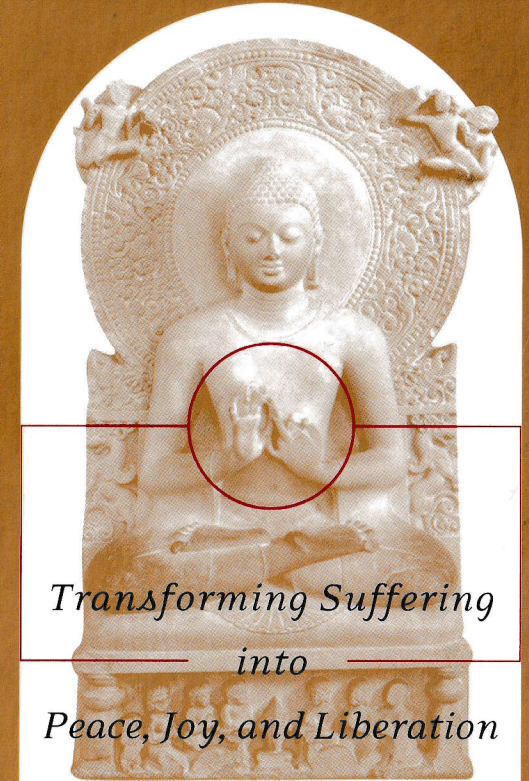


The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching

"Thich Nhat
Hanh writes
with the voice
of the Buddha."
—Sogyal Rinpoche



*Transforming Suffering
into
Peace, Joy, and Liberation*

**THICH
NHAT
HANH**

The third petal of the flower is inclusiveness, *kshanti paramita*. Inclusiveness is the capacity to receive, embrace, and transform. *Kshanti* is often translated as patience or forbearance, but I believe "inclusiveness" better conveys the Buddha's teaching. When we practice inclusiveness, we don't have to suffer or forbear, even when we have to embrace suffering and injustice. The other person says or does something that makes us angry. He inflicts on us some kind of injustice. But if our heart is large enough, we don't suffer.

The Buddha offered this wonderful image. If you take a handful of salt and pour it into a small bowl of water, the water in the bowl will be too salty to drink. But if you pour the same amount of salt into a large river, people will still be able to drink the river's water. (Remember, this teaching was offered 2,600 years ago, when it was still possible to drink from rivers!) Because of its immensity, the river has the capacity to receive and transform. The river doesn't suffer at all because of a handful of salt. If your heart is small, one unjust word or act will make you suffer. But if your heart is large, if you have understanding and compassion, that word or deed will not have the power to make you suffer. You will be able to receive, embrace, and transform it in an instant. What counts here is your capacity. To transform your suffering, your heart has to be as big as the ocean. Someone else might suffer. But if a bodhisattva receives the same unkind words, she won't suffer at all. It depends on your way of receiving, embracing, and transforming. If you keep your pain for too long, it is because you have not yet learned the practice of inclusiveness.

When Rahula, the Buddha's son, was eighteen, the Buddha delivered to him a wonderful Dharma talk on how to practice inclusiveness. Shariputra, Rahula's tutor, was there, and he listened and absorbed that teaching, also. Then, twelve years later, Shariputra had the chance to repeat this teaching to the full assembly of monks and nuns. It was the

day after the completion of the three-month rainy-season retreat, and every monk was getting ready to leave the compound and go off in the ten directions to offer the teachings to others. At that time, one monk reported to the Buddha, "My Lord, this morning as Venerable Shariputra was leaving, I asked him where he was heading, and instead of answering my question, he pushed me to the ground and did not even say, 'I'm sorry.'"

The Buddha asked Ananda, "Has Shariputra gone far yet?" and Ananda said, "No, Lord, he left just an hour ago." So the Buddha asked a novice to find Shariputra and invite him to come back. When the novice brought Shariputra back, Ananda summoned all the monks who were still there to gather. Then, the Buddha stepped into the hall and asked Shariputra formally, "Shariputra, is it true that this morning when you were going out of the monastery, a brother of yours wanted to ask you a question and you did not answer him? Is it true that instead you pushed him to the ground and didn't even say you were sorry?" Thereupon, Shariputra answered the Buddha, in front of all his fellow monks and nuns:³

"Lord, I remember the discourse you gave twelve years ago to Bhikshu Rahula, when he was eighteen years old. You taught him to contemplate the nature of earth, water, fire, and air in order to nourish and develop the virtues of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity.⁴ Although your teaching was directed to Rahula, I also learned from it, and I have tried to observe and practice that teaching.

"Lord, I have tried to practice like the earth. The earth is wide and open and has the capacity to receive, embrace,

³ *Shariputra's Lion's Roar, Anguttara Nikaya IX, 11. Also, Mahaparinirvana Sutra.*

⁴ The Buddha also taught the Four Immeasurable Minds — love, compassion, joy, and equanimity — to help us make our hearts bigger, so we don't have to suffer every time others inflict pain and injustice upon us. See chap. 22. See also Thich Nhat Hanh, *Teachings on Love.*

and transform. Whether people toss pure and fragrant substances such as flowers, perfume, or fresh milk upon the earth, or toss unclean and foul-smelling substances like excrement, urine, blood, mucus, and spit upon the earth, the earth receives them all equally, without grasping or aversion. No matter what you throw into the earth, the earth has the power to receive, embrace, and transform it. I try my best to practice like earth, to receive without resisting, complaining, or suffering.

"Lord, I practice mindfulness and loving kindness. A monk who does not practice mindfulness of the body in the body, of the actions of the body in the actions of the body, could knock down a fellow monk and leave him lying there without apologizing. But it is not my way to be rude to a fellow monk, to push him to the ground and walk on without apologizing.

"Lord, I have learned the lesson you offered to Rahula to practice like the water. Whether someone pours a fragrant substance or an unclean substance into the water, the water receives them all equally without grasping or aversion. Water is immense and flowing and has the capacity to receive, contain, transform, and purify all these things. I have tried my best to practice like water. A monk who does not practice mindfulness, who does not practice becoming like water, might push a fellow monk to the ground and go on his way without saying 'I'm sorry.' I am not such a monk.

"My Lord, I have practiced to be more like fire. Fire burns everything, the pure as well as the impure, the beautiful as well as the distasteful, without grasping or aversion. If you throw flowers or silk into it, it burns. If you throw old cloth and other foul-smelling things into it, the fire will accept and burn everything. It does not discriminate. Why? Because fire can receive, consume, and burn everything offered to it. I have tried to practice like fire. I am able to burn the things that are negative in order to transform them. A monk who

does not practice mindfulness of looking, listening, and contemplating might push a fellow monk to the ground and go on without apologizing. Lord, I am not such a monk.

"Lord, I have tried to practice to be more like air. The air carries all smells, good and bad, without grasping or aversion. The air has the capacity to transform, purify, and release. Lord Buddha, I have contemplated the body in the body, the movement of the body in the movement of the body, the positions of the body in the positions of the body, the feelings in the feelings, and the mind in the mind. A monk who does not practice mindfulness might push a fellow monk to the ground and go on without apologizing. I am not such a monk.

"My Lord, I am like an untouchable child with nothing to wear, with no title or any medal to put on my tattered cloth. I have tried to practice humility, because I know that humility has the power to transform. I have tried to learn every day. A monk who does not practice mindfulness can push a fellow monk to the ground and go on without apologizing. My Lord, I am not such a monk."

Shariputra continued to deliver his "Lion's Roar," but the other monk could stand it no longer, and he bared his right shoulder, knelt down, and begged for forgiveness. "Lord, I have transgressed the *Vinaya* (rules of monastic discipline). Out of anger and jealousy, I told a lie to discredit my elder brother in the Dharma. I beg the community to allow me to practice Beginning Anew." In front of the Buddha and the whole Sangha, he prostrated three times to Shariputra. When Shariputra saw his brother prostrating, he bowed and said, "I have not been skillful enough, and that is why I have created misunderstanding. I am co-responsible for this, and I beg my brother monk to forgive me." Then he prostrated three times to the other monk, and they reconciled. Ananda asked Shariputra to stay for a cup of tea before starting off on his journey again.

To suppress our pain is not the teaching of inclusiveness. We have to receive it, embrace it, and transform it. The only way to do this is to make our heart big. We look deeply in order to understand and forgive. Otherwise we will be caught in anger and hatred, and think that we will feel better only after we punish the other person. Revenge is an unwholesome nutriment. The intention to help others is a wholesome nutriment.

To practice kshanti paramita, we need the other paramitas. If our practice of inclusiveness does not bear the marks of understanding, giving, and meditation, we are just trying to suppress our pain and drive it down to the bottom of our consciousness. This is dangerous. That kind of energy will blow up later and destroy ourselves and others. If you practice deep looking, your heart will grow without limits, and you will suffer less.

The first disciple I ordained was a monk named Thich Nhật Tri. Brother Nhật Tri went with Sister Chân Không and me on many missions to rescue flood victims in central Vietnam, and he spent many months in a poor hamlet because I had asked him to. We were setting up the School of Youth for Social Service, and we needed to learn the real situation of the people in the rural areas. We wanted to find ways to apply nonviolence and loving kindness to help poor people improve their standard of living. It was a beautiful movement for social improvement. Eventually, we had 10,000 workers. The communists said our Buddhist movement was pro-American, and the mass media said that we Buddhist monks were disguised communists trying to arrange a communist takeover. We were just trying to be ourselves, not aligned with any warring party. In 1967, Brother Nhật Tri and seven other social workers were kidnapped by a group on the extreme right, and he has not been heard from since then.

One day, Nhật Tri was walking on the streets of Saigon, when an American soldier standing on a military truck spit

on his head. Brother Nhật Tri came home and cried and cried. Being a young man, he was tempted to fight back, and so I held him in my arms for half an hour in order to transform that feeling of being deeply hurt. I said, "My child, you were not born to hold a gun. You were born to be a monk, and your power is the power of understanding and love. The American soldier considered you to be his enemy. That was a wrong perception of his. We need 'soldiers' who can go to the front armed only with understanding and love." He stayed on with the School of Youth for Social Service. Then he was kidnapped and probably killed. Thich Nhật Tri is a big brother of the monks and nuns at Plum Village. His handwriting looked almost exactly like mine. And he wrote beautiful songs for buffalo boys to sing in the countryside.

How can we wash away that kind of injustice? How can we transform the injustice received by whole nations? Cambodians, Bosnians, Palestinians, Israelis, Tibetans, all of us suffer from injustice and intolerance. Instead of being brothers and sisters to each other, we aim guns at each other. When we are overtaken by anger, we think that the only response is to punish the other person. The fire of anger continues to burn in us, and it continues to burn our brothers and sisters. This is the situation of the world, and it is why deep looking is needed to help us understand that all of us are victims.

I told Brother Nhật Tri, "If you were born into a family along the coast of New Jersey or California and if you read the kinds of newspapers and magazine articles that those soldiers read, you would also believe that all Buddhist monks are communists, and you would spit on the head of a monk, too." I told him that American G.I.s were trained to look on all Vietnamese as enemies. They were sent here to kill or be killed. They are victims, just like the Vietnamese soldiers and Vietnamese civilians. The ones who hold the guns and shoot at us, the one who spit at you, they are not the makers of the war. The war makers are in comfortable offices in Beijing,

Moscow, and Washington, D.C. It was a wrong policy born of a wrong understanding. When I went to Washington in 1966, I met with Robert McNamara, and what I told him about the nature of war was entirely true. Half a year later, he resigned as Secretary of Defense, and recently he wrote a book and confessed that the war in Vietnam was a terrible mistake. Perhaps I helped plant some seeds of understanding in him.

A wrong perception was responsible for a wrong policy, and a wrong policy was responsible for the deaths of many thousands of American and Vietnamese soldiers, and several million Vietnamese civilians. The people in the countryside could not understand why they had to die like that, why the bombs had to fall on them day and night. I was sleeping in my room close to the Buddha Hall on the School of Youth for Social Service campus when a rocket was fired into that hall. I could have been killed. If you nourish your hatred and your anger, you burn yourself. Understanding is the only way out. If you understand, you will suffer less, and you will know how to get to the root of injustice. The Buddha said that if one arrow strikes you, you'll suffer. But if a second arrow hits you in the same spot, you'll suffer one hundred times more.⁵ When you are a victim of injustice, if you get angry, you will suffer one hundred times more. When you have some pain in your body, breathe in and out and say to yourself, "It is only a physical pain." If you imagine that it is cancer and that you will die very soon, your pain will be one hundred times worse. Fear or hatred, born of ignorance, amplifies your pain. *Prajña paramita* is the savior. If you know how to see things as themselves and not more than that, you can survive.

I love the Vietnamese people, and I tried my best to help them during the war. But I also saw the American boys in Vietnam as victims. I did not look at them with rancor, and I suffered much less. This is the kind of suffering many of us

⁵ *Samyutta Nikaya* V, 210.

have overcome, and the teaching is born out of that suffering, not from academic studies. I survived for Brother *Nhât Tri* and for so many others who died in order to bring the message of forgiveness, love, and understanding. I share this so they will not have died in vain.

Please practice deep looking, and you will suffer much less from disease, injustice, or the small pains within you. Deep looking leads to understanding, and understanding always leads to love and acceptance. When your baby is sick, of course you do your best to help him. But you also know that a baby has to be sick a number of times in order to get the immunity he needs. You know that you can survive, too, because you have developed antibodies. Don't worry. "Perfect health" is just an idea. Learn to live in peace with whatever ailments you have. Try to transform them, but don't suffer too much.

During his lifetime, the Buddha suffered too. There were plots to compete with him and even to kill him. One time, when he had a wound in his leg and people tried to help him, he said it was only a small wound, and he did his best to minimize the pain. Another time, five hundred of his monks went off to set up an alternative *Sangha*, and he took it very much in stride. Finally, the difficulties were overcome.

The Buddha gave very concrete teachings on how to develop inclusiveness — *maitri* (love), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (joy), and *upeksha* (equanimity).⁶ If you practice these Four Immeasurable Minds, you will have a huge heart.

Because *bodhisattvas* have great compassion, they have the capacity of receiving, embracing, and transforming. Because they have great understanding, they don't have to suffer. This is a great gift for the world and for the people we love.

⁶ See chap. 22 on the Four Immeasurable Minds.