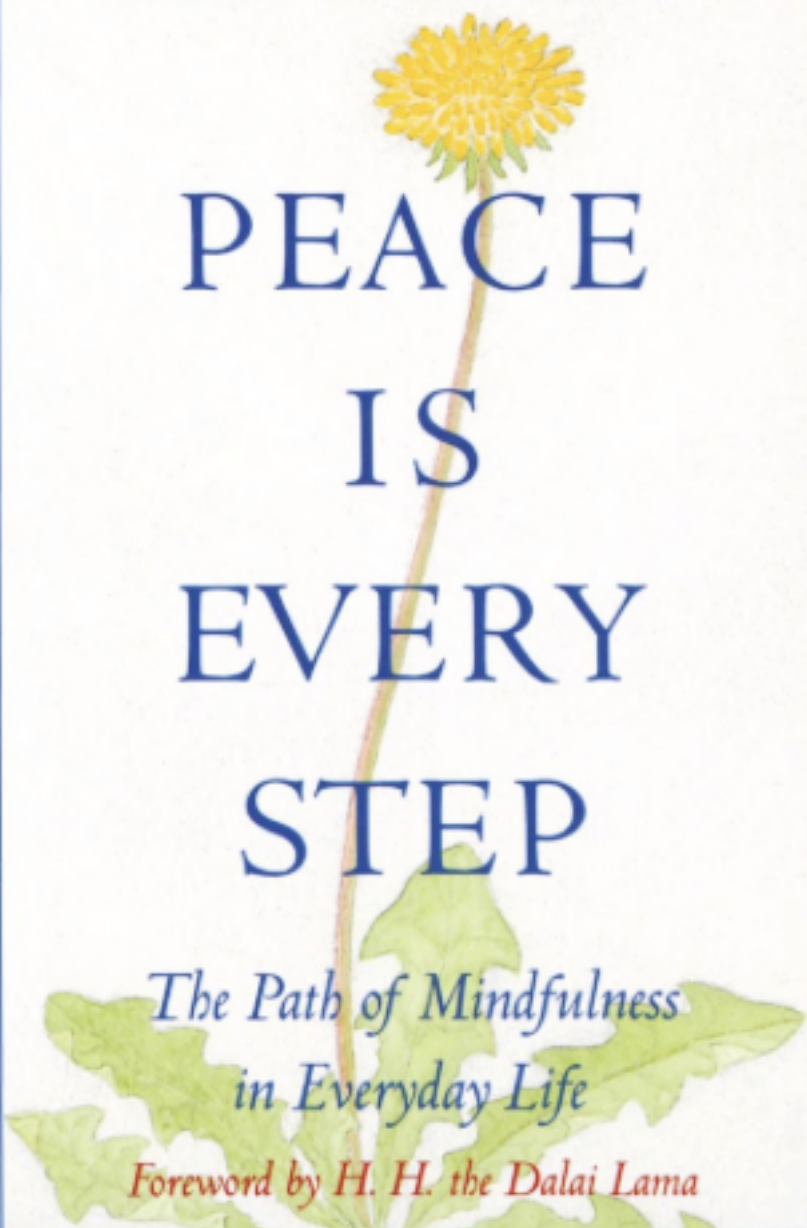


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*Thich Nhat Hanh*



PEACE  
IS  
EVERY  
STEP

*The Path of Mindfulness  
in Everyday Life*

*Foreword by H. H. the Dalai Lama*

## The Roots of War

In 1966, when I was in the U.S. calling for a ceasefire to the war in Vietnam, a young American peace activist stood up during a talk I was giving and shouted, “The best thing you can do is go back to your country and defeat the American aggressors! You shouldn’t be here. There is absolutely no use to your being here!” He and many Americans wanted peace, but the kind of peace they wanted was the defeat of one side in order to satisfy their anger. Because they had called for a ceasefire and had not succeeded, they became angry, and finally they were unable to accept any solution short of the defeat of their own country. But we Vietnamese who were suffering under the bombs had to be more realistic. We wanted peace. We did not care about anyone’s victory or defeat. We just wanted the bombs to stop falling on us. But many people in the peace movement opposed our proposal for an immediate ceasefire. No one seemed to understand.

So when I heard that Youngman shouting, “Go home and defeat the American aggressors,” I took

several deep breaths to regain myself, and I said, “Sir, it seems to me that many of the roots of the war are here in your country. That is why I have come. One of the roots is your way of seeing the world. Both sides are victims of a wrong policy, a policy that believes in the force of violence to settle problems. I do not want Vietnamese to die, and I do not want American soldiers to die either.”

The roots of war are in the way we live our daily lives—the way we develop our industries, build up our society, and consume goods. We have to look deeply into the situation, and we will see the roots of war. We cannot just blame one side or the other. We have to transcend the tendency to take sides.

During any conflict, we need people who can understand the suffering of all sides. For example, if a number of people in South Africa could go to each side and understand their suffering, and communicate that to the other sides that would be very helpful. We need links. We need communication.

Practicing nonviolence is first of all to become nonviolence. Then when a difficult situation presents itself, we will react in a way that will help the situation. This applies to problems of the family as well as to problems of society.

**Like a Leaf, We Have Many Stems**

One autumn day, I was in a park, absorbed in the contemplation of a very small, beautiful leaf, shaped like a heart. Its color was almost red, and it was barely hanging on the branch, nearly ready to fall down. I spent a long time with it, and I asked the leaf a number of questions. I found out the leaf had been a mother to the tree. Usually we think that the tree is the mother and the leaves are just children, but as I looked at the leaf I saw that the leaf is also a mother to the tree. The sap that the roots take up is only water and minerals, not sufficient to nourish the tree. So the tree distributes that sap to the leaves, and the leaves transform the rough sap into elaborated sap and, with the help of the sun and gas, send it back to the tree for nourishment. Therefore, the leaves are also the mother to the tree. Since the leaf is linked to the tree by a stem, the communication between them is easy to see. We do not have a stem linking us to our mother anymore, but when we were in her womb, we had a very long stem, an umbilical cord. The oxygen and the nourishment we needed came to us through that stem. But on the day we were born, it was cut off, and we received the illusion that we became independent. That is not true. We continue to rely on our mother for a very long time, and we have many other mothers as well. The Earth is our mother. We have a great many stems linking us to our Mother Earth. There are stems linking us with the clouds. If there are no clouds, there will be no water for us to drink. We

are made of at least seventy percent water, and the stem between the cloud and us is really there. This is also the case with the river, the forest, the logger, and the farmer. There are hundreds of thousands of stems linking us

to everything in the cosmos, supporting us and making it possible for us to be. Do you see the link between you and me? If you are not there, I am not here. This is certain. If you do not see it yet, please look more deeply and I am sure you will.

I asked the leaf whether it was frightened because it was autumn and the other leaves were falling. The leaf told me, “No. During the whole spring and summer I was completely alive. I worked hard to help nourish the tree, and now much of me is in the tree. I am not limited by this form. I am also the whole tree, and when I go back to the soil, I will continue to nourish the tree. So I don’t worry at all. As I leave this branch and float to the ground, I will wave to the tree and tell her, ‘I will see you again very soon.’”

That day there was a wind blowing and, after a while, I saw the leaf leave the branch and float down to the soil, dancing joyfully, because as it floated it saw itself already there in the tree. It was so happy. I bowed my head, knowing that I have a lot to learn from that leaf.

## We Are All Linked to Each Other

Millions of people follow sports. If you love to watch soccer or baseball, you probably root for one team and identify with them. You may watch the games with despair and elation. Perhaps you give a little kick or swing to help die ball along. If you do not take sides, the fun is missing. In wars we also pick sides, usually the side that is being threatened. Peace movements are born of this feeling. We get angry, we shout, but rarely do we rise above ail this to look at a conflict die way a mother would who is watching her two children fighting. She seeks only their reconciliation.

“In order to fight each other, the chicks born from the same mother hen put colors on their faces.” This is a well-known Vietnamese saying. Putting colors on our own face is to make ourselves a stranger to our own brothers and sisters. We can only shoot others when they are strangers. Real efforts for reconciliation arise when we see with the eyes of compassion, and that ability comes when we see clearly the nature of interbeing and interpenetration of all beings.

In our lives, we may be lucky enough to know someone whose love extends to animals and plants. We may also know people who although they themselves live in a safe situation, realize that famine, disease, and oppression are destroying

millions of people on Earth and look for ways to help those who suffer. They cannot forget the downtrodden, even amidst the pressures of their own lives. At least to some extent, these people have real-

ized the interdependent nature of life. They know that the survival of the underdeveloped countries cannot be separated from the survival of the materially wealthy, technically advanced countries. Poverty and oppression bring war. In our times, every war involves all countries. The fate of each country is linked to the fate of all others.

When will the chicks of the same mother hen remove the colors from their faces and recognize each other as brothers and sisters? The only way to end the danger is for each of us to do so, and to say to others, "I am your brother." "I am your sister." "We are all humankind, and our life is one."

## Reconciliation

What can we do when we have hurt people and now they consider us to be their enemy? These people might be people in our family, in our community, or in another country. I think you know the answer. There are few things to do. The first thing is to take the time to say, "I am sorry; I hurt you out of my ignorance, out of my lack of mindfulness, out of my lack of skillfulness. I will

try my best to change myself. I don't dare to say anything more to you," Sometimes, we do not have the intention to hurt, but because we are not mindful or skillful enough, we hurt someone. Being mindful in our daily life is important, speaking in a way that will not hurt anyone.

The second thing to do is to try to bring out the best part in ourselves, the part of the flower, to transform ourselves. That is the only way to demonstrate what you have just said. When you have become fresh and pleasant, the other person will notice very soon. Then when there is a chance to approach that person, you can come to her as a flower and she will notice immediately that you are quite different. You may not have to say anything. Just seeing you like that, she will accept you and forgive you. That is called "speaking with your life and not just with words."

When you begin to see that your enemy is suffering, that is the beginning of insight. When you see in yourself the wish that the other person stop suffering that is a sign of real love. But be careful. Sometimes you may think that you are stronger than you actually are. To test your real strength, try going to the other person to listen and talk to him or her, and you will discover right away whether your loving compassion is real. You need the other person in order to test. If you just meditate on some abstract principle such as



understanding or love, it may be just your imagination and not real understanding or real love.

Reconciliation does not mean to sign an agreement with duplicity and cruelty. Reconciliation opposes all forms of ambition, without taking sides. Most of us want to take sides in each encounter or conflict. We distinguish right from wrong based on partial evidence or hearsay. We need indignation in order to act, but even righteous, legitimate indignation is not enough. Our world does not lack people willing to throw themselves into action. What we need are people who are capable of loving, of not taking sides so that they can embrace the whole of reality.

We have to continue to practice mindfulness and reconciliation until we can see a child's body of skin and bones in Uganda or Ethiopia as our own, until the hunger and pain in the bodies of all species are our own. Then we will have realized non-discrimination, real love. Then we can look at all beings with the eyes of compassion, and we can do the real work to help alleviate suffering.

### Call Me by My True Names

In Plum Village, where I live in France, we receive many letters from the refugee camps in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the

Philippines, hundreds each week. It is very painful to read them, but we have to do it, we have to be in contact. We try our best to help, but the suffering is enormous, and sometimes we are discouraged. It is said that half the boat people die in the ocean. Only half arrive at the shores in Southeast Asia, and even then they may not be safe.

There are many young girls, boat people, who are raped by sea pirates. Even though the United Nations and many countries try to help the government of Thailand prevent that kind of piracy, sea pirates continue to inflict much suffering on the refugees. One day we received a letter telling us about a young girl on a small boat who was raped by a Thai pirate. She was only twelve, and she jumped into the ocean and drowned herself.

When you first learn of something like that, you get angry at the pirate. You naturally take the side of the girl. As you look more deeply you will see it differently. If you take the side of the little girl, then it is easy. You only have to take a gun and shoot the pirate. But we cannot do that. In my meditation I saw that if I had been born in the village of the pirate and raised in the same conditions as he was, there is a great likelihood that I would become a pirate. I saw that many babies are born along the Gulf of Siam, hundreds every day, and if we educators, social workers,

politicians, and others do not do something about the situation, in twenty-five years a

number of them will become sea pirates. That is certain. If you or I were born today in those fishing villages, we may become sea pirates in twenty-five years. If you take a gun and shoot the pirate, you shoot all of us, because all of us are to some extent responsible for this state of affairs.

After a long meditation, I wrote this poem. In it, there are three people: the twelve-year-old girl, the pirate, and me. Can we look at each other and recognize ourselves in each other? The title of the poem is "Please Call Me by My True Names," because I have so many names. When I hear one of these names, I have to say, "Yes."

Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow because even today I still arrive.

Look deeply: I arrive in every second  
to be a bud on a spring branch,  
to be a tiny bird, with wings still fragile, 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 still arrive, 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 all that are alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river, and I am the bird which, when spring comes, arrives in time to eat the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily in the clear pond, and I am also the grass-snake who, approaching in silence, 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 it makes flowers bloom in all walks of life. My pain is like a river of tears, so full it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,  
so I can hear all my cries and laughs at once, so  
lean see that my joy and pain are one. Please call  
me by my true names,  
so lean wake up,  
and so the door of my heart can be left open, the  
door of compassion.

### Suffering Nourishes Compassion

We have been practicing “engaged Buddhism” in Vietnam for the last thirty years. During the war, we could not just sit in the meditation hall. We had to practice mindfulness everywhere, especially where the worst suffering was going on.

Being in touch with the kind of suffering we encountered during the war can heal us of some of the suffering we experience when our lives are not very meaningful or useful. When you confront the kinds of difficulties we faced during the war, you see that you can be a source of compassion and a great help to many suffering people. In that intense suffering, you feel a kind of relief and joy within yourself, because you know that you are an instrument of compassion. Understanding such incense suffering and

realizing compassion in the midst of it, you become a joyful person, even if your life is very hard.

Last winter, some friends and I went to visit the refugee camps in Hong Kong, and we witnessed a lot of suffering. There were “boat people” who were just one or two years old, who were about to be sent back to their country because they were classified as illegal immigrants. They had lost both father and mother during the trip. When you see that kind of suffering, you know that the suffering your friends in Europe and America are undergoing is not very great.

Every time we come back from such a contact, we see that the city of Paris is not very real. The way people live there and the reality of the suffering in other parts of the world are so different. I asked the question, how could people live like this when things are like that? But if you stay in Paris for ten years without being in touch, you find it normal.

Meditation is a point of contact. Sometimes you do not have to go to the place of suffering. You just sit quietly on your cushion, and you can see everything. You can actualize everything, and you can be aware of what is going on in the world. Out of that kind of awareness, compassion and understanding arise naturally, and you can stay right in your own country and perform social action.

**Love in Action**

During our journey together, I have presented a number of practices to help us maintain mindfulness of what is going on inside us and immediately around us. Now, as we make our way through the wider world, some additional guidelines can help us and protect us. Several members of our community have been practicing the following principles, and I think you may also find them useful in making choices as to how to live in our contemporary world. We call them the fourteen precepts of the Order of Interbeing.

1. Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology. All systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth.

2. Do not think that the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice non-attachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual

knowledge. Be ready to learn throughout your entire life and to observe reality in yourself and in the world at all times.

3. Do not force others, including children, by any means whatsoever, to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda, or even

education. However, through compassionate dialogue, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness.

4. Do not avoid contact with suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering, by all means, including personal contact and visits, images, and sound. By such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world.

5. Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure. Live simply and share time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need.

6. Do not maintain anger or hatred. Learn to penetrate and transform them while they are still seeds in your consciousness. As soon as anger or hatred arises, turn your attention to your breathing in order to see and understand the nature of your anger or hatred and the nature of the persons who have caused your anger or hatred.

7. Do not lose yourself in dispersion and in your surroundings. Practice mindful breathing in order to come back to what is happening in the present moment. Be in touch with what is wondrous,



refreshing, and healing, both inside and around yourself. Plant the seeds of joy, peace, and understanding in yourself in order to facilitate the work of transformation in the depths of your consciousness.

8. Do not utter words that can create discord and cause the community to break. Make every effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

9. Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people. Do not utter words that cause division and hatred. Do not spread news that you do not know to be certain. Do not criticize or condemn things that you are not sure of. Always speak truthfully and constructively. Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety.

10. Do not use the religious community for personal gain or profit, or transform your community into a political party. A religious community should, however, take a clear stand against oppression and injustice, and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.

11. Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. Do not invest in companies

that deprive others of their chance to live. Select a vocation that helps realize your ideal of compassion.

12. Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and prevent war.

13. Possess nothing that should belong to others. Respect the property of others but prevent others from enriching themselves from human suffering or the suffering of other beings.

14. Do not mistreat your body. Learn to handle it with respect. Do not look on your body as only an instrument. Preserve vital energies for the realization of the Way. Sexual expression should not happen without love and commitment. In sexual relationships, be aware of future suffering that may be caused. To preserve the happiness of others, respect the rights and commitments of others. Be fully aware of the responsibility of bringing new lives into the world. Meditate on the world into which you are bringing new beings.