

# LOVE IN ACTION



*Writings on  
Nonviolent  
Social  
Change*

THICH NHAT HANH

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Foreword by  
Daniel Berrigan



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The Path of Return  
Continues the Journey

*A Play in One Act*

-Foreword-  
Their Speech Is  
All of Forgiveness

*Daniel Berrigan, S.J.*

A tone poem, a snatch of gentle, celebratory music. A verse about death, which is really about life. A transmutation of death; the emptying of the veins of death, the letting in of light and air to those fearful spaces. How does one cope with death, when death strikes, repeatedly, senselessly, destroying the young, the noble, the brave, the self giving? Grief of course, a period of silence, space for mourning. Then afterward, a reassertion, acceptance. And finally, if one is lucky, endowed, perceptive, brave with the bravery of an artist and poet, he creates something that faces the cruelty, the horror, and he brings to that welter of blood, vengeance, cruelty, and deceit, a "sea change."

It is one of the classic and very nearly crushing ironies of the long war in Vietnam; that we have been the recipient, time and again, of gifts of the spirit, gifts of art, profound understanding, hope communicated, a definition of our selves that exceeds by far our expectation of ourselves. We have heard time and again, from the "enemy," a stubborn distinction between ourselves as a people, and our leadership. Our people have been endowed (by presumption of the same "enemy") with compassion, political acuity, generosity, and goodness of spirit. We were a people saddled for a time with an unfortunate and cruel leadership, which persisted in bloodletting despite the best instinct of the majority. Thus went the reading of our character by our "enemy."

Such definitions have a mysterious power of creating what they signify, in a sense at least analogous to the sacramental. One thinks of such "opinions" so stubbornly held, so patiently reiterated over so long a period of violence, across such unexampled savagery, perpetuated by a whole succession of American leaders-one thinks of this, and is simultaneously appalled, exhilarated, and given hope. Is it possible that out of a persecuted, defamed, all but destroyed people should arise

the Suffering Servant of our own oracles; possible that salvation for the heinous, blood-ridden West should once again come from the East- and this, not in times of social normalcy, but across the curtain of blood that we wove and suspended between that people and ourselves, upon which they were stretched and racked, day after day, the people to whom Pascal surely had reference, those "crucified until the end of time"?

In a universal catastrophe, it is surely presumptuous to single out one element, one tradition, as having "suffered more" than others. Who can measure such things? They stop the heart in its tracks. At the same time, the religious resistance in the U.S. at the time of the Vietnam

War could not help but take into special account, with a special gratitude, the Vietnamese Buddhist movement. Spiritually speaking, we were closest to them. We drew most fully on their tradition-such a stubborn, unwavering, gentle, persistent, resilient strength! It seems to me far from stretching a point (more likely simply making a point) to see in this Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, and his people, a literal living out of the words of Paul the apostle, writing to his community, "... fatiguing labors more abundant, imprisonments more frequent, lashings innumerable, many threats of death ... forty lashes less one ... three times scourged, once I was stoned, three times I suffered ship wreck; a night and a day I was adrift on the high seas; in frequent journey on foot, in perils from floods, in perils from robbers, in perils from my own nation, in perils from the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilder ness, in perils on the sea, in perils from false brethren, in fatigue and hardship, in many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, in fastings, often in cold and nakedness.... And apart from these things, there is my daily pressing anxiety, my solicitude for all our communities!"

This monk, this suffering servant, who is also a poet, an activist, a teacher, and scholar, suffered a personal loss of the most appalling nature. Young Buddhists were studying at the School of Youth for Social Service, which Nhat Hanh had founded in Saigon early in the '60s. There the students were imbued with the spirit of nonviolent service. On leaving the school, they were to go in groups to help the peasants of the South in whatever way possible-building homes,



sowing or harvesting crops, resettling refugees, simple, concrete projects (we would even say, strikingly evangelical ones). But such a school, in such a time, became a mortal threat to some of those for whom weapons were the indispensable means of survival or liberation. A period of terrorism was quickly launched. Students were killed and maimed in a series of bombings. Finally, one night a horrendous crime unfolded. Five of the students were seized in their dormitories, led to the riverbank nearby and shot. One survived, the others died immediately.

The episode was not widely reported in the world. It was merely another bloody stereotyped incident of war, a spurt of gunfire in the night, a cry, blood quickly shed, quickly erased. But not forgotten by a monk who was also the friend of the slain. And so after a time, after grief and loss had had their time, came this gift, this meditation of Nhat Hanh, peaceful and serious, theologically profound, hopeful, light, airy of spirit, a paschal death and victory, a passage by water from time to timelessness. Written, one may rightfully presume, by one whose soul already is compounded of these qualities, since he conveys them with such skill. Indeed, to him the dead are the quick, and violence is by no means the master, by no means speaks the last word, or stops the mouth of the victim, or indeed finally rules, whatever his boast, his bloodstained and inflated pretensions.

The ironies implicit in the play are enormous and far of reach. We Americans cross the great waters with our techniques of death, supersonic instruments of appetite, great eyes and ears and maws, a deranged and decapitated sensory apparatus, to smell out and destroy the least lurking evidence of life, health, hope, tradition, faith, family, to tear out the very taproot of existence, to plow up and sow with salt that culture, thousands of years old, which has unfailingly nurtured a people. "Let it come down! Let it all come down!" is the manic whine of the Machine.

And lo, coming across those same waters (which we name consciousness, Styx, death, or primordial creation) comes another sort of craft, peopled with spirits, listening, bantering, remembering, laughing. Their wounds are healed, their memories lucid. They recall without rancor the method and moment of their death. If there is some

thing new about them, it is a quality at once elusive, feisty, a way of standing within death, fronting it, mocking it gently; perhaps best of all, forgiving.

These spirits are as they were before death. And this is the genius of Thich Nhat Hanh. His dead have the verisimilitude of the living. They are young, they push shadows back instead of joining them. They push the dark back, they create space, they speak up. Very different indeed from the dimwit ghosts of Virgil's underworld; more like the robustness, the crudity, of Dante's people-those in hell, chiefly.

And yet with a difference, which continues to escape my mind. It has something to do with a work of authentic Buddhist art, by a monk, about his people. A quality of inwardness, almost of austerity; a patience that escapes our monitors and timepieces; a serenity, caricatured cruelly in the West as stoicism, before death. Something of the twice born, the resurrected, something one sees more and more rarely in the West; now and again in the faces of the old, in a few children, in the cruel ecstasy of street violence; a light within, struck and then out.

Only here it is a steady flame. It lights those bodies, making lamps of them, as they cross the waters in our direction. They come toward us, and their speech is all of forgiveness, of hope, and joy. Indeed, the play seemed to me a simple act of forgiveness and reconciliation. Are you saying to us, Nhat Hanh, that the Vietnamese dead will come back to us who murdered them? will come, not as ministers of vengeance, but sacramental presences, angels, spirits of new creation?

I hope so, with all my heart.

And I thank you, Nhat Hanh, monk, medium, necromancer, artist. For your grief, for your long travail, your exile, for the deaf and dumb and uncaring world, for the crucifixion and death of your people. Forgive us.

And because the monk Thomas Merton said it to you, and your play says it to me, I dare to repeat: Alleluia! We shall see his face!

## -Introduction - Love Enables Us

At 12:30 a.m. on July 5, 1967, in the village of Binh Phuoc, Gia Dinh Province, a group of strangers abducted five young men, brought them to the bank of the Saigon River, and shot them. All five were volunteer workers in the School of Youth for Social Service, a nonviolent organization that sought only to heal the wounds of war and reconstruct the villages. Their names were Tuan, Tho, Hy, Lanh, and Dinh. Tuan was a Buddhist novice.

Four died immediately. The fifth, Dinh, survived, but his clothes were soaked with blood and he lost consciousness. The strangers thought all five were dead, so they left. Silence on the river. There are many stars in the sky, but no moon. A small sampan comes gently to the shore. Mai appears. The sampan is large enough to take the four, only four, because the fifth, Dinh, is still alive, and must stay behind.

The author has said, "I guarantee that everything in this story is true." What story is he talking about? Is it the story of the five young men shot on the bank of the Saigon River? Everyone knows this is true-why does he have to guarantee it? Or is the author talking about what happened *after* the killing, about Mai with the sampan and the five of them rowing with their bare hands?

True or not, we will never know. But if the author has guaranteed it, then let us believe him. Listen to what he has said: "I remember when I first picked up my pen to write this play. I saw fourteen eyes looking at me, fourteen eyes wide open. I have said that I guarantee the story to be true. But what does it mean to be *true*? Who can be my witness?

"I have said that it is true because I have lived the life of the story. No scientific instrument can verify the existential nature of life in this story.

"Love enables us to see things that those who are without love cannot see.

"Who will be gone and who will stay? Where do we come from and where will we go? Are the other shore and this shore one or two? Is



there a river that separates the two sides, a river that no boat can cross? Is such complete separation possible? Please come over to my boat. I will show you that there is a river, but there is no separation. Don't hesitate: I will row the boat myself. You can join me in rowing too, but let us row slowly, and very, very quietly."

Thich Nhat Hanh  
Paris, December 1967

## The Characters

All the characters were real persons, and all the events are true.

*VUI*: a student of the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS), Saigon.

*LIEN*: a teacher of the Tran Quy Cap High School, Hoi-An, and a political prisoner just released from jail. Volunteered her services to SYSS.

These two young women were murdered on the night of April 24, 1967, during a terrorist raid on the School by a group of unknown persons.

*MAI*: a young nun who had worked for SYSS. One of the first ordained Tiep Hien sisters. She immolated herself for peace on the night of May 16, 1967, at the Tu Nghiem Pagoda.

*HY*: a graduate of SYSS. *LANH*: a graduate of SYSS. *THO*: a graduate of SYSS.

*TUAN*: a young Buddhist novice, graduate of SYSS.

These four young men, all under 25, were murdered on the morning of July 5, 1967. They had come to Binh Phuoc Hamlet, on the bank of the Saigon River, to work to improve the lot of its inhabitants.

*VAN*: a staff member of the SYSS-still alive in this world.

*DUC*: a staff member of the SYSS-still alive in this world.

*PHUONG*: a staff member of the SYSS-still alive in this world.

*DINH*: a coworker of Hy, Lanh, Tho, and Tuan.

*The Prajñāparamita Heart Sutra* - the Buddha's teachings on the interconnectedness (emptiness) of things and people.

## The Path of Return

### Continues the Journey

*The story begins at 1:00 in the morning, shortly after Hy, Lanh, Tho, and Tuan were shot on the riverbank. Starry sky, no moon.*

MAI: Let's sit so that the boat stays balanced. I'll sit in the bow. Tho, can you move over a little, near me. That's fine. Now we can start to row. Let's all use our bare hands. Gen tly, Tho! You're splashing all over me!

HY: We're going quite fast, aren't we, Sister Mai?

MAI: Yes. We're very light. Brother Tuan, look at Tho! He's waving his arms too much and the boat is swaying back and forth. Please scold him, will you?

THO: I'm not afraid of Tuan. I was a devil alive and I'm a devil dead. Okay, I'll keep quiet, but don't scold me!

TUAN: Tho, you are a little devil, but a lovable little devil. When we were alive, I would knock your head now and then, and for good reason. Sister Phuong said you were very bright. I don't know if that's true or not. But you certainly had the hardest skull in the world. I hurt my knuckles knocking it.

THO: Brother Tuan, you hurt your knuckles because you behaved so badly! Look at Sister Mai. She never hurt *her* knuckles, because she never knocked me on the head. Now that we're both dead, there is no way to find out whether my head was hard or your hand was soft.

MAI: Please, Tho, be quiet. I can see that you are quite bright. But please sit still! It's too difficult to row with you fidgeting like that. We've got hours to go.

HY: Are we really going to see Sister Lien?

MAI: Yes, Sister Lien and Sister Vui.

THO: "What are they doing up there, Sister Mai?"

MAI: Vui is still working for the villagers. And she has also taken up drawing. Lien just takes it easy-walking, reading the *Heart Sutra*, giving Vui drawing lessons.

THO: Sister Mai, how can Vui still work for the villagers after being killed?

MAI: Anywhere there are men and women-hell, heaven, wherever there are villages- Vui cannot *not* work for the villagers. The last time I saw her she was pasting labels on the bottles of the mold they use to grow straw mushrooms.

THO (*teasingly*): She is probably growing the mushrooms to sell to the people in the hamlet. Vui should wander about and just enjoy herself. She already spent her earthly life working for the villagers.

MAI: Vui has never been concerned with fun-seeking the way you are! She is grown-up, you know.

THO: I'm not a little boy. I'm only two years younger than Vui. I worked hard for the villagers too! If I hadn't, would I have been elected head of the Binh Phuoc work camp?

MAI: We know you worked hard, but I still think you're not as grown-up as Vui.

THO: Please stop teasing me, Sister Mai.

HY: Why do you keep playing Sister Mai's baby brother like that, Tho? Head of the Binh Phuoc work camp! Some head! How you went around winning respect is beyond me.

THO: I don't care for anybody's respect. When we were alive, I used to act up a bit now and then to win your respect, but now that I'm dead, why should I bother? Brother Hy, tell me, are you sorry, I mean, are you sorry about being dead?

HY: What a question! Joy and sorrow are the affair of the living. Come on now, let's row a bit harder, and listen to this:

(*Hy sings*) *Listen to me*

*as you would the song of the brook or the song of the bird;*

*as you would look on the green weeping cherry,*

*the pink roses, the yellow chrysanthemums, the blue bamboo, the white clouds, the bright moon.*

(*Faint sounds of little waves slapping against the sides of the boat*)

THO: Wherever Hy goes he brings music and poetry along. What was that song? It sounds familiar.

MAI: Do you think you understand that song, Tho?

THO: Sister Mai, now that we're dead, what will we do? Do I have to keep working for the villagers like Vui?

MAI: No, you can do as you please. You can wander around and enjoy yourself.

THO: Great! Then maybe I'll be like Lien. All she does is walk here and there. But you said that she also reads the *Heart Sutra* and gives Vui drawing lessons.

MAI: That's right, you may do anything you please, just like Lien.

THO: But why does Vui have to work for the villagers?

MAI: I didn't say she had to. If Vui wants to do that, there is work for her to do. The universe of the dead changes according to your wishes. *As* I see it, the universe of the living does, too.

TUAN (*in a low voice, to himself*): The mind is like a painter. It can paint anything it wants.

THO: There goes Tuan and his Buddhist philosophy! Sister Mai, what *is* this world we are in now? Heaven or Hell? *As* far as I can see, it's not different from the world of the living.

MAI: It is neither Hell nor Heaven, Tho. And it's not as far away from the world of the living as people generally believe

LANH: For that matter, the world of the living is not far from Heaven and Hell. Wouldn't you agree, Sister Mai? I feel that if I sing now, the living will hear me.

MAI: Well, at last we hear from you, Lanh. You've been so quiet. Yes, you are right. The saying "Yin and Yang are irrevocably separate" is misleading. A lot of the sorrow that plagues the living comes from their belief that the two worlds are unbridgeable. Indeed, you can sing for the living, as I have many times... as Hy just did.

THO: Hy used to be head of the Performing Arts Committee. Tell me, Hy, when we were alive, art was a means for rural redevelopment. We used poetry, painting, music, and theater to help people. How shall we use them now?

Hy: When we were alive, art was with us. Now, art is still with us. Perhaps we are still alive, in some way. While we were living, we were already dying. How could we have life without death, or, for that matter, death without life?

THO: You're beginning to sound like Brother Tuan.

TUAN (*clears his throat*): And just what does that mean?

THO: Like a philosopher.

MAI: But, Tho, you sound like a philosopher, too. We all do. We always do when we become aware of something. Now that we are dead, we are much more lucid.

TUAN : This feels like the Saigon River. Is this still our country, our land, our water?

MAI: Yes, you only died last night, on the bank of this very river, eight kilometers back. *As* soon as it happened, I came here with this boat to get you. Now we are going upstream, toward the frontier.

(*A long silence*)

TUAN (*smiling faintly*): It's funny, I feel as if we died a long time ago. When I saw you coming, I felt as if I were waking up from a long, deep sleep. Now, I'm really quite awake.

THO: I wasn't surprised at all when I saw you, Sister Mai. It seemed the most natural thing in the world for you to be there. If you hadn't come, who would have?

MAI: It's true, I could never be too busy for all of you.

LANH: If you hadn't come, we would still be sitting on the riverbank, waiting. If we had thought of you and wanted to find you, we wouldn't have known where to look.

MAI: If you had thought of me, you would have seen me coming. *As* I said a while ago, all things happen here according to our wishes.

LANH: It's strange. I don't feel any sorrow, pain, or bitterness. Sister Mai, I thought we would bear those feelings, even after death. The living always tell stories about people who die unjustified deaths. They talk about the revenge of the dead, and they become deathly afraid. Now I see that the dead are calmer and more lucid than the living. We dead do not think at all about vengeance. We just feel compassion for the living, even for those who killed us.

THO: If I were alive, I would go to the home of the man who killed me to ask him why he dragged me to the riverbank in the dead of the night and shot me. But I don't feel any grudge against him, none at all.

HY: Perhaps we dead are more forgiving because we no longer have to bear the heavy burden of our bodies, and their desires and angers.



Desire and anger need a home, and now that we no longer have our bodies...

MAI: But Hy, how can you say that we no longer have our bodies? How could I see you if you didn't have a body? Our bodies are no longer heavy, no longer a burden, that's all. See how small and delicate this boat is, and yet it carries all five of us with ease.

THO: You're right! We really *are* light. The boat carries us and even moves quickly. Tell me, Sister Mai, were you there when they shot us?

MAI: No. But I had a strong sense that something was wrong, so I came with the boat to get you. When I arrived, the four of you were still sitting on the riverbank. Hy's clothes were soaking wet, and he was shaking a little.

HY: When they shot me, I fell into the river. Because my arms were tied behind me, I could only use my feet to try to rise to the surface, but they kept shooting until I sank completely.

MAI: Oh, Hy...

HY: Please don't feel sorry for me, Sister Mai. Save it for those still alive. I only had to go through a few seconds, a short minute of pain, that's all. But those close to us, who are still alive, they are the ones who suffer. Even those who killed us. They don't know what they did.

MAI: Tell me, Hy, how did it happen?

HY: It was about midnight. Tuan, Lanh, and I were asleep at the Health Aid Post when a group of armed men arrived. They tied our arms behind us and set the Post on fire. The flames made it look as bright as day. Then they took us to the lake near the Tinh Vo Gymnasium and told us to wait. A moment later, two more men arrived with Dinh and Tho. Their arms were also tied behind their backs. Then they took all five of us to the riverbank. We were next to the bamboo grove, supposedly waiting for a boat. Again and again they asked if we were part of the Youth for Social Service, to be absolutely sure. Then, suddenly, they shot us. We four died, but Dinh was only wounded. They thought he was dead too, so they left.

TUAN: There were eleven of them. Some were very young, sixteen or seventeen. The oldest must have been under thirty. Some of them wore black clothes, some wore uniforms. One had a raincoat and

another a poncho. Some wore military caps and bullet belts. I know who they were.

MAI: I know who they were, too. You don't have to say.

HY: I had the feeling they were not experienced at the business of killing. They had to kill us, but I could feel their reluctance.

THO: They obviously had orders from someone. The leader of the group, the one who shot me in the head twice, looked as though he had to convince himself to pull the trigger. He just didn't have it in him to do it easily. When they arrived at the house of the village medical chief, they immediately tied us together so we couldn't run. On the way to the river, we had to jump over two ditches about a meter wide, and at the second one, Dinh fell and they helped him up. I asked if they would cut us loose from each other so we could walk more easily, and they did. While we were walking, they talked to us in a very friendly way.

LANH: The men who abducted the three of us behaved the same way. They were very gentle. They let us stop and rest a couple of times. I really thought it wouldn't be too bad. When Tho crawled under barbed wire and cut himself, one man touched his forehead and asked about it, as a brother would. Another even patted me on the shoulder.

HY: And then they killed us.

MAI: What a pity! Men are such pitiful creatures.

HY: Sister Mai, you know I didn't say that with any blame. My eyes are now open. I see clearly now. I only hope that men discover a better way to be.

MAI: If anyone is tired, you can change your rowing hand. Just change seats with the person next to you. Tho, why don't you move over there and let Brother Tuan sit here. Good, let's go on. But take it easy, there's no hurry. The stars are so bright. You know, Hy, the eyes of the living have a difficult time seeing the whole of life.

HY: Isn't there a way to change that?

MAI (*speaking very slowly*): Man has progressed some, but so slowly. That is why, with our present consciousness, time in the living world goes so fast. Tell me, Brothers, before they shot you, did they say anything in particular?

LANH: They asked us if we were part of the School of Youth for Social Service. Then they walked a little ways away and whispered to each other. After that they approached us again and asked the same question, and then they consulted each other again in whispers. They repeated this a few more times, then they asked us, "Do you have anything to say?" When I heard that, chills ran up my spine. Tho said we had nothing to say, and the leader touched his forehead and said, very quickly, "I have to kill you." Then he put his gun to Tho's temple, and fired two shots. The rest of us were shot right after. Hy fell into the river, and was shot until he sank.

MAI: Poor Hy. Brother Van will be shattered when he hears about this.

TUAN: Yes. All those close to us will feel the loss. There is one consolation. *(He smiles)* The living forget quickly. In just a few months, the pain in their hearts will be soothed. Other worries and sorrows will help them forget. How could they go on living and working if they did not forget?

MAI: Still, I feel sorry for them. Some will record their love and pain on bricks and stones, or on paper with ink, to help themselves remember. But the only important image of the departed is the one that remains in the heart. As far as I am concerned, I pray that all those who were dear to me would forget me quickly so that they will not have to suffer any longer.

TUAN: Tho! What are you doing now?

MAI: Oh, no! He has regressed to his childhood. Watch out, dear Tho! You are tipping the boat!

THO: Now that I can become a child or a young adult as I wish, I do not long for my childhood any more.

TUAN: Come back, Tho, to the Tho of twenty-one. I never met the Tho of eight. Please come back at once. THO: All right, here I am. Brother Tuan, you are still quite

bound by appearance. Don't you remember, it says in the scriptures, "It is not possible to recognize the Buddha by his physical appearance?" Since you were studying to be a fully ordained monk, you should be able to see me in any form. Why must I be only the Tho of twenty-one?

TUAN: Okay! But don't preach to me from the *Diamond Sutra*. Tho, do you really think that I cannot transform myself into a little child just as well as you? I am only afraid that if I did, you would be on your knees, begging your old Tuan to come back again.

THO (*laughing*): You're the one who was studying to be a monk, not I! It is only natural that I would *not* recognize you in the form of an eight year old.

MAI: Oh please, Tho, stop teasing Brother Tuan and sit still. Tuan, do you remember the exact moment you were shot?

TUAN: When I saw they had shot Tho, I recited the name of Amitabha Buddha, and right away I was riddled with bullets. I died quickly and felt no pain at all. What happened to Dinh?

MAI: He is still alive, Tuan. One bullet went through Dinh's arm and lung and punctured his pancreas. I bent down to look at him. The strangers had already gone, and Dinh was still conscious. He coughed over and over, and each time blood spurted out. His shirt was completely soaked in blood, but he will be rescued in time, don't worry.

THO (*thoughtfully*): When he is well again, he will tell our friends what happened. I wonder if he will remember anything to tell.

LANH: Maybe it would even be better if he doesn't remember anything. We died for tolerance and love, not for more hate and destruction.

MAI: I have faith in Brother Van and our friends. I have faith in all our brothers and sisters still living. They have refused and will always refuse to choose the road of violence.

*(A long silence, followed by flarebombs exploding on the river bank, illuminating the water)*

Hy: They fire flarebombs all night, don't they!

LANH: If they could see the dead, they would know we are rowing leisurely on the river. And they would hear the sound of the water lapping against the side of our boat in the dead of night.

Hy: They don't see us only because they don't think of us. If our beloved Brother Duc were there on the riverbank, he would see us and wave. Sister Mai, why does our country go on bleeding? When will this fire burn itself out?

MAI: Be calm, Brother. Our country will be destroyed and our people will suffer even more than they already have. The cycle must be completed. Life and death are in the course of things. In the end there will be peace.

*(Gun sounds from all sides)*

THO: Some shooting! You know, Sister Mai, my mother can't sleep when she hears the guns.

MAI: Is she living by herself? Isn't there a child to stay with her?

THO: She is bringing up a small niece and they sleep together. But I am her only child.

HY: I heard that your father died a violent death also. Who killed him, Tho?

THO: When I was a child, I knew vaguely that he worked for the revolution. But let's not talk about this now. Mai, you said a while ago that Vui is working for the villagers. I still don't understand.

MAI: You will. Don't expect to understand everything in a single night. I will show you Vui's village. She has many children in her school. Her village also has water buffalo, oxen, rivers, and many trees-banana, lemon, and mandarin.

LANH: Then I too will go on working for the villagers. I remember the lemon trees. But Sister Mai, you still have not told us *your* story. What have you done since you left us?

HY: Yes, you sacrificed yourself for the cause of peace such a long time ago. How many years has it been since then, Sister Mai?

THO: Years! It's only been a few months, hasn't it?

MAI: Everyone has his own notion of time. For me, it isn't a matter of months or years. It was lifetimes ago, generations ago.

THO: Tell me, Sister Mai, was the fire very hot?

MAI: What a question! I only remember that I was calm. And my wish was fulfilled. Before the moment arrived, I prayed that I would be able to sit still in the fire. I sat very still.

LANH: When we heard the news, we cried like babies. We thought that you left us because you didn't care about us.

MAI: Do not say that, Brother. There is no choice that does not involve suffering.

LANH: Oh, we were jealous of you. Remember that we were still living. We were jealous of your spirit and your act, that is all. I certainly understand it better now.

THo: Then where did you go, Mai?

MAI (*silent and thoughtful a long while*): I stood on the balcony looking down at my own body enveloped in flames. Yes, I think I even smiled, though my eyes were filled with tears. All the people standing around were weeping, and I wept with them. But when my father arrived, I didn't cry. That was the most difficult moment. Nothing can be more painful than seeing those dear to you suffer because of what you have done. I left long letters to my parents, asking them to understand. But, as you know, letters don't mean very much.

HY: Then what happened, Sister Mai?

MAI: My father fainted, regained consciousness, and then fainted again. Fortunately, an Army captain arrived and wanted to examine and confiscate my charred body. My father was so angry that he shook all over, and somehow, his anger subdued his pain.

THo: Three cheers for the captain!

MAI: Since then I have had all the time in the world, and I have been very peaceful. My heart went out to each one of you. Many times I came to aid and protect you. What happened tonight is different. It is destiny.

HY: What have you done since then?

MAI: I have gone to many places. Up the mountain, down to the sea. Don't you see? I'm still wearing white grapefruit blossoms in my hair. Even though my eyes have seen our ruined gardens and rice fields, my heart has been set free. I know that peace will come. The wheel is turning in that direction. I've gone through entire areas where the forests have been burned down, charred and black, where the bombs have crushed the earth and bulldozed the fields, making craters everywhere. And I've seen crowds of refugees carrying their meager possessions on their backs-babies, cooking pots, a few clothes-their steps undecided, their eyes bewildered.

LANH: Can the dead do anything to help the living, Sister? MAI (*laughs*): I died a long time ago, but I know I am not really dead. The voice and figure in front of you are only



my voice and body in relation to yours. I am still present in the world of the living, and there I go on with my work.

THO: Present in the world of the living? How can you be dead and, at the same time, present in the world of the living?

MAI: It is simple. I think Brother Tuan will explain it to you.

TUAN: Go ahead, Sister Mai, you explain.

MAI: If you set fire to a piece of charcoal, it burns red and becomes heat. When the fire dies, the charcoal is reduced to ash. Heat is the afterlife of the charcoal. From then on, the heat begins an uninterrupted process of influences, either in terms of energy or physical properties. And that process of transformation, like a chain reaction, takes place either directly or indirectly in relation to other processes of transformation.

TUAN: We call it "correlated reactions."

MAI: Yes, "correlated reactions." Nothing can be lost; yet at the same time, nothing that remains static can keep its nature intact.

HY: It's the same as when Tho became the eight year old he once was. Even though we did not recognize him, he was exactly what he was.

MAI: Death is change, a sudden evolution, that's all. If Tho had died when he was eight, there would not have been any Tho of twenty-one to die just a while ago and to be sitting here now. Actually, though, the eight year old Tho had to die, to give way to the twenty-one year old Tho. But the death of the eight-year-old Tho was not sudden. It was a progressive change, a process of growing.

THO: One could also say it was a second-by-second evolution, while our own deaths tonight are an evolution of an entire period, an entire cycle.

MAI: That is more to the point than my explanation, Brother Tuan. That is it, Hy. In order to grow, Tho had to receive support from many other forms of existence-air for his lungs, food for his body, education for his mind, love for his heart. In Tho, there are innumerable physical and mental beings-his father and mother, myself, and that girl with ruddy cheeks who will cry this morning over his departure. She should be sleeping peacefully now in the world of the living.

THO: I see, Sister Mai! You are saying that I am present in her now, too, and in all who love me in the world of the living. That is why I am still there, and still able to provoke this chain reaction.

MAI: That's right. But you are not only present within them, you are present outside them as well. All you have said and done has already begun its journey. You are pre sent everywhere.

LANH: Then what we see in front of us now is not all of Tho?

MAI: How can it be when already the Tho of twenty-one is no longer the Tho of eight? The Tho in front of us is only the Tho of the narrow world of our perceptions. He is merely our perception of Tho.

LANH (*raising one finger*): Sister Mai, first let me say something, then you tell me whether I am wrong or right. We are rowing up the Saigon River and telling ourselves that we are going to pay a visit to Lien and Vui. Actually, we are only going to see the Lien and Vui in the world of our own perceptions because their real existence is far greater. We only need to look back to see them everywhere.

MAI: You are right. What we are doing is searching for the Lien and Vui of our feelings and habits. That is why we have to struggle upstream to reach the frontier. In truth, they are even more present in the world of the living. Their presence there is clearer and more substantial than in this world.

THO: Still, I would like to visit the village where Vui is working to see if she is doing better than last year. And I would like to see the lemon trees of my homeland again.

MAI: But no one says you cannot. You will see Vui. You can even become a work camp head here, you know.

THO: And Lien, where is she now?

MAI: She lives with Vui, leisurely and peacefully, smiling almost all the time. They are practically inseparable. The last time I saw her, she had the whole collection of the *Maha Prajñaparamita Sutra* in her hand. You know, she is reading the entire collection.

TUAN: If I read the *Prajña Sutra* now, I think I would understand it much more easily. There is such peace and calm within my heart.

MAI: When we see Lien, we have to ask her to explain the *Prajña Sutra* to us.

TUAN: When I was alive, not a day passed when I did not recite the *Heart Sutra*. I thought I understood it. But it was only when the man with the poncho pointed a gun at my head that I really saw what the *Heart Sutra* was all about.

LANH: Tell us, Brother Tuan, what did you see?

TUAN: It's hard to say, Lanh. It's not something to be understood but to be *seen*. We can easily explain what we understand, but not what we see or perceive. It came all of a sudden, like lightning.

LANH (*begging*): But try, Brother Tuan, what did you see? TUAN: Well, when that man with the poncho brought his

gun up to my head, I realized immediately, without being aware of it consciously, that he was not going to shoot *me*. He was going to shoot something else, but not me. How could he shoot me without knowing who I was? Since then, I have been wondering how someone can blow the brains out of another without knowing him.

THO: You are funny, Brother Tuan! He asked us over and over again to make sure that we really were the Youth for Social Service, before he killed us. He shot you because he *knew* who you were. You were a member of the Youth for Social Service. They wanted to kill the Youth for Social Service. Therefore they shot you.

LANH: Why are you smiling, Sister Mai?

MAI: Tho is speaking in terms of logic, and the *Heart Sutra* is exactly the tool we need to shatter that kind of reasoning.

TUAN: I agree with you, Sister Mai. "Youth for Social Service" is just a label that they pasted on the objects of their hatred or fear, an object that exists only in their perception. It has nothing to do with us as persons. They shot only at the object of their fear and hatred, but because they had pasted the label of this object on us, they ended up shooting us, and we died by mistake. They killed us because they truly did not know who we were.

HY: Brother Tuan, are you speaking about wrong perceptions? Hatred and fear blind us. We no longer see each other. We see only the faces of monsters, and that gives us the courage to destroy each other.

MAI: The war that is raging in our homeland is caused by exactly this blindness. Those who are shooting at this very moment do not

know who they are fighting. All are victims. And some are ready to profit from the mutual destruction.

LANH: That is certainly true of those who killed us. In a fleeting moment, I think they saw that we were just human beings, not monsters. But, when the moment arrived, they

had to shoot, to obey orders. It must be the cruel, irrevocable order imposed on man's destiny.

THO: Oh, Lanh, you talk as if there were such a thing as an abstract order. That order came from their superiors, who else?

MAI: You do not understand, Tho. The ones who killed you were only obeying the orders of their superiors. And those superiors were also victims. Yet, those who shot you did show their human qualities. They hesitated, not wanting to kill you, fighting against themselves. They had to carry out their orders because they were crushed between the hammer and the anvil, the orders and their families, their jobs, even their lives. Their consciences and perceptions had been greatly obscured.

HY: One man even exclaimed, "God, you are all so young!" It was not just an expression of pity for us, but also a protest against his own fate.

MAI: Men kill because, on the one hand, they do not know their real enemy, and on the other hand, they are pushed into a position where they must kill. Let me tell you what happened to our Brother Duc last year. He was waiting for a civilian plane at a small isolated airport in the highlands, along with a young American army officer who was waiting for a caribou plane to fly him on a search-and-destroy operation. There was no one else besides the two of them. The young American struck up a conversation with Brother Duc, who immediately saw that the man knew nothing about Vietnamese history or culture or the truth of the conflict in which he was playing a part. He knew only one thing: the Vietcong were his enemy. His duty, as he put it, was to destroy the Vietcong in order to save the Vietnamese and the free world. Brother Duc felt so sad. He asked the GI, "Are you afraid of Vietcong?" With that question the soldier leaped to his feet. Duc saw the alarm and suspicion in his eyes, fear that Duc himself might be a VC. The GI had been told again and again that the VC were

very cunning, and wherever he went, he imagined that the VC were present. So he asked rapidly, putting his hands on his gun, "Are you a VC?" Brother Duc thought the question was funny, but he dared not smile. He knew that if he said, in a joking spirit, "Yes," the soldier would shoot him. So he answered, "No," and explained that he was only a professor of religion waiting to catch a plane back to Saigon. Do you know what our Brother Duc said after he had told us about this incident? He said that if he had been killed then, it would not have been because the American soldier wanted to kill him. The soldier only wanted to kill Vietcong. He could hate the VC only because he did not really know what the VC were. He imagined that they were wild, cruel monsters that had to be hunted down. In his country the people are fed so much of this that they keep letting their government send men over here to kill and be killed. So, men kill unjustly and in turn are killed unjustly, and it is their own countrymen who kill them. They are the ones responsible for the massacre of our people, but they think they have nothing to do with it because it is not they who hold the guns and pull the triggers. Who is really killing us? It is fear, hatred, and prejudice.

LANH: The world of the living is shrouded in fog. All I feel now is compassion for the destiny of mankind. It is like walking in a moonless, starless night.

MAI: Excuse me, but may I change the subject? You know, one of the reasons I am taking you to see Sister Lien is that I want you to see her paintings. I believe that she has really achieved something. In her earthly life she loved art very much, but now she has realized it. I am sure she draws inspiration from the *Heart Sutra*.

HY: Vui, too, used to love art when she was alive. I suppose they are in accord now. I love painting myself. Do you think I will understand Sister Lien's work? Inspiration drawn from the *Heart Sutra*, that's awesome!

MAI: What wouldn't you be able to understand, Hy? Just a while ago we discussed the *Prajñāparamita* itself! We each paint our own lives. If your work is broad and free your life will be broad and free, also. That is all. We create our own worlds with our visions, conceptions, and thoughts. We might create a constricted world of

suffering and sorrow, or one that is immense and free, a truly beautiful place. The essential ingredient is a spirit of openness, tolerance, and freedom.

HY: Now I understand what Brother Tuan meant when he said, "The mind is like a painter."

MAI (*laughs*): Yes. Why don't you all begin here and now to paint your own lives. Every artist is capable, through his art, of reaching the supreme objective of life itself.

Tho: Then my picture, Sister Mai, will probably look like that of Vui. My world must contain a lemon tree! I once threatened Brother Duc that if the Pure Land has no lemon trees I will refuse to enter! But that's not all. My world will also have coconut trees, moats where the water is clear in the morning, thatch-roofed schools where at noontime the children's singing reaches my ears: "Lam Son Mountains! Lam Son Mountains! Banners flapping in the wind!"

LANH: Tho, do be quiet! I didn't realize that the dead could be homesick! When little Thanh of Binh Phuoc Hamlet hears that his teacher has been killed, he will cry until he has no tears left. Yes, our Pure Land must contain those little boys, and friendly meetings in the village where the first event of the program is always, "Our headman has a few words to say to you." There must also be those wharfs down by the river where we bathe, where we can swim over to the other side and snatch a few ears of corn to roast on an open fire and eat together. It is such a small world, isn't it, Sister Mai?

MAI (*smiles tolerantly*): No, Lanh, it is not a small world. The strokes of your painting are those of love. Not only scenes of mountains or clouds or immense skies are breath taking. Lonely pines standing on snowy cliffs can also be free and bold. The world of the bodhisattvas also has lakes and ponds, low hills, curved bridges, and red earthen paths.

LANH (*mysteriously*): And highways.

MAI: Yes, and highways. Because of love, you draw lemon trees, fig trees, bamboo groves, and river wharfs. The longer the war lasts, the more hatred it creates, and love is being crushed underfoot. We see those dear to us unjustly destroyed and it is hard to keep our hearts peaceful so that love can survive. Using hatred to fight hatred is the



surest way to create even more hatred. Those who create love are fewer and fewer, while those who create hate are more and more. And we are changed by it all. Simple, honest, close to-the-earth people, even after the war is over, will go on bearing the deep wounds inflicted by all this hatred.

LANH: Isn't that the biggest concern? It must be better to be destroyed in a split second and then recreated, than to destroy all faith and love.

TUAN: Yes, Lanh, that is our basic concern. I, myself, was born in 1945, the year of the revolution. The last of our family's three boys. As we grew up, all we saw was war and hatred. My hometown, Ben Tre, was where the energy and fervor of the revolution were in constant movement, much like the swift, deep water of the Tien Giang River on its way to the sea. Fortunately, my family realized early on the necessity of love and encouraged me to follow my inclination for a monk's life. I went to the Buddhist Institutes of Giac Sanh, Tra Vinh, and later An Quang. Then I took up social studies and fieldwork. When I worked hard, it was not because I had any illusion about my ability to change the situation. That would have been like trying to extinguish a forest fire with a cup of water. But I did have faith then, and I still have faith now, that our work was of value because it sowed seeds of tolerance and love in people's hearts.

LANH: Let us hope that our earthly lives, as well as our deaths, have sown the seeds of tolerance and love. Sister Mai's death, for instance, did not provoke any hatred. On the contrary, it awakened in many people the ability to understand and sacrifice, even people far away.

MAI: We are approaching the source of the river, my brothers. Have you noticed how thick the forest is getting?

Hy: The boat has been going fast, Sister Mai. Is Vui's village near the frontier?

MAI: Yes. In twenty kilometers, we will leave the boat for the jungle. The current will be so strong that it will be impossible for us to continue to row upstream.

*(Monkeys' cries echo through the forest)*

THO: Dawn is almost here, friends. Brother Tuan, look up at the great trees, pink in the light of dawn! There is someone standing there waiting, isn't there? Could it be Lien?

MAI (*smiles*): Of course it's Lien. "Who else? Let's row a bit harder, come on, let's row."

Writings on  
Nonviolent Social Change

## -Chapter One - Love in Action

The essence of nonviolence is love. Out of love and the willingness to act selflessly, strategies, tactics, and techniques for a nonviolent struggle arise naturally. Nonviolence is not a dogma; it is a process. Other struggles may be fueled by greed, hatred, fear, or ignorance, but a non violent one cannot use such blind sources of energy, for they will destroy those involved and also the struggle itself. Nonviolent action, born of the awareness of suffering and nurtured by love, is the most effective way to confront adversity.

The Buddhist struggle for peace in Vietnam in the 1960s and '70s arose from the great suffering inflicted on our nation by international forces. Blood and fire ravaged the countryside, and people everywhere were uprooted. The Vietnam War was, first and foremost, an ideological struggle. To ensure our people's survival, we had to overcome both communist and anticommunist fanaticism and maintain the strictest neutrality. Buddhists tried their best to speak for all the people and not take sides, but we were condemned as "pro-communist neutralists." Both warring parties claimed to speak for what the people really wanted, but the North Vietnamese spoke for the communist bloc and the South Vietnamese spoke for the capitalist bloc. The Buddhists only wanted to create a vehicle for the people to be heard-and the people only wanted peace, not a "victory" by either side. During our struggle, many scenes of love arose spontaneously-a monk sitting calmly before an advancing tank; women and children raising their bare hands against barbed wire; students confronting military police who looked like monsters wearing huge masks and holding bayonets; young women running through clouds of tear gas with babies in their arms; hunger strikes held silently and patiently; monks and nuns burning themselves to death to try to be heard above the raging noise of the war. And all of these efforts bore some fruit.

Any nonviolent action requires a thorough understanding of the situation and of the psychology of the people. In Vietnam, we inherited

many ideas from the Buddhist tradition and we learned from our mistakes as we went along. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Buddhist monks joined the struggle for independence from the French, and they won the support of their countrymen. When the Vietnam War broke out, they still had that support, as well as the knowledge gained earlier to go beyond passive resistance and undertake positive efforts to overcome the war and the oppression. In 1966, when the people of Hue and Danang learned that Field Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky was about to bring tanks and troops from Saigon to suppress the movement for peace, the people of those cities brought their family altars-the most sacred objects in their homes-onto the streets, relying on their culture and tradition to oppose the forces of destruction. Some people were critical, saying they used religion for political purposes, but I do not agree. They were using their most potent spiritual force to directly confront the violence. This was not a political act; it was an act of love.

Fasting, the method used most by Mahatma Gandhi to help India in its struggle for independence, was also used in Vietnam. Sometimes, thousands of people fasted, and other times, a single person fasted. We fasted as prayer to purify our hearts, consolidate our will, and arouse awareness and compassion in others. When Thich Tri Quang fasted for 100 days, those who passed the Duy Tan Clinic were jarred into awareness, and compassion was born in them. As a result, they felt compelled to meet, talk, and plan, thereby escalating the struggle. Thich Tri Quang had not *planned* to fast. He *had* to fast.

We also used literature and the arts as "weapons" to challenge the oppression. Works by antiwar writers, composers, poets, and artists, although illegal, were widely circulated. Antiwar songs were sung in streets and classrooms, and antiwar literature became the largest category of books sold in Vietnam, even infiltrating army units. *Look Back at Your Homeland*, *Only Death Allows You to Speak Out*, and *Lotus in a Sea of Fire* sold hundreds of thousands of copies. Our literature was considered dangerous by both sides. One book of poems, *Let Us Pray so the White Dove Will Be with Us*, was submitted to the Ministry of Information, and only two of the sixty poems in it were approved. A group of students published it anyway, and within a

week, all copies were sold. In Hue, a policeman saw a copy in a bookstore and warned the owner, "Hide this and only bring it out when someone asks for it." Sister Cao Ngoc Phuong was arrested in Hue for transporting antiwar books, and, before I left the country, I was also arrested and imprisoned for a few days in Bao Loc for "antiwar" activities, although I was charged only with the crime of listening to Hanoi Radio. Folk poetry was used as means of education. This lullaby was sung throughout the country:

*My hand is holding a bowl of ginger and salt. Ginger is hot, salt is strong.*

*They embrace each other.*

*North and South share the same sorrow.*

*We love each other,*

*why have we abandoned our love?*

This "Prayer for Peace" was printed by the tens of thousands and chanted during religious services throughout Vietnam, and its effects were widely felt:

*Homage to all Buddhas in the ten directions. Please have compassion for our suffering. Our land has been at war for two decades. Divided, it is a land of tears,*

*and blood and bones of young and old.*

*Mothers weep till their tears are dry, while their sons on distant fields decay. Its beauty now torn apart, only blood and tears now flow.*

*Brother killing brothers for promises from outside.*

During the superpower confrontation in Vietnam, while thousands and thousands of peasants and children lost their lives, our land was unmercifully ravaged. Yet we were unable to stop the fighting; we were not able to make ourselves heard or understood. We had little access to the international news media. People thought we Buddhists were trying to seize power, but we had no interest in power. We only wanted to stop the slaughter. The voice of the Viet namese people-80

percent Buddhists-was lost in the melee of shooting and bombs. But we realized that the means and the end are one, and we never employed any kind of action that betrayed our commitment to nonviolence.

In 1963, Venerable Thich Quang Duc went to the crossroads of Phan Dinh Phung, sat in the lotus position, poured gasoline on himself, and transformed himself into a torch. His disciple read his last words to the press. Madame Nhu described it as a "barbecue." By burning himself, Thich Quang Duc awakened the world to the suffering of the war and the persecution of the Buddhists. When someone stands up to violence in such a courageous way, a force for change is released. Every action for peace requires someone to exhibit the courage to challenge the violence and inspire love. Love and sacrifice always set up a chain reaction of love and sacrifice. Like the crucifixion of Jesus, Thich Quang Duc's act expressed the unconditional willingness to suffer for the awakening of others. Accepting the most extreme kind of pain, he lit a fire in the hearts of people around the world. Self-burning was not a technique or program of action. When anyone wished to burn himself or herself, the Buddhist leaders always tried to prevent it. But many monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen did sacrifice themselves for peace in this way, including my disciple Nhat Chi Mai, who declared that she wanted to be "a torch in the dark night."

Nhat Chi Mai was one of the first six people ordained into the Tiep Hien Order. In 1966, she placed a statue of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, and a statue of the Virgin Mary in front of her, and burned herself alive at the Tu Nghiem Temple, a nunnery. She left behind letters to the Presidents of North and South Vietnam, imploring them to stop the fighting. She wrote one letter to me: "Thay, don't worry too much. We will have peace soon." Nhat Chi Mai moved the hearts of millions of her countrymen, evoking the force of love.

I know that the self-immolation of monks and nuns was difficult for Westerners to understand. The Western press called it suicide, but it was not really suicide. It was not even a protest. What the monks wrote in the letters they left behind was intended only to move the hearts of

the oppressors and call the world's attention to the suffering of our people. To make a statement while enduring such unspeakable pain is to communicate with tremendous determination, courage, and sincerity. During the ordination ceremony in some Buddhist traditions, the ordainee burns one or more very small spots on his body with *moxa* incense as he takes the 250 vows of a monk, promising to live a life devoted to helping living beings. If he were to say this while sitting comfortably in an armchair, it would not be the same. When uttered while kneeling before the community of elders and experiencing this kind of pain, his words express the full seriousness of his heart and mind.

The Vietnamese monks, nuns, and laypeople who burned themselves were saying with all their strength and determination that they were willing to endure the greatest of suffering in order to protect their people. But why did they have to burn themselves to death? The difference between burning oneself with incense and burning oneself to death is only a matter of degree. What is important is not to die, but to express courage, determination, and sincerity-not to destroy, but to create. Suicide is an act of self-destruction based on the inability to cope with life's difficulties. In Buddhism, self-destruction is one of the most serious transgressions of the precepts. Those who burned themselves had lost neither courage nor hope, nor did they desire nonexistence. They were extremely courageous and aspired for something good in the future. They sacrificed themselves in order to seek help from the people of the world. I believe with all my heart that those who burned themselves did not aim at the death of the oppressors but only at a change in their policy. Their enemies were not human beings, but the intolerance, fanaticism, oppression, greed, hatred, and discrimination that lay within the hearts of their fellow men and women.

We did not plan self-immolations or any of the other methods that were used. But confronting the situation and having compassion in our hearts, ways of acting came by themselves. You cannot prefabricate techniques of nonviolent action and put them into a book for people to use. That would be naive. If you are alert and creative, you will know what to do and what not to do. The basic requisite is that you have the



essence, the substance of nonviolence and compassion in yourself. Then everything you do will be in the direction of nonviolence. Besides self-immolation, fasting, and the use of art, literature, and culture, many other tactics were employed in Vietnam. Foreign Minister Vu Van Mau, for example, resigned in 1963 and shaved his head to protest the violent policies of the Diem regime, and many professors and students followed suit. There were labor strikes at the harbors and markets, and business owners turned in their licenses. University deans, presidents, and professors resigned, and high school and university students boycotted classes and examinations. Draftees refused to fight. All of these acts were met with atrocious reprisals. The government used unbridled brutality-tear gas, suffocation gas, grenades, prisons, and torture-to obstruct and suppress these nonviolent efforts.

Police agents posed as monks and nuns and infiltrated our movement, damaging our prestige and sowing seeds of fear. They excited extremists and fanatics to overturn and destroy the leadership and members of the movement. No one knows exactly how many Buddhist and non-Buddhist leaders of the nonviolent movement were imprisoned or killed, including professors, students, intellectuals, politicians, workers, and farmers. Even social workers trying to help the peasants were terrorized and murdered. From the School of Youth for Social Service, eight people were kidnapped, six killed, and eleven seriously wounded-all because they refused to take sides in the war. In a memorial service organized for those who were killed, the SYSS students openly affirmed their commitment to nonviolence and neutrality: "Now, in the presence of our dear friends whose bodies are lying here, we solemnly proclaim that we cannot consider you who killed them to be our enemies. Our arms are open wide; we are ready to embrace your ideas and advice to help us continue our nonviolent ways of working for the people of Vietnam."

Despite the results-many years of war followed by years of oppression and human rights abuse-I cannot say that our struggle was a failure. The conditions for success in terms of a political victory were not present. But the success of a nonviolent struggle can be measured only in terms of the love and nonviolence attained, not whether a

political victory was achieved. In our struggle in Vietnam, we did our best to remain true to our principles. We never lost sight that the essence of our struggle was love itself, and that was a real contribution to humanity.

## -Chapter Two - A Proposal for Peace

*This statement was read at a press conference in Washington, D.C., on June 1, 1966, and reprinted in the Congressional Record the next day.*

Just this morning, the U.S. Consulate in Hue was destroyed by angry Vietnamese youths. In the past four days, five Vietnamese have immolated themselves, some of them leaving behind messages explaining that their actions were in protest against U.S. policy in South Vietnam. During my short visit to your country, I have repeatedly been asked why the Vietnamese people seem to have become so strongly anti-American.

I wish, first of all, to assure you that I am not anti American. Indeed, it is precisely because I do have a great respect and admiration for America that I have undertaken this long voyage to your country, a voyage that entails great personal risk for me upon my return to South Vietnam. Yet I assume this risk willingly because I have faith that if the American public can begin to understand some thing of what the Vietnamese people feel about what is happening in our country, much of the unnecessary tragedy and misery being endured by both our peoples might be eliminated.

The demonstrations, self-immolations, and protests that we are witnessing in Vietnam are dramatic reflections of the frustrations that the Vietnamese people feel at being so effectively excluded from participation in the determination of their country's future. Eighty years of French domination over Vietnam were ended by a long and bloody struggle waged and won by the Vietnamese people against overwhelming odds. During the twelve years since independence, most Vietnamese have remained without a voice in the nation's destiny, and this at a time when the nation is being subjected to a destructive force

far surpassing anything ever before seen in our country. If anti-Americanism seems to be emerging as a focus for some of the recent protests, it is because the Vietnamese people recognize that it is really only the awesome U.S. power that enables the Saigon governments to rule without a popular mandate and to follow policies contrary to the aspirations of the Vietnamese people. This is not the independence for which the Vietnamese people fought so valiantly.

The war in Vietnam today pits brother against brother, the Vietcong against the supporters of the Saigon government. Both sides claim to represent the Vietnamese people, but in reality neither side does. The most effective Vietcong propaganda says that the Saigon governments are mere puppets of the U.S., corrupt lackeys of the imperialists.

Every escalation of the war, every new contingent of U.S. troops confirms these charges and wins new recruits to the Vietcong, for the overwhelming majority of the Vietnamese people now thirst desperately for peace and oppose any further expansion of the war. They see clearly that the present policy of constant escalation only puts peace ever further into the future and merely guarantees an even greater destruction of Vietnamese society. There are now more than 300,000 Americans in my country, most of them knowing and caring little about our customs and practices and many of them involved in destroying Vietnamese people and property.

This creates friction which generously feeds the anti American propaganda, and the fact that the war kills far more innocent peasants than it does Vietcong is a tragic reality of life in the Vietnamese countryside. Those who escape death by bombings must often abandon their destroyed villages and seek shelter in refugee camps where life is even more miserable than it was in the villages. In general, these people do not blame the Vietcong for their plight. It is the men in the planes, who drop death and destruction from the skies, who appear to them to be their enemies. How can they see it otherwise?

The United States chooses to support those elements in

Vietnam that appear to be most devoted to the U.S.'s wishes for Vietnam's future. But these elements have never been viewed by the Vietnamese people as their spokesmen. Diem was not, nor were

Diem's successors. Thus, it has been the U.S.'s antipathy to popular government in South Vietnam, together with its hope for an ultimate military solution, that has not only contradicted the deepest aspirations of the Vietnamese people, but actually undermined the very objective for which we believe Americans to be fighting in Vietnam.

To us, America's first objective is to have an anticommunist, or at least a non-communist, Vietnam, whereas the Vietnamese people's objective is to have peace. They dislike communism, but they dislike war even more, especially after twenty years of fighting and bitterness which has rotted the very fabric of Vietnamese life. Equally important, we now see clearly that continuance of the war is more likely to spread communism in Vietnam than to contain it. The new social class of military officers and *commerfants* that has been created as a direct result of the U.S. involvement, a class of sycophants who support the war for crass economic reasons, are not the people to whom Washington should listen if it sincerely wishes to hear the voice of South Vietnam. The Vietnamese people reject with scorn this corrupt and self-seeking class that cares neither for Vietnam nor for the great ideals of America, but thinks only of its own interests.

The opinion is often expressed that there is no alternative to the present U.S. policy in Vietnam, neither on the political nor the military side. The non-communist alternatives to a military dictatorship are said to be too fragmented to offer a stable alternative, and a cease-fire and U.S. withdrawal are considered unfeasible because it is feared that the Vietcong will take over the country by terror.

The Vietnamese people recognize both of these dangers, but they also recognize the utter futility of the present course and the catastrophic effects that it is having on our society. Furthermore, we do not agree that there is no alternative to a military dictatorship. The force of Vietnamese nationalism is such an alternative. Indeed, this is the sole force that can prevent the complete disintegration of South Vietnam, and it is the force around which all Vietnamese can unite. But nationalism cannot attain its effective potential in the present Vietnamese political climate, where opposition to the government invites open persecution upon oneself and identification with it discredits one in the eyes of the people.

More than a decade of this atmosphere has served to drive many of the Vietnamese nationalists into the National Liberation Front, and many others of them into an ominous silence. Last year, an effort by a prominent group of nationalists to circulate a mild petition requesting peace negotiations between the South Vietnamese government and the NLF was so brutally attacked by the government that we are not likely to hear from them soon again, despite their having attained some 5,000 signers in less than three days' time.

Today, the means for nationalist expression rests mainly with the Vietnamese Buddhists, who alone command sufficient popular support to spearhead a protest for popular government. This is not a new role for Vietnamese Buddhism, for in the eyes of the Vietnamese peasants, Buddhism and nationalism are inseparably entwined. The historic accident that made the popularization of Christianity in Vietnam coincident with France subjugation of Vietnam created this image.

The repression of our faith by the French and by President Diem strengthened it. And today, when the Buddhist attempt to give expression to the long pent-up wishes of the submerged and ignored Vietnamese masses is met by the gunfire and tanks of the Vietnamese army, the Vietnamese people, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike, clearly see whose action reflects our national heritage and whose action betrays this heritage.

Thus, although the Vietnamese people may lose skirmishes because they have no foreign sources of support, the crude victories of the Saigon generals serve merely to weaken their credibility while confirming the Vietcong's propaganda claim that the government cares nothing about the people. The Buddhist efforts are designed not to weaken Vietnam's resistance but to create a genuine will to resist.

Differences do exist among the Buddhists, the Catholics, and the other sects, but they would not be insurmountable if there were a climate in Vietnam that encouraged unity. But there are those who see a unified, popular, nationalist movement in Vietnam as a threat to themselves. Such persons help to sow disunity and then use the disunity which they create as a pretext for retaining power. No, we do not accept the evaluation that there is no alternative to the present type of government.

The second argument offered for continuing the present U.S. policy is that a cease-fire and U.S. withdrawal would merely leave Vietnam to the communists. This argument we must also reject. The Vietcong grow stronger because of the mistakes made by Saigon, not because of its communist ideology or its terror. If South Vietnam could achieve a government clearly responsive to the basic aspirations of the Vietnamese people and truly independent, there would no longer be any basis for popular support for the rebels. Indeed, the rebels would have lost their reason to rebel, and if any guerrilla activity were to continue, the Vietnamese people would have the will to resist it, for they could identify it as being hostile to Vietnamese nationalism, contrary to the people's longing for peace and reconstruction, and therefore of foreign inspiration.

Since coming to the United States, I have been asked repeatedly to outline concrete proposals for ending the strife in Vietnam. Although I am not a politician and cannot therefore suggest every detail of a satisfactory settlement, the general direction that such a solution must take is quite clear to me and to many of the Vietnamese people. It does not involve the U.S. in any negotiations with Hanoi, Peking, or the NLF. To the Vietnamese people, such talks, if necessary, are the proper province of Vietnamese officials rather than of Washington.

My solution would be along the following lines:

- 1. A cessation of the bombing, north and south.*
- 2. Limitation of all military operations by U.S. and South Vietnamese forces to defensive actions: in effect, a cease-fire if the Vietcong respond in kind.*
- 3. A convincing demonstration of the U.S. intention to withdraw its forces from Vietnam over a specified period of months, with withdrawal actually beginning to take place as a sign of sincerity.*
- 4. A clear statement by the U.S. of its desire to help the Vietnamese people to have a government truly responsive to Vietnamese aspirations, and concrete U.S. actions to implement this statement, such as a refusal to support one group over another.*
- 5. A generous effort to help rebuild, in light of the destruction that has been wreaked upon Vietnam, such aid to be completely free of ideological and political strings and therefore not viewed as an affront*

*to Vietnamese independence.*

Such a program, if implemented with sufficient vigor to convince the now understandably skeptical Vietnamese people of its sincerity, offers the best hope for uniting them in a constructive effort and for restoring stability to South Vietnam.

The plan is not perfect, for the question remains of how the U.S. can be sure that the South Vietnamese government and the Vietcong would cooperate in such a venture. Insofar as the South Vietnamese government is concerned, the past statements of Premier Ky have clearly indicated his unwillingness to seek a peaceful end to the war. In fact, it has been the contradiction between the aggressive words of Saigon and the peaceful statements of Washington that has so discredited the so-called U.S. peace offensive of last winter. The withdrawal of the U.S. support for Ky may thus be a necessary precondition for implementation of such a plan.

It is obviously not possible to predict the response of the Vietcong to such a program, but the installation of a popular government in South Vietnam, plus a cease-fire and the beginning of an American withdrawal, would so undercut the Vietcong's position that it is likely to have no alternative but to cooperate.

Finally, if some may question why I ask the U.S. to take the first step, it is because the U.S. is militarily the strongest nation in the world. No one can accuse it of cowardice if it chooses to seek peace. To be a genuine leader requires moral strength as well as big guns. America's history suggests that she has the potential to provide the world this leadership.



### -Chapter Three - Our Green Garden

*From the New York Review of Books, June 9, 1966*

In Vietnam, we take great risks publishing antiwar poems. Buddhists who have protested the war have been arrested and exiled, and are now being killed in Danang. Because of this great risk, the Buddhists who demonstrated this Spring were reluctant to advocate openly an end to the war through negotiations; instead, they called for elections and democracy. We are in an impossible dilemma. If we openly call for peace, we are identified with the communists and the government will try to suppress us. If we criticize the communists, we find ourselves aligned with those Vietnamese who have been propagandists for the Americans for years and whose words against communism are soiled and discredited because they have been paid to say them. To be honorably anticommunist has been to remain silent, and, being silent, we have been labeled as innocent of the dangers of communism. But we are not. We are well aware of the restrictions on Buddhism in the North. We have studied what happened in China.

We know there is no place for spirituality in Marxism. We are ready to undertake a peaceful political struggle with the communists, if only the destruction of the war can be stopped. We are confident that the South Vietnamese can protect themselves from communist domination if we are allowed to carry out our political lives in peace.

The tragedy of American policy is that it has made such a peaceful political struggle very difficult. The Americans could have helped in reconstructing the country peacefully if they had cooperated with and strengthened the Buddhists and others who had the respect of the people. Instead, they have tried to divide the Buddhists to prevent them from becoming an organized force, and this has been disastrous. Catholicism came to Vietnam with the French, and the Catholic leaders, backed by the U.S., were objects of suspicion for most of the people. The Buddhist tradition is closely linked with nationalism, and

it is unthinkable to the broad mass of people that the Buddhists would betray them to a foreign power. At the same time, Vietnamese Buddhism is syncretic in character-there are Catholic priests who are closer to us on the question of peace than some of the older, more conservative Buddhist priests. (A few months ago, eleven Catholic priests issued a strong statement calling for peace, and they were attacked by the Catholic leaders.)

Now the U.S. has become too afraid of the communists to allow a peaceful confrontation with them to take place, and when you are afraid, you cannot win. Sending 300,000

American troops to Vietnam and bombing the countryside have only caused the communists to grow stronger. American military operations have killed and wounded more innocent peasants than Vietcong, and the Americans are blamed and hated for this. The peasants are not violently antagonistic to the Vietcong. The strong anticommunists are mostly people in the cities who fear the loss of their property, cars, businesses, and homes, and rely on the foreign army to protect them. The American soldiers, moreover, do not understand the Vietnamese. GIs make thousands of small mistakes every day that offend Vietnamese people. And the continual roaring overhead of U.S. planes on their way to drop bombs makes the people sick and angry.

So it is understandable that the villagers distrust those who are connected with the South Vietnamese government and the Americans. Along with others, I helped organize a Buddhist School of Youth for Social Service, and we have trained thousands of young people to work at community development projects in the villages. We refuse to accept money from the government or the American Military Assistance Group. We go into the villages with nothing but our own robes, and we are warmly welcomed. The peasants we work with tell us that the government officials assigned to "assist" them keep thousands of piasters a month for themselves and do nothing for them. They have come to dislike the Vietcong and fear the Americans, whose bombs continue to fall down on them.

If the U.S. wants to escalate the war, we Vietnamese cannot stop you. Even changes of government will make no difference. The war will go on. Venerable Thich Tri Quang believes we may attain peace

indirectly by means of political maneuvering and through elections. He is a man of action, courage, and intelligence, whose life is exemplary. But other Buddhists are trying to create a new Buddhist path emphasizing ways of helping the people who live on the land. I myself doubt that much will be gained by indirect political maneuvering against the government and the Catholics, as long as the U.S. is determined to continue the war. Underlying our struggles with the government in Danang and other cities is the unstated question of whether the war will go on, and this only the U.S. can decide. I believe the most effective thing we can do is advocate peace, however dangerous that may be, by telling the world that we do not accept this war, that the communists are growing stronger every day it continues to be fought, and that a cease-fire must be arranged with the Vietcong as soon as possible. Then we would welcome the help of Americans in the peaceful reconstruction of our country. Only America has the capability of stopping this war, which is destroying not only our lives, but our culture and everything of human value.

The poems that follow are not typical of my own poetry or of Vietnamese poetry generally. The tradition of poetry in Vietnam is very old and complex. It draws on early Chinese poetry, on the French Romantic and symbolist poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and, in my own case, on Zen Buddhist writers. Much of my poetry could be called "philosophical," and friends have found it in some ways similar to the work of Tagore; at least, it is extremely difficult to translate into English.

But these poems are different. They are popular poems

in free verse, and when I write them I am trying to speak very simply for the majority of Vietnamese, who are peasants and cannot speak for themselves. They do not know or care much about words like "communism" or "democracy," but only want the war to end so they can survive. I wrote these poems first for myself; when I read them I can regain the state of intense feeling in which I composed them. They have now been read and heard by many Vietnamese; and they have been denounced by both sides fighting in the war. A few days after they were published last year, government police came to seize them from the bookstores, but by then they had all been sold.

They were attacked by the Hanoi radio and the radio of the National Liberation Front. They have been read many times in public along with the peace poems of other Buddhists, and they have been sung with guitar accompaniment at student meetings, much as songs of protest are sung in the United States.

### **Condemnation**

*Listen to this:*

*Yesterday six Vietcong came through my village,  
and because of this, the village was bombed.  
Every soul was killed.*

*When I returned to the village the next day,  
there was nothing but clouds of dust-  
the pagoda without roof or altar,  
only the foundations of houses,  
the bamboo thickets burned away.*

*Here in the presence of the undisturbed stars,  
in the invisible presence of all people still alive on Earth,  
let me raise my voice to denounce this dreadful war,  
this murder of brothers by brothers!*

*Whoever is listening, be my witness:  
I cannot accept this war.  
I never could, I never will.  
I must say this a thousand times before I am killed.*

*I am like the bird who dies for the sake of its mate,  
dripping blood from its broken beak and crying out, "Beware! Turn  
around to face your real enemies  
ambition, violence, hatred, greed."*

*Men are not our enemies-even men called Vietcong.  
If we kill men, what brothers will we have left?  
With whom then shall we live?*

## **Our Green Garden**

*Fires spring up at all ten points of the universe.  
A furious, acrid wind sweeps them toward us from all sides. Aloof and  
beautiful, the mountains and rivers abide.*

*All around, the horizon burns with the color of death.  
As for me, yes, I am still alive,  
but my body and soul writhe as if they too  
had been set on fire.  
My parched eyes can shed no more tears.*

*Where are you going this evening, dear brother,  
in what direction?  
The rattle of gunfire is close at hand.  
In her breast, the heart of our mother  
shrivels and fades  
like a dying flower.  
She bows her head, the smooth black hair  
now threaded with white.  
How many nights has she clouched, wide awake,  
alone with her lantern, praying for the storm to end?  
Dearest brother, I know it is you who will shoot me tonight, piercing  
our mother's heart with a wound  
that can never heal.  
O terrible winds that blow from the ends of the Earth, hurling down our  
houses and blasting our fertile fields!*

*I say farewell to the blazing, blackening place  
where I was born.  
Here is my breast! Aim your gun at it, brother; shoot!  
I offer my body, the body our mother bore and nurtured. Destroy it if  
you wish.  
Destroy it in the name of your dream*

*that dream in whose name you kill.*

*Can you hear me invoke the darkness,  
"When will the suffering end?  
O darkness, in whose name do you destroy?"*

*Come back, dear brother, and kneel at our mother's knee.  
Don't sacrifice our green garden  
to the ragged flames that have been carried into the dooryard by wild  
winds from far away.  
Here is my breast. Aim your gun at it, brother, shoot!  
Destroy me if you wish  
and build from my carrion  
whatever it is  
you are dreaming of*

*Who will be left to celebrate a victory  
made of blood and fire?*

## **Peace**

*They woke me this morning  
to tell me my brother had been killed in battle.  
Yet in the garden,  
a new rose, with moist petals uncurling,  
blossoms on the bush.  
And I am alive,  
still breathing the fragrance of roses and dung,  
eating, praying, and sleeping.  
When can I break my long silence?  
When can I speak the unuttered words that are choking me?*

## -Chapter Four- Ahimsa: The Path of Harmlessness

The Sanskrit word *ahimsa*, usually translated "nonviolence," literally means "non-harming" or "harmlessness." To practice ahimsa, first of all we have to practice it within ourselves. In each of us, there is a certain amount of violence and a certain amount of nonviolence. Depending on our state of being, our response to things will be more or less nonviolent. Even if we take pride in being vegetarian, for example, we have to acknowledge that the water in which we boil our vegetables contains many tiny microorganisms. We cannot be completely nonviolent, but by being vegetarian, we are going in the direction of non violence. If we want to head north, we can use the North Star to guide us, but it is impossible to arrive at the North Star. Our effort is only to proceed in that direction.

Anyone can practice some nonviolence, even soldiers. Some army generals, for example, conduct their operations in ways that avoid killing innocent people; this is a kind of nonviolence. To help soldiers move in the nonviolent direction, we have to be in touch with them. If we divide reality into two camps-the violent and the nonviolent-and stand in one camp while attacking the other, the world will never have peace. We will always blame and condemn those we feel are responsible for wars and social injustice, without recognizing the degree of violence in ourselves. We must work on ourselves and also work with those we condemn if we want to have a real impact. It never helps to draw a line and dismiss some people as enemies, even those who act violently. We have to approach them with love in our hearts and do our best to help them move in a direction of nonviolence. If we work for peace out of anger, we will never succeed. Peace is not an end. It can never come about through non-peaceful means. When we protest against a war, we may assume that we are a peaceful person, a representative of peace, but this might not be the case. If we look deeply, we will observe that the roots of war are in the unmindful ways we have been living. We have not sown enough

seeds of peace and understanding in ourselves and others, therefore we are co-responsible: "Because I have been like this, they are like that." A more holistic approach is the way of "interbeing": "This is like this, because that is like that." This is the way of understanding and love. With this insight, we can see clearly and help our government see clearly. Then we can go to a demonstration and say, "This war is unjust, destructive, and not worthy of our great nation." This is far more effective than angrily condemning others. Anger always accelerates the damage.

We know how to write strong letters of protest, but we must also learn to write love letters to our President and Representatives, demonstrating the kind of understanding and using the kind of language they will appreciate. If we don't, our letters may end up in the trash and help no one. To love is to understand. We cannot express love to someone unless we understand him or her. If we do not understand our President or Congressperson, we cannot write him or her a love letter.

People are happy to read a good letter in which we share our insights and our understanding. When they receive that kind of letter, they feel understood and they will pay attention to your recommendations. You may think that the way to change the world is to elect a new President, but a government is only a reflection of society, which is a reflection of our own consciousness. To create fundamental change, we, the members of society, have to transform ourselves. If we want real peace, we have to demonstrate our love and understanding so that those responsible for making decisions can learn from us.

All of us, even pacifists, have pain inside. We feel angry and frustrated, and we need to find someone willing to listen to us who is capable of understanding our suffering. In Buddhist iconography, there is a bodhisattva named Avalokitesvara who has 1,000 arms and 1,000 hands, and has an eye in the palm of each hand. One thousand hands represent action, and the eye in each hand represents understanding.

When you understand a situation or a person, any action you do will help and will not cause more suffering. When you have an eye in your hand, you will know how to practice true nonviolence.



Imagine if each of our words also had an eye in it. It is

easy to depict a hand with an eye, but how might an artist also put an eye into our words? Before we say something, we have to understand what we are saying and the person to whom our words are directed. With the eye of understanding, we will not say things to make the other person suffer. Blaming and arguing are forms of violence. When we speak, if we suffer greatly, our words may be bitter, and that will not help anyone. We have to learn to calm our selves and become a flower before we speak. This is "the art of loving speech."

Listening is also a deep practice. The bodhisattva Avalokitesvara has a deep talent for listening. In Chinese, his name means "listening to the cries of the world." We have to listen in a way that we understand the suffering of others. We have to empty ourselves and leave space so we can listen well. If we breathe in and out to refresh and empty ourselves, we will be able to sit still and listen to the person who is suffering. When she is suffering, she needs someone to listen attentively without judging or reacting. If she cannot find someone in her family, she may go to a psychotherapist. Just by listening deeply, we already alleviate a great deal of her pain. This is an important practice of peace. We have to listen in our families and in our communities. We have to listen to everyone, especially those we consider our enemies. When we show our capacity of listening and understanding, the other person will also listen to us, and we will have a chance to tell him of our pain. This is the beginning of healing.

Thinking is at the base of everything. It is important for us to put an eye of awareness into each of our thoughts. Without a correct understanding of a situation or a person, our thoughts can be misleading and create confusion, despair, anger, or hatred. Our most important task is to develop correct insight. If we see deeply into the nature of interbeing, that all things "inter-are," we will stop blaming, arguing, and killing, and we will become friends with everyone.

These are the three domains of action-body, speech, and mind. In addition, there is *non-action*, which is often more important than action. Without our doing anything, things can sometimes go more smoothly just because of our peaceful presence. In a small boat when

a storm comes, if one person remains solid and calm, others will not panic, and the boat is more likely to stay afloat. In many circumstances, non-action can help a lot. A tree merely breathes, waves its leaves and branches, and tries to stay fresh. But if the tree were not there, we could not be here. The tree's non-action is fundamental to our wellbeing. If we can learn to live the way a tree does-staying fresh and solid, peaceful and calm-even if we do not do many things, others will benefit from our non-action, our presence. We can also practice non-action in the domain of speech. Words can create understanding and mutual acceptance, or they can cause others to suffer. Sometimes it is best not to say anything. This is a book on nonviolent social action, but we must also discuss nonviolent non-action. If we really want to help the world, the practice of non-action is essential.

Of course, sometimes non-action can be harmful. When someone needs our help and we refuse, she may die. If a monk, for example, sees a woman drowning and does not want to touch her because of his precepts, he will violate the most fundamental principle of life. When we see social injustice, if we practice non-action, we may cause harm. When people need us to say or do something, if we don't, we can kill by our inaction or our silence.

To practice ahimsa, we must first of all learn ways to deal peacefully with ourselves. If we create true harmony within ourselves, we will know how to deal with family, friends, and associates. Techniques are always secondary. Most important is to become ahimsa, so that when a situation presents itself, we will not create more suffering. To practice ahimsa, we need gentleness, loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity directed to our bodies, our feelings, and other people.

Real peace must be based on insight and understanding, and for this we must practice deep reflection-looking deeply into each act and each thought of our daily lives.

With mindfulness-the practice of peace-we can begin by working to transform the wars in ourselves. There are techniques for doing this. Conscious breathing is one. Every time we feel upset, we can stop what we are doing, refrain from saying anything, and breathe in

and out several times, aware of each in-breath and each out-breath. If we are still upset, we can go for walking meditation, mindful of each slow step and each breath we take. By cultivating peace within, we bring about peace in society. It depends on us. To practice peace in ourselves is to minimize the numbers of wars between this and that feeling, or this and that perception, and we can then have real peace with others as well, including the members of our own family.

I am often asked, "What if you are practicing love and patience and someone breaks into your house and tries to kidnap your daughter or kill your husband? What should you do? Should you shoot that person or act in a nonviolent way?" The answer depends on your state of being. If you are prepared, you may react calmly and intelligently, in the most nonviolent way possible. But to be ready to react with intelligence and nonviolence, you have to train yourself in advance. It may take ten years, or longer. If you wait until the time of crisis to ask the question, it will be too late. A this-or-that kind of answer would be superficial. At that crucial moment, even if you know that nonviolence is better than violence, if your understanding is only intellectual and not in your whole being, you will not act nonviolently. The fear and anger in you will prevent you from acting in the most nonviolent way.

To prevent war, to prevent the next crisis, we must begin right now. When a war or a crisis has begun, it is already too late. If we and our children practice ahimsa in our daily lives, if we learn how to plant seeds of peace and reconciliation in our own hearts and minds, we will begin to establish real peace and, in that way, we may be able to prevent the next war. If another war does come, we will know that we have done our best. Is ten years enough time to prepare ourselves and our nation to avoid another war? How much time does it take to breathe consciously, to smile, and to be fully present in each moment? Our real enemy is forgetfulness. If we nourish mindfulness every day and water the seeds of peace in ourselves and those around us, we have a good chance to prevent the next war and to defuse the next crisis.

## -Chapter Five- A Peaceful Heart

Immediately after ordering the ground attack on Iraq, in February 1991, President Bush addressed his nation, saying, "Whatever you are doing at this moment, please stop and pray for our soldiers in the Gulf. God Bless the United States of America." I suspect that at the same moment many Moslems were also praying to their God to protect Iraq and the Iraqi soldiers. How could God know which nation to support? Many people pray to God because they want God to fulfill some of their needs. If they want to have a picnic, they may ask God for a clear, sunny day. At the same time, farmers who need more rain might pray for the opposite. If the weather is clear, the picknickers may say, "God is on our side; he answered our prayers." But if it rains, the farmers will say that God heard *their* prayers. This is the way we usually pray.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, *"Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God."* Those who work for peace must have a peaceful heart. When you have a peaceful heart, you are the child of God. But many who work for peace are not at peace. They still have anger and frustration, and their work is not really peaceful. We cannot say that they belong to the Kingdom of God.

To preserve peace, our hearts must be at peace with the world, with our brothers and our sisters. When we try to overcome evil with evil, we are not working for peace. If you say, "Saddam Hussein is evil. We have to prevent him from continuing to be evil," and if you then use the same means he has been using, you are exactly like him. Trying to overcome evil with evil is not the way to make peace.

Jesus also said, *"Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment. But I say unto you, that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment ... whosoever shall say, 'Thou fool,' shalt be in danger of hell fire."*

Jesus did not say that if you are angry with your brother, you will be put in a place called hell. He said that if you are angry with your brother, you are already in hell. Anger *is* hell. He also said that you don't need to kill with your body to be put in jail. You need only to kill in your mind and you are already there.

In the Persian Gulf, many people practiced killing in their minds-Iraqi, American, French, British, and other soldiers. They knew that if they didn't kill, the enemy soldiers would kill them, so they used sandbags to represent their enemy, and holding their bayonets firmly, they ran, shouted, and plunged the bayonets into the sandbags. They practiced killing day and night in their hearts and minds. The damage caused by that kind of practice is huge. I happened to see a few seconds of that kind of practice on TV. Even if President Bush had not given the order for a land offensive, a lot of damage was already being done in the minds and hearts of one million people in the Gulf. Those kinds of wounds last for a long time and are transmitted to future generations. If you train yourself every day to kill during the day and then dream of killing during the night because you have spent so much time concentrating on that, the damage is deep. If you survive, you will bear that kind of scar for many years. This is a real tragedy. We usually count bodies to measure the damage from a war, but we don't count these kinds of wounds in the hearts and minds of so many soldiers. We have to see the real long-term damage that war causes. Soldiers live in hell day and night, even before they go into the battlefield, and even after they return home.

We may think of peace as the absence of war, that if the great powers would reduce their weapons arsenals, we could have peace. But if we look deeply into the weapons, we will see our own minds-our own prejudices, fears, and ignorance. Even if we transport all the bombs to the moon, the roots of war and the roots of the bombs are still here-in our hearts and minds-and, sooner or later, we will make new bombs. To work for peace is to uproot war from ourselves and from the hearts of men and women. To start a war and give the opportunity to one million men and women to practice killing day and night in their hearts is to plant many, many seeds of war-anger, frustration, and the fear of being killed. I felt very sad when I learned

that more than eighty percent of the American people supported the Gulf War.

*"Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also."*

This is Jesus' teaching about revenge. "When someone asks you for something, give it to him. When he wants to borrow something from you, lend it to him. How many Christians actually practice this? There is a story about an American soldier who was taking a Japanese prisoner during World War II. While walking together, the American discovered that the Japanese soldier spoke English and that he had been a Christian before he abandoned his faith. So he asked, "Why did you abandon Christianity? It is an excellent religion," and the Japanese man said, "I could not become a soldier and continue to be a Christian. I don't think a good Christian can become a soldier and kill another person." He understood this passage from Matthew. There must be ways to solve our conflicts without having to resort to killing. We must focus our attention on this. We have to find ways to help people get out of difficult situations, situations of conflict, without having to kill.

*"Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; that ye may be the children of your Father who is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust."*

This is nondiscrimination. When you pray only for your own picnic and not for the farmers who need the rain, you are doing the opposite of what Jesus taught. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you..." When we look deeply into our anger, we see that the person we call our enemy is also suffering. As soon as we see that, we have the capacity of accepting and having compassion for him. Jesus

called this "loving your enemy." When we are able to love our enemy, he or she is no longer our enemy. The idea of "enemy" vanishes and is replaced by the notion of someone suffering a great deal who needs our compassion. Doing this is sometimes easier than we might think, but we need to practice. If we read the Bible but don't practice, it will not help much.

*"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."* Everyone makes mistakes. If we are mindful, we see that some of our actions in the past may have caused others to suffer, and some actions of others have made us suffer. We want to be forgiving. We want to begin anew. "You, my brother or sister, have wronged me in the past. I now understand that it was because you were suffering and did not see clearly. I no longer feel anger towards you." That kind of forgiveness is the fruit of awareness. When you are mindful you can see all the causes that led the other person to make you suffer. When you see this, forgiveness and release arise naturally. You can't force yourself to forgive. Only when you understand what has happened can you have compassion for the other person and forgive him or her.

If President Bush had had more understanding of the mind of President Hussein, peace might have been obtained. President Gorbachev made a number of proposals that could have been acceptable to the allies, and many lives could have been spared. But because anger was there, Mr. Bush rejected Mr. Gorbachev's proposals, and Mr. Hussein gave the order to burn Kuwaiti oil wells. If President Bush had seen clearly the suffering of the Iraqi people, he would not have allowed his anger to be expressed by starting a war. He asked the American people to pray for the allied soldiers. He asked God to bless the United States of America. He did not say that we should pray for the civilians in Iraq or even the people of Kuwait. He wanted God to be on the side of America.

Eighty percent of the American people called the Persian Gulf War a victory-only a few hundred American soldiers were killed. But every human life is precious, and the loss of the 100,000 or more Iraqi people was a great tragedy! You may identify yourself as an American, but that is only partially true. You are more than that. You may have lost just a few hundred American lives, but you also suffered

from the Gulf War in many other ways. The deaths of so many Iraqi soldiers and civilians are also casualties that America suffered, because their death was your country's work. When President Bush said, "God bless the United States of America," he was not paying enough attention to the lives of non-Americans. To those of us who are not American, this was not a good image of America. It was selfish and arrogant, and this was also a casualty that America suffered-not just by guns and bombs, but by your President's statement. If the President had said, "God bless us so that the war will end soon and that Americans as well as Iraqis will suffer as little as possible," he could have won a lot more sympathy from people around the world. But he did not say that.

Who is President Bush? President Bush is us. We are responsible for the way he feels, for everything he does. Eighty percent of the people in America supported him in this just war. Why blame him? Our capacity of loving and understanding was so limited. We were not peaceful enough in our own hearts, and we were not able to bring peace to the hearts of other people. When I saw how we prepared for war and practiced killing day and night in our hearts and minds, I felt overwhelmed.

After the parades ended and the yellow ribbons were no longer there, what did we have? What did the wives, husbands, children, brothers, and sisters of the soldiers receive when their loved ones returned from the Gulf after so much fear, hatred, and killing-in reality and in their daily practice? We cannot imagine the long-term effects of watering so many seeds of war.

Please sit still, breathe, and look deeply, and you will see the real losses, the real casualties that America suffered and continues to suffer from the Gulf War. Visualize 500,000 allied soldiers stationed in Saudi Arabia, waiting for the order to invade Iraq, jumping and screaming as they plunge their bayonets into sandbags that represent Iraqi soldiers. You cannot plunge a bayonet into a person without first transforming yourself into a beast. On the other side, one million Iraqi soldiers were practicing the same. One and a half million soldiers were practicing violence, hatred, and fear, and the American public supported them to do so. They thought that this war was somehow clean, quick, and



moral. They saw only bridges and buildings being destroyed, but the real casualties were the souls of the men and women who came home after practicing violence for so many months.

How could they do that and remain themselves? When they returned, the soldiers cried for joy; they were alive! Their parents, wives, husbands, children, and friends also cried for joy. But after one or two weeks, the war welled up from within their deepest consciousness, and their families and the whole of society will have to endure their pain for a long time. If you are a psychologist, a playwright, a novelist, a composer, a filmmaker, a lawyer, a legislator, a peacemaker, or an environmentalist, please look deeply into the souls of the soldiers who returned from the war so you can see the real suffering that war causes, not only to soldiers, but to everyone. Then project that image onto a huge screen for the whole nation to see and to learn. If we are able to share the truth concerning the Gulf War, we will be able to avoid starting another war like it in the future. We have to see how deep the wounds of war are. How could anyone call the Gulf War a victory? A victory for whom?

## -Chapter Six - The Roots of War

There is a deep malaise in our society. Just look at the way young people consume drugs, as a way to forget. These are the seeds of war, and we have to acknowledge this if we want to transform them. We have to do it together, looking deeply into the nature of the war in our collective consciousness. The war is in our souls.

Many of us are not healthy within, and yet we continue to look for things that only harm us more. We come home from work exhausted, and we do not know how to relax. We feel a kind of vacuum in ourselves, so we turn on the television. We live in a society where we always feel we are lacking something, and we want to fill it. If we don't turn on the TV, we eat or read or talk on the telephone. We are always trying to fill our void with something. Some people even do social or political work this way. But doing this only makes us less satisfied, hungrier, and we want to consume more. We feel alienated from ourselves. There is so much anger and fear in us, and we want to suppress them, so we consume more and more things that only increase the level of toxicity in us. We watch films filled with screaming and violence. We read magazines and novels filled with hatred and confusion. We do not even have the courage to turn off our TV, because we are afraid to go back to ourselves.

The night I heard President Bush give the order to attack Iraq, I could not sleep. I was angry and overwhelmed. The next morning in the middle of my lecture, I suddenly paused and told my friends, "I don't think I will go to North America this Spring." The words just sprang out. Then I continued the lecture. In the afternoon, one American student told me, "Thay, I think you have to go to the United States. Many friends there feel the same as you do, and it would help if you would go and support them." I did not say anything. I practiced breathing, walking, and sitting, and a few days later, I decided to go. I saw that I was one with the American people, with George Bush, and

with Saddam Hussein. I had been angry with President Bush, but after breathing consciously and looking deeply, I saw myself as President Bush. I had not been practicing well enough to change this situation. I saw that Saddam Hussein was not the only person who lit the oil wells in Kuwait. All of us reached out our hands and lit them with him.

In our collective consciousness, there are some seeds of nonviolence, and President Bush did begin with sanctions. But we did not support and encourage him enough, so he switched to a more violent way. We cannot blame only him. The President acted the way he did because we acted the way we did. It is because we are not happy enough that we had a war. If we were happier, we would not take refuge in alcohol, drugs, war, and violence. Young people tell me that the most precious gift their parents can give is their own happiness. If Father and Mother themselves are happy, the children will receive seeds of happiness in their consciousness, and when they grow up, they will know how to make others happy too. When parents fight, they sow seeds of suffering in the hearts of their children, and with that kind of heritage, children grow up unhappy. These are the roots of war. If children are unhappy, they will look for other things that are exactly like war-alcohol, drugs, and some TV programs, magazines, films, and other violent "cultural products."

Our society is sick. When we put a young person in this society without trying to protect him or her, he or she will receive violence, hatred, and fear every day and get sick. Our conversations, our TV programs, our advertisements, our newspapers, our magazines all water the seeds of suffering in young people and not-so-young people.

How can we transform our individual consciousness and the collective consciousness of our society? How can we refrain from consuming more toxic cultural products? We need guidelines-a diet-and we need to practice watering the seeds of peace, joy, and happiness in ourselves. The most important practice for preventing war is to stay in touch with what is refreshing, healing, and joyful inside us and all around us. If we practice walking mindfully, being in touch with the earth, the air, the trees, and ourselves, we can heal ourselves, and our entire society will also be healed. If the whole nation would

practice watering seeds of joy and peace and not just seeds of anger and violence, the elements of war in all of us will be transformed.

We must prepare ourselves, whether we have one minute, ten years, or one thousand years. If we don't have time, there is no use in discussing peace, because you cannot practice peace without time. If you have one minute, please use that minute to breathe in and out calmly and plant the seeds of peace and understanding in yourself. If you have ten years, please use the ten years to prevent the next war. If you have one thousand years, please use the time to prevent the destruction of our planet.

Transformation is possible, but it takes time. There are already seeds of peace in those we call "hawks," but they need us to water their seeds of peace and understanding or else their seeds of anger and aggression will continue to dominate them. Do not feel discouraged. Just by your way of looking at things and doing things, you influence others. Approach everyone with love and patience, and try to water the positive seeds in them. We have to help each other, being skillful, kind, and understanding. Blaming and arguing never help.

People everywhere saw the Los Angeles policemen beating Rodney King. When I first saw that video on French Tv, I felt that I was the one being beaten, and I suffered a lot. I think you must have felt the same. All of us were beaten at the same time. We were all victims of violence, anger, misunderstanding, and the lack of respect for our human dignity.

But as I looked more deeply, I saw that the policemen beating Rodney King were no different from myself. They were doing it because our society is filled with hatred and violence. Everything is like a bomb ready to explode, and we are all a part of that bomb; we are all co-responsible. We are all the policemen *and* the victim.

In the practice of mindfulness, we nurture the ability to see deeply into the nature of things and people, and the fruit is insight, understanding, and love. Because we have not practiced deeply enough, violence has become the substance of our society. Putting the policemen in jail will not solve this fundamental problem. We accept violence as a way of life and as a way to deal with problems. If we are not mindful-if we do not transform our shared suffering through

compassion and deep understanding-then one day our child will be the one who is beaten, or the one doing the beating. It is very much our affair. We have to look at the roots of the problem and not just on the surface.

## - Chapter Seven - To Veterans

On the final day of a mindfulness retreat for 200 Americans in Massachusetts, Jon Kabat-Zinn read an insight poem that said, "The Vietnam War ends today." That was in 1987, and since then, I have begun to lead retreats for war veterans. I want veterans to realize how important they are.

I, too, am a veteran. I lost many friends-many brothers and sisters-during the Vietnam War, and I experienced much suffering. Grenades were thrown into my room, but were deflected by a curtain. Social service workers under my direction were killed and maimed. We did our best to confront the violence with love, but we had to cry a lot.

I have been practicing to transform my suffering and share my insight with others. I do not feel any more blame. I feel peace and compassion, and that allows me to help other people.

Veterans are the light at the tip of the candle, illuminating the way for the whole nation. If veterans can achieve awareness, transformation, understanding, and peace, they can share with the rest of society the realities of war. And they can teach us how to make peace with ourselves and each other, so we never have to use violence to resolve conflicts again. To make the world a peaceful place, to ensure for our children and grandchildren a life worth living, we need a transformation.

When you touch fire and your hand gets burned, it is not the responsibility of the hand alone. It is the responsibility of the whole person. The hand did not touch the fire by itself. It was commanded to do so by the brain, and the whole body got hurt at the same time. If the body blames the hand, that is not just. The hand acted because the body ordered it to do so. When there is good communication between the hand and the rest of the body, both the hand and the body will feel

better. If the body says, "You must bear the burden of your actions by yourself; I cannot forgive what you have done," that is the lack of understanding.

When you went to war, you went for the whole nation. The whole nation was responsible for what happened there, not you alone. Your hand was the hand of the whole nation. If you made mistakes, the whole nation made mistakes. If you went to war believing you were doing something important-trying to save a people, fighting evil-it was not your thinking alone; it was the thinking of the whole nation. You were sent there to fight, destroy, kill, and die. You were not the only one responsible. We cannot just shout at you and say, "You did that!" We all did it collectively.

Our individual consciousness is a product of our society, ancestors, education, and many other factors. Your sense of duty, service, and freedom were handed to you by society, and you went to war as representatives of your people, not just as individuals. You have to look deeply to understand what really happened. Your personal healing will be the healing of the whole nation, your children, and their children.

When the hand gets burned, if there is good communication with the rest of the body, blood and other fluids will rush to the wound and begin the process of healing. If the nation comes to understand the true nature of the war, loving kindness will begin to surface, and healing will begin. As long as there is no communication, there is no insight or compassion, and you will continue to suffer. Non-veterans do not understand veterans, and they refuse to listen to you. You know the truth about war, but you have not been able to share your insight with them. You have suffered so much, but you have not been able to find ways to tell people about it, and they have not been ready to listen.

You continue to suffer, because you feel guilty about your actions in Vietnam. Shame, guilt, and regret can be helpful or harmful; it depends how you use them. When you realize that you have caused a lot of damage, if you vow not to do it again, that regret is wholesome and beneficial. But if your guilt persists for too long and becomes a complex, it blocks the way to joy and peace. The way to liberate yourself is to look deeply into the nature of the guilt and self-hatred

and see the seeds of the suffering your ancestors, your parents, and the violence and lack of understanding in our society and its institutions. If you went to Vietnam with such a heritage of suffering, your actions were dictated by those forces. That is also true of those who opposed the war.

The seeds of suffering come from many directions. When your parents conceived you, you already had many seeds of happiness and suffering handed down by your ancestors. In your mother's womb, you received more seeds. If your parents were not happy together, you received seeds of suffering.

As you grew up, if your parents argued and made each other unhappy, you received those seeds of suffering, too. If your parents were alcoholic, they made you suffer. If your father abused you, you suffered. Violent films and TV programs also watered the seeds of fear and hatred in you. By the time you became a soldier, you were already filled with suffering. Then, in the army you were told that the Vietnamese were beasts and you had to kill them. You cannot kill another human being without visualizing him as a beast. The mass media reinforced this image, watering the seeds of hatred and fear in order to help you kill. So many seeds of violence were watered before you were a soldier and during the time you were a soldier.

With such a heritage of suffering, it is no surprise that you committed atrocities during the war. You knew you could be killed at any time. You saw your friends killed in ambushes. You became more and more angry and more and more afraid. You may have killed children and women. You may have raped women or destroyed villages out of the fear, hatred, and rage that were pouring into you from so many directions. If you committed atrocities in Vietnam, it was the act of everyone-your father who abused you, the press, your commander, everyone who watered the seeds of anger in you so that you could kill.

We do not need to go overseas to a war zone to see such violence. The Los Angeles policemen beating Rodney King, that was also Vietnam. War manifests itself in so many ways here and now. It is a reflection of our collective consciousness, which is filled with suffering. With this heritage, the violence will repeat itself over and



over. There will be other Vietnams, other Gulf Wars. It is our task to look deeply into the violence, hatred, and fear to see their roots.

Many soldiers who went to Vietnam had almost no contact with the Vietnamese people, culture, or life. They were told that the Vietnamese needed to be killed because they were evil and they were killers. Because it was a high-tech war, you just pushed buttons to complete many of your missions. You did not know or see the damage you were inflicting on the people and the country of Vietnam. If you flew one hundred missions, you might have been successful as a soldier, but you did not know what was happening on the ground, because you were so far away. Once you realized what was happening on the ground, you began to have guilt.

Who did that bombing? Your President, your Congress, your Senate, your people, everyone. You were only the hand ordered to do it. Why keep the regret for yourself? Why keep the shame for yourself? When you begin to see that, you will be free, and we need you to share your insight with everyone so we will not be tempted to do it again.

When you came home after the war, the American people were cool, neglectful, and unappreciative, and of course you became angry. But your people did not know anything about the war. Both hawks and doves had a very wrong view. You experienced the reality firsthand, and when you see that they were speaking out of ignorance, you will stop being angry at them. You were ignorant too, but now you have learned, and you are liberated from your anger. Now you can offer your compassion.

We who have experienced war directly have a responsibility to share our insight and experience concerning the truth of war. We are the light at the tip of the candle. It is very hot, but it has the power of shining and illuminating. We can gather into groups to support each other. Practicing mindfulness, we will know how to look deeply into the nature of the war and, with our insight, awaken our own people. We know what war is. We also know that the war is not only in us; it is in everyone-veterans and non-veterans. We must share our insight, not out of anger, but out of love. Our people need us to do it. I am trying my best, and I hope my friends will do the same.

During the war, one portion of the American population had to confront one portion of the Vietnamese population. These were the soldiers, the combatants. But the combatants and the non-combatants were not so different. In both, there were conflicts, and we have to look deeply to recognize these conflicts so that we can transform them into understanding and compassion, the fruit of insight. Insight can be brought about by mindfulness and looking deeply. If we do not have enough mindfulness, if we do not make enough effort to look deeply, we will not have enough insight to transform the conflicts that are within us, not to mention those between people and those with other nations.

The basic condition for happiness is to be understood. Our pain, hope, and despair have to be understood by someone for us to be happy. Vietnam veterans do not feel understood by their society, not even by members of their own families. Consciously or unconsciously, veterans blame the non-veterans for not understanding them. There is so much misunderstanding to be dissolved. Veterans have suffered so much, and they have to take the time to understand their own suffering. It may look as if the people of America understand Gulf War veterans better, but I don't think so. Our ignorance about the nature of war is exactly the same. The war in Vietnam and the war in the Gulf were the same. It does not change just by the way people welcome you back. Whether they shout at you or wave flags and welcome you, the true nature of the war is the same. We have to see that.

Many years have now passed since the Vietnam War. We are calm enough to realize that the Vietnam War was not necessary. We spent so much energy, so many human lives-millions of people died in Vietnam. There are still a lot of mines and bombs in Vietnam that have not been defused, and there are also many bombs in our souls that have not been defused. We need to defuse the bombs in our souls first. Then we can go to Vietnam to help defuse the bombs there.

When we look deeply, we can see that all wars have their roots in the lack of understanding. We may be a little wiser now that twenty years have passed since the Vietnam War, but are we wise enough to prevent another war? In fact, we have already had another unnecessary

war. In order to prevent yet another, we have to be prepared. We need time, of course, but we also need a way. If we know what to do, how to prepare, time is of secondary importance. We have to practice in a way that helps the whole nation see deeply into the nature of war.

When you look into your consciousness and see your own pain, you also see the suffering and confusion of your society and your government. You have been embracing your suffering for many years, but when you see it directly, *it* will transform itself into a positive source of energy that will empower you to share your insight. To help others, we have to go to them with arms extended, filled with loving kindness and compassion. Blaming others or blaming ourselves can never help. The moment we have this insight, we will stop blaming, we will stop suffering, and we will have the energy to serve our people, even *if* they are still ignorant about the nature of the war.

No one ever wins a war. The Vietnamese did not win the war. Millions of people in Vietnam are still suffering, and the country has been destroyed. Vietnam did not win anything. We cannot call it a victory. You cannot call the Gulf War a victory either. But many Americans did call it a victory, so they could have the feeling once again that America is the greatest power on Earth. They organized parades welcoming the soldiers back, trying to overcome what they called a defeat many years ago.

I don't see any difference between a Vietnam veteran and a Gulf War veteran. I don't see any difference between the nature of the war in Vietnam and the nature of the Gulf War. I don't see any difference between the consciousness of the people during the Vietnam War and the consciousness of the people during the Gulf War. Please look deeply and remove all of these false distinctions. Look deeply to see the true nature of our society and our collective consciousness. If the people are educated, if the truth can break into their souls, we will all be able to go in the direction of peace.

As long as the American people believe that the Gulf War was moral, just, and liberating, they will be tempted to do the same thing the next time there is a conflict. How can we prevent that? By telling the truth, by sharing our insight. We need to look deeply and to share our insights. We do not have time to embrace our pain in private

anymore. We have to reveal ourselves. We have to allow our selves to be the light at the tip of the candle, and to join with other veterans. We who have had firsthand experience can share the reality with everyone.

Transformation is the key. Looking just into the ocean of suffering, you see that it is immense. But if you turn around, you see the land. It is possible to transform our hearts right in the present moment. If we do it, if we vow to go in the direction of peace and service, a rose will be born in us at that very moment. My brothers and sisters who died during the war have been reborn as flowers. We have to harvest those flowers and form a beautiful bouquet. Please don't dwell on your memory of guilt. If we can learn from our suffering, all of those flowers will smile deeply at us, and we will be free.

I wrote this poem during the war. Like you, I suffered alot, but transformation was taking place right there in the midst of the war. It is not too late. I know you can do the same.

### **Message**

*Lift has left her footprints on my forehead,  
But I have become a child again this morning.  
The smile seen through leaves and flower is back to smooth away  
the wrinkles  
as the rain wipes away footprints on the beach.  
Again, a cycle of birth and death begins. I walk firmly.  
I walk on thorns, but firmly, as among flowers. I keep my head high.  
Rhymes bloom among the sounds of bombs and mortars. The tears I  
shed yesterday have become rain.  
I feel calm hearing its sound on a thatch roof  
Childhood, O my birthland is calling me, and the rain melts my  
despair.  
I am still here alive, able to smile quietly,  
the sweet fruit brought forth by the tree of suffering.  
Carrying the dead body of my brother, I go across the rice field in  
the darkness.  
Earth will keep you tight within her arms, dear one,*

*so that tomorrow, you will be transformed into flowers, this flower  
smiling quietly in this morning field.*

*This moment you will weep no more, dear one,  
we have gone through too deep a night.*

*This morning, yes, this morning, I kneel down on the green grass  
and I notice your presence.*

*O, flowers that speak to me in silence,  
the message of love and understanding has indeed come.*

## -Chapter Eight- I Have Lost My Brother

Several autumns ago, I walked up to the pine tree in my backyard and asked it one question: "What is institutional violence?" The tree did not answer right away. So I sat at its roots and waited. The backyard was covered with brilliantly colored leaves, the air was fresh, and suddenly I forgot that I was waiting for an answer. The tree and I were just there, enjoying ourselves and each other. After sitting for a long time, I turned to the tree, smiled, and said, "I no longer need an answer." Then I thanked it and awarded it the Grand Transnational Peace Prize.

When I told my friends this, one asked, "Do you give the Peace Prize often?" I did not know how to answer. I wanted to, but it was difficult. Then another asked, "What was the tree's answer to your question?" Again, I did not know what to say, so I encouraged her to go out and ask the tree.

As a novice monk, I was taught to look deeply at a cypress tree, and I learned that looking at a cypress can be very helpful. In fact, it is often easier to contemplate a cypress than to talk to a person. Before talking to a human being, watching a cypress can help. Soon I will organize an International Conference on Tree-Watching. All of the conferees will sit in the forest and just look at beautiful cypresses and pines. Then, in workshops, we can discuss strategies for tree-watching and also principles for appreciating human beings, even those who do not look or think exactly as we do. When I told this to the pine tree, it began to laugh. The tree was thinking about a particular conference held at a Hilton Hotel dealing with the problems of the Third World. Not a single Third World representative had the opportunity to speak because eloquent spokespersons from the First World spoke for them. It was too difficult for them to listen to real Third World

representatives, especially those whose ideas did not fit in with their own.

I have lost my brother and I don't know where and how to find him. My brother was accused of destroying the community because he wanted to do things differently. Now the community continues, but my brother is missing. I have been on a pilgrimage for years looking for him, but without your help, I will never succeed.

Yesterday, I stood in a park and watched a three-year-old child with all my attention, and I was heartbroken. When people say, "Things aren't too bad," I am not sure they understand. If we continue to live the way we do, what kind of world are we leaving for our children? Are we leaving any world at all?

I know my brother is still alive, and I will travel all over the world to find him. But I really need your help. Will you help me? He may be hard to recognize, but I believe the time is near. When the rest of us were asleep, my brother saw what was happening. He tried to tell us, but we never listened. We were busy doing other things practicing meditation, praying, reciting scriptures. We were not at all awake.

People thought my brother was dangerous, but it is not true. He is outspoken, but not dangerous. In fact, not listening to him is what is dangerous. One person like my brother counts for a lot. When I think of him, I know that peace is possible. Please help me find him. If we succeed, there will be hope.

If we try to remove the bombs from a distance, we can never succeed. The bombs are us, and my brother understands that. He asked why we export conventional weapons to the poorest countries of the Third World while people there are starving. I am not trying to make you sad. I just want to share some of the things my brother said.

When I look at the three-year-old child, when I look at the pine tree, I feel co-responsible for their futures. I have no money and no weapons, but I know that by not being attentive enough, I have allowed the situation to develop this far. We are all much too busy. If my brother returns home soon, we will have a chance. That is what I feel. But I am not sure all of us will be able to listen to him or understand him. We only have a chance if we are able to hear and truly understand him. If we are, we may be willing to change our ways. We

still do not know how to take care of him. So, we have to prepare. We have to look deeply into our daily lives, at the ways we think and act, and begin to live in a way that allows the return of my brother to be possible, that allows a future to be possible.

My brother said, "Each person is important. Each being is important. Each moment is important." I am sure the pine tree and the three-year-old child understand this. Our opportunity for peace is not later. It is now. My brother was considered too dangerous for the material well-being of the community. He was a little too radical, too outspoken. That is why we did not want him. But I can assure you that one person like my brother counts for a lot. I have confidence in my brother now, because as I think of him, I feel that anything is possible. Please help. Please be attentive. If you are attentive enough, you will find my brother. Please do not leave me in distress. Tell me, write me, telephone me the moment you see him. I know it may be hard to recognize him, but he is around. He may be living in a monastery or he may be somewhere on the street or in the marketplace. Or he may be within your own heart.



- Chapter Nine -

If You Want Peace, Peace Is With You Immediately

Twenty years ago, I wrote four Chinese characters on a paper lampshade: "If you want peace, peace is with you immediately." A few years later, in Singapore, I had the chance to practice these words.

It was 1976, and several of us were conducting an operation to rescue boat people in the Gulf of Siam. The project was called, "When blood is shed, we all suffer." At that time, not many people knew about the presence of the boat people, and the governments of Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore would not allow them to land on their shores. The practice was to push the boat people back out to sea so they would die, and those on land would not have to deal with them.

We hired two large ships-the *Leapdal* and the *Roland* to pick up refugees on the open sea, and two small ships the *Saigon 200* and the *Blackmark*-to communicate between the larger ships and to transport water, food, medicine, and supplies. Our plan was to fill the two large ships with refugees and take them to Australia and Guam, where, on arrival, we would inform the press so that the world would take notice of their plight, and they would not be sent back. In Malaysia, Indonesia, and other countries, thousands of boat people had been sent back and many of them died in the sea. We had to do our work in secret, since the governments of the world did not want to acknowledge the plight of the boat people, and we knew we would be deported from Singapore if we were discovered. We managed to rescue nearly 800 boat people from the Gulf of Siam. On New Year's Eve, I rode out to sea in the small *Saigon 200* to talk with the refugees on the larger ships. Using a wireless telephone, I wished them a Happy New Year. After we said good-bye, I headed back to shore, and, in the darkness, a huge wave welled up and drenched me. I had the impression that the power of darkness was warning me, "It is the fate of these people to die. Why are you interfering?"

Sometimes we asked fishermen to pick these boat people up during the night, and then we took them by taxi to the French Embassy. In the morning, they were discovered by the French Ambassador, who was very kind. He called the police, knowing that because of his awareness of the presence of these people, they would get "illegal refugee" status. Even though they were put in prison, it was far better than being sent back to sea. Then we worked to help these people get accepted to go to France. We were trying to do many things to reverse the situation.

From time to time, we saw things you cannot believe. We met with a group of sixty people in a barracks. They had just destroyed their own boat so that the Malaysian police would not send them back out to sea, but the police were trying to repair their boat in order to do just that. When we saw these people, the men were just staring into empty space, and the women and children could not stop crying. One of them told us that they came with two boats. The Malaysian police had given them some water and told them to go to Singapore, where they would be welcomed, but this was not true-the Singaporeans always towed boats back out into the ocean no matter how dangerous it was for the boat people.

When the two boats tried to sail away from Malaysia, one capsized. The sixty people on this boat had witnessed the deaths of everyone on the other boat, right in front of their eyes, and there was nothing they could do to help. So they decided to return to the shores of Malaysia, and this time they destroyed and sank their own boat the moment they arrived. They did not want to be pushed out to sea again. We immediately went to the nearest town and called Reuters, AFP, and other media people to come and take photographs. Because of this, the police did not send them back out to sea, but instead brought them to prison and later to a refugee camp.

The suffering we touched doing this kind of work was so deep that if we did not have a reservoir of spiritual strength, we would not have been able to continue. During those days, we practiced sitting and walking meditation, and eating our meals in silence in a very concentrated way. We knew that without this kind of discipline, we would fail in our work. The lives of many people depended on our mindfulness.

After we had rescued nearly 800 people from small boats at sea, the government of Singapore discovered us. We were close to succeeding in sending the *Roland* and the *Leapdal* to Australia, but because of a leak to the press, several reporters tracked us down and published a story about our project. The press is sometimes frivolous; they just want to write a story, even if human lives are at stake.

Because we had been exposed, the Singapore authorities gave the order for the police to surround our flat at two o'clock in the morning. Two policemen were at the front door, two at the back, and two came in to get me. They took my travel documents and ordered me to leave the country within twenty-four hours. I knew that two large boatloads of people were waiting for me to help bring them to shore. The police said, "We will return your travel documents at the airport tomorrow." Those policemen were not like human beings. They were unable to understand the suffering of the boat people or how we were trying to help them.

What could we do in such a situation? We had to breathe deeply and consciously. Otherwise we might panic, or fight with the police, or do something to express our anger at their lack of humanity. Knowing that in twenty-four hours we had to leave 800 people on two boats without food and water, what could we do? We could not go back to sleep.

At that time of the night, no one would answer phone calls. Even the French Embassy was not open. So all of us practiced walking meditation inside our small flat for the rest of the night. If you practice conscious breathing before some difficulty arises, you will be prepared.

We had to find a way for 800 people to travel safely to Australia or Guam. The *Saigon 200* and the *Blackmark* were not allowed to leave port to take food and water to the refugees on the *Leapdal* and the *Roland*. The *Roland* had enough fuel to reach Australia, but we needed to get food to them. Then its engine broke down. The day was very windy and the sea quite rough, and we worried about their safety, even just drifting offshore. But the Malaysian government would not allow the ship to enter Malaysian waters. I tried to get permission to enter a neighboring country in order to continue the rescue operation, but

the governments of Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia would not grant me an entry visa. Even though I was on land, I too was drifting on the sea, and my life was one with the 800 refugees on the ships. There were more problems than seemed possible to solve in just twenty-four hours.

I decided to practice the meditation topic, "If you want peace, peace is with you immediately," and I was surprised to find myself quite calm, not afraid or worried about anything. I was not just being careless. This was truly a peaceful state of mind, and in that state, I was able to overcome this difficult situation. The idea came to me to ask the French Embassy to intervene on my behalf so that my visa would be extended for a few more days, enough time to tie up all of these loose ends. And at five minutes before noon, just as the Immigration Department was about to close for the weekend and I would have to leave the country, the extension was granted. As long as I live, I will never forget those seconds of sitting meditation, those breaths, those mindful steps during that night and that morning. Success came when I faced the problem directly. I vowed that if I could not have peace at that moment, I would never be able to have peace. If I could not be peaceful in the midst of danger, the kind of peace I might realize in easier times would not mean anything. Practicing the topic, "If you want peace, peace is with you immediately," I was able to resolve many problems one after another.

We had to hand the refugees over to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, who kept them for months and years in the camps in Malaysia. It was very painful. Yet we had conducted our operation in prayer and meditation, because we knew that everything depended on our mindfulness. We did sitting meditation late into the night every night, then recited the *Heart Sutra*, as if we were in a monastery.

Our work did bring the cries of the boat people to the attention of the world. In 1977, the U.S. government increased the quota for Vietnamese refugees to 7,000 per year, then 15,000, then 100,000. Australia and other countries followed suit. If we do our best, in full awareness and with a heart free from anger, we cannot worry about results.



- Chapter Ten -  
Call Me by My True Names

In 1976, I wrote a poem about a twelve-year-old girl, one of the boat people crossing the Gulf of Siam, who was raped by a sea pirate and threw herself into the sea; the pirate, who was born in a remote village along the coast in Thailand; and me. I was not on the boat-in fact, I was thousands of miles away-but because I was mindful, I knew what was going on in the Gulf.

I was angry when I received the news of her death, but I learned after meditating for several hours that I could not just take sides against the pirate. I saw that if I had been born in his village and brought up under the same conditions, I would be exactly like him. Taking sides is too easy. Out of my suffering, I wrote this poem, entitled "Please Call Me by My True Names." I have many names, and when you call me by any of them, I have to say, "Yes."

*Don't say that I will depart tomorrow  
even today I am still arriving.*

*Look deeply: every second I am arriving  
to be a bud on a spring branch,  
to be a tiny bird, with still fragile wings,  
learning to sing in my new nest,  
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,  
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone*

*I am still arriving, in order to laugh and to cry,  
in order to fear and to hope,  
the rhythm of my heart is the birth and death of every living  
creature.*

*I am a mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river.  
And I am the bird,  
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.*

*I am a frog swimming happily  
in the clear water of a pond,  
and I am the grass-snake  
that silently feeds itself on the frog.*

*I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones, my legs as thin as  
bamboo sticks.  
And I am the arms merchant,  
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.*

*I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,  
who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate.  
And I am the pirate,  
my heart not yet capable  
of seeing and loving.*

*I am a member of the politburo,  
with plenty of power in my hands, and I am the man who has to pay  
his "debt of blood" to my people,  
dying slowly in a forced-labor camp.*

*My joy is like spring, so warm  
that it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth. My pain is like a  
river of tears,  
so vast that it fills all four oceans.*

*Please call me by my true names,  
so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once, so I can see that my  
joy and pain are one.*

*Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up  
and open the door of my heart, the door of compassion.*

We think we need an enemy. Governments work hard to get us to be afraid and to hate so we will rally behind them. If we do not have a real enemy, they will invent one in order to mobilize us. Recently I went to Russia with some American and European friends, and we found that the Russian people are wonderful. For so many years the American government told their people that Russia was "an evil empire."

It is not correct to believe that the world's situation is in the hands of the government and that if the President would only have the correct policies, there would be peace. Our daily lives have the most to do with the situation of the world. If we can change our daily lives, we can change our governments and we can change the world. Our presidents and our governments are us. They reflect our lifestyle and our way of thinking. The way we hold a cup of tea, pick up a newspaper, and even use toilet paper have to do with peace.

As a novice in a Buddhist monastery, I was taught to be aware of each thing I did throughout the day, and for more than fifty years, I have been practicing this. When I started, I thought this kind of practice was only for beginners, that advanced people did more important things, but now I know that the practice of mindfulness is for everyone. Meditation is to see into our own nature and wake up. If we are not aware of what is going on in ourselves and in the world, how can we see into our own nature and wake up? Are we really awake when we drink our tea, read our newspaper, or use the toilet?

Our society makes it difficult for us to be awake. There are so many distractions. We know that 40,000 children in the Third World die of hunger every day, but we keep forgetting. Our society makes us forgetful. That is why we need practice to help us be mindful. I know a number of friends who refrain from eating dinner two times each week in order to remember the situation in the Third World.

One day I asked a young Vietnamese refugee who was eating a bowl of rice whether children in his country eat rice of such high quality. He said no, because he knows the situation. He experienced hunger in Vietnam-there were times when he ate only dried potatoes,



while he longed for a bowl of rice. In France, he has been eating rice for a year, and he is already beginning to forget. But when I asked him, he remembered. I could not ask the same question to a French or American child, because they have not had the experience of hunger. It is difficult for people in the West to understand the situation in the Third World. It seems to have nothing to do with their situation. I told the Vietnamese boy that the rice he was eating in France came from Thailand, and that most Thai children do not have rice of such high quality, because the best rice is set aside for export to Japan and the West in exchange for foreign currency.

In Vietnam we have a delicious banana called *chuối già*, but the children and adults in Vietnam do not have the right to eat these bananas because they are all for export. In return, Vietnam gets guns in order to kill ourselves and our brothers. Some of us practice this exercise of mindfulness: We sponsor a child in the Third World and get news from him or her, thus keeping in touch with the reality outside. We try many ways to be awake, but our society still keeps us forgetful. Meditation is to help us remember. There are other ways to nourish awareness. One thirteen-year-old Dutch boy visited our retreat center and joined us for a silent lunch. It was the first time he had eaten in silence, and he was embarrassed. Afterwards, I asked him if he had felt uncomfortable, and he said yes. I explained that the reason we eat in silence is to be in touch with the food and the presence of each other. If we talk a lot, we cannot enjoy these things. I asked him if there was some time when he turned off the TV in order to enjoy his dinner more, and he said yes. Later in the day, I invited him to join us for another silent meal, and he enjoyed it very much. Society bombards us with so many noises that we have lost our taste for silence. Every time we have a few minutes, we turn on the TV or make a phone call. We do not know how to be ourselves without something to distract us. So, the first thing we need to do is to return to ourselves and reorganize our daily lives so that we are not just victims of society and other people.

To educate people for peace, we can use words or we can speak with our lives. If we are not peaceful, if we are not feeling well in our skin, we cannot demonstrate real peace, and we cannot raise our

children well either. To take good care of our children means to take good care of ourselves, to be aware of our situation. Please sit down with your child and, together, contemplate the little flowers that grow among the grasses. Breathing in and out, smiling together-that is real peace education. When we can learn to appreciate these small, beautiful things, we will not have to search for anything else. We can be peace ourselves, and we can make peace with our friends and even with our so called enemies.

## -Chapter Eleven - On Simplicity

In 1951, I went with a few brother monks to a remote mountain in the Dai Lao region of Vietnam to build a meditation center. We asked some native mountain people for their help, and two Montagnards from the Jarai tribe joined us in clearing the forest, cutting trees into lumber, and gathering other materials for construction. They were hard workers, and we were grateful for their assistance. But after working with us only three days, they stopped coming. Without their help, we had many difficulties, as we were not familiar with the ways of the forest. So we walked to their village and asked what had happened. They said, "Why should we return so soon? You already paid us enough to live for a month! We will come again when we run out of rice." At the time, it was a common practice to underpay the Montagnards, to avoid just this kind of thing. We had paid them properly, and, surely enough, they stopped coming.

Many people criticized the Montagnards for this ethic.

They said that this laziness could only lead to trouble, and they listed four reasons to support their claim: (1) The Montagnards would be happier and more comfortable if they would work harder. (2) They would earn more money, which they could save for difficult periods. (3) The Montagnards should work harder in order to help others. (4) If they would work harder, they would have the means to defend themselves from invasions and the exploitation of others. There may be some validity to each of these points, but if we look closely at the lives of the Montagnards, we will come to understand them, and ourselves, better.

*1. The Montagnards would be happier and more comfortable if they would work harder.*

The Montagnards lived simply. They did not store much food at all. They had no bank accounts. But they were much more serene and at peace with themselves, nature, and other people, than almost anyone in the world. I am not suggesting that we all return to primitive lifestyles, but it is important that we see and appreciate the wisdom contained in a life-style like this, a wisdom that those of us immersed in modernization and economic growth have lost.

How much stuff do we need to be happy and comfortable? Happiness and comfort vary according to taste. Some people think they need three or four houses—one on the Riviera, one in New York, one in Tokyo, and perhaps one in Fiji. Others find that a two or three-room hut is quite enough. In fact, if you own a dozen luxurious houses, you may rarely have time to enjoy them. Even when you have the time, you may not know how to sit peacefully in one place. Always seeking distraction—going to restaurants, the theater, or dinner parties, or taking vacations that exhaust you even more, you can't stand being alone and facing yourself directly.

In former times, people spent hours drinking one cup of tea with dear friends. A cup of tea does not cost much, but today, we go to a cafe and take less than five minutes to drink our tea or coffee, and even during that short time, we are mostly thinking and talking about other things, and we never even notice our tea. We who own just one house barely have the time to live in it. We leave home early in the morning after a quick breakfast and go off to work, spending an hour in the car or the train and the rest of the day in the office. Then we return home exhausted, eat dinner, watch TV, and collapse so we can get up early for work. Is this "progress"?

The Montagnards were quite content to live in simple bamboo and palm-leaf huts and wash their clothes by hand. They refused to be slaves to economic pressures. Content with just a few possessions, they rarely needed to spend their time or money seeing doctors or psychotherapists for stress-related ailments.

*2. They would earn more money, which they could save for difficult periods.*

How much do we need to save? We do not save air, because we trust that it will be available to us when we need it. Why must we stockpile food, money, or other things for our own private use, while so many others are hungry?

People who accumulate a house, a car, a position, and so forth, identify themselves with what they own, and they think that if they lose their house, their car, or their position, they would not be themselves. To me, they are already lost. By accumulating and saving, they have constructed a false self, and in the process they have forgotten their truest and deepest self. Psychotherapists can try to help, but the cause of this illness is in their way of life. One way to help such a person would be to place him in an "underdeveloped" country where he could grow *his* own food and make his own clothes. Sharing the fate and simple life of peasants might help him heal quickly.

We have enough resources and know-how to assure every human being of adequate shelter and food every day. If we don't help others live, we ourselves are not going to be able to live either. We are all in the same boat-the planet Earth. Why not put our efforts into trying to help each other and save our boat instead of accumulating savings only for ourselves and our own children?

### *3. The Montagnards should work harder in order to help others.*

Of course, the Montagnards could have spent more time working in order to send aid to people who were starving in other parts of the world. If they did not do so, it was because they didn't know much about the existence of other nations. They certainly did help their own tribal members whenever they got sick or when a crop was destroyed by some natural disaster. But let us reflect for a moment on what the Montagnard people did *not* do.

They did not harm or exploit others. They grew their own food and exchanged some of their products with other people. They did not do violence to nature. They cut only enough wood to build their houses. They cleared only enough land to plant their crops. Because of their simple life-style, they did not overconsume natural resources. They did not pollute the air, water, or soil. They used very little fuel and no

electricity. They did not own private cars, dishwashers, or electric razors. The way they lived enabled natural resources to continually renew themselves. A lifestyle like theirs demonstrates that a future for humankind is possible, and this is the most helpful thing anyone can do to help others.

*4. If they would work harder, they would have the means to defend themselves from invasion and the exploitation of others.*

It is true that the Montagnards were exploited by others and were often victims of social injustice. They lived in remote mountain areas. If others settled nearby, they risked losing their land due to a lack of means with which to defend themselves.

People said that if the rest of us in Vietnam worked as little as they did, our country would never be able to resist foreign intervention and exploitation. It seems clear that the Montagnards and others like them had to do something more. But what? If the Montagnards would have moved down to the more populated areas, they would have seen men and women working extremely hard and getting poorer. They would have seen how expensive food, lodging, electricity, water, clothing, and transportation were. Their civilized countrymen were working all day long and could barely pay for the most basic items they consumed. The Montagnards in the forest did not need to spend any money. If they would have lived and worked in the cities, how would that have helped Vietnam resist foreign intervention? All they would have learned is that in the so-called developed nations, resources are used to make bombs and other elaborate weapons, while many citizens live in misery. The Montagnards might well need nuclear weapons to resist foreign intervention if they were to catch up with their more "developed" brothers and sisters. Will social injustice ever be abolished before all people wake up and realize that unless we let others live, we ourselves will not be able to live?

Economic growth may be necessary for the welfare of people, but the present rate of economic growth is destroying humanity and nature. Injustice is rampant. We humans are part of nature, and doing harm to nature only harms us. It is not just the poor and oppressed who are victims of environmental damage. The affluent are just as much

victims of pollution and the exploitation of resources. We must look at the whole picture and ask, "Does our way of life harm nature? Does our way of life harm our fellow humans? Do we live at the expense of others, at the expense of the present, and at the expense of the future?" If we answer truthfully, we will know how to orient our lives and our actions. We have much to learn from the Montagnards and others like them. We must learn to live in a way that makes a future possible.

## -Chapter Twelve - The Human Family

Although Human beings are a part of nature, we single ourselves out and classify other animals and living beings as "nature," while acting as if we were somehow separate from it. Then we ask, "How should we deal with nature?" We should deal with nature the way we should deal with ourselves! Nonviolently. We should not harm ourselves, and we should not harm nature. To harm nature is to harm ourselves, and vice versa. If we knew how to deal with ourselves and our fellow human beings, we would know how to deal with nature. Human beings and nature are inseparable. By not caring properly for either, we harm both.

We can only be happy when we accept ourselves as we are. We must first be aware of all the elements within us, and then we must bring them into harmony. Our physical and mental well-being are the result of understanding what is going on in ourselves. This understanding helps us respect nature in ourselves and also helps us bring about healing. If we harm another human being, we harm ourselves.

To accumulate wealth and own excessive portions of the world's natural resources is to deprive our fellow humans of the chance to live. To participate in oppressive and unjust social systems is to widen the gap between rich and poor and thereby aggravate the situation of social injustice. Yet we tolerate excess, injustice, and war, while remaining unaware that the human race as a family is suffering. While some members of the human family are suffering and starving, for us to enjoy false security and wealth is a sign of insanity.

The fate of each individual is inextricably linked to the fate of the whole human race. We must let others live if we ourselves want to live. The only alternative to coexistence is co-nonexistence. A civilization in which we kill and exploit others for our own aggrandizement is sick. For us to have a healthy civilization, everyone



must be born with an equal right to education, work, food, shelter, world citizenship, and the ability to circulate freely and settle on any part of the Earth. Political and economic systems that deny one person these rights harm the whole human family. We must begin by becoming aware of what is happening to every member of the human family if we want to repair the damage already done.

To bring about peace, we must work for harmonious coexistence. If we continue to shut ourselves off from the rest of the world, imprisoning ourselves in our narrow concerns and immediate problems, we are not likely to make peace or to survive. It is difficult for one individual to preserve harmony among the elements within himself, and it is even more difficult to preserve harmony among the members of the human family. We have to understand the human race to bring it into harmony. Cruelty and disruption destroy the harmony of the family. We need legislation that keeps us from doing violence to ourselves or nature, and prevents us from being disruptive and cruel.

We have created a system that we cannot control. This system imposes itself on us, and we have become its slaves. Most of us, in order to have a house, a car, a refrigerator, a Tv, and so on, must sacrifice our time and our lives in exchange. We are constantly under the pressure of time. In former times, we could afford three hours for one cup of tea, enjoying the company of our friends in a serene and spiritual atmosphere. We could organize a party to celebrate the blossoming of one orchid in our garden. But to day we can no longer afford these things. We say that time is money. We have created a society in which the rich become richer and the poor become poorer, and in which we are so caught up in our own immediate problems that we cannot afford to be aware of what is going on with the rest of the human family. We see images on Tv, but we do not really understand our Third World brothers and sisters.

The individual and all of humanity are both part of nature and should be able to live in harmony with nature. Nature can be cruel and disruptive and therefore, at times, needs to be controlled. To control is not to dominate or oppress but to harmonize and equilibrate. We must be deep friends with nature in order to control certain aspects of it.

This requires a full understanding of nature. Typhoons, tornadoes, droughts, floods, volcanic eruptions, and proliferations of harmful insects all constitute danger and destruction to life. Although parts of nature, these things disrupt the harmony of nature. We should be able to prevent to a large degree the destruction that natural disasters cause, but we must do it in a way that preserves life and encourages harmony.

The excessive use of pesticides that kill all kinds of insects and upset the ecological balance is an example of our lack of wisdom in trying to control nature. Economic growth that devastates nature by polluting and exhausting nonrenewable resources, rendering the Earth impossible for beings to live on, is another. Such economic growth may appear to benefit some humans, but in reality it disrupts and destroys the whole of nature to which we all belong.

The harmony and equilibrium in the individual, society, and nature are being destroyed. Individuals are sick, society is sick, and nature is sick. We must reestablish harmony and equilibrium, but how? Where can we begin the work of healing? Would we begin with the individual, society, or the environment? We must work in all three domains. People of different disciplines tend to stress their particular areas. For example, politicians consider an effective rearrangement of society necessary for the salvation of humans and nature, and therefore urge that everyone engage in the struggle to change political systems.

We Buddhist monks are like psychotherapists in that we tend to look at the problem from the viewpoint of mental health. Meditation aims at creating harmony and equilibrium in the life of the individual. Buddhist meditation uses the breath as a tool to calm and harmonize the whole human being. As in any therapeutic practice, the patient is placed in an environment that favors the restoration of harmony. Usually psychotherapists spend their time observing and then advising their patients. I know of some, however, who, like monks, observe themselves first, recognizing the need to free their own selves from the fears, anxieties, and despair that exist in each of us. Many therapists seem to think that they themselves have no mental problems, but the monk recognizes in himself the susceptibility to fears and anxieties, and to the mental illness that is caused by the inhuman social and economic systems that prevail in today's world.

Buddhists believe that the reality of the individual, society, and nature's integral being will reveal itself to us as we recover, gradually ceasing to be possessed by anxiety, fear, and the dispersion of mind. Among the three-individual, society, and nature-it is the individual who begins to effect change. But in order to effect change, he or she must have personally recovered, must be whole. Since this requires an environment favorable to healing, he or she must seek the kind of life-style that is free from destructiveness. Efforts to change the environment and to change the individual are both necessary, but it is difficult to change the environment if individuals are not in a state of equilibrium. From the mental health point of view, efforts for us to recover our humanness should be given priority.

Restoring mental health does not mean simply helping individuals adjust to the modern world of rapid economic growth. The world is sick, and adapting to an unwell environment will not bring real health. Many people who seek the help of a psychotherapist are really victims of modern life, which separates human beings from the rest of nature. One way to help such a person may be to move him or her to a rural area where he can cultivate the land, grow his own food, wash his clothes in a clear river, and live simply, sharing the same life as millions of peasants around the world. For psychotherapy to be effective, we need environmental change, and psychotherapists must participate in efforts to change the environment. But that is only half their task. The other half is to help individuals be themselves, not by helping them adapt to an ill environment, but by providing them with the strength to change it. To tranquilize them is not the way. The explosion of bombs, the burning of napalm, the violent deaths of relatives and neighbors, the pressures of time, noise, and pollution, the lonely crowds have all been created by the disruptive course of our economic growth. They are all sources of mental illness, and they must end. Anything we can do to bring them to an end is preventive medicine. Political activities are not the only means to this end.

While helping their particular patients, psychotherapists must, at the same time, recognize their responsibility to the whole human family. Their work must also prevent others from becoming ill. They are challenged to safeguard their own humanness. Like others,

psychotherapists and monks need to observe first themselves and their own ways of life. If they do, I believe they will seek ways to disengage themselves from the present economic systems in order to help reestablish harmony and balance in life. Monks and psychotherapists are human beings. We cannot escape mental illness if we do not apply our disciplines to ourselves. Caught in forgetfulness and acquiescence to the status quo, we will gradually become victims of fear, anxiety, and egotism of all kinds. But if psychotherapists and monks, through mutual sharing, help each other apply our disciplines to our own lives, we will rediscover the harmony in ourselves and thereby help the whole human family.

A tree reveals itself to an artist when he or she can establish a genuine relationship with it. If a human is not a real human being, he may look at his fellow humans and not see them; he may look at a tree and not see it. Many of us cannot see things because we are not wholly ourselves. "When we are wholly ourselves, we can see how one person by living fully demonstrates to all of us that life is possible, that a future is possible. But the question, "Is a future possible?" is meaningless without seeing the millions of our fellow humans who suffer, live, and die around us. Only when we really see them will we be able to see ourselves and see nature.

## -Chapter Thirteen - The Sun My Heart

When I first left Vietnam, I had a dream in which I was a young boy, smiling and at ease, in my own land, surrounded by my own people, in a time of peace. There was a beautiful hillside, lush with trees and flowers, and on it was a little house. But each time I approached the hillside, obstacles prevented me from climbing it, and then I woke up.

The dream recurred many times. I continued to do my work and to practice mindfulness, trying to be in touch with the beautiful trees, people, flowers, and sunshine that surrounded me in Europe and North America. I looked deeply at these things, and I played under the trees with the children exactly as I had in Vietnam. After a year, the dream stopped. Seeds of acceptance and joy had been planted in me, and I began to look at Europe, America, and other countries in Asia as also my home. I realized that my home is the Earth. Whenever I felt homesick for Vietnam, I went outside into a backyard or a park, and found a place to practice breathing, walking, and smiling among the trees.

But some cities had very few trees, even then. I can imagine someday soon a city with no trees in it at all. Imagine a city that has only one tree left. People there are mentally disturbed, because they are so alienated from nature. Then one doctor in the city sees why people are getting sick, and he offers each person who comes to him this prescription: "You are sick because you are cut off from Mother Nature. Every morning, take a bus, go to the tree in the center of the city, and hug it for fifteen minutes. Look at the beautiful green tree and smell its fragrant bark."

After three months of practicing this, the patient will feel much better. But because many people suffer from the same malady and the doctor always gives the same prescription, after a short time, the line

of people waiting their turn to embrace the tree gets to be very long, more than a mile, and people begin to get impatient. Fifteen minutes is now too long for each person to hug the tree, so the city council legislates a five-minute maximum. Then they have to shorten it to one minute, and then only a few seconds. Finally, there is no remedy at all for the sickness.

If we are not mindful, we might be in that situation soon. We have to remember that our body is not limited to what lies within the boundary of our skin. Our body is much more immense. We know that if our heart stops beating, the flow of our life will stop, but we do not take the time to notice the many things outside of our bodies that are equally essential for our survival. If the ozone layer around our Earth were to disappear for even an instant, we would die. If the sun were to stop shining, the flow of our life would stop. The sun is our second heart, our heart outside of our body. It gives all life on Earth the warmth necessary for existence. Plants live thanks to the sun. Their leaves absorb the sun's energy, along with carbon dioxide from the air, to produce food for the tree, the flower, the plankton. And thanks to plants, we and other animals can live. All of us-people, animals, plants, and minerals-"consume" the sun, directly and indirectly. We cannot begin to describe all the effects of the sun, that great heart outside of our body.

When we look at green vegetables, we should know that it is the sun that is green and not just the vegetables. The green color in the leaves of the vegetables is due to the presence of the sun. Without the sun, no living being could survive. Without sun, water, air, and soil, there would be no vegetables. The vegetables are the coming-together of many conditions near and far.

There is no phenomenon in the universe that does not intimately concern us, from a pebble resting at the bottom of the ocean, to the movement of a galaxy millions of light years away. Walt Whitman said, "I believe a blade of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars..." These words are not philosophy. They come from the depths of his soul. He also said, "I am large, I contain multitudes."

This might be called a meditation on "interbeing endlessly interwoven." All phenomena are interdependent. When we think of a

speck of dust, a flower, or a human being, our thinking cannot break loose from the idea of unity, of one, of calculation. We see a line drawn between one and many, one and not one. But if we truly realize the interdependent nature of the dust, the flower, and the human being, we see that unity cannot exist without diversity. Unity and diversity interpenetrate each other freely. Unity is diversity, and diversity is unity. This is the principle of interbeing.

If you are a mountain climber or someone who enjoys the countryside or the forest, you know that forests are our lungs outside of our bodies. Yet we have been acting in a way that has allowed millions of square miles of land to be deforested, and we have also destroyed the air, the rivers, and parts of the ozone layer. We are imprisoned in our small selves, thinking only of some comfortable conditions for this small self, while we destroy our large self. If we want to change the situation, we must begin by being our true selves. To be our true selves means we have to *be* the forest, the river, and the ozone layer. If we visualize our selves as the forest, we will experience the hopes and fears of the trees. If we don't do this, the forests will die, and we will lose our chance for peace. When we understand that we inter-are with the trees, we will know that it is up to us to make an effort to keep the trees alive. In the last twenty years, our automobiles and factories have created acid rain that has destroyed so many trees. Because we inter-are with the trees, we know that if they do not live, we too will disappear very soon.

We humans think we are smart, but an orchid, for example, knows how to produce noble, symmetrical flowers, and a snail knows how to make a beautiful, well-proportioned shell. Compared with their knowledge, ours is not worth much at all. We should bow deeply before the orchid and the snail and join our palms reverently before the monarch butterfly and the magnolia tree. The feeling of respect for all species will help us recognize the noblest nature in ourselves.

An oak tree is an oak tree. That is all an oak tree needs to do. If an oak tree is less than an oak tree, we will all be in trouble. In our former lives, we were rocks, clouds, and trees. We have also been an oak tree. This is not just Buddhist; it is scientific. We humans are a young species. We were plants, we were trees, and now we have become

humans. We have to remember our past existences and be humble. We can learn a lot from an oak tree.

All life is impermanent. We are all children of the Earth, and, at some time, she will take us back to herself again. We are continually arising from Mother Earth, being nurtured by her, and then returning to her. Like us, plants are born, live for a period of time, and then return to the Earth. When they decompose, they fertilize our gardens. Living vegetables and decomposing vegetables are part of the same reality. Without one, the other cannot be. After six months, compost becomes fresh vegetables again. Plants and the Earth rely on each other. Whether the Earth is fresh, beautiful, and green, or arid and parched depends on the plants.

It also depends on us. Our way of walking on the Earth has a great influence on animals and plants. We have killed so many animals and plants and destroyed their environments. Many are now extinct. In turn, our environment is now harming us. We are like sleepwalkers, not knowing what we are doing or where we are heading. Whether we can wake up or not depends on whether we can walk mindfully on our Mother Earth. The future of all life, including our own, depends on our mindful steps.

Birds' songs express joy, beauty, and purity, and evoke in us vitality and love. So many beings in the universe love us unconditionally. The trees, the water, and the air don't ask anything of us; they just love us. Even though we need this kind of love, we continue to destroy them. By destroying the animals, the air, and the trees, we are destroying ourselves. We must learn to practice unconditional love for all beings so that the animals, the air, the trees, and the minerals can continue to be themselves.

Our ecology should be a deep ecology-not only deep, but universal. There is pollution in our consciousness. Television, films, and newspapers are forms of pollution for us and our children. They sow seeds of violence and anxiety in us and pollute our consciousness, just as we destroy our environment by farming with chemicals, clear-cutting the trees, and polluting the water. We need to protect the ecology of the Earth and the ecology of the mind, or this kind of violence and recklessness will spill over into even more areas of life.



Our Earth, our green beautiful Earth is in danger, and all of us know it. Yet we act as if our daily lives have nothing to do with the situation of the world. If the Earth were your body, you would be able to feel many areas where she is suffering. Many people are aware of the world's suffering, and their hearts are filled with compassion. They know what needs to be done, and they engage in political, social, and environmental work to try to change things. But after a period of intense involvement, they become discouraged, because they lack the strength needed to sustain a life of action. Real strength is not in power, money, or weapons, but in deep, inner peace.

If we change our daily lives-the way we think, speak, and act-we change the world. The best way to take care of the environment is to take care of the environmentalist. Many Buddhist teachings help us understand our inter connectedness with our Mother, the Earth. One of the deepest is the *Diamond Sutra*, which is written in the form of a dialogue between the Buddha and his senior disciple, Subhuti. It begins with this question by Subhuti: "If daughters and sons of good families wish to give rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind, what should they rely on and what should they do to master their thinking?" This is the same as asking, "If I want to use my whole being to protect life, what methods and principles should I use?"

The Buddha answers, "We have to do our best to help every living being cross the ocean of suffering. But after all beings have arrived at the shore of liberation, no being at all has been carried to the other shore. If you are still caught up in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a life span, you are not an authentic bodhisattva." Self, person, living being, and life span are four notions that prevent us from seeing reality.

Life is one. We do not need to slice it into pieces and call this or that piece a "self." What we call a self is made only of non-self elements. When we look at a flower, for example, we may think that it is different from "non-flower" things. But when we look more deeply, we see that everything in the cosmos is in that flower. Without all of the non-flower elements-sunshine, clouds, earth, minerals, heat, rivers, and consciousness-a flower cannot be. That is why the Buddha teaches that the self does not exist. We have to discard all distinctions between self

and non-self. How can anyone work to protect the environment without this insight?

The second notion that prevents us from seeing reality is the notion of a person, a human being. We usually discriminate between humans and non-humans, thinking that we are more important than other species. But since we humans are made of non-human elements, to protect our selves we have to protect all of the non-human elements. There is no other way. If you think, "God created man in His own image and He created other things for man to use," you are already making the discrimination that man is more important than other things. When we see that humans have no self, we see that to take care of the environment (the non-human elements) is to take care of humanity. The best way to take good care of men and women so that they can be truly healthy and happy is to take care of the environment.

I know ecologists who are not happy in their families. They work hard to improve the environment, partly to escape family life. If someone is not happy within himself, how can he help the environment? That is why the Buddha teaches that to protect the non-human elements is to protect humans, and to protect humans is to protect non-human elements.

The third notion we have to break through is the notion of a living being. We think that we living beings are different from inanimate objects, but according to the principle of interbeing, living beings are comprised of non-living being elements. When we look into ourselves, we see minerals and all other non-living-being elements. Why discriminate against what we call inanimate? To protect living beings, we must protect the stones, the soil, and the oceans. Before the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, there were many beautiful stone benches in the parks. As the Japanese were rebuilding their city, they discovered that these stones were dead, so they carried them away and buried them. Then they brought in live stones. Do not think these things are not alive. Atoms are always moving. Electrons move at nearly the speed of light. According to the teaching of Buddhism, these atoms and stones are consciousness itself. That is why discrimination by living beings against non-living beings should be discarded.

The last notion is that of a life span. We think that we have been alive since a certain point in time and that prior to that moment, our life did not exist. This distinction between life and non-life is not correct. Life is made of death, and death is made of life. We have to accept death; it makes life possible. The cells in our body are dying every day, but we never think to organize funerals for them. The death of one cell allows for the birth of another. Life and death are two aspects of the same reality. We must learn to die peacefully so that others may live. This deep meditation brings forth non-fear, non-anger, and non-despair, the strengths we need for our work. With non-fear, even when we see that a problem is huge, we will not burn out. We will know how to make small, steady steps. If those who work to protect the environment contemplate these four notions, they will know how to be and how to act.

In another Buddhist text, the *Avatamsaka* ("Adorning the Buddha with Flowers"? Sutra, the Buddha further elaborates his insights concerning our "interpenetration" with our environment. Please meditate with me on the "Ten Penetrations":

The first is, "All worlds penetrate a single pore. A single pore penetrates all worlds." Look deeply at a flower. It may be tiny, but the sun, the clouds, and everything else in the cosmos penetrates it. Nuclear physicists say very much the same thing: one electron is made by all electrons; one electron is in all electrons.

The second penetration is, "All living beings penetrate one body. One body penetrates all living beings." When you kill a living being, you kill yourself and everyone else as well.

The third is, "Infinite time penetrates one second. One second penetrates infinite time." A *ksana* is the shortest period of time, actually much shorter than a second.

The fourth penetration is, "All Buddhist teachings penetrate one teaching. One teaching penetrates all Buddhist teachings." As a young monk, I had the opportunity to learn that Buddhism is made of non-Buddhist elements. So, whenever I study Christianity or Judaism, I find the Buddhist elements in them, and vice versa. I always respect non-Buddhist teachings. All Buddhist teachings penetrate one

teaching, and one teaching penetrates all Buddhist teachings. We are free.

The fifth penetration is, "Innumerable spheres enter one sphere. One sphere enters innumerable spheres." A sphere is a geographical space. Innumerable spheres penetrate into one particular area, and one particular area enters into innumerable spheres. It means that when you destroy one area, you destroy every area. When you save one area, you save all areas. A student asked me, "Thay, there are so many urgent problems, what should I do?" I said, "Take one thing and do it very deeply and carefully, and you will be doing everything at the same time."

The sixth penetration is, "All sense organs penetrate one organ. One organ penetrates all sense organs"-eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. To take care of one means to take care of many. To take care of your eyes means to take care of the eyes of innumerable living beings.

The seventh penetration is, "All sense organs penetrate non-sense organs. Non-sense organs penetrate all sense organs." Not only do non-sense organs penetrate sense organs, they also penetrate non-sense organs. There is no discrimination. Sense organs are made of non-sense-organ elements. That is why they penetrate non-sense organs. This helps us remember the teaching of the *Diamond Sutra*.

The eighth penetration is, "One perception penetrates all perceptions. All perceptions penetrate one perception." If your perception is not accurate, it will influence all other perceptions in yourself and others. Suppose a bus driver has an incorrect perception. We know what may happen. One perception penetrates all perceptions.

The ninth penetration is, "Every sound penetrates one sound. One sound penetrates every sound." This is a very deep teaching. If we understand one sound or one word, we can understand all.

The tenth penetration is, "All times penetrate one time. One time penetrates all times-past, present, and future. In one second, you can find the past, present, and future." In the past, you can see the present and the future. In the present, you can find the past and future. In the future, you can find the past and present. They "inter-contain" each other. Space contains time, time contains space. In the teaching of interpenetration, one determines the other, the other determines this

one. When we realize our nature of interbeing, we will stop blaming and killing, because we know that we inter-are.

Interpenetration is an important teaching, but it still suggests that things outside of one another penetrate into each other. Interbeing is a step forward. We are already inside, so we don't have to enter. In contemporary nuclear physics, people talk about implicit order and explicit order. In the explicit order, things exist outside of each other-the table outside of the flower, the sunshine outside of the cypress tree. In the implicit order, we see that they are inside each other-the sunshine inside the cypress tree. Interbeing is the implicit order. To practice mindfulness and to look deeply into the nature of things is to discover the true nature of interbeing. There we find peace and develop the strength to be in touch with everything. With this understanding, we can easily sustain the work of loving and caring for the Earth and for each other for a long time.

## -Chapter Fourteen - From Weapons to Human Solidarity

All things are interconnected. The nuclear arms race is inextricably linked to other forms of violence and suffering that afflict life on Earth. Recognizing this, I propose reductions in military spending with corresponding allocations to be used for the alleviation of world hunger. As the strongest nation on Earth, the United States can take the first step with an independent initiative for stopping the arms race, and this action can be taken regardless of the actions that are taken or not taken by any other country. Let the money that is saved by reductions in defense spending be spent for jobs and industries that grow, process, and ship food to the starving children of the world.

I address this proposal to the people of the United States, and in particular to my colleagues in the religious and peace communities. Forty thousand children a day and ten million people a year die of starvation. This suffering cannot be alleviated by government action alone. As individuals, we must also assume responsibility and lend our efforts and our hearts to the work of ending human suffering and building human solidarity. For example, if people in Western countries reduced their consumption of meat and alcohol by just fifty percent, the resultant availability of grain would change the fate of millions of starving people in the developing countries.

During the war in Vietnam we proposed a cease-fire plan to the Americans. It was the voice of those who were under the bomb. The proposal was for the Americans to independently declare a cease-fire, and then invite the other side to respond, promising that if the other responded, the U.S. would set a timetable for total withdrawal from Vietnam. The same can be done regarding the manufacture of arms.

I hope the United States will independently declare a stop to the arms race, and invite Russia, China, and all other arms-producing countries to do the same. This could be done for six months, with or

without reciprocation. Then, if other countries do reciprocate, the U.S. could take another step toward complete and general disarmament. In this way, through varying stages, defense spending could be reduced while at the same time resources could be redirected to alleviate human suffering.

This proposal is offered for the endorsement of all religious denominations, international peace organizations, and other people and organizations that share in the common cause of disarmament and development. I strongly urge these friends to work to create jobs that nurture the peace and well-being of humanity in order to offer alternative employment to those engaged in the manufacture and sale of the weapons that, even at this moment, are destroying lives of people all over the world.

## -Chapter Fifteen - The Way Ahead for Buddhism in Vietnam

*Many of us are working to encourage religious freedom in Vietnam. This statement was drafted in 1992 as an effort in this direction. It has been sent to high monks and nuns in the Buddhist leadership, and to government authorities in Vietnam.*

### *1. Protecting our Nation's Nature-Heritage (Preserving our Mother's Body)*

As Vietnamese students of the Buddha, we make a vow to protect the wholeness of the territory of Vietnam, which means to protect the soil, the mountains, the forests, the rivers, the ocean, and the air. We vow to do everything that we can to protect the environment, to protect every species of animal and plant life in the country of Vietnam. We vow to stop the pollution and destruction of the nature heritage of Vietnam. As Vietnamese Buddhists we call on our compatriots, our government, and all those who are friends of Vietnam anywhere in the world to make a contribution to this task of protecting the Vietnamese environment. We expect that efforts to develop agriculture and industry, investments abroad, and the exploitation of resources will be founded on the principle of protecting our nature-heritage.

The protection of life is a practice observed by all Buddhists. Life here means not only the life of human beings, but also the life of all animal, plant, and mineral species. The Diamond Sutra teaches that the human race cannot exist if there is destruction of the animal, plant, and mineral species. Anyone living anywhere on this planet, if they are aware of the state of our planet Earth at this present time, will look at the world and act in accord with this principle.

### *2. Protecting the Cultural Heritage of Our People (As the Bird Has Its Nest, so a Person Has Ancestors)*



As Vietnamese students of the Buddha, we vow to bear in mind the happiness established for us by our ancestors. We are determined not to abandon the cultural roots and traditions of our ancestors and our people. All of our cultural heritage-whether architecture (our pagodas, village meeting houses, villages, tombs, non-Buddhist temples and shrines), literature, poetry, music, dance, customs, or dress-needs to be respected, preserved, and cared for so that all our people, now and in the future, may be in touch with our traditional culture. We call on our compatriots, our government, and all those who are friends of Vietnam anywhere in the world to contribute their energy to this work of protecting our culture. New ways of thought, new ways of life, and new forms of religious belief should be introduced in the spirit of respecting and protecting our cultural heritage.

People of our age suffer and feel alienated because they have cut off all contact with their cultural roots. As Vietnamese Buddhists we call for a return to the source in order to rediscover a feeling of confidence in the value of our traditional culture, to foster that value, and to enrich it. An individual is not a separate, independent entity, but a continuation of the ancestral line, tradition, and culture. This fact is a reflection of the awareness of the teachings of interdependent origination and selflessness in Buddhism.

Anyone whosoever living anywhere on this planet Earth, if they are aware of the state of separation and alienation of people of our time, will look at the world and act in accord with this principle.

### *3. Vietnamese Buddhists Have No Enemies (Only Love and Compassion Can Put an End to Hatred)*

Vietnamese students of the Buddha wish to live in peace in their own hearts and at peace with all other sectors of the Vietnamese people, without discriminating according to race, creed, and ideology, as long as they all share the willingness to protect the nature and the cultural heritage of our land. As Vietnamese Buddhists, we look on every Vietnamese person as a brother or a sister and do not consider anyone to be an enemy, even those who have contributed to the suppression of the Buddhists in the past. We make the vow to

contribute to the overcoming of all rivalries and resolving all misunderstandings between different sectors of our people. We appeal for understanding and forgiveness of mistakes which we have caused each other in the past in order to contribute together to building the present and the future. It is our earnest desire to have peace and joy in our hearts by living in harmony with the Confucian, Taoist, Christian, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and any other religious traditions of our people.

Recognizing that no one is our enemy is one of the basic teachings of Buddhism. This recognition is also enshrined in all the great spiritual, humanist, and religious traditions of the world.

#### *4. Buddhism as Engaged and Unified*

As Vietnamese students of the Buddha, we wish to have a unified congregation including all the Buddhists of Vietnam. The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (founded in 1964) and the Buddhist Church of Vietnam (founded in 1981) need to unite in order to combine all the good and beautiful things that are available in these two churches. A unified church of all Vietnamese Buddhists has to be independent, autonomous, and not subject to government interference in its internal affairs.

The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, which was founded in 1964, was one of the outstanding achievements of Vietnamese Buddhists after countless struggles which cost many tears and many lives. Such a church is truly a church of the people. Such a church has to be recognized by history, by the people, and by the government. The performance and the strong points of such a church must be welcomed wholeheartedly by a unified Buddhist congregation of all Buddhists in Vietnam.

#### *5. Vietnamese Buddhism Has No Political Objective*

The Unified Buddhist Church of all Vietnamese Buddhists is determined to stay in the field of religious practice. All the teaching and practice activities of Vietnamese Buddhists are to heal the deep wounds of individuals, families, and society; to transform the

suffering, hatred, and anger so that people will be able to accept, love, and embrace each other. We reject the path of seeking power, the manipulation of political power, or engagement in partisan politics.

#### *6. The Real Needs of Present-Day Buddhism in Vietnam*

As Vietnamese students of the Buddha, we expect the right to practice and teach in freedom as religion is practiced in the free countries of the world, which involves:

1. the freedom to publish and circulate Buddhist sutras, books, and journals,
2. the freedom to found institutes of all levels of Buddhist studies,
3. the freedom to found centers of study and practice for both laypeople and monks and nuns,
4. the freedom to organize ceremonies, teachings, and sessions of practice, and
5. the freedom to practice relief work in society as a way of realizing love and compassion.
6. Vietnamese Buddhists demand that all imprisoned monks be set free.
7. Vietnamese Buddhists demand the return of all establishments belonging to the Unified Buddhist Church that have been confiscated.
8. Monks and nuns have the right to go abroad in order to study, make contacts, practice, and teach.
9. All monks, nuns, and practitioners abroad have the right to come home to Vietnam to practice and to teach.
10. All the important figures of the Council of Elders and the Executive Council of the Unified Buddhist Church be allowed to return to their former positions of responsibility in the Unified Buddhist Church of all Vietnamese Buddhists.

## -Chapter Sixteen - The Ancient Tree

*Written as a memorial to Nhat Chi Mai, my student who immolated herself for peace on May 16, 1967*

In a deep forest in the highlands stood an ancient tree. No one knew how many thousands of years it had lived. Its trunk was so large that the arm spans of eighteen people could not embrace it; great roots pushed up through the ground and spread to a radius of fifty meters. The earth beneath the tree's shadow was unusually cool. Its bark was as hard as rock; if you pressed a fingernail against it, pain ran through your finger. Its branches held tens of thousands of nests, sheltering hundreds of thousands of birds, both large and small.

In the morning, when the sun rose, the first rays of light were like a conductor's baton, initiating a mighty symphony, the voices of thousands of birds, a symphony as majestic as the sun dawning behind the summit of the mountain. All the creatures of the mountain and forest arose, either on two feet or four, slowly, in wonder.

In the great tree there was one hole large as a grapefruit from Bien Hoa and twelve meters from the ground. In the hole lay a small brown egg. No one could say if a bird had brought the beautiful egg to the hole. Some thought the egg had not come from a living bird but had been forged by the sacred air of the forest and the life energy of the great tree.

Thirty years passed; the egg remained intact. Some nights, birds would be startled from their sleep by a cloud hovering over the hole and a brilliant light shining there, illuminating an entire corner of the forest. Finally, one night, under a full moon, the egg opened and a strange bird was born. The bird was very little; it gave a small chirp in the cold night. The moon was very bright; the stars were very bright.

The tiny bird cried throughout the night. Its cry was neither tragic nor bold; it was a cry of surprise and strangeness. It cried until the sun appeared. The first rays of light opened the symphony; thousands of birds' voices broke forth. From that moment, the little bird cried no more.

It grew quickly. The nuts and grains mother birds brought to the hole were always plenty. Soon the hole in the tree became too small, and the bird had to find another place, much larger, in which to live. It now knew how to fly; it looked for its own food and gathered sticks of straw to cover the floor of its new nest. Strangely, although the egg had been brown, the bird was as white as snow. When it flew, its wingspan was vast, and it moved slowly and very quietly. Often it flew to faraway places where white waterfalls tumbled day and night like the majestic breath of earth and sky.

Sometimes the bird did not return for several days. When it returned, it lay in its nest all day and night, thoughtfully and quietly. Its two eyes were very bright; they never lost the look of surprise they had from the beginning.

Now, in the ancient forest of Dai Lao, a hermit's small hut stood on the slope of a hill. There a monk had lived for almost fifty years. The bird often flew across Dai Lao forest; from time to time it saw the monk walking slowly down the path to the spring, holding a water jug in his hand. One day, smoke gently lingered over the roof of the humble hut and an atmosphere of warmth surrounded the hill. The bird saw two monks together on the path leading from the spring to the hut, speaking as they walked. That night the bird remained in Dai Lao forest. Concealed in the branches of a tree, the bird watched the light of the fire flickering inside the hut, where the two monks conversed through the night.

The bird flew high, high over the ancient forest. For several days it flew back and forth in the sky without landing. Below stood the great tree in the ancient forest; below, the creatures of the mountain and forest were concealed by grass, bushes, and trees. Since the day the bird listened to the exchange between the two monks, its bewilderment

grew. Where have I come from and where will I go? How many thousands of years will the great tree stand?

The bird had heard the two monks speak about Time.

What is Time? Why has Time brought us here, and why will it take us away? The nut that a bird eats has its own delicious nature. How can I find out the nature of Time? The bird wanted to pick up a small piece of Time and lie quietly with it in its nest for several days to examine its nature. Even if it took months or years to examine, the bird was willing.

The bird flew high, high over the ancient forest. It was like a round balloon drifting in nothingness. The bird felt its nature was as empty as a balloon's. The emptiness of its nature was the ground of its existence, but it was also the cause of the bird's suffering. "Time, if I could find you, certainly I could find myself," thought the bird.

After several days and nights, the bird came to rest quietly in its nest. It had brought back a tiny piece of earth from the Dai Lao forest. Deep in thought, it picked up the piece of earth to examine it. The monk from the Dai Lao forest had said to his friend, "Time is stilled in Eternity. There Love and Beloved are One. Each blade of grass, each piece of earth, each leaf, is one with that love."

The bird was still unable to find Time. The small token of earth from the Dai Lao forest revealed nothing. Perhaps the monk had lied to his friend. Time lies in Love, but where is Love? The bird remembered the splashing water falls endlessly tumbling in the Northwest Forest. It remembered the days it listened to the sound of the waterfalls from morning to evening. The bird had imagined itself tumbling like a waterfall. It played with the light shining on the water, with the waterfall it caressed the pebbles and rocks in the streams. In those moments, the bird felt that it was a waterfall itself, that the sound of endless falling water came from it.

One noon, flying across the Dai Lao Forest, the bird did not see the hut. The whole forest had burned; only a pile of ashes remained where the monk's hut had been. In a panic, the bird flew around searching. The monk was no longer in the forest. "Where had he gone? Corpses of animals. Corpses of birds. Had the fire consumed the monk? The bird was bewildered. Time, what are you? Why do

you bring us here and why will you take us away? The monk said, "Time is stilled in Eternity." If that is so, perhaps Love has returned the monk to Itself.

Suddenly the bird felt anxious. It flew swiftly back to the ancient forest. Anguished cries of many birds. Explosions. The ancient forest, far away, was burning. Faster, faster still, the bird flew. The fire licked the sky. The fire spread near the great tree. Hundreds of thousands of birds shrieked in fright.

The fire approached the great tree. The bird fanned the fire with its wings, hoping to put it out, but the fire burned more fiercely. The bird sped to the spring, dipped its wings in the water, and rushed back to shake the water over the forest. The drops sizzled. It was not enough, not enough. The bird's entire body soaked in water was not enough to extinguish the fire.

Cries of hundreds of thousands of birds. Screams of young birds without feathers to fly. The fire began to burn the great tree. Why was there no rain? Why didn't the downpour that fell endlessly in the Northwest Forest flow like a waterfall? The bird let forth a piercing cry. The cry was tragic and passionate and was suddenly transformed into the rushing sound of a waterfall. All at once, the bird felt the fullness of its existence. Loneliness and emptiness vanished as an illusion. The image of the monk. The image of the sun behind the mountain peak. The image of rushing water falling endlessly through a thousand lifetimes. The cry of the bird was now the full sound of the waterfall. Without anxiety, the bird plunged into the forest fire like a majestic waterfall.

The next morning was calm. The marvelous rays of the sun shone, but there was no symphony, no voices of tens of thousands of birds. Portions of the forest were completely burned. The great tree still stood, but more than half of its branches and leaves were charred. Corpses of large birds, corpses of small birds. The morning forest was silent.

The birds still alive called one another, their voices bewildered. They did not know by what grace the clear sky had suddenly poured forth rain, extinguishing the forest fire the afternoon before. They remembered seeing the bird shaking water from its two wings. They

knew it was the white bird from the great tree. They flew everywhere throughout the forest seeking the corpse of the white bird, but they did not find it.

Perhaps the bird had flown away to live in a different forest. Perhaps the bird had been killed by the fire. The great tree, its body covered with wounds, did not say a word. The birds cocked their heads to the sky and began to build new nests in the wounded body of the great tree. Does the great tree miss the child to which sacred mountain air and the life energy of four thousand years had given birth? Bird, where have you gone? Listen to the monk: I believe Time has returned the bird to the Love that is the source of all things.



## Sources

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