

“The monk who taught
the world mindfulness.”

—*TIME*



Being Peace



Thich Nhat Hanh

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Foreword by Jane Goodall

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Foreword

IT SADDENS ME THAT I'VE never met Thich Nhat Hanh in person, because when I read *Being Peace* it resonated in some place deep within me. I was just a child during World War II, but I was well aware of the horrors of that terrible time, the killing and destruction. We were not in one of the big cities where German bombs and doodle bugs brought terror night after night, but still we had to take shelter when the planes flew overhead, and we felt the house shake when the occasional bombs were dropped nearby. People we knew were killed. And when I learned about the Holocaust and saw the first photos of the living skeletons that were finally rescued from among the piles of the dead, I was so shocked. How could people be treated in this way?

Whenever I was troubled, I would climb into the branches of my favorite tree in the garden to try to come to terms with what was going on. I think it was there that I learned the importance of inner peace. "Life is filled with suffering, but it is also filled with many wonders," writes Thich Nhat Hanh. And, without knowing of this wonderful monk or his teachings, the truth of those words has been part of my being ever since my childhood. For me, the wonders were the breeze swaying the leaves, the song of a bird, the love in the eyes of my mother, and the deep emotional bond with my very special dog. And, although I did not know it at the time, it was then that I learned how living in the moment was one way to cope with some

of the pain and suffering. Another way, I discovered later, was to do something, anything, to try to help.

Thich Nhat Hanh was much closer to the destructive forces that tore apart Vietnam during what the Vietnamese called “the American War.” At that time, I was far removed from the terrible things going on in his world. I was out in the rainforests of Gombe National Park in Tanzania, learning from the chimpanzees and the forest they lived in. Learning about the interconnectedness of all life. And feeling a close spiritual connection with the natural world and a sense of oneness with the beauty around me. When I learned about what was happening in Vietnam—the napalm bombs that inflicted so much pain on the people, and the defoliation of the forests with huge amounts of Agent Orange—I was horrified. The suffering of the people. The suffering of nature.

Unlike so many Buddhist monks, Thich Nhat Hanh chose to speak out against the injustice that was being perpetrated on his country and traveled to America (and subsequently to other countries) to plead with the people to stop the war. And for this he was forced into exile, refused permission to return to his own country by the governments of both North and South Vietnam. So began his mission to bring the teachings of Buddhism to the world. Thus a personal tragedy for him was a blessing for millions around the globe.

The youth movement, Roots & Shoots, that I founded in 1991 has as its core teaching the idea that every individual makes a difference, *every day*, and you can choose what

difference you make. That everything in this world is interconnected and the actions of one individual can influence events on the other side of the globe. That to attain our true human potential, head and heart must work in harmony. That to change people's thinking it is important to reach into their hearts, for they must change from within. And that if you care deeply about some injustice, some cruelty being inflicted on people or animals, then you should try to do something about it—roll up your sleeves and take action.

Roots & Shoots members understand the need to live in peace and harmony with each other and with the natural world. If you wish for a peaceful world, how can that be accomplished if those fighting for peace do so from anger and hate? No, as Thich Nhat Hanh teaches, we must *be* the peace we wish for in the world. For many this seems impossible—if your parents have been killed, you have been raped, your home destroyed, how can you be the peace you wish to see in the world? But it will surely help if you are surrounded by those with hearts filled with love and hope for peace. Perhaps it will help you take the first steps away from hate. And towards forgiveness.

These are the things I so wish I could discuss with Thich Nhat Hanh, those things that keep me awake long into the night. For I know that his wisdom, his aura of peace, would help me in my own journey through life and this, in turn, would help me to better help others who are suffering.

I recently had a letter from a man, who must be anonymous, who is being punished for a crime he did not

commit. He was sentenced to eight years in jail. For no more than an hour or so a day he was allowed to leave his cell and go outside to a small space imprisoned by high walls. He wrote: "I'm sitting under a beautiful blue sky, feathered with eiderdown clouds, next to a lush fig tree. Swifts, kestrels, sparrows, starlings, and the occasional eagle grace this sky. It may just be fifteen by fifteen meters square, but I find my freedom here. I rarely think of myself as a prisoner." Had he, perhaps, read those famous words of Thich Nhat Hanh: "Life is filled with suffering, but it is also filled with many wonders, like the blue sky, the sunshine, and the eyes of a baby. To suffer is not enough. We must also be in touch with the wonders of life. They are within us and all around us, everywhere, any time."

A Holocaust survivor told me that he managed to endure two years of solitary confinement because, high up in the wall of his bare cell, was a tiny window through which he could see just one branch of a tree. And watching the buds burst into leaf, and the occasional bird perching there, and the leaves turning golden in autumn, helped him endure the long dark winters, for he kept the wonders of life—the leaves, the birds—within him, stored in his memory as he waited for them to burst into bud again the next spring.

As I write these words, we are living in dark times. Fortunately, there are many brave people fighting for peace and justice and an end to discrimination. Fighting the arrogance and lust for power and wealth that is destroying the biodiversity and natural resources of Planet Earth,

dispossessing millions of people from their homelands and plunging millions into poverty. *Being Peace* was published in 1987, over thirty years ago, but the words still resonate and can bring comfort to those who are praying and working for a better world.

To change the hearts of others, says Thich Nhat Hanh, first you must change your own. That teaching has been the gift he has taken with him everywhere he's gone. And that gift lives on in his teachings, captured in this book. "To suffer is not enough," he says. "We must also be in touch with the wonders of life." A soldier tenderly carrying a wounded child from the ruins of a house bombed in Syria; a bird singing on the branch of a tree in a refugee camp; the sweet lullaby a mother sings to her infant while the shots of gang warfare are heard outside the window; the memories of her lover's embrace lighting the eyes of a dying woman, helping her to let go.

To all who read this book, may its message empower your own journey, give you the assurance that your life matters, and may you become ever more "in touch with the wonders of life."

JANE GOODALL, PHD, DBE,
FOUNDER OF THE JANE GOODALL INSTITUTE
& UN MESSENGER OF PEACE

2020



Suffering Is Not Enough

LIFE IS FILLED WITH SUFFERING, but it is also filled with many wonders, like the blue sky, the sunshine, and the eyes of a baby. To suffer is not enough. We must also be in touch with the wonders of life. They are within us and all around us, everywhere, any time.

If we are not happy, if we are not peaceful, we can't share peace and happiness with others, even those we love, those who live under the same roof. If we are peaceful, if we are happy, we can smile and blossom like a flower, and everyone in our family, our entire society, will benefit from our peace. Do we need to make a special effort to enjoy the beauty of the blue sky? Do we have to practice to be able to enjoy it? No, we just enjoy it. Each second, each minute of our lives can be like this. Wherever we are, any time, we have the capacity to enjoy the sunshine, the presence of each other, even the sensation of our breathing. We don't need to go to China to enjoy the blue sky. We don't have to travel into the future to enjoy our breathing. We can be in touch with these things right now. It would be a pity if we were only aware of suffering.

We are so busy we hardly have time to look at the people we love, even in our own household, and to look at ourselves. Society is organized in a way that even when we have some leisure time, we don't know how to use it to

get back in touch with ourselves. We have millions of ways to lose this precious time—we turn on the TV. We are not used to being with ourselves, and we act as if we don't like ourselves and are trying to escape from ourselves.

Meditation is to be aware of what is going on—in our bodies, in our feelings, in our minds, and in the world. Each day forty thousand children die of hunger. The superpowers now have more than fifty thousand nuclear warheads, enough to destroy our planet many times. Yet the sunrise is beautiful, and the rose that bloomed this morning along the wall is a miracle. Life is both dreadful and wonderful. To practice meditation is to be in touch with both aspects. Please do not think we must be solemn in order to meditate. In fact, to meditate well, we have to smile a lot.

Recently I was sitting with a group of children, and a boy named Tim was smiling beautifully. I said, "Tim, you have a very beautiful smile," and he said, "Thank you." I told him, "You don't have to thank me, I have to thank you. Because of your smile, you make life more beautiful. Instead of saying, 'Thank you,' you could say, 'You're welcome.'"

If a child smiles, if an adult smiles, that is very important. If in our daily life we can smile, if we can be peaceful and happy, not only we, but everyone, will profit from it. This is the most basic kind of peace work. When I see Tim smiling, I am so happy. If he is aware that he is making other people happy, he can say, "You're welcome."



From time to time, to remind ourselves to relax, to be peaceful, we may wish to set aside some time for a retreat, a day of mindfulness, when we can walk slowly, smile, drink tea with a friend, enjoy being together as if we are the happiest people on Earth. This is not a retreat, it is a treat. During walking meditation, during kitchen and garden work, during sitting meditation, all day long, we can practice smiling. At first you may find it difficult to smile, and we have to think about why. Smiling means that we are ourselves, that we have sovereignty over ourselves, that we are not drowned in forgetfulness. This kind of smile can be seen on the faces of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

I would like to offer a short poem you can recite from time to time, while breathing and smiling:

Breathing in, I calm my body.
 Breathing out, I smile.
 Dwelling in the present moment
 I know this is a wonderful moment.

“Breathing in, I calm my body.” Reciting this line is like drinking a glass of ice water—you feel the cold, the freshness, permeate your body. When I breathe in and recite this line, I actually feel the breathing calming my body, calming my mind.

“Breathing out, I smile.” You know the effect of a smile. A smile can relax hundreds of muscles in your face, and relax your nervous system. A smile makes you master of yourself. That is why the Buddhas and bodhisattvas are

always smiling. When you smile, you realize the wonder of the smile.

“Dwelling in the present moment.” While I sit here, I don’t think of somewhere else, of the future or the past. I sit here, and I know where I am. This is very important. We tend to be alive in the future, not now. We say, “Wait until I finish school and get my PhD degree, and then I will be *really* alive.” When we have it, and it wasn’t easy to get, we say to ourselves, “I have to wait until I have a job in order to be really alive.” And then after the job, a car. After the car, a house. We are not capable of being alive in the present moment. We tend to postpone being alive to the future, the distant future, we don’t know when. Now is not the moment to be alive. We may never be alive at all in our entire life. Therefore, the technique, if we have to speak of a technique, is to be in the present moment, to be aware that we are here and now, and the only moment to be alive is the present moment.

“I know this is a wonderful moment.” This is the only moment that is real. To be here and now, and enjoy the present moment is our most important task. “Calming, Smiling. Present moment, Wonderful moment.” I hope you will try it.



Even though life is hard, even though it is sometimes difficult to smile, we have to try. Just as when we wish each other “Good morning,” it must be a real “Good morning.”

Recently, one friend asked me, "How can I force myself to smile when I am filled with sorrow? It isn't natural." I told her she must be able to smile to her sorrow, because we are more than our sorrow. A human being is like a television set with millions of channels. If we turn the Buddha on, we are the Buddha. If we turn sorrow on, we are sorrow. If we turn a smile on, we really are the smile. We can't let just one channel dominate us. We have the seeds of everything in us, and we have to take the situation in hand to recover our own sovereignty.

When we sit down peacefully, breathing and smiling, with awareness, we are our true selves, we have sovereignty over ourselves. When we open ourselves up to a TV program, we let ourselves be invaded by the program. Sometimes it is a good program, but often it is just noisy. Because we want to have something other than ourselves enter us, we sit there and let a noisy television program invade us, assail us, destroy us. Even if our nervous system suffers, we don't have the courage to stand up and turn it off, because if we do that, we will have to return to our self.

Meditation is the opposite. It helps us return to our true self. Practicing meditation in this kind of society is very difficult. Everything seems to work in concert to try to take us away from our true self. We have thousands of things, like videotapes and music, which help us be away from ourselves. Practicing meditation is to be aware, to smile, to breathe. These are on the opposite side. We go back to ourselves in order to see what is going on, because

to meditate means to be aware of what is going on. What is going on is very important.



Suppose you are expecting a child. You need to breathe and smile for the baby. Please don't wait until your baby is born before beginning to take care of him or her. You can take care of your baby right now. If you can't smile, that's very serious. You might think, "I'm too sad. Smiling just isn't the correct thing to do." Maybe crying or shouting would be correct, but your baby will get it—anything you are, anything you do, is for your baby.

Even if you do not have a baby in your womb, the seed is already there. Even if you are not married, even if you are a man, you should be aware that a baby is already there, the seeds of future generations are already there. Please don't wait until the doctors tell you that you are going to have a baby to begin to take care of it. It is already there. Whatever you are, whatever you do, your baby will receive it. Anything you eat, any worries that are on your mind will be for him or her. Can you tell me that you cannot smile? Think of the baby, and smile for him, for her, for the future generations. Please don't tell me that a smile and your sorrow just don't go together. It's your sorrow, but what about your baby? It's not his sorrow, it's not her sorrow.

Children understand very well that in each woman, in each man, in each child, there is a capacity of waking

up, of understanding, and of loving. Many children have told me that they cannot show me anyone who does not have this capacity. Some people allow it to develop, and some do not, but everyone has it. This capacity of waking up, of being aware of what is going on in your feelings, in your body, in your perceptions, in the world, is called Buddha nature, the capacity of understanding and loving. Since the baby of that Buddha is in us, we should give him or her a chance. Smiling is very important. If we are not able to smile, then the world will not have peace. It is not by going out for a demonstration against nuclear missiles that we can bring about peace. It is with our capacity of smiling, breathing, and being peace that we can make peace.



The Three Gems

MANY OF US WORRY about the situation of the world. We don't know when the bombs will explode. We feel that we are on the edge of time. As individuals, we feel helpless, despairing. The situation is so dangerous, injustice is so widespread, the danger is so close. In this kind of situation, if we panic, things will only become worse. We need to remain calm, to see clearly. Meditation is to be aware, and to try to help.

I like to use the example of a small boat crossing the Gulf of Siam. In Vietnam, there are many people, called boat people, who leave the country in small boats. Often the boats are caught in rough seas or storms, the people may panic, and boats can sink. But if even one person aboard can remain calm, lucid, knowing what to do and what not to do, he or she can help the boat survive. His or her expression—face, voice—communicates clarity and calmness, and people have trust in that person. They will listen to what he or she says. One such person can save the lives of many.

Our world is something like a small boat. Compared with the cosmos, our planet is a very small boat. We are about to panic because our situation is no better than the situation of the small boat in the sea. You know that we have more than fifty thousand nuclear weapons.

Humankind has become a very dangerous species. We need people who can sit still and be able to smile, who can walk peacefully. We need people like that in order to save us. Mahayana Buddhism says that you are that person, that every one of us is that person.



I once had a student named Thich Thanh Van, who'd entered the monastery at the age of six. At the age of seventeen, he began to study with me. Later, he was the first director of the School of Youth for Social Service, where he directed thousands of young people working during the war in Vietnam, rebuilding villages that were destroyed, and resettling tens of thousands of refugees fleeing the war zones. He was killed in an accident. I was in Copenhagen when I heard of the death of my student. He was a very gentle monk, very brave.

When he was a novice, six or seven years old, he saw people come to the temple and bring cakes and bananas to offer to the Buddha. He wanted to know how the Buddha eats bananas, so he waited until everyone went home and the shrine was closed, and then he peered through the door, waiting for the Buddha to reach out his hand, take a banana, peel it, and eat it. He waited and waited, but nothing happened. The Buddha did not seem to eat bananas, unless he realized that someone was spying on him.

Thich Thanh Van told me several other stories about when he was a young boy. When he discovered that the

statue of the Buddha was not the Buddha, he began to ask where the Buddhas are, because it did not seem to him that Buddhas were living among humans. He concluded that Buddhas must not be very nice, because when people became Buddhas, they would leave us to go to a faraway country. I told him that Buddhas are us. They are made of flesh and bones, not copper or silver or gold. The Buddha statue is just a symbol of the Buddha, in the same way the American flag is a symbol of America. The American flag is not the American people.

The root word *budh* means to wake up, to know, to understand; someone who wakes up and understands is called a Buddha. It is as simple as that. The capacity to wake up, to understand, and to love is called Buddha nature. When Buddhists say, "I take refuge in the Buddha," they are expressing trust in their own capacity of understanding, of becoming awake. The Chinese and the Vietnamese say, "I go back and rely on the Buddha in me." Adding "in me" makes it very clear that you yourself are the Buddha.

In Buddhism, there are three gems: Buddha, the awakened one; Dharma, the way of understanding and loving; and Sangha, the community that lives in harmony and awareness. The three are interrelated, and at times it is hard to distinguish one from another. In everyone there is the capacity to wake up, to understand, and to love. So in ourselves we find Buddha, and we also find Dharma and Sangha. I will explain more about Dharma and Sangha, but first I want to say something about Buddha, the one

who develops his or her understanding and loving to the highest degree. (In Sanskrit, understanding is *prajña* and love is *karuna* and *maitri*.)

Understanding and love are not two separate things, they're just one. Suppose your son wakes up one morning and sees that it is already quite late. He decides to wake up his younger sister, to give her enough time to eat breakfast before going to school.

It happens that she is grouchy and instead of saying, "Thank you for waking me up," she says, "Shut up! Leave me alone!" and kicks him. He will probably get angry, thinking, "I woke her up nicely. Why did she kick me?" He may want to go to the kitchen and tell you about it, or even kick her back. But then he remembers that during the night his sister coughed a lot, and he realizes that she must be sick. Maybe she has a cold, maybe that is why she behaved in such a mean way. He is not angry anymore. At that moment there is *budh* in him. He understands, he is awake. When you understand, you cannot help but love. You cannot get angry. To develop understanding, you have to practice looking at all living beings with the eyes of compassion. When you understand, you love. And when you love, you naturally act in a way that can relieve the suffering of people.

Someone who is awake, who knows, who understands, is called a Buddha. Buddha is in every one of us. We can become awake, understanding, and also loving. I often tell children that if their mother or father is very understanding and loving, working, taking care of the

family, smiling, being lovely, like a flower, they can say, “Mommy [or Daddy], you are all Buddha today.”



Two thousand five hundred years ago there was a person who practiced in a way that his understanding and love became perfected, and everyone in the world recognized this. His name was Siddhartha. When Siddhartha was very young, he began to think that life contained a lot of suffering, that people didn't love and understand each other enough. So he left his home to go to the forest to practice meditating, breathing, and smiling. He became a monk, and he tried to practice in order to develop his awakening, his understanding, and his love to the highest levels. He practiced sitting meditation and walking meditation for several years with five friends who were also monks. Although they were intelligent people, they made mistakes. For instance, each day they ate only one piece of fruit—one mango, or one guava, or one star fruit. Sometimes people exaggerate, and say that Siddhartha ate only one sesame seed a day, but I went to the forest in India where he practiced, and I know that is silly because there are no sesame seeds there. I saw also the Neranjara River, in which he bathed several times, and the Bodhi tree where he sat and became a Buddha. The Bodhi tree I saw is not the same tree, it is the great-great-great-grandchild of the first Bodhi tree.

One day Siddhartha became so weak that he could not practice, and as he was an intelligent young man, he

decided to go to the village and get something to eat—bananas or bread or anything. But as soon as he took four or five steps, he stumbled and fainted; he lost consciousness because he was too hungry. He would have died, but the village chief's daughter, Sujata, who was taking food to the forest gods, saw him and came over. She found that he was still alive, still breathing, but very weak, and so she took a bowl and poured some milk into his mouth. At first Siddhartha did not react, but then his lips moved and he began to drink the milk. He drank a whole bowl of milk, and he felt much better and slowly sat up. He looked beautiful, because Siddhartha was a very, very handsome person. Nowadays people make statues of him that are not very handsome. Sometimes they are even grouchy, without any smile on his face. But he was a very beautiful person, and Sujata thought that he must be the god of the mountain. She kneeled down and was about to worship, but he stretched out his arm to tell her not to, and he told her something.

What do you think he must have said to her?

He said, "Please give me another bowl of milk." He saw that the milk was doing wonderful things, and he knew that once our body is strong enough, we can succeed in meditation. The young lady was so happy, she poured him another bowl of milk. After that, she inquired about him, and he said that he was a monk, trying to meditate to develop his compassion and his understanding to the highest level so that he could help other people. She asked if there was anything she could do to help, and

Siddhartha said, "Each day at noontime, can you give me a small bowl of rice? That would help me very much." So from that day on, she brought him some rice wrapped in banana leaves, and sometimes she also brought milk.

The five other monks Siddhartha had been practicing with despised him and thought him worthless. "Let us go somewhere else to practice. He drinks milk, and he eats rice. He has no perseverance." But Siddhartha did very well. Day in and day out he meditated, and he developed his insight, his understanding, and his compassion very, very quickly as he recovered his health.

One day, after taking a swim in the Neranjara River, he had the impression that he only needed one more sitting to come to a total breakthrough, to become a fully enlightened person. When he was about to sit down, still practicing walking meditation, a buffalo boy came by. In India 2,500 years ago, water buffalo were used to pull the plows, and a buffalo boy's job was to watch them, bathe and take care of them, and cut grass for them to eat.

As the buffalo boy came by, he saw Siddhartha walking very peacefully, and he liked him immediately. Sometimes we see someone we like very much, even if we don't know why. The boy wanted to say something, but he was shy, so he came near Siddhartha three or four times before saying, "Sir, I like you very much." Siddhartha looked at him and said, "I like you also." Encouraged by this response, the boy told him, "I really want to give you something, but I have nothing I can give you." And Siddhartha said, "You do have something that I need. You