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the language simple and clear.
This book is for everyone."
—*Falwell Magazine*



BEING PEACE

THICH NHAT HANH

AUTHOR OF *THE ENERGY OF PRAYER*

INTRODUCTION BY JACK KORNFIELD

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PRAISE FOR THICH NHAT HANH AND *Being Peace*

“Thich Nhat Hanh shows us the connection between personal inner peace and peace on earth.”

—His Holiness the Dalai Lama

“A glass of water in the desert for those interested in both Buddhism and the world.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“For spiritual seekers and social activists, this is it, the bible of Engaged Buddhism.”

—*Inquiring Mind*

“*Being Peace* is one of the most important books ever written.”

—*Pilgrim’s Way Catalog*

“To read this book is to come into living contact with a remarkable teacher of peacemaking spirituality....Thich Nhat Hanh’s style breathes confidence in the ability of his readers to experience peace, not just long for it.”

—Pax Christi USA

“I have learned from [Thich Nhat Hanh] that ‘being peace’ is more than a good idea. It is a moving and profound challenge to bring gentleness into every corner of your life.”

—*Vajradhatu Sun*

“It is as though Thich Nhat Hanh has pared down the voluminous teachings of Buddhism to the innermost core....This book reflects the heart of a remarkable human being, one who has emerged from Vietnam’s nightmare with his soul not only intact but radiant.”

—*Resurgence*

“*Being Peace* is a jewel of love and wisdom, a mirror reflecting our own happy Buddhahood. Its recognition that will inspire everyone, regardless of previous religious persuasion, with the unexpected joy of smiling.”

“An exquisite meditation on *being* peace in order to make peace. A book for everyone concerned about the state of the world and the quality of our lives.”

—*In Context*

Being Peace

THICH NHAT HANH

Illustrated by Mayumi Oda

Introduction by Jack Kornfield



PARALLAX PRESS
BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA



Introduction

JACK KORNFIELD

IN THIS WONDERFUL BOOK, Thich Nhat Hanh teaches us the reality of interdependence: “Even if I just clap my hands, the effect is everywhere, in the faraway galaxies.”

In 2007, we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of *Being Peace*. The publication of this seminal book and the Dharma teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh have had an extraordinary effect on Dharma practice in the Western world, especially visible here in America. At once simple and yet profoundly poetic and clear, compassionate and inspiring, the writings and teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh have transformed Buddhist teachings from a distant ideal into the immediacy of the awakened heart.

The Buddhist ancient stories tell how just the simple presence of a master is enough to touch the seeds of awakening in all those around. Just as the fragrances of jasmine and rosebay and sandalwood bring beauty, the fragrance of one who walks and speaks in harmony with the Dharma brings blessing wherever they go.

I’ve seen Thich Nhat Hanh walk slowly and mindfully into a gathering of thousands of people and the simple power of his presence radiates a joy and peace that spreads to all those present. In the same

way, the gracious and heartfelt writing you hold in your hands calms the mind and opens the heart to wisdom.

Through his being and his words, Thich Nhat Hanh invites us into the reality of the present. Because he is a poet, his language has beauty, intimacy, and rich texture that illuminate the mind. Because he is courageous, he willingly pierces our great heart of compassion, so that we can bow to burning hurricanes and sea pirates, to the sorrows of the world and those who cause sorrows. Because he is wise, his simple words speak to the most obvious Dharma and to the truly profound levels of Buddhist awakening, all at one time. In doing so, he simultaneously unites the great Buddhist schools of Theravada and Mahayana, following the rich legacy of Vietnamese Dharma.

Thich Nhat Hanh has helped us to see the depths of dependent origination in a flower. In the midst of it all he has taught us to breathe, to smile, to live with a free heart. And most importantly, in our troubled world he makes no false division between inner awakening and engaged compassion. To his eye, like his spiritual ancestor Mahatma Gandhi, every being matters, everything is sacred.

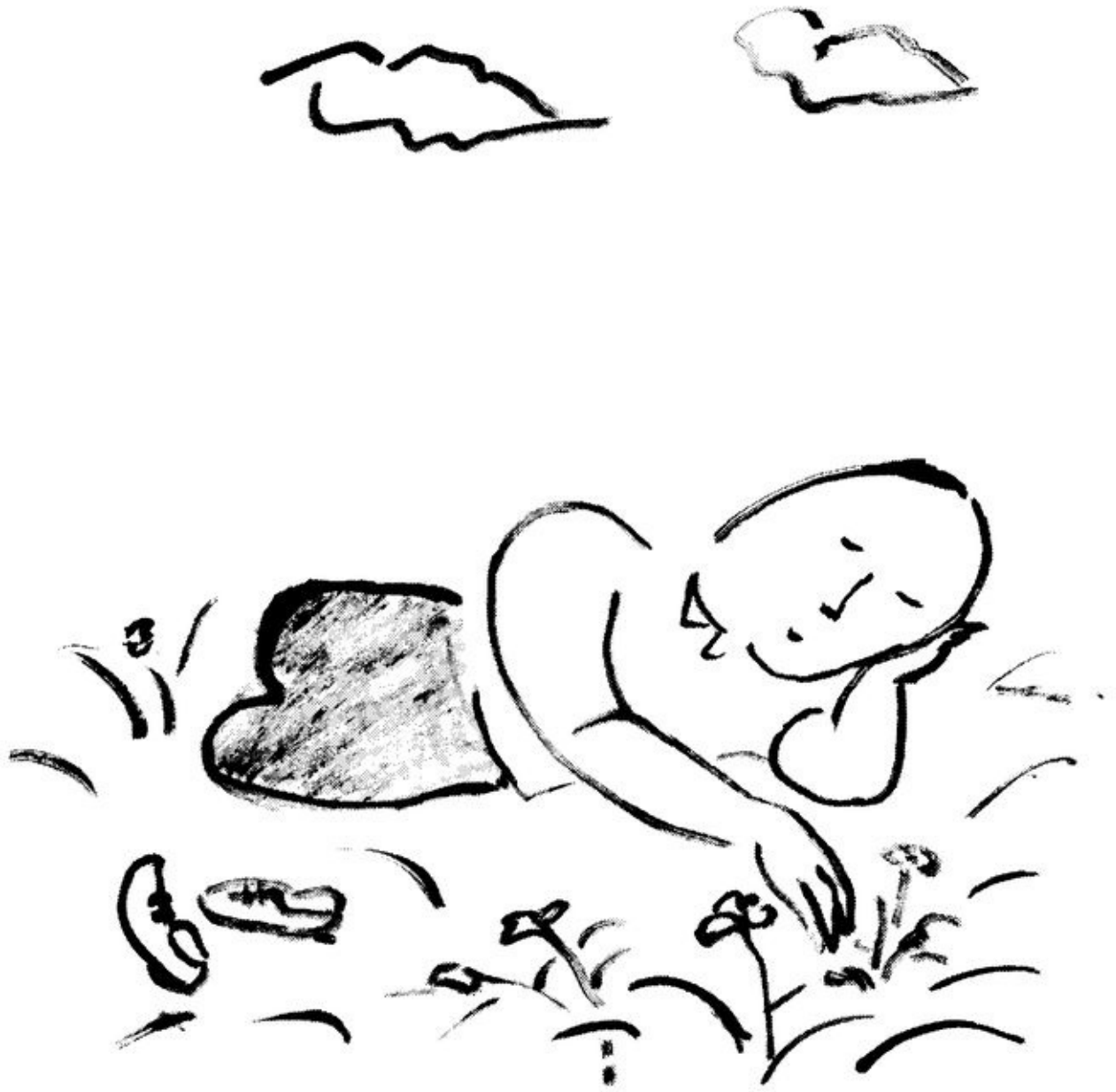
For well over half a century this revolutionary monk has spread the teachings of *Being Peace*. This book is a treasure. If you look deeply, you will see in it the seeds of all Thich Nhat Hanh's most important teachings, and the seeds of your own awakening as well.

May it bless all who touch its beautiful words.

With Metta,
Jack Kornfield
Spirit Rock Meditation Center, 2005

*If we are peaceful, if we are happy,
we can blossom like a flower,
and everyone in our family,
our entire society,
will benefit from our peace.*





1

SUFFERING IS NOT ENOUGH

LIFE IS FILLED with suffering, but it is also filled with many wonders, such as the blue sky, the sunshine, and the eyes of a baby. To suffer is not enough. We must also be in touch with the wonders of life. They are within us and all around us, everywhere, anytime.

If we are not happy, if we are not peaceful, we can't share peace and happiness with others, even those we love, those who live under the same roof. If we are peaceful, if we are happy, we can smile and blossom like a flower, and everyone in our family, our entire society, will benefit from our peace.

Do we need to make a special effort to enjoy the beauty of the blue sky? Do we have to practice to be able to enjoy it? No, we just enjoy it. Each second, each minute of our lives can be like this. Wherever we are, anytime, we have the capacity to enjoy the sunshine, the presence of each other, even the sensation of our breathing. We don't need to go to China to enjoy the blue sky. We don't have to travel into the future to enjoy our breathing. We can be in touch with these things right now. It would be a pity if we were only aware of suffering.

We are so busy we hardly have time to look at the people we love, even in our own household, and to look at ourselves. Society is organized in a way that even when we have some leisure time, we don't know how to use it to get back in touch with ourselves. We have millions of ways to lose this precious time—we turn on the TV, or pick up the telephone, or start the car and go somewhere. We are not used to being with ourselves, and we act as if we don't like ourselves and are trying to escape from ourselves.

Meditation is to be aware of what is going on—in our bodies, in our feelings, in our minds, and in the world. Each day 40,000 children die of hunger. The superpowers now have more than 50,000 nuclear warheads, enough to destroy our planet many times. Yet the sunrise is beautiful, and the rose that bloomed this morning along the wall is a miracle. Life is both dreadful and wonderful. To practice meditation is to be in touch with both aspects. Please do not think we must be solemn in order to meditate. In fact, to meditate well, we have to smile a lot.

Recently I was sitting with a group of children, and a boy named Tim was smiling beautifully. I said, "Tim, you have a very beautiful smile," and he said, "Thank you." I told him, "You don't have to thank me, I have to thank you. Because of your smile, you make life more beautiful. Instead of saying 'Thank you,' you could say, 'You're welcome.' "

If a child smiles, if an adult smiles, that is very important. If in our daily life we can smile, if we can be peaceful and happy, not only we, but everyone will profit from it. This is the most basic kind of peace work. When I see Tim smiling, I am so happy. If he is aware that he is making other people happy, he can say, "You're welcome."

From time to time, to remind ourselves to relax, to be peaceful, we may wish to set aside some time for a retreat, a day of mindfulness, when we can walk slowly, smile, drink tea with a friend, enjoy being together as if we are the happiest people on Earth. This is not a retreat, it is a treat. During walking meditation, during kitchen and garden work, during sitting meditation, all day long, we can practice smiling. At first you may find it difficult to smile, and we have to think about why. Smiling means that we are ourselves, that we have sovereignty over ourselves, that we are not drowned in forgetfulness. This kind of smile can be seen on the faces of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

I would like to offer one short poem you can recite from time to time, while breathing and smiling.

Breathing in, I calm my body.
Breathing out, I smile.
Dwelling in the present moment
I know this is a wonderful moment.

“Breathing in, I calm my body.” Reciting this line is like drinking a glass of ice water—you feel the cold, the freshness, permeate your body. When I breathe in and recite this line, I actually feel the breathing calming my body, calming my mind.

“Breathing out, I smile.” You know the effect of a smile. A smile can relax hundreds of muscles in your face, and relax your nervous system. A smile makes you master of yourself. That is why the Buddhas and bodhisattvas are always smiling. When you smile, you realize the wonder of the smile.

“Dwelling in the present moment.” While I sit here, I don’t think of somewhere else, of the future or the past. I sit here, and I know where I am. This is very important. We tend to be alive in the future, not now. We say, “Wait until I finish school and get my Ph.D. degree, and then I will be *really* alive.” When we have it, and it wasn’t easy to get, we say to ourselves, “I have to wait until I have a job in order to be really alive.” And then after the job, a car. After the car, a house. We are not capable of being alive in the present moment. We tend to postpone being alive to the future, the distant future, we don’t know when. Now is not the moment to be alive. We may never be alive at all in our entire life. Therefore, the technique, if we have to speak of a technique, is to be in the present moment, to be aware that we are here and now, and the only moment to be alive is the present moment.

“I know this is a wonderful moment.” This is the only moment that is real. To be here and now, and enjoy the present moment is our most important task. “Calming, Smiling. Present moment, Wonderful moment.” I hope you will try it.

Even though life is hard, even though it is sometimes difficult to smile, we have to try. Just as when we wish each other “Good morning,” it must be a real “Good morning.” Recently, one friend asked me, “How can I force myself to smile when I am filled with sorrow? It isn’t natural.” I told her she must be able to smile to her sorrow, because we are more than our sorrow. A human being is like a television set with millions of channels. If we turn the Buddha on, we are the Buddha. If we turn sorrow on, we are sorrow. If we turn a smile on, we really are the smile. We can’t let just one channel dominate us. We have the seeds of everything in us, and we have to take the situation in hand and recover our own sovereignty.

When we sit down peacefully, breathing and smiling, with awareness, we are our true selves, we have sovereignty over ourselves. When we open ourselves up to a TV program, we let ourselves be invaded by the program. Sometimes it is a good program, but often it is just noisy. Because we want something other than ourselves enter us, we sit there and let a noisy television program invade us, assail us, destroy us. Even if our nervous system suffers, we don’t have the courage to stand up and turn it off, because if we do that, we will have to return to our self.

Meditation is the opposite. It helps us return to our true self. Practicing meditation in this kind of society is very difficult. Everything seems to work in concert to try to take us away from our true self. We have thousands of things, like videotapes and music, which help us be away from ourselves. Practicing meditation is to be aware, to smile, to breathe. These are on the opposite side. We go back to ourselves in order to see what is going on, because to meditate means to be aware of what is going on. What is going on is very important.

Suppose you are expecting a child. You need to breathe and smile for the baby. Please don't wait until your baby is born before beginning to take care of him or her. You can take care of your baby right now, or even sooner. If you can't smile, that's very serious. You might think, "I'm too sad. Smiling just isn't the correct thing to do." Maybe crying or shouting would be correct, but your baby will get—anything you are, anything you do, is for your baby.

Even if you do not have a baby in your womb, the seed is already there. Even if you are not married, even if you are a man, you should be aware that a baby is already there, the seeds of future generations are already there. Please don't wait until the doctors tell you that you are going to have a baby to begin to take care of it. It is already there. Whatever you are, whatever you do, your baby will receive. Anything you eat, any worries that are on your mind will be for him or her. Can you tell me that you cannot smile? Think of the baby, and smile for him, for her, for the future generations. Please don't tell me that a smile and your sorrow just don't go together. It's your sorrow, but what about your baby? It's not his sorrow, it's not her sorrow.

Children understand very well that in each woman, in each man, in each child, there is a capacity of waking up, of understanding, and of loving. Many children have told me that they cannot show me anyone who does not have this capacity. Some people allow it to develop, and some do not, but everyone has it. This capacity of waking up, of being aware of what is going on in your feelings, your body, in your perceptions, in the world, is called Buddha nature, the capacity of understanding and loving. Since the baby of that Buddha is in us, we should give him or her a chance. Smiling is very important. If we are not able to smile, then the world will not have peace. It is not by going out for demonstration against nuclear missiles that we can bring about peace. It is with our capacity of smiling, breathing, and being peace that we can make peace.





2

THE THREE GEMS

MANY OF US WORRY about the world situation. We don't know when the bombs will explode. We feel that we are on the edge of time. As individuals, we feel helpless, despairing. The situation is s

dangerous, injustice is so widespread, the danger is so close. In this kind of situation, if we panic things will only become worse. We need to remain calm, to see clearly. Meditation is to be aware, and to try to help.

I like to use the example of a small boat crossing the Gulf of Siam. In Vietnam, there are many people, called boat people, who leave the country in small boats. Often the boats are caught in rough seas or storms, the people may panic, and boats can sink. But if even one person aboard can remain calm, lucid, knowing what to do and what not to do, he or she can help the boat survive. His or her expression—face, voice—communicates clarity and calmness, and people have trust in that person. They will listen to what he or she says. One such person can save the lives of many.

Our world is something like a small boat. Compared with the cosmos, our planet is a very small boat. We are about to panic because our situation is no better than the situation of the small boat in the sea. You know that we have more than 50,000 nuclear weapons. Humankind has become a very dangerous species. We need people who can sit still and be able to smile, who can walk peacefully. We need people like that in order to save us. Mahayana Buddhism says that you are that person, that each of you is that person.

I once had a student named Thich Thanh Van, who'd entered the monastery at the age of six. At the age of seventeen, he began to study with me. Later, he was the first director of the School of Youth for Social Service, where he directed thousands of young people working during the war in Vietnam rebuilding villages that were destroyed, and resettling tens of thousands of refugees fleeing the war zones. He was killed in an accident. I was in Copenhagen when I heard of the death of my student. He was a very gentle monk, very brave.

When he was a novice, six or seven years old, he saw people come to the temple and bring cakes and bananas to offer to the Buddha. He wanted to know how the Buddha eats bananas, so he waited until everyone went home and the shrine was closed, and then he peered through the door, waiting for the Buddha to reach out his hand, take a banana, peel it, and eat it. He waited and waited, but nothing happened. The Buddha did not seem to eat bananas, unless he realized that someone was spying on him.

Thich Thanh Van told me several other stories about when he was a young boy. When he discovered that the statue of the Buddha was not the Buddha, he began to ask where the Buddhas are, because he did not seem to him that Buddhas were living among humans. He concluded that Buddhas must not be very nice, because when people became Buddhas, they would leave us to go to a faraway country. He told him that Buddhas are us. They are made of flesh and bones, not copper or silver or gold. The Buddha statue is just a symbol of the Buddha, in the same way the American flag is a symbol of America. The American flag is not the American people.

The root word "budh" means to wake up, to know, to understand. A person who wakes up and understands is called a Buddha. It is as simple as that. The capacity to wake up, to understand, and to love is called Buddha nature. When Buddhists say, "I take refuge in the Buddha," they are expressing trust in their own capacity of understanding, of becoming awake. The Chinese and the Vietnamese say

“I go back and rely on the Buddha in me.” Adding “in me” makes it very clear that you yourself are the Buddha.

In Buddhism, there are three gems: Buddha, the awakened one; Dharma, the way of understanding and loving; and Sangha, the community that lives in harmony and awareness. The three are interrelated, and at times it is hard to distinguish one from the other. In everyone there is the capacity to wake up, to understand, and to love. So in ourselves we find Buddha, and we also find Dharma and Sangha. I will explain more about Dharma and Sangha, but first I want to say something about Buddha, the one who develops his or her understanding and loving to the highest degree. (In Sanskrit understanding is “*prajña*” and love is “*karuna*” and “*maitri*.”)

Understanding and love aren’t two separate things, they’re just one. Suppose your son wakes up one morning and sees that it is already quite late. He decides to wake up his younger sister, to give her enough time to eat breakfast before going to school. It happens that she is grouchy and instead of saying, “Thank you for waking me up,” she says, “Shut up! Leave me alone!” and kicks him. He will probably get angry, thinking, “I woke her up nicely. Why did she kick me?” He may want to go to the kitchen and tell you about it, or even kick her back. But then he remembers that during the night his sister coughed a lot, and he realizes that she must be sick. Maybe she has a cold, maybe that is why she behaved in such a mean way. He is not angry anymore. At that moment there is *budh* in him. He understands, he is awake. When you understand, you cannot help but love. You cannot get angry. To develop understanding, you have to practice looking at all living beings with the eyes of compassion. When you understand, you love. And when you love, you naturally act in a way that can relieve the suffering of people.

Someone who is awake, who knows, who understands, is called a Buddha. Buddha is in every one of us. We can become awake, understanding, and also loving. I often tell children that if their mother or father is very understanding and loving, working, taking care of the family, smiling, and being loved as a flower, they can say, “Mommy [or Daddy], you are all Buddha today.”

Two thousand five hundred years ago there was a person who practiced in a way that his understanding and love became perfected, and everyone in the world recognized this. His name was Siddhartha. When Siddhartha was very young, he began to think that life contained a lot of suffering, that people didn’t love and understand each other enough. So he left his home to go to the forest to practice meditating, breathing, and smiling. He became a monk, and he tried to practice in order to develop his awakening, his understanding, and his love to the highest levels. He practiced sitting meditation and walking meditation for several years with five friends who were also monks. Although they were intelligent people, they made mistakes. For instance, each day they ate only one piece of fruit—orange, mango, or one guava, or one star fruit. Sometimes people exaggerate, and say that Siddhartha ate only one sesame seed a day, but I went to the forest in India where he practiced, and I know that is silly because there are no sesame seeds there. I saw also the Neranjara River, in which he bathed several times, and the Bodhi tree where he sat and became a Buddha. The Bodhi tree I saw is not the same tree, it is the great-great-great-grandchild of the first Bodhi tree.

One day Siddhartha became so weak that he could not practice, and as he was an intelligent young

man, he decided to go to the village and get something to eat—bananas or cake or anything. But soon as he took four or five steps, he stumbled and fainted; he lost consciousness because he was so hungry. He would have died, but the village chief's daughter, Sujata, who was taking food to the forest gods, saw him and came over. She found that he was still alive, still breathing, but very weak, and so she took a bowl and poured some milk into his mouth. At first Siddhartha did not react, but then his lips moved and he began to drink the milk. He drank a whole bowl of milk, and he felt much better and slowly sat up. He looked beautiful, because Siddhartha was a very, very handsome person. Nowadays people make statues of him that are not very handsome. Sometimes they are even grumpy without any smile on his face. But he was a very beautiful person, and Sujata thought that he must be the god of the mountain. She knelt down and was about to worship, but he stretched out his arm to tell her not to, and he told her something.

What do you think he must have said to her?

He said, "Please give me another bowl of milk." He saw that the milk was doing wonderful things and he knew that once our body is strong enough, we can succeed in meditation. The young lady was so happy, she poured him another bowl of milk. After that, she inquired about him, and he said that he was a monk, trying to meditate to develop his compassion and his understanding to the highest level so that he could help other people. She asked if there was anything she could do to help, and Siddhartha said, "Each day at noontime, can you give me a small bowl of rice? That would help me very much." So from that day on, she brought him some rice wrapped in banana leaves, and sometimes she also brought milk.

The five other monks Siddhartha had been practicing with despised him and thought him worthless. "Let us go somewhere else to practice. He drinks milk, and he eats rice. He has no perseverance." But Siddhartha did very well. Day in and day out he meditated, and he developed his insight, his understanding, and his compassion very, very quickly as he recovered his health.

One day, after taking a swim in the Neranjara River, he had the impression that he only needed one more sitting to come to a total breakthrough, to become a fully enlightened person. When he was about to sit down, still practicing walking meditation, a buffalo boy came by. In India 2,500 years ago, water buffalo were used to pull the plows, and a buffalo boy's job was to watch them, bathe and take care of them, and cut grass for them to eat.

As the buffalo boy came by, he saw Siddhartha walking very peacefully, and he liked him immediately. Sometimes we see someone we like very much, even if we don't know why. The boy wanted to say something, but he was shy, so he came near Siddhartha three or four times before saying, "Gentleman, I like you very much." Siddhartha looked at him and said, "I like you also." Encouraged by this response, the boy told him, "I really want to give you something, but I have nothing I can give you." And Siddhartha said, "You do have something that I need. You have very beautiful green grass that you just cut. If you want to, please give me an armful of that grass." The boy was so happy to be able to give him something, and Siddhartha thanked him very much. After the buffalo boy left, Siddhartha spread the grass into a cushion that he could sit on.

As he sat down, he made a firm vow, "Until I get true enlightenment, I shall not stand up." With this strong determination, he meditated all night, and when the morning star appeared in the sky, he became a fully enlightened person, a Buddha, with the highest capacity to understand and to love.

The Buddha stayed at that spot for two weeks, smiling and enjoying his breathing. Every day Sujata brought him rice and the buffalo boy also came by to see him. He taught them about understanding, loving, and being awake. There is a scripture in the Pali Canon called the Sutra of Tending Buffalo, which lists eleven skills a buffalo boy must have, such as recognizing his own buffalo, making smokes to keep mosquitoes away, taking care of wounds on the body of buffalo, helping buffalo cross rivers, and finding places with enough water and grass to eat. After listing eleven skills, the Buddha tells the monks that meditation is also like this, and he lists eleven parallel skills for monks—recognizing the five components of a human being, and so on. Most stories of the life of the Buddha overlook the two weeks he stayed near the Bodhi tree, meeting with Sujata and the buffalo boy, walking slowly and enjoying themselves. But I am sure it happened this way. Otherwise how could the Buddha have delivered the Sutra of Tending Buffalo? In fact, when the buffalo boy grew up, he must have become a disciple of the Buddha, and one day, as he sat in the front of the assembly, the Buddha delivered the sutra.

After two weeks, the Buddha realized he had to get up from his seat under the Bodhi tree and share his understanding and compassion with other people. He told Sujata and the buffalo boy, “I am sorry, but I have to leave now. We are so happy together, but I must go and work with the adults.”

He thought about how he could share his understanding and compassion, and he remembered the five friends who had practiced with him. He walked an entire day in order to find them, and when he happened upon their camp, they had just finished their afternoon sitting meditation. They sat a lot. They were very thin by now, as you can imagine. One of them saw the Buddha coming and said to the others, “Don’t stand up if he comes. Don’t go to the gate to welcome him. Don’t go and fetch water for him to wash his feet and his hands. He didn’t persevere. He ate rice, and he drank milk.” But when he arrived, he was so attractive and so peaceful that they could not help themselves from offering him water to wash his feet and his hands and giving him a special seat. The Buddha told them, “Friends, you have found a way to develop understanding and loving. Please sit down, I’ll teach you.” They did not believe, at first. They said, “Siddhartha, while we practiced together, you gave up. You drank milk, you ate rice. How is it possible you have become a fully enlightened person? Please tell us. We cannot believe it.” The Buddha said, “Friends, have I ever told you a lie?” In fact, he had never lied to anyone, and these five friends remembered that. “I have never told you a lie. Now I am not telling you a lie. I have become a fully enlightened person, and I’ll be your teacher. Sit down, and listen to me.” And the five of them sat down and listened to the Buddha. He gave his first Dharma talk for adults. If you want to read his words, they are available in a wonderful sutra (called Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma) explaining the basic doctrines of Buddhism: suffering, the causes of suffering, the removal of suffering, and the way to do it.

I’ve read many accounts of the life of the Buddha, and I see him as a person like us. Sometimes artists draw a Buddha in a way that we cannot recognize him as a human being. In fact, he is a human being. I have seen so many Buddha statues, but not many really beautiful and simple ones. If anything

you want to draw a picture of a Buddha, please sit down and breathe for five or ten minutes, smiling before you pick up the pen to draw a Buddha. Then draw a simple Buddha, beautiful but simple, with a smile. And if you can, draw some children sitting with him. Buddha is young, not too grim, not too solemn, with a very light smile on his face. We have to go in this direction, because, when we look at the Buddha, we have to like him just as the buffalo boy and Sujata did.

When we say, “I take refuge in the Buddha,” we can also understand that “The Buddha takes refuge in me,” because without the second part the first part isn’t complete. The Buddha needs us for awakening, understanding, and love to be real things and not just concepts. They must be real things that have real effects on life. Whenever I say, “I take refuge in the Buddha,” I hear “Buddha takes refuge in me.” There is a verse for planting trees and other plants:

I entrust myself to earth,
Earth entrusts herself to me.
I entrust myself to Buddha,
Buddha entrusts herself to me.

“I entrust myself to earth” is like “I take refuge in the Buddha.” (I identify myself with the plant.) The plant will die or be alive because of the earth. The plant takes refuge in the earth, the soil. Because earth entrusts herself to me because each leaf that falls down and decomposes makes the soil richer. We know that the layer of soil that is rich and beautiful has been made by the vegetation. If the Earth is green and beautiful, it is because of this vegetation. Therefore, while the vegetation needs the earth, the Earth also needs the vegetation to express herself as a beautiful planet. So when we say, “I entrust myself to earth,” I am also saying: “Earth entrusts herself to me.” “I entrust myself to Buddha, Buddha entrusts herself to me.” It’s very clear that the wisdom, the understanding, and love of Shakyamuni Buddha need us to be real again in life. Therefore, we have a very important task: to realize awakening, to realize compassion, to realize understanding.

We are all Buddhas, because only through us can understanding and love become tangible and effective. Thich Thanh Van was killed during his effort to help other people. He was a good Buddhist because he was a good Buddha, because he was able to help tens of thousands of people, victims of the war. Because of him, awakening, understanding, and love were real things for many people. So we can call him a Buddha body, in Sanskrit we say “Buddhakaya.” For Buddhism to be real, there must be a Buddhakaya, an embodiment of awakened activity. Otherwise Buddhism is just a word. Thich Thanh Van was a Buddhakaya. Shakyamuni was a Buddhakaya. When we realize awakening, when we are understanding and loving, each of us is a Buddhakaya.

The second gem is the Dharma. Dharma is what the Buddha taught. It is the way of understanding and love—how to understand, how to love, how to make understanding and love into real things. Before the Buddha passed away, he said to his students, “Dear friends, my physical body will not be here

tomorrow, but my teaching body will always be here to help. You can consider it as your own teacher, a teacher who never leaves you.” That is the birth of “Dharmakaya.” The Dharma has a body also, the body of the teaching. The meaning of Dharmakaya is quite simple, although some people in Mahayana have made it very complicated. Dharmakaya just means the teaching of the Buddha, the way to realize understanding and love. Later it became something like the ontological ground of being.

Anything that can help you wake up has Buddha nature. When I am alone and a bird calls me, I return to myself. I breathe, and I smile, and sometimes it calls me once more. I smile and I say to the bird, “I hear already.” Not only sounds, but sights can remind you to return to your true self. In the morning when you open your window and see the light streaming in, you can recognize it as the voice of the Dharma, and it becomes part of the Dharmakaya. That is why people who are awake see the manifestation of the Dharma in everything. A pebble, a bamboo tree, the cry of a baby, anything can be the voice of the Dharma calling. We can practice like that.

In the thirteenth century, a monk came to visit Tue Trung, the most illustrious teacher of Buddhism in Vietnam at that time. The monk asked him, “What is the pure, immaculate Dharmakaya?” Tue Trung pointed to the excrement of a horse. This was an irreverent approach to Dharmakaya, because people were using the word “immaculate” to describe it. You can’t use words to describe the Dharmakaya. Even though we say that it is immaculate and pure, that doesn’t mean it is separate from things that are impure. Reality, ultimate reality, is free from all adjectives, either pure or impure. So his response was to shake up the monk’s mind, so he could cleanse himself of all these adjectives in order to see into the nature of the Dharmakaya. A teacher is also part of the Dharmakaya because she or he helps us be awake. The way she looks, the way she lives her daily life, the way she deals with people, animals, and plants helps us realize understanding and love in our life.

There are many ways of teaching: teaching by words, teaching by books, teaching by tape recorder. I have a friend who is a Zen teacher in Vietnam, quite well-known. He isn’t allowed to preach in Ho Chi Minh City, because if he teaches there, too many people come to hear him, and the government doesn’t like that. Therefore, people make tape recordings of his talks, and he has become known as the Cassette Monk! He is still in Vietnam. The government chased him away from his monastery, so he had to go to another place to teach.

Even if we can’t hear the teachings of the cassette monk, his being is very helpful to us in being awake, for he is part of the Dharmakaya. Dharmakaya is not just expressed in words, in sounds. It can express itself in just being. Sometimes if we don’t do anything, we help more than if we do a lot. We call that non-action. It is like the calm person on a small boat in a storm. That person does not have to do much, just to be himself, and the situation can change. That is also an aspect of Dharmakaya: not talking, not teaching, just being.

This is true not only of humans, but other species as well. Look at the trees in our yard. An oak tree is an oak tree. That is all it has to do. If an oak tree is less than an oak tree, then we are all in trouble. Therefore, the oak tree is preaching the Dharma. Without doing anything, not serving in the School of Youth for Social Service, not preaching, not even sitting in meditation, the oak tree is very helpful to all of us just by being there. Every time we look at the oak tree we have confidence. During the summer we sit under it and we feel cool, relaxed. We know that if the oak tree is not there, and all the other trees are not there, we will not have good air to breathe.

In our former lives, we were trees. Maybe we have even been oak trees ourselves. This isn’t ju

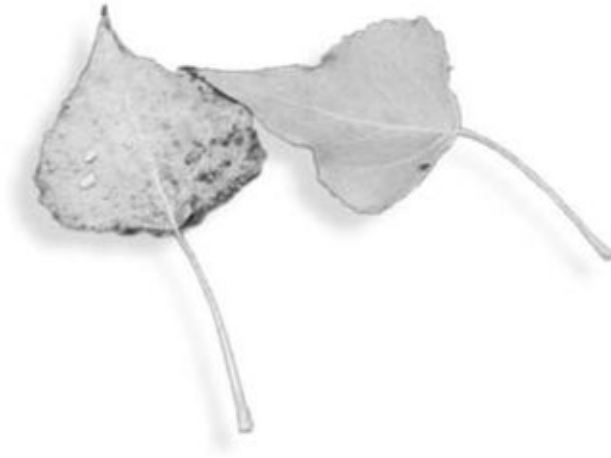
Buddhist theory; it's science. The human species is a very young species—we appeared on the Earth only recently. ~~Before that, we were rock, we were gas, we were minerals, we were single-celled beings.~~ We were plants, we were trees, and now we have become humans. We have to recall our past existences. This is not difficult. You just sit down and breathe and look, and you can see your past existences. When we shout at the oak tree, the oak tree isn't offended. When we praise the oak tree, it doesn't raise its nose. We can learn the Dharma from the oak tree; therefore, the oak tree is part of our Dharmakaya. We can learn from everything that is around, that is in us. Even if we aren't at a meditation center, we can still practice at home, because around us the Dharma is present. Everything is preaching the Dharma. Each pebble, each leaf, each flower is preaching the Saddharma Pundarika Sutra.

The Sangha is the community that lives in harmony and awareness. "Sanghakaya" is a new Sanskrit term. The Sangha needs a body also. When you are with your family and you practice smiling and breathing, recognizing the Buddha body in yourself and your children, then your family becomes your Sangha. If you have a bell in your home, the bell becomes part of your Sanghakaya, because the bell helps you to practice. If you have a cushion, then the cushion also becomes part of the Sanghakaya. Many things help us practice. The air, for breathing. If you have a park or a riverbank near your home, you are very fortunate because you can enjoy practicing walking meditation. You have to discover your Sanghakaya, inviting a friend to come and practice with you, have tea meditation, sit with your friend, join you for walking meditation. All those efforts are to establish your Sanghakaya at home. Practicing is easier if you have a Sanghakaya.

Siddhartha, the Buddha-to-be, while practicing with other people, began to drink milk, and the five monks who were with him went away. So he made the Bodhi tree into his Sanghakaya. He made the buffalo boy, Sujata, the river, the trees, and the birds around him into his Sanghakaya. There are those in Vietnam who live in reeducation camps. They don't have a Sangha. They don't have a Zen center. But they practice. They have to look upon other things as part of their Sanghakaya. I know of people who practiced walking meditation in their prison cells. They told me this after they got out of the camp. So while we are lucky, while we are still capable of finding so many elements to set up our Sanghakaya, we should do so. A friend, our own children, our own brother or sister, our house, the trees in our backyard, all of them can be part of our Sanghakaya.

Practicing Buddhism, practicing meditation is for us to be serene and happy, understanding and loving. In that way we work for the peace and happiness of our family and our society. If we look closely, the Three Gems are actually one. In each of them, the other two are already there. In Buddha there is Buddhahood, there is the Buddha body. In Buddha there is the Dharma body because without the Dharma body, he could not have become a Buddha. In the Buddha there is the Sangha body because he had breakfast with the Bodhi tree, with the other trees, the birds, and the environment. In a meditation center, we have a Sangha body, Sanghakaya, because the way of understanding and compassion is practiced there. Therefore the Dharma body is present, the way, the teaching is present. But the teaching cannot become real without the life and body of each of us. So the Buddhakaya is also present. If Buddha and Dharma are not present, it is not a Sangha.

Without you, the Buddha is not real, it is just an idea. Without you, the Dharma cannot be practiced. It has to be practiced by someone. Without each of you, the Sangha cannot be. That is why when we say, "I take refuge in the Buddha," we also hear, "The Buddha takes refuge in me." "I take refuge in the Dharma. The Dharma takes refuge in me. I take refuge in the Sangha. The Sangha takes refuge in me."





3

FEELINGS AND PERCEPTIONS

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