

**Calming Strong Emotions
Meditations to Cultivate Power
by
Thich Nhat Hanh**

Many of us suffer from strong, painful emotions and don't know how to handle them. When you notice that there's a feeling in you that isn't calm or peaceful, you can repeat to yourself, "Breathing in, I am present for my feelings. Breathing out, I calm my feeling." When you say this, your emotions begin to calm down. This is important. The emotion may be despair, fear, or anger, but whatever it is, mindful breathing will calm it.

When you notice a strong emotion arising, go back to yourself and begin the practice of mindful breathing to generate the energy of mindfulness for your protection. Be there for your emotion and don't let it just overtake you. Don't become a victim of your emotions.

It's like when you know a heavy storm is coming. You have to do everything you can to protect your house so that it won't be damaged by the wind. Strong emotions come from within, from the depths of our consciousness. The energy of mindfulness also comes from the depths of our consciousness. So you sit in a stable position, in a chair with your feet flat on the floor or cross-legged on a cushion, or you lie down, and you prepare yourself for the emotion. You begin to breathe in and out, and you focus your attention on your abdomen. Why your abdomen? When you see a tree in a storm and you focus your attention on the top of the tree, you feel vulnerable. You have the impression that the tree is too fragile to withstand the storm, because the little branches and the leaves on the top of the tree sway violently in the wind. You have the impression that the tree will be blown away. But if you focus your attention on the trunk of the tree, you get a different impression. You can see that the tree is solid and rooted deeply in the soil, so you know the tree will withstand the storm.

You are also a tree, and that strong emotion is the storm that is approaching. If you don't prepare for it, you may be blown away. To prepare means to begin mindful breathing and to bring your attention down from the level of thinking to the level of the belly, just below the navel. This is called belly breathing. Just focus all your attention on your belly and become aware of the rise and fall of your abdomen, which is the trunk of your tree. Don't stay on the level of the brain because that is where the storm winds are blowing the hardest. It's dangerous to stay at the level of your thinking. Go down and embrace the trunk of the tree below the navel, where you will be safe.

This is a simple practice, but it is effective. You're aware that an emotion is only an emotion. It's just a small part of your whole being. You are much more than your emotion. An emotion comes, stays for a while, and goes away, just like a storm. If you're aware of that, you won't be afraid of your emotions. Many young people don't know how to handle their emotions, and they suffer greatly. They

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believe the only way to end the suffering is to kill themselves. There are many young people who commit suicide simply because they don't know how to handle their emotions. Yet it's not difficult. It's helpful to know that an emotion is just an emotion, and that you are much more than your emotions, which come, stay awhile, and go. Why should you die because of an emotion?

When you focus your attention on your abdomen for fifteen or twenty minutes and take refuge in your practice, your emotion will subside. Then you'll feel peaceful and happy because you know there's a way to handle your emotions. You know the next time an emotion arises, you can do exactly the same thing.

When you've practiced and you have confidence in the practice, you can help someone who is close to you when they are overwhelmed by a strong emotion. You might say, "Come and sit by my side. Take my hand. Let us practice mindful breathing and pay attention to the rise and fall of our abdomens." Holding that person's hand, you can convey your strength and confidence. The two of you will be breathing in and out together. Fifteen or twenty minutes later, he will feel all right. In the future he can do it himself. Teaching a friend how to practice like that may save his life later on.

I advise you not to wait until a strong emotion comes before beginning the practice. You'll surely forget to do it. Learn it right now. Practice fifteen minutes every day. Sit or lie in a stable position and practice mindful breathing. Enjoy your in-breath and your out-breath, and focus your attention on the abdomen. Belly breathing can be very deep, very slow, and very powerful. If you continue doing this for three weeks, you'll develop the right practice. Then, when a strong emotion arises, you'll remember the practice and you will succeed in soothing your emotion. Each time your emotion becomes a little less powerful. You don't have to fight; you just allow the energy of mindfulness to embrace your emotion. Then it will weaken and go back to the depths of your consciousness.