

Habit Energies

Thich Nhat Hanh

Transformation at the base

The function of store consciousness
Is to receive and maintain
Seeds and their habit energies,
So they can manifest in the world, or remain dormant.

THE SEEDS that we receive from our ancestors, friends, and society are held in our consciousness, just as the earth holds the seeds that fall upon it. Like the seeds in the earth, the seeds in our store consciousness are hidden from us. We are seldom in contact with them. Only when they manifest in our mind consciousness do we become aware of them. When we feel happy, we may believe that there is no seed of anger in us. But as soon as someone irritates us, our seed of anger will make itself known.

Habit energy is an important term in Buddhist psychology. Our seeds carry the habit energies of thousands of years. The Sanskrit term for habit energy, *vashana*, means "to permeate," "to impregnate." If you want to make jasmine tea, you pick jasmine flowers, put them in a box together with the tea, close it tightly, and leave it for several weeks. The fragrant jasmine penetrates deeply into the tea leaves. The tea will then smell of jasmine, because it has absorbed the perfume of the jasmine blossoms. Our store consciousness also has a strong capacity to receive and absorb "fragrances" or "scents."

This impregnation of our consciousness, the habit energies carried by the seeds, affects our patterns of seeing, feeling, and behaving. The seeds in our consciousness manifest not only in a psychological form but also as the objects of our perception - mountains, rivers, other people. Because of habit energies, we are not able to perceive things as they truly are. We interpret everything we see or hear in terms of our habit energy. If we crumple a sheet of paper, it is difficult to make it lie flat again. It has the habit energy of being crumpled. We are the same. When we meet a person, what we really meet is our own habit energy and it prevents us from seeing anything else. Perhaps when we first met this person, we had a negative reaction to him. We formed a habit energy of how we relate to him on the basis of that, and we continue to relate to him that way. Every time we look at him, we see the same old person even if he has changed completely. Our habit energies keep us from being able to perceive the reality of the present moment.

We are influenced by the actions and beliefs of our parents and of society. But our reactions to things have their own patterns and we are taught in these patterns. Our habit energies are the fruit of our behaviour formed by our reactions to things and also by our environment. When a person is brought up in a certain environment, a habit energy is formed. Many children today have the habit energy of watching TV. They are unhappy when they are brought somewhere where there is no television. One boy, when he came to Plum Village and discovered that there was no television, wanted his mother to take him away. We convinced him to stay for half a day, and

during that time many other children played with him. After a few hours, he agreed to stay longer. He ended up staying for three weeks. He discovered that he could be happy without television.

That is the good news. It is possible for us to change our habit energies. And in fact, in order to transform we must change them. Even though we may have the best intention to transform ourselves, we will not be successful unless we work on our habit energies. The easiest way to do this is with a Sangha, a group of people who practice mindfulness together. If we put ourselves in an environment where we can practice deeply with other people, we will be able to alter our habit energies. Through the practice of mindfulness, we can identify the seeds in us, and recognize the habit energies that go along with them. With mindfulness, we can observe our habit energies and begin to transform them.

If our families and friends are unstable, their behavior will also "impregnate" our consciousness. That is why it is important to choose carefully who we spend time with. When we talk with someone who is unhappy, our store consciousness will receive the seeds of suffering.

If we aren't careful to maintain our own wholesome seeds during the wholesome seed during the conversation, her suffering will water the seeds of suffering in us and we will water the seeds of suffering in us and we will feel exhausted.

The practice of mindfulness allows us to create new, more functional habit energies. Suppose that when we hear a certain phrase, we grimace. It's not that we want to make a face, it just happens automatically. To replace this old habit energy with a new one, every time we hear that phrase we breathe consciously. At first conscious breathing requires effort. It doesn't yet come naturally. If we continue to practice, however, conscious breathing will become a habit energy. We form any new habit in the same way. When you first begin brushing your teeth after meals, you might forget sometimes. After a while it becomes a habit, and not brushing is uncomfortable.

Some habit energies are very difficult to transform. Smoking is a habit energy that is hard to give up. Mindfulness is the key. Whenever we are smoking, we practice mindfulness in order to know that we are smoking. Our mindfulness of this habit energy will grow deeper every day, and we will see that we are destroying our lungs. Then we will see the link between our lungs, our health, and the people we love. We realize that looking after ourselves is also looking after our loved ones. Then we will make the decision to take care of our body -for their sake as well as our own. Mindfulness encourages these kinds of insights.

Drinking is another habit energy. Perhaps every time we feel sad we drink a glass of wine in order to forget our sadness. With mindfulness, each time we raise our glass we say, "I know that I am drinking a glass of wine." When our mindfulness is stronger, we will be able to say, "I know that I am sad," when we drink wine. As our insight grows and we see more deeply the sadness behind our habit energy of drinking wine, we will be able to begin to transform the seeds of sadness in ourselves.

Happiness can also be a habit energy. When we practice walking meditation, every step we take brings us peace and joy. When we first begin to practice walking meditation, we may have to make an effort. We are not yet skilled at it. But one day we begin to feel peace and joy quite naturally. We wonder, "Why was I always in such a hurry?" Once we feel at ease with walking meditation and other ways of moving mindfully, they become a wholesome habit.

Though there are positive habit energies, it seems that negative habits are established more quickly than positive ones. At school our children are exposed to both good and bad habits, but they seem to learn the bad one right away. It takes time for a young person to learn to appreciate Shakespeare, but it doesn't take long at all to learn to drink alcohol. When you teach something to a child, you may have to repeat it again and again so that the seed will be planted solidly in the

child's consciousness. When you paint a wall, the first coat is not enough. You have to paint over it a second and a third time. This is how we learn.

We have to recognize, embrace, and transform our negative habit energies and train ourselves to have more positive habit energies. I was fortunate that early in my life I learned the good habit of practicing sitting meditation every day to calm myself and to cultivate more stability, solidity and freedom. Many of us now have learned the habit of returning to our breathing and smiling every time we hear the bell of mindfulness. these positive habits need to be cultivated, because our negative habits always push us to do and say things that bring suffering to ourselves and others others.