

## The Fifth Precept: Diet for a Mindful Society

By Thich Nhat Hanh

**Commentaries by the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hahn, on the Buddhist Five Precepts, or Five Mindfulness Trainings.**

*Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I vow to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking and consuming. I vow to ingest only items that preserve peace, well-being and joy in my body, in my consciousness, and in the collective body and*

*consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant or to ingest foods or other items that contain toxins, such as certain TV programs, magazines, books, films and conversations. I am aware that to damage my body or my consciousness with these poisons is to betray my ancestors, my parents, my society and future generations. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger and confusion in myself and in society by practicing a diet for myself and for society. I understand that a proper diet is crucial for self-transformation and for the transformation of society.*



Whenever we take a bath or a shower, we can look at our body and see that it is a gift from our parents and their parents. Even though many of us do not want to have much to do with our parents--they may have hurt us so much--when we look deeply, we see that we cannot drop all identification with them. As we wash each part of our body, we can ask ourselves, "To whom does this body belong? Who has transmitted this body to me? What has been transmitted?" Meditating this way, we will discover that there are three components: the transmitter, that which is transmitted, and the one who receives the transmission. The transmitter is our parents. We are the continuation of our parents and their ancestors. The object of transmission is our body itself. And the one who receives the transmission is us. If we continue to meditate on this, we will see clearly that the transmitter, the object transmitted, and the receiver are one. All three are present in our body. When we are deeply in touch with the present moment, we can see that all our ancestors and all future generations are present in us. Seeing this, we will know what to do and what not to do--for ourselves, our ancestors, our children, and their children.

At first, when you look at your father, you probably do not see that you and your father are one. You may be angry at him for many things. But the moment you understand and love your father, you realize the emptiness of transmission. You realize that to love yourself is to love your father, and to love your father is to love yourself. To keep your body and your consciousness healthy is to do it for your ancestors, your parents, and future generations. You do it for your society and for everyone, not just yourself. The first thing you have to bear in mind is that you are not practicing this as a separate entity. Whatever you ingest, you are doing it for everyone. All of your ancestors and all future generations are ingesting it with you. That is the true meaning of the emptiness of the transmission. The Fifth Precept should be practiced in this spirit.

There are people who drink alcohol and get drunk, who destroy their bodies, their families, their society. They should refrain from drinking. But you who have been having a glass of wine every week during the last thirty years without doing any harm to yourself, why should you stop that? What is the use of practicing this precept if drinking alcohol does not harm you or other people? Although you have not harmed yourself during the last thirty years by drinking just one or two glasses of wine every week, the fact is that it may have an effect on your children, your grandchildren, and your society. We only need to look deeply in order to see it. You are practicing not for yourself alone, but for everyone. Your children might have a propensity for alcoholism and, seeing you drinking wine every week, one of them may become alcoholic in the future. If you abandon your two glasses of wine, it is to show your children, your friends, and your society that your life is not only for yourself. Your life is for your ancestors, future generations, and also your society. To stop drinking two glasses of wine every week is a very deep practice, even if it has not brought you any harm. That is the insight of a bodhisattva who knows that everything she does is done for all her ancestors and future generations. The emptiness of transmission is the basis of the Fifth Precept. The use of drugs by so many young people should also be stopped with the same kind of insight.

In modern life, people think that their body belongs to them and they can do anything they want to it. "We have the right to live our own lives." When you make such a declaration, the law supports you. This is one of the manifestations of individualism. But, according to the teaching of emptiness, your body is not yours. Your body belongs to your ancestors, your parents, and future generations. It also belongs to society and to all the other living beings. All of them have come together to bring about the presence of this body--the trees, clouds, everything. Keeping your body healthy is to express gratitude to the whole cosmos, to all ancestors, and also not to betray the future generations. We practice this precept for the whole cosmos, the whole society. If we are healthy, everyone can benefit from it--not only everyone in the society of men and women, but everyone in the society of animals, plants, and minerals. This is a bodhisattva precept. When we practice the Five Precepts we are already on the path of a bodhisattva.

When we are able to get out of the shell of our small self and see that we are interrelated to everyone and everything, we see that our every act is linked with the whole of humankind, the whole cosmos. To keep yourself healthy is to be kind to your ancestors, your parents, the future generations, and also your society. Health is not only bodily health, but also mental health. The Fifth Precept is about health and healing.

"Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I vow to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society..." Because you are not doing it only for yourself, to stop drinking one or two glasses of wine a week is truly an act of a bodhisattva. You do it for everyone. At a reception, when someone offers you a glass of wine, you can smile and decline, "No, thank you. I do not drink alcohol. I would be grateful if you would bring me a glass of juice or water." You do it gently, with a smile. This is very helpful. You set an example for many friends, including many children who are present. Although that can be done in a very polite, quiet way, it is truly the act of a bodhisattva, setting an example by your own life.

Everything a mother eats, drinks, worries about, or fears will have an effect on the fetus inside her. Even when the child inside is still tiny, everything is in it. If the young mother is not aware of the nature of interbeing, she may cause damage to both herself and her child at the same time. If she drinks alcohol, she will destroy, to some extent, the brain cells in her fetus. Modern research has proven this.

Mindful consumption is the object of this precept. We are what we consume. If we look deeply into the items that we consume every day, we will come to know our own nature very well. We have to eat, drink, consume, but if we do it unmindfully, we may destroy our bodies and our consciousness, showing ingratitude toward our ancestors, our parents, and future generations.

When we eat mindfully we are in close touch with the food. The food we eat comes to us from nature, from living beings, and from the cosmos. To touch it with our mindfulness is to show our gratitude. Eating in mindfulness can be a great joy. We pick up our food with our fork, look at it for a second before putting it into our mouth, and then chew it carefully and mindfully, at least fifty times. If we practice this, we will be in touch with the entire cosmos.

Being in touch also means knowing whether toxins are present in the food. We can recognize food as healthy or not thanks to our mindfulness. Before eating, members of a family can practice breathing in and out and looking at the food on the table. One person can pronounce the name of each dish, "potatoes," "salad," and so on. Calling something by its name helps us touch it deeply and see its true nature. At the same time, mindfulness reveals to us the presence or absence of toxins in each dish. Children enjoy doing this if we show them how. Mindful eating is a good education. If you practice this way for some time, you will find that you will eat more carefully, and your practice of mindful eating will be an example for others. It is an art to eat in a way that brings mindfulness into our life.

We can have a careful diet for our body, and we can also have a careful diet for our consciousness, our mental health. We need to refrain from ingesting the kinds of intellectual "food" that bring toxins into our consciousness. Some TV programs, for example, educate us and help us to lead a healthier life, and we should make time to watch programs like these. But other programs bring us toxins, and we need to refrain from watching them. This can be a practice for everyone in the family.

We know that smoking cigarettes is not good for our health. We have worked hard to get the manufacturers to print a line on a pack of cigarettes: "WARNING, SMOKING MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH." That is a strong statement, but it was necessary because advertisements to promote smoking are very convincing. They give young people the idea that if they don't smoke, they are not really alive. These advertisements link smoking with nature, springtime, expensive cars, beautiful men and women, and high standards of living. One could believe that if you don't smoke or drink alcohol, you will not have any happiness at all in this life. This kind of advertising is dangerous; it penetrates into our unconscious. There are so many wonderful and healthy things to eat and drink. We have to show how this kind of propaganda misleads people.

The warning on cigarette packs is not enough. We have to stand up, write articles, and do whatever we can to step up campaigns against smoking and drinking alcohol. We are going in the right direction. At last it is possible to take an airplane flight without suffering from cigarette smoke. We have to make more effort in these directions.

I know that drinking wine runs deep in Western culture. In the ceremony of the Eucharist and the Passover seder, wine is an important element. But I have spoken to priests and rabbis about this, and they have told me it is possible to substitute grape juice for the wine. Even if we don't drink at all, we can still get killed on the streets by a drunk driver. To persuade one person to refrain from drinking is to make the world safer for us all.

Sometimes we don't need to eat or drink as much as we do, but it has become a kind of addiction. We feel so lonely. Loneliness is one of the afflictions of modern life. It is similar to the Third and Fourth Precepts--we feel lonely, so we engage in conversation, or even in a sexual relationship, hoping that

the feeling of loneliness will go away. Drinking and eating can also be the result of loneliness. You want to drink or overeat in order to forget your loneliness, but what you eat may bring toxins into your body. When you are lonely, you open the refrigerator, watch TV, read magazines or novels, or pick up the telephone to talk. But unmindful consumption always makes things worse.

There may be a lot of violence, hatred, and fear in a film. If we spend one hour looking at that film, we will water the seeds of violence, hatred, and fear in us. We do that, and we let our children do that, too. Therefore we should have a family meeting to discuss an intelligent policy concerning television watching. We may have to label our TV sets the same way we have labelled cigarettes: "WARNING: WATCHING TELEVISION CAN BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH." That is the truth. Some children have joined gangs, and many more are very violent, partly because they have seen a lot of violence on television. We must have an intelligent policy concerning the use of television in our family.

We should arrange our schedules so that our family has time to benefit from the many healthy and beautiful programs on TV. We do not have to destroy our television set; we only have to use it with wisdom and mindfulness. This can be discussed among the family and the community. There are a number of things we can do, such as asking the TV stations to establish healthier programming, or suggesting to manufacturers to offer television sets that receive only stations that broadcast healthy, educational programs, like PBS. During the war in Vietnam, the American army dropped hundreds of thousands of radio sets in the jungles that could receive only one station, the one that made propaganda for the anticommunist side. This is not psychological warfare, but I think many families would welcome a TV set that would allow us to see only healthy programs. I hope you will write to TV manufacturers and TV stations to express your ideas about this.

We need to be protected because the toxins are overwhelming. They are destroying our society, our families, and ourselves. We have to use everything in our power to protect ourselves. Discussions on this subject will bring about important ideas, such as to how to protect ourselves from destructive television broadcasts. We also have to discuss in our families and communities which magazines that we and our children enjoy reading, and we should boycott those magazines that spill toxins into our society. Not only should we refrain from reading them, but we should also make an effort to warn people of the danger of reading and consuming these kinds of products. The same is true of books and conversations.

Because we are lonely, we want to have conversations, but our conversations can also bring about a lot of toxins. From time to time, after speaking with someone, we feel paralyzed by what we have just heard. Mindfulness will allow us to stop having the kinds of conversations that bring us more toxins.

Psychotherapists are those who listen deeply to the sufferings of their clients. If they do not know how to practice to neutralize and transform the pain and sorrow in themselves, they will not be able to remain fresh and healthy in order to sustain themselves for a long time.

The exercise I propose has three points: First, look deeply into your body and your consciousness and identify the kinds of toxins that are already in you. We each have to be our own doctor not only for our bodies, but also for our minds. After we identify these toxins, we can try to expel them. One way is to drink a lot of water. Another is to practice massage, to encourage the blood to come to the spot where the toxins are, so the blood can wash them away. A third is to breathe deeply air that is fresh and clean. This brings more oxygen into the blood and helps it expel the toxins in our bodies. There are mechanisms in our bodies that try to neutralize and expel these substances, but our bodies may

be too weak to do the job by themselves. While doing these things, we have to stop ingesting more toxins.

At the same time, we look into our consciousness to see what kinds of toxins are already in there. We have a lot of anger, despair, fear, hatred, craving, and jealousy--all these things were described by the Buddha as poisons. The Buddha spoke of the three basic poisons as anger, hatred, and delusion. There are many more than that, and we have to recognize their presence in us. Our happiness depends on our ability to transform them. We have not practiced, and so we have been carried away by our unmindful life-styles. The quality of our life depends very much on the amount of peace and joy that can be found in our bodies and consciousness. If there are too many poisons in our bodies and consciousness, the peace and joy in us will not be strong enough to make us happy. So the first step is to identify and recognize the poisons that are already in us.

The second step of the practice is to be mindful of what we are ingesting into our bodies and consciousness. What kind of toxins am I putting into my body today? What films am I watching today? What book am I reading? What magazine am I looking at? What kind of conversations am I having? Try to recognize the toxins.

The third part of the practice is to prescribe for yourself a kind of diet. Aware of the fact that there are this many toxins in my body and consciousness, aware of the fact that I am ingesting this and that toxin into my body and consciousness every day, making myself sick and causing suffering to my beloved ones, I am determined to prescribe for myself a proper diet. I vow to ingest only items that preserve well-being, peace, and joy in my body and my consciousness. I am determined not to ingest more toxins into my body and consciousness.

Therefore, I will refrain from ingesting into my body and consciousness these things, and I will make a list of them. We know that there are many items that are nutritious, healthy, and delightful that we can consume every day. When we refrain from drinking alcohol, there are so many delicious and wholesome alternatives: fruit juices, teas, mineral waters. We don't have to deprive ourselves of the joys of living, not at all. There are many beautiful, informative, and entertaining programs on television. There are many excellent books and magazines to read. There are many wonderful people and many healthy subjects to talk about. By vowing to consume only items that preserve our well-being, peace, and joy, and the well-being, peace, and joy of our family and society, we need not deprive ourselves of the joys of living. Practicing this third exercise brings us deep peace and joy.

Practicing a diet is the essence of this precept. Wars and bombs are the products of our consciousness individually and collectively. Our collective consciousness has so much violence, fear, craving, and hatred in it, it can manifest in wars and bombs. The bombs are the product of our fear. Because others have powerful bombs, we try to make bombs even more powerful. Then the other nations hear that we have powerful bombs, and they try to make even more powerful bombs. Removing the bombs is not enough. Even if we could transport all the bombs to a distant planet, we would still not be safe, because the roots of the wars and the bombs are still intact in our collective consciousness. Transforming the toxins in our collective consciousness is the true way to uproot war.

When we saw the video of Rodney King being beaten on the streets of Los Angeles, we did not understand why the five policemen had to beat a defenseless person like that again and again. We saw the violence, hatred, and fear in the policemen. But it is not the problem of the five policemen alone. Their act was the manifestation of our collective consciousness. They are not the only ones who are violent and full of hatred and fear. Most of us are like that. There is so much violence in all big

cities, not only Los Angeles, but also San Francisco, New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Tokyo, Paris, and elsewhere. Every morning, when going to work, policemen say, "I have to be careful or I may be killed. I will be unable to return to my family." A policeman practices fear every day, and because of that, he may do things that are quite unwise. Sometimes there is no real danger, but because he suspects he may be shot, he takes his gun and shoots first. He may shoot a child playing with a toy gun. One week before Rodney King was beaten, a policewoman in Los Angeles was shot in the face and killed. It is natural that the police in the area became angry when they heard this, and they all went to the funeral to demonstrate their anger and hatred to society and to the administration for not providing them with enough safety. The government is not safe either--presidents and prime ministers get assassinated. Because society is like this, policemen and policewomen are like that. "This is, because that is. This is like this, because that is like that." A violent society creates violent policemen. A fearful society creates fearful policemen. Putting the policemen in jail does not solve the problem. We have to change the society from its roots, which is our collective consciousness, where the root-energies of fear, anger, greed, and hatred lie.

We cannot abolish war with angry demonstrations. We have to practice a diet for ourselves, our families, and our society. We have to do it with everyone else. In order to have healthy TV programs, we have to work with artists, writers, filmmakers, lawyers, and legislators. We have to step up the struggle. Meditation should not be a drug to make us oblivious to our real problems. It should produce awareness in us, and also in our families and in our society. Enlightenment has to be collective for us to achieve results. We have to stop the kinds of consuming that poison our collective consciousness.

I do not see any other way than the practice of these bodhisattva precepts. We have to practice them as a society in order to produce the dramatic changes we need. To practice as a society will be possible only if each of us vows to practice as a bodhisattva. The problem is great. It concerns our survival and the survival of our species and our planet. It is not a matter of enjoying one glass of wine. If you stop drinking your glass of wine, you do it for the whole society. We know that the Fifth Precept is exactly like the first one. When you practice non-killing and you know how to protect the lives of even small animals, you realize that eating less meat has to do with the practice of the precept. If you are not able to entirely stop eating meat, at least make an effort to reduce eating meat. If you reduce eating meat and drinking alcohol by fifty percent, you will already be performing a miracle; that alone can solve the problem of hunger in the Third World. Practicing the precepts is to make progress every day. That is why during the precept recitation ceremony, we always answer the question of whether we have made an effort to study and practice the precept by deep breathing. That is the best answer. Deep breathing means that I have made some effort, but I can do better.

The Fifth Precept can be like that, too. If you are unable to completely stop drinking, then stop four-fifths, or three-fourths. The difference between the First and the Fifth Precept is that alcohol is not the same as meat. Alcohol is addictive. One drop brings about another. That is why you are encouraged to stop even one glass of wine. One glass can bring about a second glass. Although the spirit is the same as the First Precept, you are strongly recommended not to take the first glass of wine. When you see that we are in great danger, refraining from the first glass of wine is a manifestation of your enlightenment. You do it for all of us. We have to set an example for our children and our friends. On French television they say, "One glass is all right, but three glasses will bring about destruction." (Un verre ça va; trois verres bonjour les dégâts.) They do not say that the first glass brings about the second, and the second brings about the third. They don't say that, because they belong to a civilization of wine. Here in Plum Village, in the Bordeaux region of France, we are

surrounded by wine. Many of our neighbors are surprised that we don't profit from being in this area, but we are a pocket of resistance. Please help us.

When I was a novice, I learned that from time to time we had to use alcohol in preparing medicines. There are many kinds of roots and herbs that have to be macerated in alcohol to have an effect. In these instances, alcohol is allowed. When the herbs have been prepared, we put the mixture in a pot and boil them. Then they no longer have an intoxicating effect. If you use some alcohol in cooking, the result may be the same. After the food is cooked, the alcohol in it will not have an intoxicating nature. We should not be narrow-minded about this.

No one can practice the precepts perfectly, including the Buddha. The vegetarian dishes that were offered to him were not entirely vegetarian. Boiled vegetables contain dead bacteria. We cannot practice the First Precept or any of the precepts perfectly. But because of the real danger in our society--alcoholism has destroyed so many families and has brought about much unhappiness--we have to do something. We have to live in a way that will eradicate that kind of damage. That is why even if you can be very healthy with one glass of wine every week, I still urge you with all my strength to abandon that glass of wine.

I would also like to say something about not using drugs. As alcohol has been the plague of one generation, drugs are the plague of another. One young girl in Australia told me that she did not know anyone in her age group who does not take drugs of one kind or another. Often young people who have taken drugs come to meditation centers to deal with the problem of facing life as it is. They are often talented and sensitive people--painters, poets and writers--and by becoming addicted to drugs they have, to a small or large extent, destroyed some brain cells. It means that they now have little stability or staying power, and are prone to sleeplessness and nightmares. We do what we can to encourage them to stay for a course of training in the meditation center, but because they are easily disillusioned, they tend to leave when things become difficult. Those who have been addicted to drugs need discipline. I am not sure that a meditation center like Plum Village is the best place to cure victims of drug addiction. I think that experts and specialists in this field are better equipped than we are. A meditation center should be able to receive educators and specialists in drug addiction as well as the victims of drug addiction for short courses in meditation to make its resources available where they are truly needed.

The practice that we offer is that of the Fifth Precept, to prevent someone from becoming involved with drugs in the first place. Parents especially need to know what spiritual food to give their children. So often, children feel spiritually starved by the wholly materialistic outlook of their parents. The parents are unable to transmit to the children the values of their spiritual heritage, and so the children try to find fulfillment in drugs. Drugs seem to be the only solution when teachers and parents are spiritually barren. Young people need to touch the feeling of deep-seated well-being within themselves without having to take drugs, and it is the task of educators to help them find spiritual nourishment and well-being. But if educators have not yet discovered for themselves a source of spiritual nourishment, how can they demonstrate to young people how that nourishment may be found?

The Fifth Precept tells us to find wholesome, spiritual nourishment, not only for ourselves but also for our children and future generations. Wholesome, spiritual nourishment can be found in the moon, the spring blossoms, or the eyes of a child. The most basic meditation practices of becoming aware of our bodies, our minds, and our world can lead us into a far more rich and fulfilling state than drugs could ever do. We can celebrate the joys that are available in the simplest pleasures.

The use of alcohol and drugs is causing great damage to our societies and families. Governments work hard to stop the traffic of drugs. They use airplanes, guns, and armies to do so. Most people know how destructive the use of drugs is but they cannot resist, because there is so much pain and loneliness inside them, and the use of alcohol and drugs helps them to forget for a while their deep malaise. Once people get addicted to alcohol and drugs, they might do anything to get the drugs they need—lie, steal, rob, or even kill. To stop the drug traffic is not the best way to prevent people from using drugs. The best way is to practice the Fifth Precept and to help others practice.

Consuming mindfully is the intelligent way to stop ingesting toxins into our consciousness and prevent the malaise from becoming overwhelming. Learning the art of touching and ingesting refreshing, nourishing, and healing elements is the way to restore our balance and transform the pain and loneliness that are already in us. To do this, we have to practice together. The practice of mindful consuming should become a national policy. It should be considered true peace education. Parents, teachers, educators, physicians, therapists, lawyers, novelists, reporters, filmmakers, economists, and legislators have to practice together. There must be ways of organizing this kind of practice.

The practice of mindfulness helps us be aware of what is going on. Once we are able to see deeply the suffering and the roots of the suffering, we will be motivated to act, to practice. The energy we need is not fear or anger; it is the energy of understanding and compassion. There is no need to blame or condemn. Those who are destroying themselves, their families, and their society by intoxicating themselves are not doing it intentionally. Their pain and loneliness are overwhelming, and they want to escape. They need to be helped, not punished. Only understanding and compassion on a collective level can liberate us. The practice of the Five Wonderful Precepts is the practice of mindfulness and compassion. For a future to be possible for our children and their children, we have to practice.

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