

From *Peace is Every Step* by Thich Nhat Hanh  
(pp 95–98)

### **“Interbeing”**

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper *inter-are*. “Inter-being” is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix “inter-” with the verb “to be,” we have a new verb, inter-be.

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. Without sunshine, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow without sunshine. And so we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. The logger’s father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

Looking even more deeply, we can see ourselves in this sheet of paper too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, it is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. We cannot point out one thing that is not here—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything coexists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. “To be” is to inter-be. We cannot just be by ourselves alone. We have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is because everything else is.

Suppose we try to return one of the elements to its source. Suppose we returned the sunshine to the sun. Do you think that this sheet of paper will be possible? No, without sunshine nothing can be. And if we return the logger to his mother, then we have no sheet of paper either. The fact is that this sheet of paper is made-up only of “non-paper” elements. And if we return these non-paper elements to their sources, then there can be no paper at all. Without non-paper elements, like mind, logger, sunshine and so on, there will be no paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.

## “Flowers and Garbage”

Defiled or immaculate. Dirty or pure. These are concepts we form in our mind. A beautiful rose we have just cut and placed in our vase is pure. It smells so good, so fresh. The garbage can is the opposite. It smells horrible, and it is filled with rotten things.

But that is only when we look on the surface. If we look more deeply, we will see that in just five or six days, the rose will become part of the garbage. We do not need to wait five days to see it. If we just look at the rose, and we look deeply, we can see it now. And if we look into the garbage can, we see that in a few months its contents will be transformed into lovely vegetables, and even a rose. If you are a good organic gardener, looking at a rose you can see the garbage, and looking at the garbage you can see the rows. Roses and garbage inter-are. Without a rose we cannot have garbage; and without garbage we cannot have a rose. They need each other very much. the rose and the garbage are equal. The garbage is just as precious as the rose. If we look deeply at the concepts of defilement and immaculateness, we return to the notion of interbeing.

In the city of Manila there are many young prostitutes; Some are only 14 or 15 years old. They are very unhappy. They did not want to be prostitutes, but their families are poor, and these young girls went to the city to look for some kind of job, like street vendor, to make money to send back to their families. Of course, this is not only true in Manila, but in Ho Chi Minh city in Vietnam, in New York City, and in Paris also. After only a few weeks in the city, a vulnerable girl can be persuaded by a clever person to work for him and earn perhaps one hundred times more money than she could as a street vendor. Because she is so young and does not know much about life, she accepts and becomes a prostitute. Since that time, she has carried the feeling of being impure, defiled, and this causes her great suffering. When she looks at other young girls, dressed beautifully, belonging to good families, a wretched feeling wells up in her, a feeling of defilement that becomes her hell.

But if she could look deeply at herself and at the whole situation, she would see that she is the way she is because other people are the way they are. How can a “good girl,” belong to a good family, be proud? Because the “good family’s” way of life is the way it is, the prostitute has to live as a prostitute. No one among us has clean hands. No one of us can claim that it is not our responsibility. The girl in Manila is that way because of the way we are. Looking into the life of that young prostitute, we see the lives of all the “non-prostitutes.” and looking at the non-prostitutes and the way we live our lives, we see the prostitute. Each thing helps to create the other.

Let us look at wealth and poverty. The affluent society and the deprived society inter-are. The wealth of one society is made of the poverty of the other period “this is like this, because that is like that.” Wealth is made of non-wealth elements, and poverty

is made by non-poverty elements. It is exactly the same as with the sheet of paper. So we must be careful not to imprison ourselves in concepts. The truth is that everything contains everything else. We cannot just be, we can only inter-be. We are responsible for everything that happens around us.

Only by seeing with the eyes of interbeing can that young girl be freed from her suffering. Only then will she understand that she is bearing the burden of the whole world. What else can we offer her? Looking deeply into ourselves, we see her, and we will share her pain and the pain of the whole world. Then we can begin to be of real help.