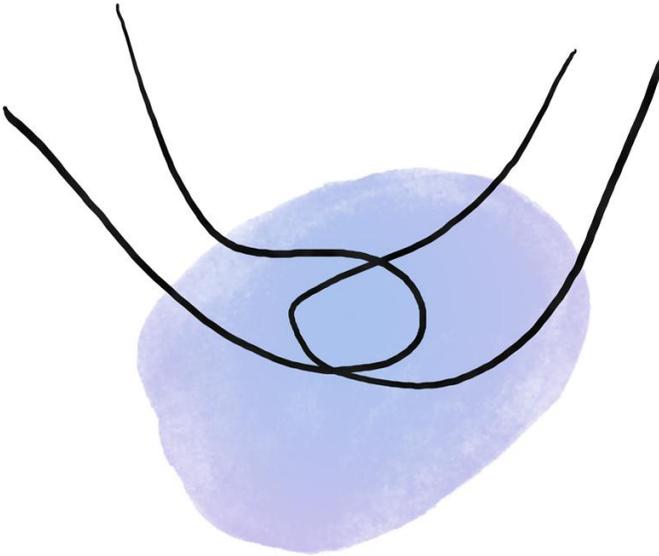
*I invite you to take good care of your mind
and to use your creative talents to heal the world.*

Every day, the amount of content shared on the Internet increases at a staggering rate. While it has become easy for us to drown under

harmful stimuli, distraction and propaganda, it has also become easier than ever for us to access and share true knowledge. Knowledge is power and this power is only a click away. So let us use the Internet intelligently, learning to differentiate between what's useful and what's not.

The knowledge of self-help brings love to the world.

Relationships



We all need people who can support us and whom we can support in return.

When reporting the results of his Harvard Study of Adult Development, one of the most comprehensive studies of emotional well-being in

history, psychiatrist Robert Waldinger had to yield to overwhelming evidence: “Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period.”

In choosing friends, we don't need to discriminate, but we do need to discern. “Friends” who are physically or emotionally abusive, or who pressure us into using drugs, fighting or stealing won't help. We want to surround ourselves well.

A good friend is not a 'perfect human being' (nobody is) but someone who cares about how you feel. He takes good enough care of himself, knowing that his well-being is closely tied to yours. You can be fully yourself with her, and she can be fully herself with you. They walk with you through joy and sorrow.

In romantic relationships, patience is key. I encourage you to spend a few months building a foundation of friendship, trust, and mutual understanding before considering physical intimacy. Patience might be the more difficult option, but it is also the most rewarding. It enables you to make the kind and informed choices that will keep your love beautiful and long-lasting.

To nurture good relationships, we want to communicate with calmness, understanding and a willingness to contribute. Just like our own mind, we can also picture other people's minds as gardens that contain all sorts of seeds- seeds of joy and sadness, trust and distrust, understanding and ignorance, peace and restlessness, and so on.

*We can speak in a way
that will only water another person's positive seeds.*

Showing appreciation is a great way to do so.

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You can say “Nice to see you!” or “I loved today's dinner, Mom!” or “Thank you for being my friend,” or “What you did yesterday really made my day” or “I didn't know you had this talent!” When we express gratitude, we help other people feel seen and valued. Most of us fail to show appreciation because we are too busy, we take things for granted, or we believe that the person “already knows.” Maybe she does, but really needs you to remind her.

Offering a smile or a helping hand in cooking, cleaning, washing dishes and other participatory acts of kindness are other ways to infuse our relationships with goodness. We don't need to overextend ourselves, but we do want to do our part according to our capacities.

Practicing loving attention, you will respond to conflict with more empathy and clarity. At times, you might be inspired to apologize.

*True apologies are not based on fear,
but an aspiration to better ourselves
and to relieve the other person
from any harm we might have caused.*

Have compassion for yourself as you say sorry. Guilt is a medicine that calls for the right dosage: enough to protect us from creating unnecessary suffering, but never to the point of despising ourselves.

We tend to see things only from our side. We see what triggered our hurt, but we don't see the conditions that made the other person react the way they did. It is a great idea to take time to reflect on his or her

feelings and needs, and to ask them if we've understood them correctly.

A lot of suffering can be avoided when we know how to check our own and others' perceptions. Try not to jump too quickly to conclusions. Learn to ask "Did I hear you say, ...?" or "Did you really do ...?" or "Why did you say ...?" or "Why did you do ...?" and make space for the other person to answer. Life is difficult enough; we don't need to make each other suffer over intentions nobody had and things that did not happen.

Mother Teresa knew something about love. "I want you to be concerned with your neighbor," she urged her listeners before asking, "Do you know your neighbor?"

*Take time to sit with your partner, relative, or friend
and ask them how they feel, how their day was,
what they like, or how you can better support them.*

Allow the other person to express themselves. Try not to interrupt, judge, give unsought advice, or compare their experiences with yours. This will help them feel heard and accepted, and help you open your mind to their realities.

You might be surprised, like I was when I first arrived at Plum Village, to learn that monks and nuns can have fun. Actually, I have much more fun now than before I was ordained. *Real fun.*

Real fun is the kind of fun

*that makes you happy when you do it
and when you reflect back on what you did
- not the kind of fun that makes you happy for five minutes
and embarrassed for five years.*

In healthy group dynamics, people laugh *with* but don't laugh *at*. They spend time together knowing that every moment is precious. They do things from a state of relaxation, not anxiety or compulsion. They enjoy physical movement, being outside in nature, and having fresh, healthy food.

True joy is real and true joy is possible.

Some people believe that to be a kind, spiritual person, you need to forget about your feelings and let others step on your feet as much as they please. In the name of non-violence, they do violence to themselves. This is dangerous, as the following story illustrates.

Once a upon a time, there was a young snake who had just learned about mindfulness and healthy living. One day, as he was meditating peacefully in the forest, a man came by and poked him with a stick. The young snake kept his eyes closed and meditated harder. The man poked him harder! Sweat began dropping from the snake's head as he remembered his vow not to bite. Eventually, the man ended up beating our poor little snake.

Bruised and devastated, the young, spiritual snake painfully climbed up the mountain to consult with his teacher. After listening to him compassionately, the grandmaster snake said: "My poor disciple! Yes, I

told you not to bite... *but I didn't tell you not to hiss!*"

We all need to hiss from time to time. We just have to do it mindfully.

When others offend us, it is our right and responsibility to confront them in a calm, humble and direct way.

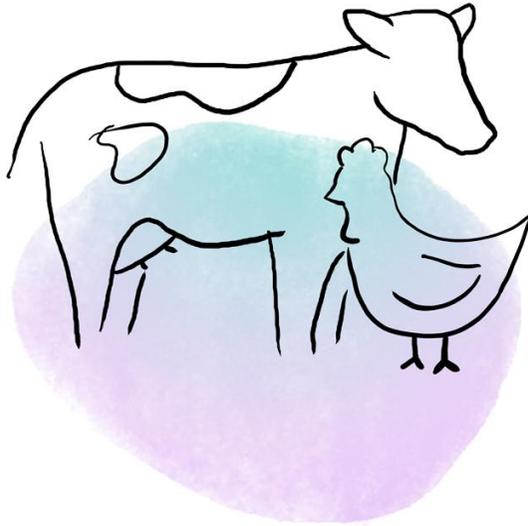
Find the right time to let them know how their behavior affects you and how you'd like them to better support you.

Dealing with people is a bit like swimming in the ocean. Waves are bound to come, whether big or small. If you stand proud and tall to meet a wave head on, both sides are going to get hurt. But if you swim away from the wave, it will end up catching up with you and bring you down.

Waves of hurt are bound to arise in your relationships, whether big or small. The key is, don't react with pride or aggression, and don't run away from the situation either. Learn to dive straight below the wave, meaning to face the conflict with courage, humility, understanding, and love.

This is what I strive for: never submissive, but always respectful.

The Animals



A civilized society does not condone the unnecessary harming and killing of living beings.

The first time I made the connection between the food I ate and the death of animals, I was horrified. My twin sister and I were eight year old when, following our mother to the food market, we came face to

face with corpses of rabbits and pigs hanging upside down. Distressed, I turned to my mother and asked, "Mom... Are they dead?"

My sister and I, scandalized, cried our revulsion at the butcher's stand, before our embarrassed mother walked us away. Coming home, I informed my mother I would not eat meat anymore. She tried to dissuade me, saying I needed protein to grow, but I insisted, asking her meal after meal not to put meat on my plate.

I only managed to stay vegetarian for a few months; after which, eating meat still felt wrong, but I looked the other way. At the risk of sounding like I'm justifying myself, up until my teenage years, I don't remember anyone watering my seed of compassion for farm animals. My own lack of resolve, the culture I lived in, and my unchecked beliefs about nutrition prevented me from expressing the care I had for animals.

When I was seventeen, my mother became vegetarian, for both health and ethical reasons. She learned that plants provide all the amino acids (the building blocks of protein) we need, and gracefully apologised for her past mistake. After divorcing my father, she began cooking delicious vegetarian dishes for us and inspired me to reconnect with my childhood's aspiration not to contribute to animal suffering.

We all say we love animals. We may share heart-melting clips of animals on social media. We play with our pets, admire them and care for them. We can feel elated looking at birds soaring in the sky. We can be struck by the beauty and preciousness of life. Yet, when it comes to animals that we label as "items of consumption," we as a society can also be quick to disconnect.

*We choose not to make the connection
between the food we eat, the clothes we wear*

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and the painful realities of those innocent creatures.

We ourselves could never artificially impregnate cows, separate newly born calves from their mothers, slit their throats, hang them upside down and cut them into pieces. We are horrified at the idea of throwing male chicks in industrial grinders, trimming chickens' beaks, smashing piglets' heads on concrete and castrating pigs manually. Yet these are only some of the atrocities we pay other people to commit for us daily.

To open the doors of our hearts, let us open the doors to slaughterhouses and see: there is no humane way to kill an animal who wants to live, to separate a family that wants to be together, or to hurt an innocent animal.

*To go vegan is to bridge the gap
between our moral values
and our daily actions.*

I have come to believe that making progress towards a vegan lifestyle is one of the most impactful things we can do to heal our world.

Women are more likely to go vegan than men, partly because many of us still associate meat consumption with manliness, believing we can't have one without the other. I believe a "real man" has the courage to confront the suffering around him and to stand up for what is right.

I invite you to watch vegan documentaries and learn more about the suffering within the animal farming industry. It won't be easy, but the

temporary discomfort of watching will be well worth your newly gained empathy and awareness.

There are 7.5 billion people on Earth and every year we kill 70 billion land animals and 2.7 trillion sea animals for consumption. We don't have to. The American Dietetic Association, the British Dietetic Association and other large bodies of nutrition professionals have let us know that

“Appropriately planned vegan diets are healthful and nutritionally adequate for all stages of life.”

Our ancestors' conditions might have been different, but in today's world, the availability of food allows us to survive *and* thrive on a strictly plant-based diet. Plants provide us with all the fiber, vitamins, minerals, proteins, calcium, iron, antioxidants, and other nutrients we need – without the cholesterol, trans fat, hormones, antibiotics, and other harmful substances found in animal products.

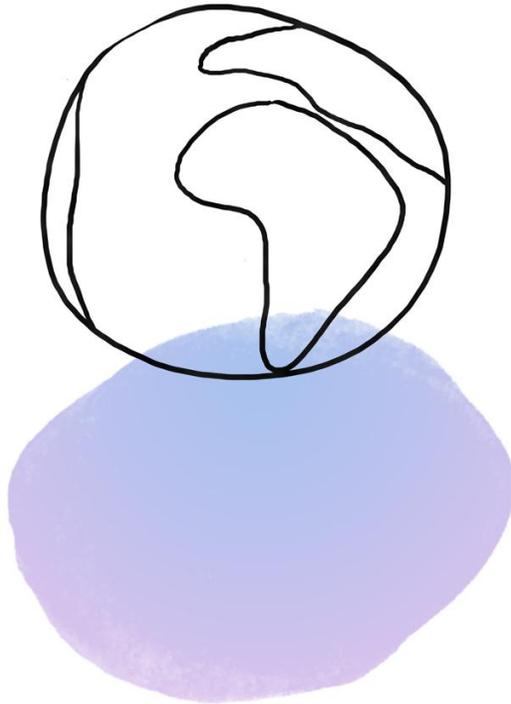
We cannot argue that consuming animal products is a personal choice, because there are victims involved. Morality is not a matter of personal preference, nor can it be based on the behavior of people in the past or animals in the wild. Morality stems from a direct encounter with the reality of suffering, *from the victim's perspective*.

To be born a human being is to be born a big sister or big brother in the Earth's family. We can protect, support, and let live, knowing that our younger siblings' suffering and happiness are intimately connected to our own suffering and happiness.

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Let us be *true* animal lovers.

The Earth



We have a planet to save.

But we won't save it by going on with business as usual. We won't save it without opening our hearts, educating ourselves, changing our ways, and encouraging others to do the same.

*Animal farms occupy thirty percent of the Earth's land,
consume half of all grain and one fourth of all freshwater.*

In a world where the human population is rising, one in eight people do not have access to safe water, and one in ten people live in a state of starvation, *it is time for us to embrace a new dietary paradigm.*

*The animals we raise for food release in the environment
130 times as much excrement
as the entire human population.*

The animal farming industry is responsible for more greenhouse gas emissions than the entire transportation system combined and is the leading cause of rainforest destruction, species extinction, topsoil erosion, water pollution, land desertification and oceanic dead zones. Fishing is destroying our oceans, and scientists warn us that if we continue to fish at this pace, our oceans will be emptied by 2048.

The bottom line is, *animal agriculture is the leading cause of global depletion.*

We are at a turning point in history, a time that calls for collective awakening and action. The United Nations declared,

*“A global shift towards a vegan diet is vital to save the world
from the worst impacts of climate change.”*

Going vegan is one of the best decisions I've made in my life and I know you can do it too. By adopting a plant-based diet, refusing to wear fur, leather, wool or feathers, and not using cosmetics tested on animals, you choose compassion over convenience, truth over tradition, and life over death.

To assist you in your transition, you may want to use vegan apps, join online vegan groups, and find tasty plant-based alternatives to your favorite animal products. Please continue to educate yourself on animal welfare, vegan nutrition and the ecological impact of animal agriculture, so that you can face well-meaning but ill-informed reactions with science and facts.

Going vegan is the most helpful, but it is not the only thing we can do for the environment.

About *40% of the food produced in the world never gets eaten*. Supermarkets discard perfectly edible items upon reaching their expiration date; and schools, hotels, businesses and restaurants throw away untouched meals to prepare fresher food for the next day.

*We can use technology to connect them
to nonprofits feeding people in need.*

Redistributing food lessens our ecological footprint, helps organizations flourish emotionally and feeds the hungry all at once. As a school administrator, restaurant manager, business owner, software developer, or social worker, you can help make food redistribution a reality where you live.

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To minimize food waste and save money, organizations can incorporate simple changes such as removing trays, using slightly smaller plates, and launching food waste prevention campaigns. Households can use smaller fridges, and as individuals, we can learn to value our food better, only putting on our plate the amount we can eat.

*We want future generations to remember us
for the things we did, not the trash we left behind.*

If we consume so much, it's partly because we feel empty inside. The best way to release our cravings and attachments is to reconcile with nature, to create meaningful connections with other people, and to devote our lives to a greater cause.

To generate less trash, you can bring your own reusable bottle, cup or mug wherever you go. When going shopping, bring your own reusable bags; try to buy fresh produce at the farmers' market; buy in bulk or by weight when possible; and avoid single-use disposables. You can also learn to make your own hygiene, beauty, and cleaning products using natural ingredients. The Earth, your health, and your wallet will all thank you.

To minimize the release of pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers into the earth, water, air, and your own body, try to buy organic products when possible. To reduce transportation-based pollution, buy more locally grown produce. Even better, you can grow some of your food, whether indoor, in your yard, or in your community garden. Gardening is not that difficult - and it is a wonderful way to connect to life at a fundamental level.

To reduce CO₂ emissions, you can consider sharing rides, choosing a clean energy vehicle, using public transportation and walking or biking short distances. To reduce energy expenditures, you can insulate your house, set an automatic thermostat, and enjoy slightly cooler temperatures during the winter and slightly warmer ones during the summer.

We can remember to sort our trash and recycling properly, particularly glass, plastic, aluminium and electronics, which take impossibly long times to decompose in nature. We can transform organic waste into fertilizer, whether in our garden through natural means or at home using clean composting technologies.

Ultimately, to stop our global waste hemorrhage, we need to effectively re-think and re-shape our economy, from one which is linear - take, make, and dispose - to one that is *circular*.

We want to produce all goods with their future lives in mind.

“Dumping and praying” shouldn't be an option anymore.

There is no waste in nature. The end of one cycle is merely the beginning of another, and by-products are only the source of new products. To build a truly sustainable economy, we must humble ourselves and learn to *work with and within the laws of nature*, using renewable sources of energy and biodegradable materials.

As environmentally conscious citizens and scientists, let us keep raising awareness and pressuring policy makers.

We need entrepreneurs to come up with new, viable, and eco-friendly business models.

These businesses use clean sources of energy, local resources, minimal and ecological packaging, and only generate useful by-products. If you are an entrepreneur, I encourage you to look for ways to make use of existing waste and put it back into the market. Also, you may want to use technology to connect your factory directly with your consumers. By bypassing distributors and retailers, you will be able to offer cheaper products and minimize your ecological footprint at the same time.

Dependent on fossil fuels, our civilization is a house of cards ready to collapse.

We cannot rely on oil, coal and natural gas as our main sources of energy, since scientists expect them to be depleted within the next 50-100 years. More importantly, burning these resources exerts a huge toll on our planet by contributing to global warming, degraded air quality, oil spills, and acid rain. Biomass and nuclear energy also present similar issues.

We want to quickly rebuild our infrastructure around renewable sources of energy.

We have the technology to do so. We can make use of the sunlight, wind, rain, tides, waves, and geothermal heat to produce energy locally, cleanly and competitively. Energy production is not only tied to

the economy and the environment, but also to international security. When every nation is able to produce its own energy locally, many wars will be avoided and the world will be a safer place.

If you came home one day to find your kitchen sink overflowing and your floor flooded, common sense would tell you to first turn off the tap and then mop the floor. In the same way, as individuals and as a society,

*We must begin by
stopping our unnecessary production of waste.*

We've talked about ways to do so:

- going vegan,
- consuming less,
- redistributing food and goods,
- adopting a circular economy, and
- adopting renewable sources of energy.

Now let's talk about ways to clean up the mess.

Many young people enjoy getting together to clean their neighborhood, city and/or local beach. They find volunteering to be a great way to serve the planet while making friends and growing their hearts wide.

It makes me truly happy to see talented young people pouring their brains power into developing new technologies to better serve the Earth. At the same time, while developing man-made technologies, let us also remember the amazing technologies that our Mother Earth has

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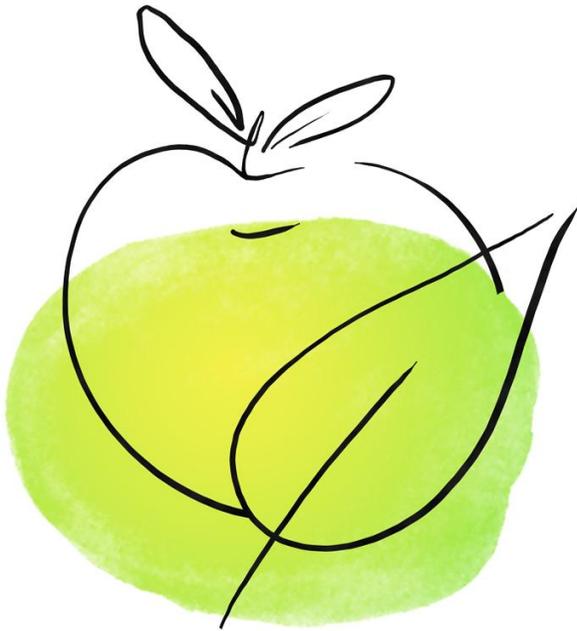
been perfecting over billions of years.

Planting trees and algae are simple and effective ways to support our Earth in cleaning the air and water, protecting our soils, and providing food and habitat for wildlife. When choosing a tree to plant, opt for fruit trees or large trees which will offer more food, shade, and oxygen. Rescuing, caring for, and reintroducing endangered species is another commendable way to honor life and preserve ecosystems.

We have done great harm to mother Earth, but she still loves us in the most tangible and intimate ways. She is the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the plants we use for food and medicine. She is our blue pearl, the one and only habitable planet we know of.

Let us take care of her.

Health



Our day-to-day choices have a big impact on our health.

Three years into my monastic life, when I was living in our community's monastery in Thailand, I fell extremely sick. I was bedridden for a month with a fever doctors could not diagnose and, on top of the pain, feelings of powerlessness and shame were piling up. Fortunately, I was

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introduced to a doctor who teaches natural self-healing practices and, following his advice, I recovered in only two days.

This experience marked me deeply; I was shocked to realize, on one hand, how much suffering disease could entail, and on the other, that there existed simple and scientifically endorsed self-care practices that could be so effective.

Although the Buddha taught extensively on ethical living, human relationships, mind training, and inner freedom, he said very little on physical health, and I made the vow to keep on educating myself on this important area. I hope you won't have to learn about the importance of health the hard way like I did.

*According to the Global Burden of Disease study,
nothing kills more people in the world than unhealthy diets.*

Eating right is crucial for health but many of us are still confused as to what "eating right" actually means.

When studying the lifestyles of the longest-living populations on earth, spread in five areas referred to as the "Blue Zones," researcher Dan Buettner and his team found a common pattern in dietary habits: "*Fruits and vegetables, whole grains and beans* dominate Blue Zones' meals all year round."

Yet a question remained, as to which between a *predominantly* plant-based and a *fully* plant-based diet was most conducive to longevity. "There are so many healthy practices Blue Zones people

engage in," Buettner suspected, "they may have been able to get away with a little bit of meat now and then, because its deleterious effect was counterbalanced by other foods and lifestyle choices."

The Blue Zone that could help scientists answer this question was the Adventists community in California - some of its members ate a bit of meat and fish on occasions, some were vegetarians who allowed eggs and milk, and some fully plant-based. The study *Beyond Meatless, the Health Effects of Vegan Diets: Finding from the Adventist Cohorts* reported, "Vegetarians have consistently shown to have lower risks for cardiometabolic outcomes and some cancers [...] Compared to lacto-ovo-vegetarian diets, vegan diets seem to provide some added protection against obesity, hypertension, type-2 diabetes, and cardiovascular mortality."

The largest study on diet and human health is the China Health and Nutrition Survey, in which 880 million Chinese citizens were followed over the course of twenty years. After checking for possible confounding variables, researchers from Cornell University, Oxford University, and the Chinese Academy of Preventative Medicine concluded that *"People who ate the most animal-based foods got the most chronic disease, and those who ate the most plant-based foods were the healthiest."*

A whole-food plant-based diet is the only diet which has scientifically proven to reverse heart disease, the disease that claims most lives worldwide, in the majority of patients. The same diet has shown to prevent and even reverse other top killers of our modern world such as high blood pressure, type-2 diabetes, and some forms of cancer.

*Our best available scientific body of evidence
calls for a whole plant food revolution.*

To improve your diet, just eat more whole plant foods today than yesterday. Whole grains and legumes provide you with the healthy bulk you need to feel satiated. Fruits, berries, greens, colorful vegetables, herbs and spices are wonderfully health-protective. A small handful of nuts each day serve as a perfect source of fat. Lastly, remember to take a B12 supplement, as this important vitamin has become harder to find in our increasingly sanitized world. The good news is, whole plant foods are not just the healthiest way to eat, they are also the cheapest to buy.

As you experience the benefits of adding more whole plant foods in your diet, you will feel more confident to let go of meat, fish, eggs and dairy products, as well as refined grains, oil, salt, sugar, artificial sweeteners, chemical additives, and heavily processed food items. When you fall off the wagon, please don't beat yourself up but observe the effects of the food on your body and go back to more nutrient-dense and life-promoting foods. Learning about the science of whole plant nutrition and experimenting with new recipes will keep you on a good track.

Between two intakes of food, our digestive tract begins to cleanse itself and our body can focus on healing. We want to offer ourselves enough fasting time daily. I suggest you only eat in a twelve-hour window, from 6am to 6pm, as this rhythm is more in accord with our natural circadian rhythms.

If it feels comfortable and if you are not underweight, you can

gradually shorten your feeding times to an early eight hours window, eating for instance only from 7am to 3pm or from 8am to 4pm, provided that you can consume enough calories during this time. Early time restricted eating is not about depriving ourselves but enjoying food when our body is most ready to digest and feeling light and energized throughout the day.

If you are struggling with a substance addiction, I kindly invite you to take a moment to breathe mindfully and look at your situation with compassion. Ask yourself, how have these substances been helping you?

*To break free from addiction
is to find better ways to meet our needs.*

You can relate to your feelings with loving attention. You can create a safe place of refuge within yourself. You can expand your consciousness in empowering and sustainable ways. You can connect meaningfully with others. And you can make your life so enjoyable you won't need to take a break from it. You can do all of this – without harming your health, spending money, feeling ashamed and scared, or causing your loved ones to worry.

The quality of our sleep is closely tied to our mood, cognitive function, immune function, and even life expectancy. To reap the full benefits of a good night's sleep, we want to go to bed early, as studies show the most restorative sleeping hours are from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m.

Teenagers should aim for nine to ten hours of sleep per night and adults from seven to eight.

Helpful habits you may like to incorporate in your evening routine include avoiding screen time and keeping your room cool, because darkness and a decrease in temperature are the environmental cues our bodies rely on to induce sleep. Before bed, I personally like to rub my ankles for a few minutes, before lying down on my back with my hands on my lower abdomen, breathing slowly and deeply waiting for sleep. When I begin to become sleepy, I turn to my right side.

Modern life has become increasingly sedentary, and inactivity has become the fourth biggest killer of adults worldwide.

There are many ways for us to include more movement in our lives.

We can choose to take the stairs instead of the elevator, to bike to school or work, to carry our groceries, to tend to the vegetable garden, to walk our dog, to squat on the floor instead of sitting on a chair, etc. Even the simple act of wiggling our toes and fingers from time to time can make a small contribution to improving blood flow.

I distinguish between *strengthening* exercises, which raise our heart rate and engage our muscles, and *restorative* exercises, which promote flexibility, relaxation, and a smooth flow of energy.

You may like to practice a few minutes of strengthening exercises in the morning before breakfast, to increase your metabolism and wake your body up. I love hindu squats, hindu push-ups, and chin-ups. Don't hesitate to try out different strengthening exercises, and know you can also make up your own movements: simply move slowly, close to the ground, breathing through the nose. You should feel your muscles working without running out of breath.

My favorite restorative exercise is the *arms swinging*. Although you can practice it any time, I suggest you make it part of your evening routine to help you wind down and prepare to sleep.

The arms swinging exercise starts standing feet shoulder-width apart and parallel to each other. Bring your hands to shoulder height, palms facing down. Drop your hands and swing your arms naturally, back and forth, making sure your arms are parallel to the floor when coming back up. The best swinging speed is the speed with which you feel most at ease - not too fast and not too slow. Swing continuously and relaxingly. On the fourth time your hands drop behind you, bend your knees very slightly, without passing your toes. *Keep on swinging your arms, mentally counting "1 ... 2 ... 3 ... down", bending your knees slightly as your hands drop on the 4th count*, and back to 1 again. Keep your mouth closed and breathe naturally through your nose throughout the exercise, not trying to coordinate your breath and movements. Do not accelerate the swinging speed but keep it regular, continuous, and perfectly relaxed.

For best results, practice for a minimum of 10 minutes every evening. To conclude the exercise, keep your legs straight but continue to swing your arms for a minute or so. Then, relax your shoulders and allow your arms to naturally come back to your sides. Stand still for another minute, breathing mindfully, conscious of any new sensations

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manifesting in your body.

As an alternative to the arms swinging exercise, you may like to try the *deep stretch*. For the deep stretch, spread a blanket or yoga mat (but not a soft mattress) on the floor close to a wall. Close your window to avoid cold drafts and turn off any air conditioning or fan. Sit down on your mat with one hip touching the wall before placing your two legs up the wall. Your buttocks should touch or be placed as close to the wall as possible, and your legs should be straight with your feet hips-width apart. Bring your two arms straight behind you to rest on the floor, with hands shoulder-width apart and palms facing towards the ceiling. Your two legs and arms are in line. In case you can not keep your legs or arms straight or in case your hands can not touch the floor, just stretch to the extent that feels appropriate for now, knowing that regular practice of this exercise will make you more flexible.

Relax into the position for *as long as possible*. Breathe naturally through your nose and give your body enough time to work through the different layers of physical tensions and energetic blockages. It is a good idea to time your deep stretch sessions and keep track of your progress. When you cannot hold the position anymore, slowly bring your knees and hands towards your belly, giving yourself a minute or two for your blood to flow back to normal before standing back up.

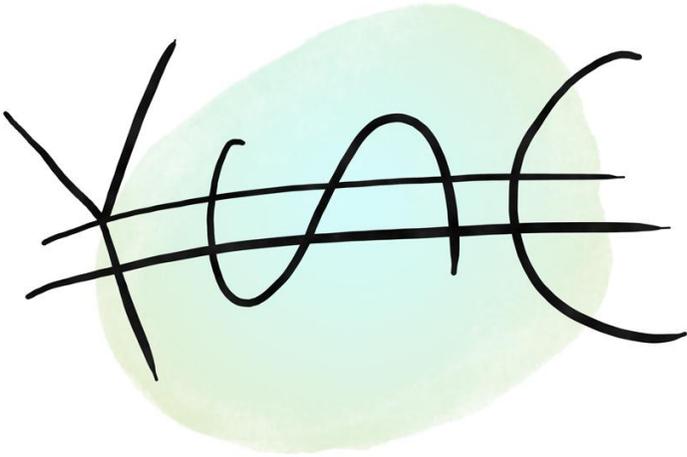
Health and vitality are the foundation of life, without which our ability to celebrate, to engage with others, and to realize projects will suffer. Nobody has perfect health but we can all do what it takes to minimize our chances of getting sick and maximize our chances of feeling light and strong.

*According to the World Health Organization,
two thirds of our chronic diseases worldwide
are caused by poor lifestyle choices.*

To tackle today's global health challenges, a healthcare system centered around drugs and surgery is not enough. Governmental policies are necessary to develop green spaces, encourage movement and human connections, subsidize organic plant agriculture and tax animal farming, bring health education to schools, make courses in lifestyle medicine mandatory in medical schools, and reimburse doctors for lifestyle counseling.

As individuals and as a society, we can tackle our epidemic of lifestyle related diseases.

Money



When our basic material needs are met, more money doesn't make us happier.

In his book "The High Price of Materialism", psychology researcher Tim Krasser examines the relationship between materialistic values and

quality of life. After exploring the scientific literature thoroughly, as well as conducting his own research, he reports: "What stands out across the studies is a simple fact: people who strongly value the pursuit of wealth and possessions report lower psychological well-being than those who are less concerned with such claims."

For instance, in one survey of over 7000 college students from 41 countries, researchers Edward Diener and Shige Oishi found that placing a strong value on making money was associated with decreased life satisfaction. In another study of 700 teenagers, Patricia and Jacob Cohen observed that admiration of materialistic values was positively and significantly related to almost every psychological diagnosis they assessed, such as attention deficit disorder, substance abuse, depression, separation anxiety, narcissism, and so on.

Science shows that an important risk factor for developing a materialistic mindset is the lack of secure attachment in childhood. Because we haven't felt seen and valued enough growing up, we are tempted to turn towards things to fill up the void. We may imagine that if we surround ourselves with enough *symbols of worth*, such as nice clothes, a fancy car, or a position in society, we will finally receive the attention and approval we have been desperately looking for.

My concern is, even if we were to obtain those things and attract the attention and approval that *might* come with them, we would still feel we are only celebrated for the things we have, rather than for our character or the happiness we bring to others. If we expect money or status to guarantee us secure and nurturing human connections, we might be setting ourselves up for disappointment. As one of my brothers humorously put it, "If it is mangoes you are looking for, why climb a coconut tree?"

*In the name of money and things,
many people lose touch with themselves
and complicate their relationships with others.*

Money is not "evil" per se, but if we chase after it at the expense of the truly rewarding experiences of life, we will regret it later. One of the most common regrets people have on their deathbed is that they worked too hard. They wished they had made more time for their loved ones and for pursuing their dreams.

*Material comforts will never replace
the true comfort of a healthy body,
a clear mind, and a meaningful life.*

In my travels, I have met wealthy adults who feel they never have enough, and poor children playing happily as if they owned the whole world. Although of course I don't think of wealth as a purely subjective matter of course, it would not be reasonable to think of it as purely objective either. Our experience of wealth, just like our experience of anything else, is co-conditioned by our mental attitude.

A poor mind is an abyss of greed, while a rich mind is filled with gratitude and generosity. In other words, the poor-minded person thinks about what they can get from the world, while the rich-minded asks what they can give back to the world- regardless of the amount of money in their bank account.

I *feel* rich. I have a roof over my head and enough food to eat. I have nature, wonderful friends, and beautiful aspirations in my heart. I want to grow and to give, to have a positive impact in the world. I don't envy anyone, and I definitely don't need luxury.

Luxury is boring. People buy things believing that things will take care of them. But as it turns out, it's a two-way street. They always end up having to take care of their things: they worry about them, protect them, keep them clean, fix them when they break, and suffer when they lose them as if they had just lost their beloved.

The Buddha said that contentment is the greatest wealth. If you wish to increase your wealth tenfold today, quickly and easily, here is the secret: increase your gratitude tenfold. Take note of the things you have, whether mentally or in writing. You will feel rich instantly. And if you want to feel rich every day, make gratitude a daily practice.

Not only do you have “the right to pursue happiness”, you also have the power to *generate* your own happiness.

*The economy should be at the service of humanity
- and not the other way around.*

The first issue with our current economic system is the wide disparity of wealth. While some suffer from their insatiable greed for more accessories, others suffer trying to meet their most basic needs. The social tension brought about by inequality puts society at risk by fostering division, mental illness, and crime.

At a basic psychological level, the idea of "having to make a living" puts the whole of society in "survival mode", where it becomes harder to make wise, long-term decisions that are in line with our moral values. How can we expect a society to thrive when all its members live in survival mode?

The Universal Basic Income (UBI) is a promising solution. The idea is simple: the government offers a monthly sum of money to every individual, which is just enough to provide for their shelter, food, and medicine, no strings attached. While this might seem naive and unrealistic, pilot projects show that governments can earn back money down the line by saving costs on physical health care, mental health care, and criminal justice. Pilot projects also show that people on UBI do not become "lazy" (as some might expect!) but are more willing to take entrepreneurial risks, and contribute to society in ways that bring them to life.

*Universal Basic Income is
the most simple and direct way to remedy poverty.*

If UBI can provide a floor for society to stand on, a *maximum wage* can provide the roof that shelters it from the downpour of exploitation. Any money that an individual would earn beyond that roof would be automatically given back to society. Because excessive power is intoxicating, and ultimately alienating, it doesn't serve the individual that owns it. And because our natural resources are limited, let us stand up as a human community and enact a maximum wage.

The second issue with our current capitalist system is that it *only* rewards demand. While rewarding demand is an effective way to promote creativity, when left unchecked it creates a society of addiction which doesn't take into account the emotional realities of its members.

For instance, smoking, getting cancer, waging wars, and depleting natural resources: those are all great for our Gross Domestic Product - but indeed terrible for us humans and for life on Earth. This intrinsic disconnect between what our economic system rewards and what our civilization needs is at the root of so much suffering.

*To heal our economy, let us reward not only demand
but also long-term well-being.*

It is possible for us to quantify the impact of each product or service on the regeneration of nature, protection of species, social cohesiveness, mental health, and physical wellness.

We can apply this long-term well-being factor to every financial transaction. For transactions which have a relatively harmful impact on long-term well-being, a fraction of the transaction can be collected, depending on the severity of the harm. The sum of all of this money can then be used to reward companies and individuals providing sought for services and products that promote long-term well-being.

By implementing a long-term well-being factor in every transaction, we make it cheaper for everyone to pay for truly useful things and services, and more expensive to buy harmful things. We support

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companies in doing good, and disincentive them to cause harm. All of this without removing the individual's freedom of choice and without the need for taxes collected by a central government.

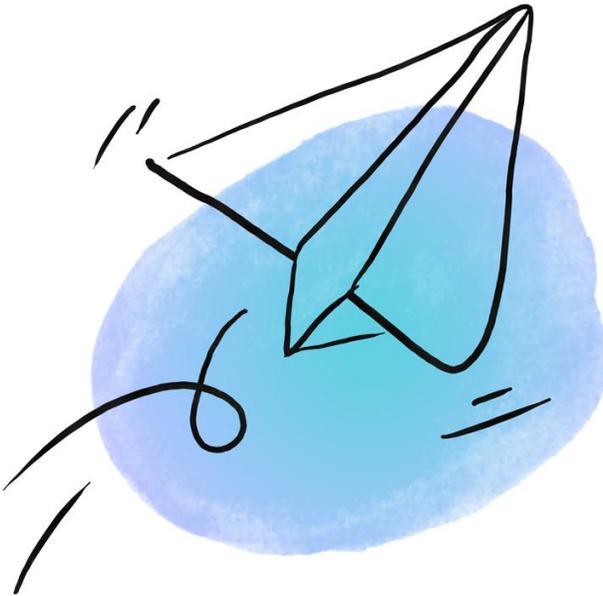
Last but not least, transactions should remain anonymous. To have all of our transactional information tied to our other personal data points would plunge our world into an Orwellian state of surveillance, in which too much power is concentrated in the hands of the few. Privacy deprivation is disastrous for mental health. We all need safe spaces to live our lives the way we want, without a constant feeling that “Big Brother is watching us”... and the never-ending doubt about who is watching over Big Brother. The harm of global surveillance in society far exceeds its benefits, and our economic system should reflect this. If consumers wished, they could donate their data to further a particular cause, such as helping a company better understand their clients or advancing medical research, but by default, transactions should remain anonymous. To protect privacy is to protect human dignity.

To summarize, a healthy economic system, as I see it, would

- provide a universal basic income, to guarantee everyone's dignity
- include a maximum wage, to protect everyone's empathy
- reward demand, to foster a healthy sense of competition
- reward long-term well-being, to gently guide society, and
- protect privacy, to avoid people's data being gathered in the hands of the few.

We don't need to be rich to flourish as human beings. We can find fulfillment in a humble life in the service of the greater good. We can heal our economic system, so it can better serve humanity.

Education



The job of a school is to keep children healthy and happy, and to teach them the skills they will need to co-create a harmonious society.

I have failed school – and school has failed me. School painted a world of competition on the blank canvas of my innocence. The clock on the wall blocked the sun in the sky, books and pens replaced beauty and

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play, and the teacher's voice drowned burgeoning dreams. In its obsession with abstract knowledge, school failed to address my real issues, and by the time I was a teenager, it had become clear that school and I were not meant for each other.

"Why are you skipping so many classes?" one teacher asked, the day my high school summoned me. "Don't you want to graduate?" another teacher added. I did not understand why adults were so keen to make me become like them, when they were obviously living unhappy lives at the service of an unhappy system. I asked back, "Graduate for what?" and in the long silence that followed, teachers and student grieved together over the lack of meaning pervading modern society.

In October 2015, the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence released the results of a survey of 22,000 high school-age youth. To the question, "How do you feel at school?" the number one answer received was "tired," number two was "stressed," and number three was "bored." This epidemic of ill-being at school is a disturbing testament to our inability to meet the true needs of young people.

*For education to be relevant,
teachers must know how to listen to students.*

In the mindfulness retreats we offer to educators, each participant learns to anchor their attention on their breath and to offer their loving attention to the person speaking. Listening attentively, without interrupting or correcting, can be profoundly healing.

Children, as much as anyone else, need to be heard and seen in their humanity. They want to know that they are not alone as they go through the natural vicissitudes of life. As presbyterian minister Fred

Rogers said, "If we can make it clear that feelings are mentionable and manageable, we will have done a great service for mental health."

Conducting regular and anonymous surveys can help governments and school administrators stay relevant in helping students. Good questions are directed towards students' physical, mental, and social well-being; which new subjects they would like to learn and which existing subjects they deem unnecessary; which ways of learning do they find most engaging; and any suggestion they might have to make school time more helpful and enjoyable.

Receiving honest feedback won't be easy in the beginning, but soon the whole school will benefit from the renewed culture of listening and the administration's willingness to experiment with constructive changes.

Khalil Gibran, in his book *The Prophet*, eloquently illuminates our tendency to control children: "You may give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts. You may house their bodies but not their souls, for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams. You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you, for life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday."

Parents, educators, and school administrators have much to learn from children, such as their playfulness, spontaneity, and open-mindedness. Children, through their mere presence, can remind us of our not-so-lost innocence, help us live in the present, and inspire us to make wiser choices for the future.

As a student, you may want to help transform your school from within. You can ask to start a mindfulness club, a kindness and gratitude club, an anti-bullying club, an environmental protection club, to make time to play with the elderly at a local nursing home, serve at a homeless

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shelter, do voluntary work at an animal rescue sanctuary, or any other meaningful project that inspires you.

After motivating fellow students, approach your favorite teacher or principal and thank them for the work they have been doing. Then, present your ideas in a way that can appeal to their reason and heart, keeping the whole school's well-being as your guiding thread.

While doing your best to communicate your ideas and ask for support, please be ready to receive a “no” gracefully. Whatever your school's answer might be, you are planting a seed in them, and this seed might just need time to sprout. You can always try again later - don't give up!

I am delighted to see so many teachers worldwide learning mindfulness techniques, for themselves first, and then to share with their students. This is what my mother did after discovering the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh and the Plum Village community. At that time, she had just begun working in an underprivileged school, where other teachers would send her their “worst cases” to “re-educate” in after-school classes.

Instead of punishing them, as her hierarchy asked, she taught them how to breathe mindfully, how to love themselves, how to identify their emotions, and how to relate to one another with kindness. They would sing mindfulness songs, practice mindful movements, mindful eating, and lying-down meditation. Rather than being scared, children started teaching each other and came back for more.

I loved to hear my mother's school stories. In one memorable incident, a child with violence issues attended two mindfulness sessions with her. One day, while in class with another teacher, he got very angry, picked up a chair, and aimed it at his teacher. Realizing what he was doing, he announced to the whole class, “Ok! Now, I've got to meditate!” He put the chair down, went to the corner of the

classroom, sat down, breathed deeply, and embraced his anger. Needless to say, mindfulness is not just helpful to students but to their teachers too!

In her review paper *The Evidence for Mindfulness in Schools for Children and Young People*, Emeritus Professor Katherine Weare concludes that mindfulness "can reliably impact on a wide range of indicators of positive psychological, social and physical well-being and flourishing." Although the reviewed studies only offered an average of ten classes, students already showed a reduction in anxiety, depression, and stress, an increase in emotional self-regulation, self-perception, self-care, and relationship skills, and an improvement in focus, learning, and academic performance.

School time can be more about *being* and less about *becoming*. Every period of life is worth enjoying and every period sets the tone for the next. We can't expect bored and anxious children to magically turn into lively and fulfilled adults. We should take care of them in the present moment.

*To invest in the happiness of children is not naive
- it is a powerful action with far-reaching repercussions.*

Happy children make their parents and teachers happy. Happy children learn better and are more creative. Happy children are less likely to commit crimes and more likely to turn into productive and responsible adults; not because they were forced to, but because they could find within themselves the joy to contribute.

Children learn best by example, as this witty little story illustrates. Once upon a time, there was a sage who used to counsel people. One day, a

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couple approached him to complain about their little boy: "We've been telling our child to give up eating sweets but he doesn't comply. Please, wise one, help us." The man pondered for a while, and then asked the family to return in one month.

A month later, the sage looked at the boy and kindly said, "Please, stop eating sweets." The couple stood there waiting for more, before breaking the silence "Is that it?" and the man said, "Yes." "But why did it take you a whole month just to tell him that?" The wise man smiled before explaining, "Well, I had to stop eating sweets myself, first!"

Every teacher transmits his way of being and of doing things. A happy teacher, one who knows how to take care of her physical and mental health, to listen deeply, and to instill self-confidence, can inspire students far beyond her subject area.

Before offering feedback, it is important that teachers help students feel loved and accepted, because outside of emotionally safe connections, corrections are not received as well. Good feedback honors the learning processes alive in the student. It communicates what psychology researcher Carol Dweck calls a "growth mindset," that is, the releasing of limiting beliefs and the celebration of presence, participation, and effort. Good feedback doesn't make use of threats but taps into the student's natural curiosity. It is concrete, doable, constructive, and seeks to help the student begin from wherever they are and take one more step in a positive direction.

I consider grading to be a rather harmful form of feedback. The pursuit of high marks as an end in itself not only creates an unhealthy atmosphere of competition but also distracts children from the joy of learning. Students begin to study "for the test" and not for their lives anymore.

Testing can exist without grading. If the administration really insists on seeing grades, grades can be made for them, while being kept hidden from the students and their parents. Testing, then, simply becomes one of the many ways children can consolidate and expand their knowledge. This communicates a healthier idea of success - the success of surpassing oneself, as opposed to surpassing others.

I believe learning would be more effective if we could allow children more freedom to choose what to explore. Teachers can play more the role of facilitators and less the role of all-knowing authority figures. Corners for different areas of exploration could be set up in the school or classroom, where children could go read books, watch videos, consult an adult and even teach each other on their favorite topic. Learning happens much faster when there is genuine curiosity and interest.

I wish youth could be invited to learn about nature, not through books but through direct experience, as it will instill in them feelings of reverence towards life. They could also be taught to garden, cook and clean, as those are not only necessary skills to have but will also help them feel rooted in their environment and proud to contribute. I wish youth could learn science more as a method of inquiry and less as a rigid set of truths- otherwise, over time, much of what they've learned will be proven false and they'll still be unable to think for themselves. History and geography are only worth teaching when presented in a way that provides youth with a clear understanding of how to build a more peaceful and open-minded society.

Schools would benefit greatly from reorganizing themselves around the principles of lifestyle medicine - promoting whole-food plant-based eating and replacing unhealthy snacks with healthier ones, not starting too early in the morning to allow students enough quality sleep, bringing more movement to the classroom, launching alcohol and drug prevention programs, teaching stress reduction techniques such as

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mindfulness, and creating a sense of community and belonging at school through anti-bullying programs and circles of compassionate listening.

*To ensure a brighter future for our world,
we should communicate to children
a healthier idea of success.*

We set our society for failure every time we teach children, whether consciously or unconsciously, that the goal of life is to accumulate wealth and power.

To take care of one's health, to manage one's emotions, to understand one's mind, to create meaningful friendships, to resolve conflicts, and to connect with and care for one's environment - these are all trainable skills, and failure to place them at the center of our educational system, while stuffing the youth with useless notions, constitutes a serious breach in moral duty.

Every child in the world deserves a happy childhood and a holistic education.

Peace



We all need peace.

“Of course, people don't want war...but they can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. This is easy,” said Hermann Göring, senior

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politician of Nazi Germany, before revealing, “All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and for exposing the country to danger. It works the same in every country.”

*Fear and ignorance breed war.
Fearlessness and understanding bring peace.*

War and peace begin inside ourselves. We have already talked about effective ways to take care of our minds: being selective in what we watch and listen to, surrounding ourselves with kind people, taking time out in nature, focusing on our breath, and generating loving thoughts.

As a monk, I have the chance to travel to many countries and meet people from all walks of life. What strikes me the most is *how deeply human we all are*. I encourage you to meet those of other cultures, to listen to them, and to open your heart and mind to their life stories. Doing so has helped me to realize how conditioned we all are and to not take myself too seriously.

When traveling, another thing that surprises me is how everyone finds their country precious and beautiful. I believe it is time for us to look beyond our man-made boundaries and see: it is our *Earth* which is precious and beautiful. The Earth is our mother, and she needs her children to live in harmony.

*Patriotism teaches us
to be proud of things we have not done*

and to hate people we have not met.

*It is time to upgrade from nationalism
to biosphere consciousness.*

Your country's destiny is interwoven with the destinies of all other countries. If other countries aren't safe, your country won't be safe either. To help your country is to help the world, and to help the world is to help your country.

Although I was privileged to be born in a peaceful country, I have always felt within me the wounds of my ancestors during the Lebanese Civil War and the Second World War. Modern science recognizes transgenerational trauma as a real phenomenon. As young people, we want to heal these traumas and to make sure we don't create any more for future generations.

Joining the army is not only about becoming fit and disciplined. It also entails making decisions and witnessing scenes that will haunt us for the rest of our lives.

Military organizations feed on poor or wounded young men with a relentless need to prove themselves. As a young man, you will find it healing to recognize the presence of your father in your heart and in every cell of your body. You don't need to seek his approval outside of you because your father is already a part of you. You can channel his and all your male ancestors' energy to serve the world in constructive ways.

Mindfulness helps us calm down and see that all forms of life interrelate, thus giving us the *spiritual strength* we need to stand for peace.

Stand for peace... and honor the beauty and kindness inside of you. Stand for peace... and help those around you feel more confident in standing for peace too. Stand for peace... and protect yourself, your children and their children by not sowing seeds of hatred and retaliation in the world. Stand for peace... and protect all those, wherever they are, whose lives depend on your political stance.

In war, there is no real victory.

If you care about your country, think about the soldiers whose lives will be put on the line. Think about their children and families who will learn about their death on the battlefield or welcome home a disabled and/or traumatized parent or family member. You might be surprised to learn that more soldiers are lost to suicide each year than to actual combat.

True compassion is both intelligent and radical. It strives to understand the roots of hurtful behaviors in people's social conditioning, not to excuse them, but to work to uproot them. In compassion, we help people to heal and flourish, knowing that human beings who have truly flourished cannot kill anymore.

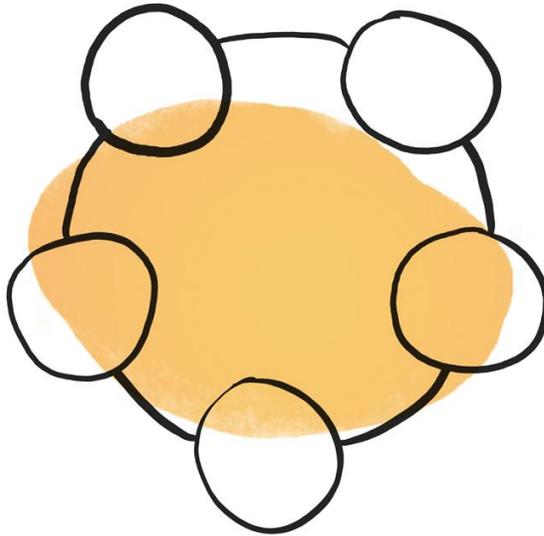
Wars occur when we believe that the end justifies the means. I would like to suggest to you that the means are at least as important as the end. To promote peace and prevent war, we need people trained in meditation, who know how to listen deeply and to bring groups together in a way that makes human connections and mutual understanding possible.

In a conflict, both sides should be able to express the suffering they have gone through openly and without being interrupted. To express our suffering and to listen to the suffering of the other side is to connect to our common humanity. To stick to the facts and to consciously refrain from judging is to give the other side the patience to hear what we've been going through. This is how healing and reconciliation take place.

Every action that goes in the direction of peace and mutual understanding is praiseworthy. Please, do not despair, but take care of yourself and do something, no matter how small, with the means you have.

Your peace is a gift to the world.

Communities



Members of nurturing communities are equipped with self-care tools, communicate compassionately with one another, and share a common, lofty mission.

All networks of life you interact with are your communities. These are

your family, circle of friends, school, company, hobby club, online platforms, support group, religious faith, charity, neighborhood, the human species, and the entire ecosystem. Your communities influence you and you influence your communities.

*Reflect on how nurturing your communities have been for you
and how can you make them more nurturing
for you and others.*

Caring for yourself is already caring for your communities. When you cultivate loving attention, consume healthily, live simply and purposefully, you naturally become a source of joy to those around you. Without preaching or pushing, you are transforming your communities from the inside.

At times, seeing the choices you make may make some people defensive or critical. In those moments, ask yourself whether you are making your choices with loving intention and informed understanding. If you are, persevere, and give other people the reasons and time they need to understand you. You may just happen to be the first person they know to open a door towards a better way of life.

To have a beautiful aspiration is to own a treasure, but to have friends to realize it with is truly priceless.

*Connect with people who can help you
realize your dream of serving the world.*

There are so many people doing good in the world today, and you might only be one Internet search away from them. Please, be brave and reach out, because you need it, and because the world needs it. Connecting with conscious networks of people, you can support and be supported, inspire and be inspired. You can spend time with friends you resonate with. You can learn from and enrich the collective wisdom. And you can help love grow in the world.

You may want to start a residential community, a company, or an organization - a nurturing environment for you and others to take refuge in. You know how valuable it is for people to reconcile personal values with social acceptance. You understand that your and everyone else's willpower is limited, and you want to gather the conditions that will make it more difficult for all of you to make harmful choices, and easier to make healthy, compassionate ones.

Define clearly your community's core values and mission.

This will help attract motivated people and keep you all moving in the right direction.

As your community learns and grows, it will become apparent that it needs a minimal set of rules to preserve its happiness, harmony, and integrity. Please discuss with fellow members which consequence should follow which harmful behaviors, such as: exclusion, a communal meeting to decide the best course of action, the release of an undesirable possession followed with apologies, public apologies, or

simply trying better. Understand that good rules are not designed to punish the individual, but to protect and heal all people involved. Your community can recite its values, mission statement, and rules once a week, in a gathering every member needs to attend. This communal reading will prove to be a cornerstone in the well-being and longevity of your community.

I am glad that my blood family and spiritual community are not perfect, because if they were, I wouldn't be allowed in.

*Vulnerability plays a central role in building
a sense of belonging and togetherness.*

Your community will benefit from organizing regular circles of mindful listening. Offering each other safe spaces to share our true feelings and difficulties makes mutual support possible. We want others to love us for who we are, and not someone we pretend to be. We want to connect at a heart level, and not just to work on projects.

You might be surprised to hear that in Plum Village, we even go so far as to organize “happiness meetings”, that is, meetings during which we only talk about the conditions supportive to our well-being and the joy we experience in our mindfulness practice. And nothing else!

This being said, there are times of course when we need to discuss issues and make decisions.

A good meeting is productive, pleasant, and ends on time.

To ensure your meetings run smoothly, your community should choose tactful and experienced facilitators. In the days leading to the meeting, the facilitator's task is to collect issues calling for discussion and sort them by order of priority. To begin the meeting, she can thank participants for coming, invite them to turn off their electronic devices, and guide them into a few minutes of breath meditation.

The facilitator presents the meeting's agenda and time frame. When introducing a topic, he wants to be as brief as possible while still providing enough information for participants to form opinions. She then raises a question and opens for community members to contribute their insights and suggestions. The facilitator's task is to make sure as many people as possible share and that each does so concisely, concretely, and constructively.

Anchoring your mind in your breath can help you remain centered and calm among the diverging opinions. Everyone, including you, is trying their best to contribute, based on your different past experiences. See yourself in others and others in yourself. You and your fellow community members are "network computing" your way towards an informed, creative, and compassionate decision.

Ideally, a community makes all its decisions by consensus. In difficult cases that need to be solved, another meeting can be scheduled, so as to give members enough time to reconsider their viewpoint. Only when strictly necessary, a decision by majority can be made, which all members will need to abide by.

Living with others is an art worth learning. Our technology driven, materialistic lifestyles may have dulled our most basic social skills, but

we only need a bit of human contact, time, and curiosity, to bring those skills back to life and see them flourish.

You are not on Earth to dream your life alone, but to live your dreams with others.

You can help heal the system.

Starting a mindfulness practice, you develop the emotional intelligence you and the world need. Adopting a whole-food plant-based diet, you protect your health, the animals, and life on Earth. Living simply, cultivating nurturing relationships and serving others, you infuse life with joy and meaning. Sharing the knowledge of self-help, you fuel the global healing revolution.

As a human community, we need to examine the questions of well-being, compassion, and interconnectedness in scientific and nonsectarian ways. We want to be proactive and brave in placing what truly matters at the heart of our school system, health care system, mass media, economy, politics, and communities.

In the midst of my teenage crisis, I made a promise: if I could ever transform my suffering, which looked insurmountable at the time, I would help others do the same. Today, I can honestly say that I am healed. Healed, not in the sense that I have stopped encountering difficulties, but in the sense that I can take care of myself, smile every day, and live with curiosity and purpose. My pain has become a door for me to connect with and care for others.

Life may challenge you, but keep on feeling. Life may hurt you, but keep on feeling. Life may break you, but keep on feeling. Keep on feeling until life fully breaks you open, until your heart overflows with love for yourself and others. Keep on feeling until you merge with the flow of life and nothing can break you anymore.

Nobody needs any more suffering, but we each want to tend to the suffering we have with loving attention, so that we can soothe it, learn from it, rise above it, and gather the strength we need to help the world.

*Thank you for reading,
thank you for taking good care of yourself,
and thank you for doing your part - wherever you are.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Brother Promise (Thích Chân Pháp Thệ) is a Lebanese French Buddhist monk. Ordained in 2009 by Vietnamese Zen master and peace activist Thích Nhất Hạnh, he has since lived in various monasteries of the Plum Village community in France, Thailand, and the United States. He likes learning stuff and making friends. But he doesn't like writing about himself in the third person... Because it's weird. Anyways!

MENTAL HEALTH REVOLUTION

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