



What Do You Put in Your Mind?

BY SISTER TRUE DEDICATION | JULY 19, 2018



Just as you consume food, you consume media. And like food, some media is wholesome and some is unhealthy. Sister True Dedication on why you need to pay attention to what nourishes your mind.

Nayda Collazo-Llorens, Comfortably Numb, 2012-17. Courtesy of the Artist and LMAKgallery, New York.

You may take care of your body with a healthy and ethical diet, and perhaps a balanced program of exercise. But do you have a similarly intentional diet for your mind?

We all want to master our mind, to tame its monkey-mind aspects. That's why we practice meditation and mindfulness. But it's not just a question of willpower or skill. Our mind is made of what we feed it, so we need to know how to nourish and protect it.

I was a young journalist working for BBC News when I first heard Thich Nhat Hanh teach

that when you read a newspaper, magazine, or website, watch films or television, or even engage in conversation, you are engaged in consumption. I'd never thought of it like that before. I'd thought of TV, magazines, radio shows, and music as ephemeral and optional. It was up to the viewer, reader, or listener to do with them what they will.

I heard Thich Nhat Hanh speak with a fierce and solemn voice as he declared in a talk, “When we watch television and movies we consume, when we browse the internet we consume, when we listen to music or a conversation, we consume.” I remember his soft words booming through the loudspeakers: “And what we consume every day may be highly toxic. It may contain violence, craving, fear, anger, and despair.”

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I was shocked. Suddenly websites, radio shows, movies, music—and even conversations with close friends—struck me as strangely substantive and not so ephemeral after all. Maybe I wasn't as free from them as I thought.

I realized that it's true: once those images, sounds, ideas, and feelings come into your mind, they stay there. There are disturbing scenes from movies I watched as a teenager that still come up in my consciousness twenty years later. There are conversations I walk away from feeling queasy. If I'm mindful and honest enough, I recognize how a single news bulletin can touch off seeds of fear, despair, anger, hatred, or helplessness deep in my consciousness. Or how a movie can nourish my baseline anger and aggression. Or how one riff from a music track in a supermarket or escalator can spark sorrow, craving, or nostalgia, just as easily as it can trigger joy or delight.

I remember meeting a practitioner who wore earplugs when she did her weekly shopping so she didn't have to hear the Muzak. “It's my mind!” she announced. “I'll choose what to put into it, thank you very much.”

There's a kind of freedom in choosing what you will let into your mind and what you won't. But how many of us allow ourselves that kind of freedom? When you stick with a TV show or

news article, is it because you really want to? Or is it because you're afraid to confront what comes up inside when you switch it off or put it down? In the newsroom, we were trained in the art of "sticky" news—the kind of news that's hard to turn off.

"We have more than enough information," says Thich Nhat Hanh, "but is it the right kind of information?" How many hours a day do we spend receiving input? What is coming into our consciousness along with it? Is it violence, fear, anxiety, craving, and despair that feed negativity, or something that helps positive seeds grow?

We have to be honest with ourselves—to check in with our heart–mind—not only after we've watched, read, or listened to something, but also while we're consuming it. We need to ask ourselves: How am I feeling now? What am I really feeding?

“ *It's one thing to be informed; it's another to be overwhelmed.* ”

We also need to be aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption. Thich Nhat Hanh would always teach that we have to sit down and have a strategy for what we consume. We have to set an intention—to talk about it and come up with a plan for ourselves as individuals, as couples, or as a family. How much media is enough, and of what kind?

Using a website-blocking app, I've recently brought my daily news limit down from ten minutes a day to five, and that's plenty. It's one thing to be informed; it's another to be overwhelmed.

Sometimes we're so overdosed with information that we forget the simple wonders of the present moment: the presence of our loved ones across the table, the sound of the wind in the trees, the clouds scudding across the sky, the early morning birdsong. "When you eat your breakfast, are you eating your breakfast, or are you eating your projects or the morning radio show?" Thich Nhat Hanh would ask.

If there is a lot of violence in our society, he says, it is also because as a nation we are consuming so much violence every day, in everything we watch, hear, and read. It pollutes our compassion and our peace.

Advertisements are designed to trigger the seed of craving in us—to convince us that we can only be happy if and when we have this or that new product. There is a whole new field of research on “attention”—and how to steal it from us. Just traveling through a city, even if we don’t want to consume, we are consuming anyway.

“Is it right,” asks Thich Nhat Hanh, “to allow people to get rich producing products that are toxic for ourselves and our children? They cannot in the name of freedom poison us with their products, films, magazines, books, and computer games.”

We speak about “freedom of the press,” but what about “freedom of the media consumer”? If we wish to cultivate healthy and compassionate minds, that freedom is something we’ll have to claim for ourselves.



ABOUT SISTER TRUE DEDICATION

Sister True Dedication is a monastic dharma teacher in the Plum Village tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh and a former BBC journalist.

TOPICS: Internet & Technology, Pop Culture, Social Media, Society, Thich Nhat Hanh

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