

Together We are One: Honoring Our Diversity, Celebrating Our Connection

By Thich Nhat Hanh

chapter iii

what is your true name?

When I was first exiled in France, I learned of an eleven-year-old girl escaping from Vietnam with her family and other boat people. She was raped by a pirate, right on her boat. Her father tried to intervene, but the pirate threw her father into the sea. After the child was raped, she jumped into the ocean to commit suicide. We received the news of this event one day in our Buddhist Association office in Paris. It was so upsetting to me that it kept me from sleeping. I felt anger, blame, and despair.

That evening in sitting meditation, I saw myself being born as a baby boy into a very poor fishing family on the coast of Thailand. My father was a fisherman. He couldn't read, he had never gone to the temple; he had never received any Buddhist teaching or any kind of education. The politicians, educators, and social workers in Thailand had never helped my father. My mother was also illiterate, and she didn't know how to raise children. My father's family had been poor fishermen for many generations—my grandfather and my great-grandfather had been fishermen, too. And when I turned thirteen, I also became a fisherman. I had never gone to school, I had never heard of the Buddhadharma, I had never felt loved or understood, and I lived in chronic poverty that persisted from one generation to the next.

Then one day another young fisherman said to me: "Let's go out onto the ocean. There are boat people that pass near here and they often carry gold and jewelry, sometimes even money. Just one trip and we can be free from this poverty." I accepted the invitation. I thought, "We only need to take away a little bit of their jewelry, it won't do any harm, and then we can be free from this poverty." So I became a pirate. The first time I went out I didn't even know that I had become a pirate. But once out on the ocean, I saw the other pirates raping young women on the boats. I had never touched a young woman, I had never even thought about holding hands or going out with a young woman. But on the boat there was a very beautiful young woman, and there was no policeman to forbid me. I saw other people doing it, and I asked myself: "Why shouldn't I try it, too? This may be my chance to try the body of a young woman." So I did it.

If you were there on the boat and had a gun, you could shoot me. But shooting me wouldn't help me. Nobody had ever taught me how to love, how to understand, how to see the suffering of others. My father and mother were not taught this either. I didn't know what was wholesome and what was unwholesome, I didn't understand cause and effect. I was living in the dark. If you had a gun, you could shoot me, and I would die. But you wouldn't be able to help me at all.

As I continued sitting, I saw hundreds of babies being born that night along the coast of Thailand under the same circumstances, many of them baby boys. If the politicians and cultural ministers could look deeply, they would see that within twenty years those babies would become pirates. When I was able to see that, I understood the actions of that pirate. When I put myself in the situation of being born into a family that was uneducated and poor from one generation to the next, I saw that I would not be able to avoid becoming a pirate. When I saw that, my hatred vanished and I felt that I could love that pirate.

When I saw those babies being born and growing up with no help, I knew that I had to do something so that they would not become pirates. The energy of a bodhisattva, a compassionate being with limitless love, grew inside me. I didn't suffer anymore. I could embrace not only the eleven-year-old child who was raped, but also the pirate.

When you address me as "Venerable Nhat Hanh," I say, "Yes." When you call the name of the child who was raped, I also say, "Yes." And if you call the name of the pirate, I will also say, "Yes." If I had been born in that area under those circumstances, I might have been that girl or I might have been that pirate.

I am the child in the Congo, all skin and bones, my two legs as thin as bamboo sticks. And I am also the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to the Congo. Those poor children in the Congo do not need bombs; they need food to eat. But here in the U.S., I live by producing bombs and guns. If we want others to buy guns and bombs, then we have to create wars. If you call the name of the child in the Congo, I say, "Yes." If you call the name of those who produce the bombs and guns, I also say, "Yes." When I'm able to see that I am all those people, my hatred is no longer there, and I'm determined to live in such a way that I can help the victims, and I can also help those who create the wars and destruction.

ACCEPT YOURSELF AS YOU ARE

If we have not found our true home it is difficult for us to have a true name. Our name should give us the feeling of being at home. Society may label us French or African or American, or perhaps people call us African American, or Asian American, whether we feel at home with that name or not. Sometimes we are not comfortable with what our country is doing. Sometimes we are uncomfortable

with our culture, our society, our church, and we don't feel at home. So the name others give us is not our true name, and we should have a true name. But we cannot find our true name unless we have a true home.

Besides asking about our true home and our true name, we can also ask, "Do I have a true color?" This is also very difficult. Sometimes we are not comfortable with our color, whether it is black, brown, yellow, or white. We may be ashamed of our color because in the past our ancestors may have done things that we are not proud of. So even if you have white skin, you may not like it. You may not like to be called white. We must all have a true color that is free from these kinds of feelings, these kinds of complexes. So in terms of geography, in terms of race, in terms of culture, we are confused and we don't know who we are or where our true home is. True happiness cannot be found unless we can find our true home. To find our true home we must accept ourselves as we are.

THE WISDOM OF NONDISCRIMINATION

In 1966, I gave a talk at a church in Minneapolis, and afterward I was very tired. I walked slowly in meditation back to my room so I could enjoy the cold, fragrant night air and be nourished and healed. While I was walking, taking each step in freedom, a car came up from behind and, braking loudly, stopped very close to me. The driver opened the door, looked at me and shouted: "This is America, this is not China." Then he drove away. Maybe he thought, "This is a Chinese person who dares to walk in freedom in America," and he could not bear it. Maybe he thought, "This is America, only white people can live here. Chinese people, how dare you come here, how dare you walk with such freedom? You have no right to walk in this way. This is America, this is not China." That is discrimination against nationality, against race. But I was not angry—that was the good thing about it—I thought it was funny. I thought: "If he would just pause for a moment, I would tell him, 'I agree with you one hundred percent, this is America, this is not China. Why do you have to shout at me?'"

We know that the seed of discrimination lies in all of us. Once in New York, a black woman shouted at me even though I am also a person of color. It is not only certain people who discriminate; the oppressed and the oppressors are inside each one of us. Our practice is to attain the wisdom of nondiscrimination.

When people call us African American, we should answer, "Yes." When they call us African, we answer, "Yes," and when they call us American, we also answer, "Yes." When people call the names of those who are discriminated against, we answer, "Yes." And when they call the names of those who are discriminating, we also answer, "Yes." All of them are us. Within each of us is the victim of discrimination as well as the perpetrator of discrimination.

CULTIVATING EQUANIMITY

The Buddha lived in a society that was very divided by the caste system. The Brahmins, the priestly caste, believed themselves to be superior. Then there were the outcastes who lived at the bottom of society. The Buddha often spoke about the caste system, and he talked about nobility in terms of thinking, speech, and action, not in terms of blood ancestry or race. In the teachings of the Buddha, it is very clear that what determines the value of a person is not her race or caste, but her thought, speech, and action. We are noble not because of our race, but because of our way of thinking, our way of speaking, and our way of acting. There are many who believe they are noble, but whose lives are not noble at all. Their way of thinking, speaking, and acting is ignoble, so there is nothing in them that can be called noble. There are people, no matter what ethnic group they belong to, whose way of thinking is full of understanding, compassion, and brotherhood, whose way of speaking is full of hope and confidence and whose way of acting is full of compassion. It is easy to see the nobility in them.

According to the teaching of the Buddha, everyone has the seed of equanimity, of nondiscrimination within himself or herself. If we are able to touch that seed in ourselves, the wisdom of nondiscrimination will manifest, nor we will not suffer and make others suffer.

Let's look into our bodies for another example. We call one hand our right hand, and the other our left hand. They are quite distinct, and we don't mix them up. My right hand has written all my poems, except one. I always write my poems with a pen, except for one time when I didn't have a pen. There was a poem in me that wanted to come out. I did not have a pen, but there was a typewriter on the table. So I took out an old envelope, rolled it into the typewriter and typed my poem. I still remember the title of the poem: "The Little Buffalo Is Chasing after the Sun." That was the only time when my left hand participated in poetry writing. Yet my right hand has never had a complex of superiority. My right hand does not think or say things like: "Left hand, do you know that I have written all the poems except one? Do you know that I can do calligraphy? I can invite the bell to sound? And you, left hand, do not seem to be good for anything!" My right hand never thinks that way, it never has that attitude. My right hand is never proud or caught in a superiority complex. A superiority complex makes us suffer. Not only when we have low self-esteem do we suffer, but when we have high self-esteem—the feeling that we are more powerful, more talented, more important—we also suffer.

Although my left hand has not written many poems or done any calligraphy, she does not suffer from any complex of inferiority. It's wonderful. She does not suffer at all. There is no comparing, no low self-esteem. That is why my left hand is perfectly happy.

One day I was trying to hang a picture on the wall. My left hand was holding a nail and my right hand a hammer. That day, I don't know why, instead of pounding on the nail I pounded on my

finger. When I hit my finger, the left hand suffered. Immediately the right hand put down the hammer and took care of the left hand in the most tender way, as though she was taking care of herself. She didn't see it as her duty. This kind of thing happens very naturally; my right hand does things for my left hand as if she were doing them for herself.

The psychologist Fritz Perls wrote a poem in which he says, "You are you, and I am I, and if by chance we find each other, it's beautiful. If not, it can't be helped." I disagree with the sentiment behind this poem. My right hand doesn't say: "I am me and you are you, we are different hands." There's no such thinking. My two hands practice perfectly the teaching of the Buddha that there is no separate self.

My right hand considers the suffering of my left hand as her own suffering. That is why she did everything to take care of the left hand. My left hand was not at all angry. My left hand did not say, "You, right hand, you have done me an injustice. Give me that hammer. I want justice!" She had no such thinking. This confirms that there is an inherent wisdom in my left hand, the wisdom of nondiscrimination. When we have it, we don't have to suffer at all. The wisdom of nondiscrimination in Sanskrit is *nirvikalpapiana*. *Vikalpa* is discrimination, *nirvikalpa* is nondiscrimination, and *jñāna* means wisdom. This wisdom is innate in all of us.

INTERBEING

Once I went to Italy for a retreat, and I noticed that the olive trees were growing in groups of three or four. I was surprised and asked, "Why do you plant olive trees in groups of three or four?" Our Italian friends explained that each group of three or four is just one tree. Some years before, it had been so cold that all the olive trees froze and appeared to have died. But deep down at the level of the roots, they were still alive. After the hard winter, the spring came and new branches sprouted. Then, instead of one trunk, the olive trees grew three or four trunks.

If we are brothers or sisters of the same parents, we are like those three or four olive trees with the same roots. They look like different trees, but they are just one. It would be funny if this tree discriminated against that one; if they were to fight and kill each other, that would be sheer ignorance. When they look deeply and are in touch with their roots, they know that they are brothers and sisters, they are one.

Suppose the Israelis were to touch their wisdom of nondiscrimination. They would find out that the Palestinians are their brothers. They are like the right hand and the left hand, and it is silly to see each other as enemies and kill each other for the sake of "survival." It is a pity that Hindus and Muslims fight and kill each other. It is a pity that Catholics and Protestants fight and kill each other.

They are of the same roots. But they have not been able to touch their ground of being and allow the wisdom of nondiscrimination to manifest and show them the way and the truth.

When we are able to touch our true home, we see that everything includes everything else, we touch the interbeing nature of everything. If we look deeply into the flower, we see a cloud because we know without the cloud there would be no rain and this flower could not manifest. Looking into the flower we see this element that we don't call "flower" but which is part of the flower, that is, the cloud, the water. If we remove the cloud from the flower, the flower cannot be there for us anymore. Looking deeply at the flower, we see the sunshine. The sunshine is in it. Without the sunshine, nothing can grow. I can touch the sunshine by touching the petal of the flower. If we remove the sunshine, the flower will disappear. When we look into the flower we see the earth, we see the minerals. We cannot remove soil and minerals from the flower or the flower will collapse, it will vanish. That is why we can say that a flower is made only of non-flower elements. Cloud and sunshine are non-flower elements essential to the flower. The soil and the compost are non-flower elements. Without non-flower elements a flower cannot manifest herself as a wonderful phenomenon. A flower cannot be by herself alone. Without the sunshine, without the rain, without the soil, a flower cannot be. A flower can only inter-be—with the sunshine, the cloud, the soil, the farmer, with everything. So, "to be" means to inter-be. We cannot be by ourselves alone. A flower is made exclusively of non-flower elements. If we were to remove all the non-flower elements, there would be no flower to see and touch. So the flower has no separate existence. How can a flower exist without sunshine, cloud, or soil?

The flower is full of everything in the cosmos, except one thing: the flower does not have a separate self, a separate existence. This is the insight of the Buddha. This is important. With meditation, with mindfulness and concentration, we can look deeply into the flower and discover the nature of emptiness. The flower is empty of what? It is empty of a separate existence, but at the same time it is totally full of the cosmos. This is the case of the flower, the table, the house, and the river. We cannot be by ourselves alone. We have to inter-be with everyone else, with everything else.