

All formations
They are subject to birth
But when the notions of birth
This silence

A Teaching by Thich Nhat Hanh

CALLIGRAPHY BY BARBARA BASH

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and death

and death have been removed,

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THERE ARE TWO KINDS of truth, conventional truth and absolute truth, but they are not opposites. They are part of a continuum. There is a classic Buddhist *gatha*:

*All formations are impermanent.
They are subject to birth and death.
But remove the notions of birth and death,
and this silence is called great joy.*

This beautiful poem has only twenty-six words, but it sums up all of the Buddha's teaching. It is one of the great-

est poems of humanity. If you are a composer, please put it to music and make it into a song. The last two lines should sound like thundering silence, the silencing of all speculation, of all philosophies, of all notions and ideas.

The *gatha* begins in the realm of conventional truth and ends in the realm of absolute truth. The first line describes reality as we usually perceive it. "All formations are impermanent." This is something concrete that we notice as soon as we start paying attention. The five elements that make up our sense of personhood—form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness—all are flowing and changing day

and night. We can feel their impermanence and so we are tempted to say that the first two lines of this gatha are true.

But the danger of this statement is that we may believe that formations are real and impermanence is an absolute truth. And we may use that kind of truth as a weapon in order to fight against those who don't agree with our ideas. "Formations" is a notion, an idea. "Impermanence" is another notion. Neither is more true than the other. When you say, "All formations are impermanent," you are indirectly confirming their permanence. When you confirm the existence of something, you are also implying the existence of its opposite. When you say the right exists, you have to accept the existence of the left. When you confirm that something is "high," you're saying something else is "low." Impermanence becomes a notion that opposes the notion of permanence. So though perhaps it tried to escape, the first two lines of the gatha are still in the realm of conventional, relative truth.

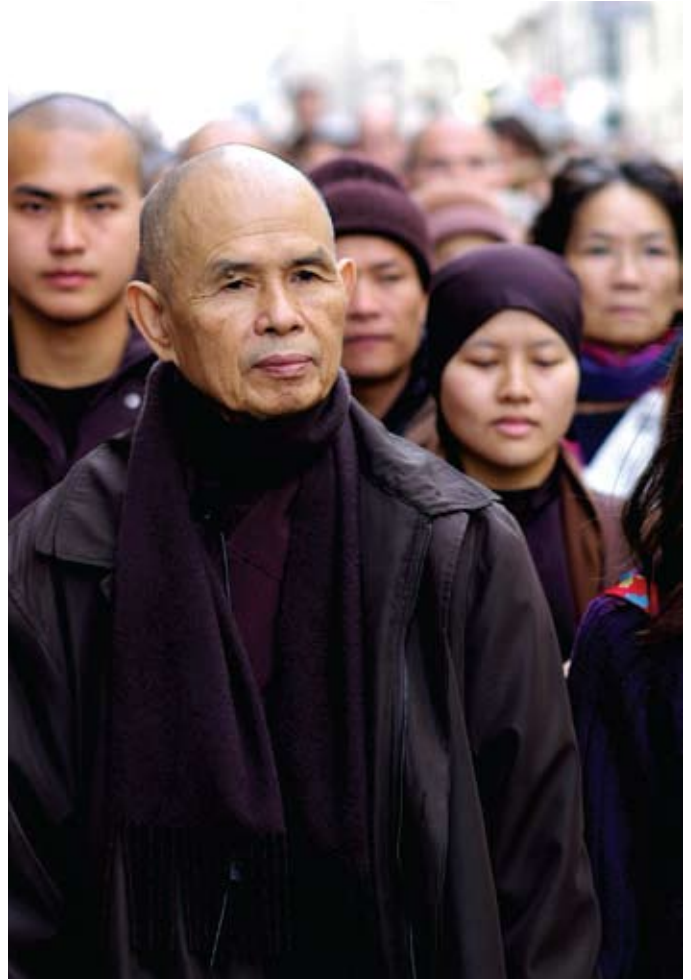
To reach the absolute truth, the ultimate truth, you need to release the conventional truth found there. There's a Chinese term that means halfway truths and another that means all-the-way, hitting-the-bottom truths. The first two lines are a half-way truth and the third and fourth lines try to remove what we learned in the first two.

When the notions are removed, then the perfect silence, the extinction of all notions, the destruction of all pairs of opposites, is called great joy. That is the teaching of absolute truth, of nirvana. What does nirvana mean? It is absolute happiness. It's not a place you can go; it's a fruit that you can have wherever you are. It's already inside us. The wave doesn't have to seek out the water. Water is what the wave has to realize as her own foundation of being.

If you have come from a Jewish or Christian background, you may like to compare the idea of nirvana, great bliss, with the idea of God. Because our idea of God may be only that, an idea. We have to overcome the idea in order to really touch God as a reality. Nirvana can also be merely the idea of nirvana. Buddha also can be just an idea. But it's not the idea that we need; we need the ultimate reality.

The first two lines of the gatha dwell in the realm of opposites: birth and death, permanence and impermanence, being and nonbeing. In God, in nirvana, opposites no longer exist. If you say God exists, that's wrong. If you say God doesn't exist, that's equally wrong. Because God cannot be described in terms of being and nonbeing. To be or not to be, that is not the question. The notions of being and nonbeing are obstacles that you have to remove in order for ultimate reality to manifest.

In classical Chinese, the third line of the gatha literally says, "But when both birth and death die." What does it mean by "death dying"? It means you have to kill your notions of birth and death. As someone who practices the way of the Buddha, you have the sword of the bodhisattva Manjushri, which is sharp enough to remove wrong perceptions and cut through all notions, including those of birth and death.



Paris, walking meditation, 2007.

PHOTO BY DUC TRUONG

The true practitioner understands real rebirth, real continuation. There are two views concerning life after death. Quite a number of people, including scientists, believe that after we die, there'll be nothing left. From being we become nonbeing. They don't believe that there is something that continues after you die. That view is called nihilism. In this view, either there is no soul or the soul completely dies. After death, our body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness are completely gone. The opposite view, eternalism, is that after we die, we are still here and we will continue forever. Our soul is immortal. While our physical body may die, our soul continues forever, whether in paradise or in hell. The Buddha called these two views just another pair of opposites.

Before you can answer the question, "What will happen to me after I die?" you need to answer another question, "What is happening to me in the present moment?" Examining this question is the essence of meditation. If we don't know how to look deeply into what is happening to us in the here and the now, how can we know what will happen to us when we are dead?

When we look at a candle, we say that the candle is radiating light, heat, and fragrance. The light is one kind of energy

it emits, the heat is another, and the fragrance is a third kind of energy it can offer us in the here and the now. If we are truly alive, we can see that we aren't very different from the candle. We are offering our insight, our breath, our views right now. Every moment you have a view, whether about yourself, the world, or how to be happy, and you emit that view. You produce thought and your thought carries your views. You are continued by your views and your thinking. Those are the children you give birth to every moment. And that is your true continuation.

So it is crucial to look deeply at your thoughts and your views. What are you holding on to? Whether you are an artist or a businessperson, a parent or a teacher, you have your views about how to live your life, how to help other people, how to make your country prosperous, and so on. When you are attached to these views, to the idea of right and wrong, then you may get caught. When your thinking is caught in these views, then you create misunderstanding, anger, and violence. That is what you are becoming in this very moment.

When you are mindful of this and can look deeply, you can produce thoughts that are full of love and understanding. You can make yourself and the world around you suffer less.

You are not static. You are the life that you are becoming. Because "to be" means to be something: happy or unhappy, light or heavy, sky or earth. We have to learn to see being as becoming. The quality of your being depends on the object of your being. That is why when you hear Rene Descartes' famous statement, "I think, therefore I am," you have to ask, "You are what?" Of course you are your own thinking—and your happiness or your sorrow depends very much on the quality of your thinking. So you are your view, you are your thinking, you are your speech, you are your action, and these things are your continuation. You are becoming now; you are being reborn now in every second. You don't need to come to death in order to be reborn. You are reborn in every moment; you have to see your continuation in the here and the now.

I don't care at all what happens to me when I die. That's why I have a lot of time to care about what is happening to me in the here and the now. When I walk, I want to enjoy every step I take. I want freedom and peace and joy in every step. So joy and peace and lightness are what I produce in that moment. I have inherited it and I pass it on to other people. If someone sees me walking this way and decides to walk mindfully for him- or herself, then I am reborn in him or in her right away—that's my continuation. That's what is happening to me in the here and the now. And if I know what is happening to me in the here and the now, I don't need to ask the question, "What will happen to me after this body disintegrates?" There is no "before" and "after," just as there is no birth and death. We can be free of these notions in this very moment, filled with the great joyful silence of all that is. ♦

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Beginner's Mind

*We have the inherent capacity to recognize what is good, what is beautiful, and what is true, says
Thich Nhat Hanh.*

IN THE ZEN TRADITION, we often speak of the beginner's mind. The beginner's mind is something very beautiful. It is like our first love. It should be protected and nourished.

I was ordained as a novice at the age of sixteen. I loved living in the monastery. There wasn't much thinking, only a feeling that something there was very good and true. In the mind of the young person, something beautiful must be true at the same time, and something true must also be beautiful. You don't analyze; you just sense if something is beautiful and try following in that direction. You are falling in love with what is good. That kind of love is the beginner's mind.

The beginner's mind is like a young plant, and it needs good conditions in order to grow strong. If the conditions aren't supportive, then you lose your beginner's mind. That is a pity. To have supportive conditions doesn't mean that everything must go well on the path of practice. You don't have to have everyone's encouragement. In fact, on every path of practice there are many obstacles to discourage you. Every time you overcome an obstacle, your beginner's mind gets stronger. So these obstacles are not really obstacles; they are there to help you get stronger.

Every one of us has a beginner's mind. In each of us, there is that capacity to recognize what is good, what is beautiful, what is true. We should find any means, every kind of occasion, every kind of opportunity, and every kind of factor that can help nourish our beginner's mind. Our person is like a garden, filled with many flowering plants. But in the garden there are things other than flowers and plants. If we neglect the garden, it will be overrun with weeds, and our flowers will wither and die.

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Suppose you live with someone you appreciate very much. That person has goodness, talent, and kindness, and you feel very lucky to be able to live with such a person. You recognize him or her as someone wonderful. And yet sometimes you don't cherish her presence or his presence. Sometimes you say something rude or impatient. And sometimes you want to be alone, far away from this person. And yet deep inside you, you know that if that person died or went away, you would suffer tremendously. We all have that tendency to neglect and forget.

Every time I turn on the water tap, I practice mindfulness and I see that the water that flows through my fingers is a miracle. It has come from deep down in the earth or high in the mountains, and it has arrived in my bathroom. And because of mindfulness I know that there are areas on earth where water is very rare, and families have to travel three or five kilometers to get a bucket of water to bring home so they can cook and wash.

Although part of us recognizes that the water is precious, another part of us tends to neglect that. We call it forgetfulness, the opposite of mindfulness. Forgetfulness is the other side of ourselves. We have both mindfulness and forgetfulness at the same time. And sometimes forgetfulness gets the upper hand and you lose your happiness. You are capable of being grateful, and when you feel grateful, you're happy. But sometimes you just forget, you don't feel grateful anymore, and every time you don't feel grateful, you suffer. We all have that tendency to be ungrateful, just as we all have gratefulness within. We are made of these conflicts. We are made of flowers and compost at the same time, because we are a garden.

When we are learning something for the first time, before our mind is filled with preconceptions, we pay full attention. We are in our beginner's mind and we have our full mindfulness available. If we practice diligently and creatively, we can keep our practice fresh and our beginner's mind intact. ♦

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Politics of a Still Mind

PERRY GARFINKEL offers an appreciation of the deep personal realization behind Thich Nhat Hanh's philosophy of Engaged Buddhism.

HE'S TALLER THAN you'd expect—especially for a Vietnamese man—and thinner. He has big ears and huge eyes set deep into his face that give the impression that he is watching you very closely but from very far away. And he speaks so softly that you have to pay exquisite attention or miss his point entirely. Maybe that's his ploy.

A dharma teacher friend of mine calls his brand Buddhism Lite. And I tended to agree when I first saw Thich Nhat Hanh address a packed auditorium at Berkeley High School in California in 1988. His simple message and his demure persona, especially in comparison to the personas of those who were traveling the North American Buddhism circuit at the time, convinced me that this guy was never going to catch on in the West.

Little did I know.

Many people already knew he had been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for his anti-Vietnam War activities, speeches, and writings. Many more knew of Vietnamese monks whose acts in demonstration against that war had galvanized anyone with a sentient heart at the time. The image of Thich Quang Duc in 1963—sitting in full lotus, sitting as still as if he were in deep meditation before a statue of the Buddha but in fact fully engulfed in flames in a Saigon plaza—was burned into our collective consciences. We were both riveted and repulsed each time we saw it on TV, in newspapers, and in magazines. The thing was, though, to do such a thing was unimaginable, no matter how committed we were to ending the war. Although there seemed something inherently hypocritical for someone from a tradition whose operating paradigm was to harm no living thing to kill himself or herself in the name of peace, we all still could identify with a frustration that made us feel as if we would implode.

Thay, as he is commonly called, which means “teacher,” was a lecturer at Columbia University when he saw that image with the rest of us. He rushed home, realizing that the conflagration was about to rage out of control in the country he so dearly loved. He set harder to work. In 1965, he established the School of Youth



Thich Nhat Hanh leading a peace march in Los Angeles, 2006.

for Social Service, a grassroots Peace Corps of sorts made up of Buddhist volunteers who rebuilt bombed villages, set up schools and medical centers, resettled homeless families, and organized agricultural cooperatives. He also set up the Order of Interbeing, the *Tiep Hien* Order. *Tiep* means “being in touch with” or “continuing.” *Hien* means “realizing” and “making it here and now.” I often muse on that term, “interbeing,” reflecting a clever poet’s love of wordplay as well as a sublime comprehension of Buddhism. In the most economic fashion, the word speaks volumes about the law of cause and effect, about karma. My interpretation of interbeing: OK, fine, you practiced enough to get from “doing” to “being.” Now what are you doing with being? Wallowing in it? Or taking that wisdom a step further, to the third pearl of the refuges, to sangha. To learning how to “be” together. It expresses the Buddhist concept of interdependence, with attention to the relationship between and among people. It is the heart of socially engaged Buddhism.

A few years later, in 1967, we saw yet another widely circulated photo of yet another self-immolation, but this time it struck too close to home for Thay. The victim was Nhat Chi Mai, a nun who had been one of the first six members ordained into the *Tiep Hien* Order. She wrote in her last note, “I offer my body as a torch to dissipate the dark, to waken love among men, to give peace to

Vietnam.” The date of her death was May 16, 1967.

Only a few months earlier, on January 25, the Rev. Martin Luther King, the Nobel Laureate of 1964, had written the letter recommending Thay for the same prize. The irony alone would have debilitated a man with less fortitude: to be thus honored and then four months later to see the war escalating, to witness his close followers forfeiting their lives to awaken people to the plight of Vietnam.

But Thich Nhat Hanh pressed on. Even after the Paris Peace Accord was signed in 1973 and the Vietnamese government denied Thay entry back into the country, he led efforts from France, where he lived in exile, to rescue his fellow citizens, who were fleeing his homeland and floated in boats in the Gulf of Siam. When the government forced him to stop, he established the Unified Buddhist Church in France. By 1982, with growing support, he and his longtime colleague Sister Chan Khong founded Plum Village as a place to conduct retreats and workshops and seminars on peace negotiation and conflict resolution. The work goes on to this day.

Buddhism Lite indeed.

I met Rev. Hanh at Plum Village in the south of France, ninety kilometers east of Bordeaux, a region more famous to devotees

of the god Bacchus than of the Buddha. We sat inside his cottage, which overlooks a patchwork quilt of rich, green vineyards interspersed with radiant yellow sunflowers—a scene that would have made Van Gogh run for his easel. He had accepted my request for an interview for an article I was writing for no less prestigious a magazine than *National Geographic* on one condition, a condition he requires of all journalists no matter how prestigious the publication. First, I had to sit his retreat, then I could conduct the interview. I welcomed the chance to sit. I was exhausted from a twenty-week road trip following the footsteps of the growing worldwide Engaged Buddhism movement, set in motion by Thich Nhat Hanh, and I needed a place to collect my wits, to marinate in meditation. I got there as a retreat was in progress for the Vietnamese Diaspora, which was very much a cultural in-gathering of families and friends who had settled in far-flung Western countries after 1975. I tried to let go of my disappointment that my own schedule had made me miss the previous week, when Thay and Sister Chan Khong led conflict-negotiation workshops for Israelis and Palestinians. The journalist in me knew that would have generated sensational dynamic tension, the stuff on which reporters thrive. As it turned out, I was at precisely the right place at

precisely the right time with precisely the right people.

Though I have attended close to twenty retreats over the years, I had not participated in one of Thich Nhat Hanh's. But that was not why I felt like a fish out of water. I felt little in common with Vietnamese people. I had never been to Vietnam. I knew little to nothing about their culture, except that I loved their spring rolls. Though I had protested the war in Vietnam, had been tear gassed at Dupont Circle in Washington in 1969, had seen them on television through the sixties and early seventies, their faces speaking the international language of grief and terror, I had never actually met a Vietnamese person.

But over several days, the Vietnamese at Plum Village won my heart with their warmth and compassion; with their good humor, curiosity, and intelligence; with their friendliness after some initial shyness (and with their still-delicious spring rolls). They exemplify the human condition, of both the dark and the light side: they have suffered immeasurably, yet they continue to have hope.

Between the sitting sessions, Thay's dharma talks took me somewhat aback, to be honest. Knowing his influential role in spearheading a more socially and politically relevant Buddhism, I was surprised that his talks were about everyday mundane re-

The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings

The mindfulness trainings of the Order of Interbeing, first enumerated by Thich Nhat Hanh in 1966 at the height of the Vietnam War, expand on the traditional Buddhist precepts. Going beyond individual behavior, they serve as a guide for political and social action.



The first six members of the Order of Interbeing

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

2. Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice nonattachment 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, including personal contact, 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.

relationships—about open communication between parents and children, about keeping love fresh between husband and wife, about the importance of non-discrimination and mutual understanding in the increasing number of relationships between couples of different religious and cultural backgrounds.

By then I'd already interviewed some of the great Buddhist leaders and religious thinkers of the world—Robert Thurman, Joseph Goldstein, Huston Smith, Mark Epstein, S.N. Goenka, Reggie Ray, even His Holiness the Dalai Lama—and had come to expect nothing less than highly relevant profundity in such lectures, Buddhology at its best.

“Aren't there enough relationship gurus?” I asked when we met. I was thinking of Dr. Phil, John Gray, Oprah, and others who impart their versions of “truth” to us between commercial breaks, in books, in books-on-tape, on DVDs and videos ad nauseam. “Aren't there more important issues to discuss?”

“Such as war, violence, death, economic problems, terrorism?” he asked rhetorically. My tape recorder strained as much as I did to hear his softly spoken and carefully selected words. “The conflict in the Middle East, tension between religious groups—these are about relationships. The Buddha identified ignorance as the second noble truth. We create ignorance through poor commu-

nication. Misunderstanding begins in the microcosm, between two people. It creates fear, and fear creates violence. When you act with violence and anger, you create more violence and anger. The majority of the people who come here suffer from relationship, health, and work problems. But if your relationship is good, then you are happy, your health improves, and you'll be more successful in your enterprise.”

I had forgotten, as we all so often forget, that profundity comes in the simplest truths. And, in the manner of the dharma teachers, Thay brought his abiding message back to the cushion.

“It all starts with a spin on an old adage: ‘Don't just do something; sit there;’” he said. “With all this socially engaged work, first you must learn what the Buddha learned, to still the mind. Then you don't take action; action takes you.”

Action of that quality has guided and informed the missions of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, the Zen Hospice Project, the Sarvadaya Shramadana Movement of Sri Lanka, and so many more that its truth and wisdom are undeniable. Those groups, their leaders, and I symbolically circumambulate the lotus pond at Plum Village in honor of the foundational work of Thich Nhat Hanh, Sister Chan Khong, and their *Tiep Hien* Order. ♦

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

7. Do not lose yourself in dispersion and in your surroundings. Practice mindful breathing 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 you. Plant 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 of which you are not sure. 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 Buddhist community for personal gain or profit or transform your community into a political party. A religious community, however, should 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 profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on earth.

14. Do not mistreat your body. Learn to handle it with respect. Preserve vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realization of the Way. Be fully aware of the responsibility of bringing new lives into the world. Meditate on the world into which you are bringing new beings. ♦

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