

Love in Action

Thich Nhat Hanh

On Simplicity

In 1951, I went with a few brother monks to a remote mountain in the Dai Lao region of Vietnam to build a meditation center. We asked some native mountain people for their help, and two Montagnards from the Jarai tribe joined us in clearing the forest, cutting trees into lumber, and gathering other materials for construction. They were hard workers, and we were grateful for their assistance. But after working with us only three days, they stopped coming. Without their help, we had many difficulties, as we were not familiar with the ways of the forest. So we walked to their village and asked what had happened. They said, "Why should we return so soon? You already paid us enough to live for a month! We will come again when we run out of rice." At the time, it was a common practice to underpay the Montagnards, to avoid just this kind of thing. We had paid them properly, and, surely enough, they stopped coming.

Many people criticized the Montagnards for this ethic. They said that this laziness could only lead to trouble, and they listed four reasons to support their claim: (1) The Montagnards would be happier and more comfortable if they would work harder. (2) They would earn more money, which they could save for difficult periods. (3) The Montagnards should work harder in order to help others. (4) If they would work harder, they would have the means to defend themselves from invasions and the exploitation of others. There may be some validity to each of these points, but if we look closely at the lives of the Montagnards, we will come to understand them, and ourselves, better.

1. The Montagnards would be happier and more comfortable if they would work harder. The Montagnards lived simply. They did not store much food at all. They had no bank accounts. But they were much more serene and at peace with themselves, nature, and other people, than almost anyone in the world. I am not suggesting that we all return to primitive lifestyles, but it is important that we see and appreciate the wisdom contained in a lifestyle like this, a wisdom that those of us immersed in modernization and economic growth have lost.

How much stuff do we need to be happy and comfortable? Happiness and comfort vary according to taste. Some people think they need three or four houses--one on the Riviera, one in New York, one in Tokyo, and perhaps one in Fiji. Others find that a two or three-room hut is quite enough. In fact, if you own a dozen luxurious houses, you may rarely have time to enjoy them. Even when you have the time, you may not know how to sit peacefully in one place. Always seeking distraction--going to restaurants, the theater, or dinner parties, or taking vacations that exhaust you even more, you can't stand being alone and facing yourself directly.

In former times, people spent hours drinking one cup of tea with dear friends. A cup of tea does not cost much, but today, we go to a cafe and take less than five minutes to drink our tea or coffee, and even during that short time, we are mostly thinking and talking about other things, and we never even notice our tea. We who own just one house barely have the time to live in it. We leave home early in the morning after a quick breakfast and go off to work, spending an hour in the car or the train and the rest of the day in the office. Then we return home exhausted, eat dinner, watch TV, and collapse so we can get up early for work. Is this "progress"?

The Montagnards were quite content to live in simple bamboo and palm-leaf huts and wash their clothes by hand. They refused to be slaves to economic pressures. Content with just a few possessions, they rarely needed to spend their time or money seeing doctors or psychotherapists for stress related ailments.

2 They would earn more money, which they could save for difficult periods.

How much do we need to save? We do not save air, because we trust that it will be available to us when we need it. Why must we stockpile food, money, or other things for our own private use, while so many others are hungry?

People who accumulate a house, a car, a position, and so forth, identify themselves with what they own, and they think that if they lose their house, their car, or their position, they would not be, themselves. To me, they are already lost. By accumulating and saving, they have constructed a false self, and in the process they have forgotten their truest and deepest self. Psychotherapists can try to help, but the cause of this illness is in their way of life. One way to help such a person would be to place him in an "underdeveloped" country where he could grow his own food and make his own clothes. Sharing the fate and simple life of peasants might help him heal quickly.

We have enough resources and know-how to assure every human being of adequate shelter and food every day. If we don't help others live, we ourselves are not going to be able to live either. We are all in the same boat the planet earth. Why not put our efforts into trying to help each other and save our boat instead of accumulating savings only for ourselves and our own children?

3. The Montagnards should work harder in order to help others.

Of course, the Montagnards could have spent more time working in order to send aid to people who were starving in other parts of the world. If they did not do so, it was because they didn't know much about the existence of other nations. They certainly did help their own tribal members whenever they got sick or when a crop was destroyed by some natural disaster. But let us reflect for a moment on what the Montagnard people did not do.

They did not harm or exploit others. They grew their own food and exchanged some of their products with other people. They did not do violence to nature. They cut only enough wood to build their houses. They cleared only enough land to plant their crops. Because of their simple lifestyle, they did not over consume natural resources. They did not pollute the air, water, or soil. They used very little fuel and no electricity. They did

not own private cars, dishwashers, or electric razors. The way they lived enabled natural resources to continually renew themselves. A lifestyle like theirs demonstrates that a future for humankind is possible, and this is the most helpful thing anyone can do to help others.

4. If they would work harder, they would have the means to defend themselves from invasions and the exploitation of others.

It is true that the Montagnards were exploited by others and were often victims of social injustice. They lived in remote mountain areas. If others settled nearby, they risked losing their land due to a lack of means with which to defend themselves.

People said that if the rest of us in Vietnam worked as little as they did, our country would never be able to resist foreign intervention and exploitation. It seems clear that the Montagnards and others like them had to do something more. But what? If the Montagnards would have moved down to the more populated areas, they would have seen men and women working extremely hard and getting poorer. They would have seen how expensive food, lodging, electricity, water, clothing, and transportation were. Their civilized countrymen were working all day long and could barely pay for the most basic items they consumed. The Montagnards in the forest did not need to spend any money. If they would have lived and worked in the cities, how would that have helped Vietnam resist foreign intervention? All they would have learned is that in the so-called developed nations, resources are used to make bombs and other elaborate weapons, while many citizens live in misery. The Montagnards might well need nuclear weapons to resist foreign intervention if they were to catch up with their more "developed" brothers and sisters. Will social injustice ever be abolished before all people wake up and realize that unless we let others live, we ourselves will not be able to live?

Economic growth may be necessary for the welfare of people, but the present rate of economic growth is destroying humanity and nature. Injustice is rampant. We humans are part of nature, and doing harm to nature only harms us. It is not just the poor and oppressed who are victims of environmental damage. The affluent are just as much victims of pollution and the exploitation of resources. We must look at the whole picture and ask, "Does our way of life harm nature? Does our way of life harm our fellow humans? Do we live at the expense of others, at the expense of the present, and at the expense of the future?" If we answer truthfully, we will know how to orient our lives and our actions. We have much to learn from the Montagnards and others like them. We must learn to live in a way that makes a future possible.

The Human Family

Although human beings are a part of nature, we single ourselves out and classify other animals and living beings as "nature," while acting as if we were somehow separate from it. Then we ask, "How should we deal with nature?" We should deal with nature the way we should deal with ourselves! Nonviolently. We should not harm ourselves, and we should not harm nature. To harm nature is to harm ourselves, and vice versa. If we knew how to deal with ourselves and our fellow human beings, we would know how to deal with nature. Human beings and nature are inseparable. By not caring properly for either, we harm both.

We can only be happy when we accept ourselves as we are. We must first be aware of all the elements within us, and then we must bring them into harmony. Our physical and mental well-being are the result of understanding what is going on in ourselves. This understanding helps us respect nature in ourselves and also helps us bring about healing.

If we harm another human being, we harm ourselves. To accumulate wealth and own excessive portions of the world's natural resources is to deprive our fellow humans of the chance to live. To participate in oppressive and unjust social systems is to widen the gap between rich and poor and thereby aggravate the situation of social injustice. Yet we tolerate excess, injustice, and war, while remaining unaware that the human race as a family is suffering. While some members of the human family are suffering and starving, for us to enjoy false security and wealth is a sign of insanity.

The fate of each individual is inextricably linked to the fate of the whole human race. We must let others live if we ourselves want to live. The only alternative to coexistence is co-nonexistence. A civilization in which we kill and exploit others for our own aggrandizement is sick. For us to have a healthy civilization, everyone must be born with an equal right to education, work, food, shelter, world citizenship, and the ability to circulate freely and settle on any part of the earth. Political and economic systems that deny one person these rights harm the whole human family. We must begin by becoming aware of what is happening to every member of the human family if we want to repair the damages already done.

To bring about peace, we must work for harmonious coexistence. If we continue to shut ourselves off from the rest of the world, imprisoning ourselves in our narrow concerns and immediate problems, we are not likely to make peace or to survive. It is difficult for one individual to preserve harmony among the elements within himself, and it is even more difficult to preserve harmony among the members of the human family. We have to understand the human race to bring it into harmony. Cruelty and disruption destroy the harmony of the family. We need legislation that keeps us from doing violence to ourselves or nature, and prevents us from being disruptive and cruel.

We have created a system that we cannot control. This system imposes itself on us, and we have become its slaves. Most of us, in order to have a house, a car, a refrigerator, a TV, and so on, must sacrifice our time and our lives in exchange. We are constantly under the pressure of time. In former times, we could afford three hours for one cup of tea, enjoying the company of our friends in a serene and spiritual atmosphere. We could organize a party to celebrate the blossoming of one orchid in our garden. But today we can no longer afford these things. We say that time is money. We have created a society in which the rich become richer and the poor become poorer, and in which we are so caught up in our own immediate problems that we cannot afford to be aware of what is going on with the rest of the human family. We see images on TV, but we do not really understand our Third World brothers and sisters.

The individual and all of humanity are both a part of nature and should be able to live in harmony with nature. Nature can be cruel and disruptive and therefore, at times, needs to be controlled. To control is not to dominate or oppress but to harmonize and equilibrate. We must be deep friends with nature in order to control certain aspects of it. This requires

a full understanding of nature. Typhoons, tornadoes, droughts, floods, volcanic eruptions, and proliferations of harmful insects all constitute danger and destruction to life. Although parts of nature, these things disrupt the harmony of nature. We should be able to prevent to a large degree the destruction that natural disasters cause, but we must do it in a way that preserves life and encourages harmony.

The excessive use of pesticides that kill all kinds of insects and upset the ecological balance is an example of our lack of wisdom in trying to control nature.

The harmony and equilibrium in the individual, society, and nature are being destroyed. Individuals are sick, society is sick, and nature is sick. We must reestablish harmony and equilibrium, but how? Where can we begin the work of healing? Would we begin with the individual, society, or the environment? We must work in all three domains. People of different disciplines tend to stress their particular areas. For example, politicians consider an effective rearrangement of society necessary for the salvation of humans and nature, and therefore urge that everyone engage in the struggle to change political systems.

We Buddhist monks are like psychotherapists in that we tend to look at the problem from the viewpoint of mental health. Meditation aims at creating harmony and equilibrium in the life of the individual. Buddhist meditation uses the breath as a tool to calm and harmonize the whole human being. As in any therapeutic practice, the patient is placed in an environment that favors the restoration of harmony. Usually psychotherapists spend their time observing and then advising their patients. I know of some, however, who, like monks, observe themselves first, recognizing the need to free their own selves from the fears, anxieties, and despair that exist in each of us. Many therapists seem to think that they themselves have no mental problems, but the monk recognizes in himself the susceptibility to fears and anxieties, and to the mental illness that is caused by the inhuman social and economic systems that prevail in today's world.

Buddhists believe that the reality of the individual, society, and nature's integral being will reveal itself to us as we recover, gradually ceasing to be possessed by anxiety, fear, and the dispersion of mind. Among the three- individual, society, and nature-it is the individual who begins to effect change. But in order to effect change, he or she must have personally recovered, must be whole. Since this requires an environment favorable to healing, he or she must seek the kind of lifestyle that is free from destructiveness. Efforts to change the environment and to change the individual are both necessary, but it is difficult to change the environment if individuals are not in a state of equilibrium. From the mental health point of view, efforts for us to recover our humanness should be given priority.

Restoring mental health does not mean simply helping individuals adjust to the modern world of rapid economic growth. The world is sick, and adapting to an unwell environment will not bring real health. Many people who seek the help of a psychotherapist are really victims of modern life, which separates human beings from the rest of nature. One way to help such a person may be to move him or her to a rural area where he can cultivate the land, grow his own food, wash his clothes in a clear river, and live simply, sharing the same life as millions of peasants around the world. For

psychotherapy to be effective, we need environmental change, and psychotherapists must participate in efforts to change the environment. But that is only half their task. The other half is to help individuals be themselves, not by helping them adapt to an ill environment, but by providing them with the strength to change it. To tranquilize them is not the way. The explosion of bombs, the burning of napalm, the violent deaths of relatives and neighbors, the pressures of time, noise, and pollution, the lonely crowds have all been created by the disruptive course of our economic growth. They are all sources of mental illness, and they must end. Anything we can do to bring them to an end is preventive medicine. Political activities are not the only means to this end.

While helping their particular patients, psychotherapists must, at the same time, recognize their responsibility to the whole human family. Their work must also prevent others from becoming ill. They are challenged to safeguard their own humanness. Like others, psychotherapists and monks need to observe first themselves and their own ways of life. If they do, I believe they will seek ways to disengage themselves from the present economic systems in order to help reestablish harmony and balance in life. Monks and psychotherapists are human beings. We cannot escape mental illness if we do not apply our disciplines to ourselves. Caught in forgetfulness and acquiescence to the status quo, we will gradually become victims of fear, anxiety, and egotism of all kinds. But if psychotherapists and monks, through mutual sharing, help each other apply our disciplines to our own lives, we will rediscover the harmony in ourselves and thereby help the whole human family.

A tree reveals itself to an artist when he or she can establish a genuine relationship with it. If a human is not a real human being, he may look at his fellow humans and not see them; he may look at a tree and not see it. Many of us cannot see things because we are not wholly ourselves. When we are wholly ourselves, we can see how one person by living fully demonstrates to all of us that life is possible, that a future is possible. But the question, "Is a future possible?" is meaningless without seeing the millions of our fellow humans who suffer, live, and die around us. Only when we really see them will we be able to see ourselves and see nature.

The Sun My Heart

When I first left Vietnam, I had a dream in which I was a young boy, smiling and at ease, in my own land, surrounded by my own people, in a time of peace. There was a beautiful hillside, lush with trees and flowers, and on it was a little house. But each time I approached the hillside, obstacles prevented me from climbing it, and then I woke up.

The dream recurred many times. I continued to do my work and to practice mindfulness, trying to be in touch with the beautiful trees, people, flowers, and sunshine that surrounded me in Europe and North America. I looked deeply at these things, and I played under the trees with the children exactly as I had in Vietnam. After a year, the dream stopped. Seeds of acceptance and joy had been planted in me, and I began to look at Europe, America, and other countries in Asia as also my home. I realized that my home is the earth. Whenever I felt homesick for Vietnam, I went outside into a backyard or a park, and found a place to practice breathing, walking, and smiling among the trees.

But some cities had very few trees, even then. I can imagine someday soon a city with no trees in it at all. Imagine a city that has only one tree left. People there are mentally disturbed, because they are so alienated from nature. Then one doctor in the city sees why people are getting sick, and he offers each person who comes to him the prescription: "You are sick because you are cut off from Mother Nature. Every morning, take a bus, go to the tree in the center of the city, and hug it for fifteen minutes. Look at the beautiful green tree and smell its fragrant bark." After three months of practicing this, the patient will feel much better.

But because many people suffer from the same malady and the doctor always gives the same prescription, after a short time, the line of people waiting their turn to embrace the tree gets to be very long, more than a mile, and people begin to get impatient. Fifteen minutes is now too long for each person to hug the tree, so the city council legislates a five-minute maximum. Then they have to shorten it to one minute, and then only a few seconds. Finally there is no remedy at all for the sickness.

If we are not mindful, we might be in that situation soon. We have to remember that our body is not limited to what lies within the boundary of our skin. Our body is much more immense. We know that if our heart stops beating, the flow of our life will stop, but we do not take the time to notice the many things outside of our bodies that are equally essential for our survival. If the ozone layer around our earth were to disappear for even an instant, we would die. If the sun were to stop shining, the flow of our life would stop. The sun is our second heart, our heart outside of our body. It gives all life on earth the warmth necessary for existence. Plants live thanks to the sun. Their leaves absorb the sun's energy, along with carbon dioxide from the air, to produce food for the tree, the flower, the plankton. And thanks to plants, we and other animals can live. All of us- people, animals, plants, and minerals- "consume" the sun, directly and indirectly. We cannot begin to describe all the effects of the sun, that great heart outside of our body.

When we look at green vegetables, we should know that it is the sun that is green and not just the vegetables. The green color in the leaves of the vegetables is due to the presence of the sun. Without the sun, no living being could survive. Without sun, water, air, and soil, there would be no vegetables. The vegetables are the coming-together of many conditions near and far.

There is no phenomenon in the universe that does not intimately concern us, from a pebble resting at the bottom of the ocean, to the movement of a galaxy millions of light years away. Walt Whitman said, "I believe a blade of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars. . . ." These words are not philosophy. They come from the depths of his soul. He also said, "I am large, I contain multitudes."

This might be called a meditation on "interbeing endlessly interwoven". All phenomena are interdependent. When we think of a speck of dust, a flower, or a human being, our thinking cannot break loose from the idea of unity, of one, of calculation. We see a line drawn between one and many, one and not one. But if we truly realize the interdependent nature of the dust, the flower, and the human being, we see that unity cannot exist without diversity. Unity and diversity interpenetrate each other freely. Unity is diversity, and diversity is unity. This is the principle of interbeing.

If you are a mountain climber or someone who enjoys the countryside or the forest, you know that forests are our lungs outside of our bodies. Yet we have been acting in a way that has allowed millions of square miles of land to be deforested, and we have also destroyed the air, the rivers, and parts of the ozone layer. We are imprisoned in our small selves, thinking only of some comfortable conditions for this small self, while we destroy our large self. If we want to change the situation, we must begin by being our true selves. To be our true selves means we have to *be* the forest, the river, and the ozone layer. If we visualize ourselves as the forest, we will experience the hopes and fears of the trees. If we don't do this, the forests will die, and we will lose our chance for peace. When we understand that we inter-are with the trees, we will know that it is up to us to make an effort to keep the trees alive. In the last twenty years, our automobiles and factories have created acid rain that has destroyed so many trees. Because we inter-are with the trees, we know that if they do not live, we too will disappear very soon.

We humans think we are smart, but an orchid, for example, knows how to produce noble, symmetrical flowers, and a snail knows how to make a beautiful, well-proportioned shell. Compared with their knowledge, ours is not worth much at all. We should bow deeply before the orchid and the snail and join our palms reverently before the monarch butterfly and the magnolia tree. The feeling of respect for all species will help us recognize the noblest nature in ourselves.

An oak tree is an oak tree. That is all an oak tree needs to do. If an oak tree is less than an oak tree, we will all be in trouble. In our former lives, we were rocks, clouds, and trees. We have also been an oak tree. This is not just Buddhist; it is scientific. We humans are a young species. We were plants, we were trees, and now we have become humans. We have to remember our past existences and be humble. We can learn a lot from an oak tree.

All life is impermanent. We are all children of the earth, and, at some time, she will take us back to herself again. We are continually arising from Mother Earth, being nurtured by her, and then returning to her. Like us, plants are born, live for a period of time, and then return to the earth. When they decompose, they fertilize our gardens. Living vegetables and decomposing vegetables are part of the same reality. Without one, the other cannot be. After six months, compost becomes fresh vegetables again. Plants and the earth rely on each other. Whether the earth is fresh, beautiful, and green, or arid and parched depends on the plants.

It also depends on us. Our way of walking on the earth has a great influence on animals and plants. We have killed so many animals and plants and destroyed their environments. Many are now extinct. In turn, our environment is now harming us. We are like sleepwalkers, not knowing what we are doing or where we are heading. Whether we can wake up or not depends on whether we can walk mindfully on our Mother Earth. The future of all life, including our own, depends on our mindful steps.

Birds' songs express joy, beauty, and purity, and evoke in us vitality and love. So many beings in the universe love us unconditionally. The trees, the water, and the air don't ask anything of us; they just love us. Even though we need this kind of love, we continue to

destroy them. By destroying the animals, the air, and the trees, we are destroying ourselves. We must learn to practice unconditional love for all.

Our earth, our green beautiful earth is in danger, and all of us know it. Yet we act as if our daily lives have nothing to do with the situation of the world. If the earth were your body, you would be able to feel many areas where she is suffering. Many people are aware of the world's suffering, and their hearts are filled with compassion. They know what needs to be done, and they engage in political, social, and environmental work to try to change things. But after a period of intense involvement, they become discouraged, because they lack the strength needed to sustain a life of action. Real strength is not in power, money, or weapons, but in deep, inner peace.

If we change our daily lives-the way we think, speak, and act-we change the world. The best way to take care of the environment is to take care of the environmentalist. Many Buddhist teachings help us understand our interconnectedness with our mother, the earth. One of the deepest is the Diamond Sutra, which is written in the form of a dialogue between the Buddha and his senior disciple, Subhuti. It begins with this question by Subhuti: "If daughters and sons of good families wish to give rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind, what should they rely on and what should they do to master their thinking?" This is the same as asking, "If I want to use my whole being to protect life, what methods and principles should I use?" , The Buddha answers, "We have to do our best to help every living being cross the ocean of suffering. But after all beings have arrived at the shore of liberation, no being at all has been carried to the other shore. If you are still caught, up in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a life span, you are not an authentic bodhisattva" Self, person, living being, and life span are four notions that prevent us from seeing reality.

Life is one. We do not need to slice it into pieces and call this or that piece a "self." What we call a self is made only of non-self elements. When we look at a flower, for example, we may think that it is different from "non-flower" things. But when we look more deeply, we see that everything in the cosmos is in that flower. Without all of the non-flower elements-sunshine, clouds, earth, minerals, heat, rivers, and consciousness-a flower cannot be. That is why the Buddha teaches that the self does not exist. We have to discard all distinctions between self and non-self. How can anyone work to protect the environment without this insight?

The second notion that prevents us from seeing reality is the notion of a person, a human being. We usually discriminate between humans and non-humans, thinking that we are more important than other species. But since we humans are made of non-human elements, to protect ourselves we have to protect all of the non-human elements. There is no other way. If you think, "God created man in His own image and He created other things for man to use," you are already making the discrimination that man is more important than other things. When we see that humans have no self, we see that to take care of the environment (the non-human elements) is to take care of humanity. The best way to take good care of men and women so that they can be truly healthy and happy is to take care of the environment.

I know ecologists who are not happy in their families. They worked hard to improve the environment, partly to escape family life. If someone is not happy within himself, how can he help the environment? That is why the Buddha teaches that to protect the non-human elements is to protect humans, and to protect humans is to protect non-human elements.

The third notion we have to break through is the notion of a living being. We think that we living beings are different from inanimate objects, but according to the principle of interbeing, living beings are comprised of non-living-being elements. When we look into ourselves, we see minerals and all other non-living-being elements. Why discriminate against what we call inanimate? To protect living beings, we must protect the stones, the soil, and the oceans. Before the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, there were many beautiful stone benches in the parks. As the Japanese were rebuilding their city, they discovered that these stones were dead, so they carried them away and buried them. Then they brought in live stones. Do not think these things are not alive. Atoms are always moving. Electrons move at nearly the speed of light. According to the teaching of Buddhism, these atoms and stones are consciousness itself. That is why discrimination by living beings against non-living beings should be discarded.

The last notion is that of a life span. We think that we have been alive since a certain point in time and that prior to that moment, our life did not exist. This distinction between life and non-life is not correct. Life is made of death, and death is made of life. We have to accept death; it makes life possible. The cells in our body are dying every day, but we never think to organize funerals for them. The death of one cell allows for the birth of another. Life and death are two aspects of the same reality. We must learn to die peacefully so that others may live. This deep meditation brings forth non-fear, non-anger, and non-despair, the strengths we need for our work. With non-fear, even when we see that a problem is huge, we will not burn out. We will know how to make small, steady steps. If those who work to protect the environment contemplate these four notions, they will know how to be and how to act.

In another Buddhist text, the Avatamsaka (Adorning the Buddha with Flowers) Sutra, the Buddha further elaborates his insights concerning our "interpenetration" with our environment. Please meditate with me on the "Ten Penetrations":

The first is, "All worlds penetrate a single pore. A single pore penetrates all worlds." Look deeply at a flower. It may be tiny, but the sun, the clouds, and everything else in the cosmos penetrates it. Nuclear physicists say very much the same thing: one electron is made by all electrons; one electron is in all electrons.

The second penetration is, "All living beings penetrate one body. One body penetrates all living beings." When you kill a living being, you kill yourself and everyone else as well.

The third is, "Infinite time penetrates one second. One second penetrates infinite time." A *ksana* is the shortest period of time, actually much shorter than a second.

The fourth penetration is, "All Buddhist teachings penetrate one teaching. One teaching penetrates all Buddhist teaching." As a young monk, I had the opportunity to learn that

Buddhism is made of non-Buddhist elements. So, whenever I study Christianity or Judaism, I find the Buddhist elements in them, and vice versa. I always respect non-Buddhist teachings. All Buddhist teachings penetrate one teaching, and one teaching penetrates all Buddhist teachings. We are free.

The fifth penetration is, "Innumerable spheres enter one sphere. One sphere enters innumerable spheres." A sphere is a geographical space. Innumerable spheres penetrate into one particular area, and one particular area enters into innumerable spheres. It means that when you destroy one area, you, destroy every area. When you save one area, you save all areas. A student asked me, "Th'ay, there are so many urgent problems, what should I do?" I said, "Take one thing and do it very deeply and carefully, and you will be doing everything at the same time."

The sixth penetration is, "All sense organs penetrate one organ. One organ penetrates all sense organs"--eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. To take care of one means to take care of many. To take care of your eyes means to take care of the eyes of innumerable living beings.

The seventh penetration is, "All sense organs penetrate non-sense organs. Non-sense organs penetrate all sense organs." Not only do non-sense organs penetrate sense organs, they also penetrate non-sense organs. There is no discrimination. Sense organs are made of non-sense-organ elements. That is why they penetrate non-sense organs. This helps us remember the teaching of the Diamond Sutra.

The eighth penetration is, "One perception penetrates all perceptions. All perceptions penetrate one perception." If your perception is not accurate, it will influence all other perceptions in yourself and others. Suppose a bus driver has an incorrect perception. We know what may happen. One perception penetrates all perceptions.

The ninth penetration is, "Every sound penetrates one sound. One sound penetrates every sound." This is a very deep teaching. If we understand one sound or one word, we can understand all.

The tenth penetration is, "All times penetrate one time. One time penetrates all times--past, present, and future. In one second, you can find the 'past, present, and future.'" In the past, you can see the present and the future. In the present, you can find the past and future. In the future, you can find the past and present. They "inter-contain" each other. Space contains time, time contains space. In the teaching of interpenetration, one determines the other, the other determines this one. When we realize our nature of interbeing, we will stop blaming and killing, because we know that we inter-are.

Interpenetration is an important teaching, but it still suggests that things outside of one another penetrate into each other. Interbeing is a step forward. We are already inside, so we don't have to enter. In contemporary nuclear physics, people talk about implicit order and explicit order. In the explicit order, things exist outside of each other--the table outside of the flower, the sunshine outside of the cypress tree. In the implicit order, we see that they are inside each other--the sunshine inside the cypress tree.

Interbeing is the implicit order. To practice mindfulness and to look deeply into the nature of things is to discover the true nature of interbeing. There we find peace and develop the strength to be in touch with everything. With this understanding, we can easily sustain the work of loving and caring for the earth and for each other for a long time.

(Excerpted From “**The Soul of Nature**: celebrating the spirit of the Earth” edited by Michael Tobias & Georgianne Cowan, Penguin 1996)