

Nondiscrimination

When you feel you have nothing to belong to and have no identity, that is when you have a chance to break through to your true home

by Thich Nhat Hanh, from *The Mindfulness Bell*

DEAR SANGHA, yesterday I spoke about home, true home. I told you that I have a home nobody can take away from me, no matter where I go. One time when I was in Washington, D.C., the State Department informed me that my passport was no longer valid. They did that so I could not speak publicly on behalf of the victims of the war. People in Washington, D.C., urged me to go into hiding, because I risked deportation and jail. I did not go into hiding. I was forced to seek political asylum in France, and I obtained a travel document called an *apatride*; the English word for a person with this document is “expatriate.” With this document, you can ask for a visa to go to European countries who have signed the Geneva Convention. But for countries like Canada and the United States of America, where you must have a visa, it is very difficult to ask for a visa when you do not have a country. You are without fatherland, motherland.

But because I do not have a country of my own, I had the opportunity to find my true home. This is very important. It is because I did not belong to any particular country that I made an effort to break through, and I got my true home.

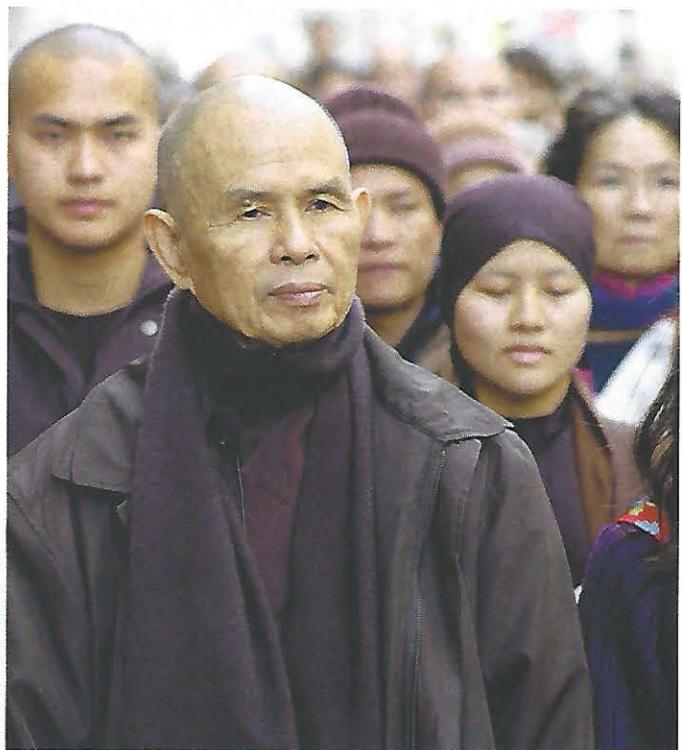
My dear friends, if you have the feeling you do not belong to any country, to any geographical spot, to any cultural heritage, to any particular ethnic group—for example when you go to Japan you don’t feel that Japan accepts you, when you go back to America you don’t feel that America is your home, when you go to Africa, you don’t think that you are an African, when you go back to the United States of America you don’t feel that you are accepted; when you feel you have nothing to belong to, you have no identity, that is when you have a chance to break through to your true home. That was my case.

My true home is not limited to any spot, any place—geographically speaking, ethnically speaking, culturally speaking—although there may be some cultural preference, some ethnic preference, some geographical preference.

Sometimes you like snow and very cold weather. Sometimes you like to be in a place where there is a lot of sunshine. You may have a preference, but you do not discriminate. All belongs to you.

THERE IS ABSOLUTELY no discrimination in your true home. At times you may prefer something, but you do not discriminate against anything in terms of geography, ethnicity, or culture, because everything may be beautiful, every place may be beautiful. And you do not just have one portion of it, you have the totality of it. You are free to enjoy everything.

Suppose you love oranges and consider oranges to be your favorite fruit. Still nothing prevents you from enjoying other



kinds of fruits like mango, kiwi, or even durian. [Laughter] It would be a pity if you were committed to eating only one kind of fruit. You are free, and you can enjoy every kind of fruit. And it would be a pity if you committed only to one spiritual heritage, like only Christianity or Buddhism. Because there are beautiful things to enjoy in each spiritual heritage.

Your orange may taste wonderful, but mango tastes wonderful also. It would be a pity to discriminate against the mango and the kiwi and the durian. So in your true home there is no discrimination; you are free. And when you live with the wisdom of nondiscrimination, you don't suffer.

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You have a lot of wisdom and you embrace everyone—every country, every culture, every ethnic group. That is my case. I don't discriminate against anything. I love oranges, but I also love mangos and kiwis. Durian—[Laughter]—although I don't eat it, I don't discriminate against it, and my disciples eat it for me.

This is my right hand; this is my left hand. My right hand has written all of my poems except one. I always write my poems with a pen, except one time when I did not have a pen and there was a poem in me that wanted to come out. There was a typewriter so I rolled an old envelope into it and I typed my poem. That was the only time my left hand participated in poetry writing, yet my right hand never has a superiority complex. My right hand does not think or say things like, "Left Hand, do you know that I have written all

the poems except one? [Laughter] Do you know that I can do calligraphy? I can invite the bell to sound. And you, Left Hand, do not seem to be good for anything." My right hand never has that kind of thinking, that kind of attitude. That is why my right hand never suffers because of jealousy; it does not have a superiority complex. When you feel that you are more powerful, more talented, more important than others, then you suffer from a superiority complex.

And my left hand doesn't have an inferiority complex, though she has not written many poems or done any calligraphy. It's wonderful; she does not suffer at all. There is no comparing, there is no low self-esteem. That is why she is perfectly happy, my left hand.

One day I was trying to hang a picture on the wall. My left hand was holding a nail, my right hand was a hammer. That day, I don't know why, instead of pounding on the nail I pounded on my finger. And when I hit the finger of my left hand, the left hand suffered, and the right hand put down the hammer right away and took care of the left hand in the most tender way, like it was taking care of itself. There was no duality. The right hand does things for my left hand as it does for itself. There is no discrimination, no thinking: "I am I, and you are you." My two hands practice perfectly the teaching of the Buddha—no self, no separate self.

My right hand considers the suffering of my left hand as his own suffering. That is why he did everything to take care of the left hand. My left hand did not have any anger toward my right hand. It did not say, "You, Right Hand, you have done me an injustice. Give me that hammer, I want justice!" [Laughter] There's no such thinking. There is a kind of wisdom inherent in my right hand and in my left hand, called by the Buddha the wisdom of nondiscrimination. If you have it, you don't have to suffer at all.

IN SANSKRIT, NIRVIKALPAJNANA. Vikalpa, discrimination ... nirvikalpa, nondiscrimination ... jnana, wisdom: the wisdom of nondiscrimination. The wisdom of nondiscrimination is innate in us. But if we allow the wrong perceptions and habit energies to cover it up, it cannot manifest. The practice of meditation helps us to recognize the seed of nondiscrimination in us, and if we cultivate it, water it every day, it will manifest fully and liberate us. The other person also has the wisdom of nondiscrimination. But because he or she has lived in a culture, in an environment where the thinking and action are so categorized by

individualism, selfishness, and ignorance, the wisdom of nondiscrimination cannot manifest.

One year I went to Italy for a retreat, and I noticed they planted olive trees in groups of three or four. I was surprised, and asked, "Why do this?" They said, "No, we didn't." But if you look, you see groups of three or four olive trees together. They explained it's not three olive trees, it's just one. One year it was so cold that all the olive trees died, but deep down the roots did not die. So after the hard winter, spring came and young sprouts were born. And then instead of having one trunk, they had three or four trunks. Looking superficially you think that there are three or four olive trees but in fact they are one. If you are brothers of the same parents, you are like that. You have the same roots, father and mother. These three or four olive trees, they have the same block of roots. They look like different trees, but they are just one. It would be strange if one of the trees discriminated against another one, and they fought and killed each other. That is sheer ignorance. If they look deeply and touch their roots, they know they are brother and sister. They are one.

If the Israelis touch their wisdom of nondiscrimination, they will find out the Palestinians are their brothers. They are like the right hand and the left hand. It would be silly to consider each other as enemies and kill each other for the

sake of survival. It would be a pity if Hindus and Muslims fight and kill each other. It would be a pity if Catholics and Protestants fight and kill each other, because they are of the same roots. They do it because they have not been able to touch their ground of being, allowing the wisdom of nondiscrimination to manifest, to show them the way and the truth. When you go to your true home, when you are able to touch your true home, you see everything includes everything else—you touch the nature of interbeing of everything.

If you look deeply into this flower, you see a cloud, because you know that if there is no cloud there will be no rain, and this flower cannot manifest itself. So looking in the flower you see an element you don't call flower. But if you remove the cloud from the flower, the flower cannot be there. And if you look deeply you see the sunshine. Without the sunshine, nothing can grow. I can touch the sunshine by touching the petal of the flower. If you remove the sunshine, the flower will disappear.

When you look into the flower you see the earth, you see the minerals. You cannot remove the elements of soil from the flower—it will collapse, it will vanish. That is why you can say a flower is made only of non-flower elements. Cloud is a non-flower element essential to the flower. Sunshine is a non-flower element. The soil, the compost are non-flower



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elements. Without non-flower elements a flower cannot manifest herself as a wonderful thing. A flower cannot be by herself alone. A flower can only inter-be with the sunshine, with the cloud, with the soil, with the farmer, and with everything. So, to be means to inter-be. You cannot be by yourself alone. And a flower is made exclusively of non-flower elements. If you remove all the non-flower elements, there is no flower to be seen and touched. So the flower has no separate existence. You cannot imagine there is a flower without sunshine, without cloud, without soil.

Such a thing does not exist: the Buddha called it the “self.” The flower is full of everything in the cosmos, except one thing – the flower does not have a separate self, a separate existence. This is the insight of the Buddha.

What is America made up of? Only non-American elements. Culturally speaking, ethnically speaking, and geographically speaking, it's the same. America has no self, no separate self. And America cannot be by herself alone.

The flower is full of everything, but empty of a self, of a separate existence. This is important. With meditation, with mindfulness and concentration, you can look deeply into the flower and discover the nature of emptiness. Empty of what? Empty of a separate existence. But at the same time, the flower is totally full of the cosmos. So, the real meaning of “to be” is “to inter-be.” You cannot be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with everyone else, everything else. That is the case of the flower, that is the case of the table, that is the case of the house, the case of the river.

SUPPOSE WE SPEAK of America as a flower. What is America made up of? Only non-American elements. Culturally speaking, ethnically speaking, and geographically speaking, it's the same. America has no self, no separate self.

And America cannot be by herself alone. America has to inter-be with non-American elements. This is the teaching of the Buddha, this is the insight you can touch with the practice of looking deeply.

America is made only of non-American elements. And if you have that wisdom, you will do everything to protect non-American elements. If you destroy non-American elements, you destroy America, right? And, in fact, now America is doing a lot of harm to non-American elements. America thinks she has a self, a separate self. That is why you have to bring the wisdom back to America, so America realizes she is made only of non-American elements. If America is made only of non-American elements, then the American citizen is made up of non-American elements. There is no such thing as an American identity. Looking deeply into an American, you see only non-American elements. There's no such thing called an American self.

Scientifically speaking, the idea of self, the idea of entity, is an illusion. If you touch the truth of non-self you are free. But if you allow that illusion to occupy you, you will continue to suffer a lot.

You call me a Vietnamese, and you are very sure that I am Vietnamese. You consider Vietnamese to be an identity. In my case, I don't have a Vietnamese passport, I don't have an identity card. Legally speaking, I am not a Vietnamese.

Culturally speaking, I have elements of French culture in me, of Chinese culture in me, of Indian culture in me, even of American Indian culture. There is no such thing as Vietnamese culture. And when you look into my writing, my person, my Dharma talks, you can discover several sources of cultural streams. Ethnically speaking, there is no such race as the Vietnamese race. Looking into me you can see Melanesian elements, Indonesian elements, Mongolian elements, Negritos elements. The Vietnamese race is made only of non-Vietnamese elements. If you know that, you are free. 

This is an excerpt of a 2004 Dharma talk by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, who is a global spiritual leader, poet, and peace activist. Excerpted from *The Mindfulness Bell* (Summer 2018), a quarterly journal of the art of mindful living in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, published by the Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism, Deer Park Monastery in Escondido, CA.
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