

THICH NHAT HANH ON EXPERIENCING EMPATHY

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Please Call Me by My True Names¹

Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow
because even today I still arrive.

Look deeply: I arrive in every second
to be a bud on a spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, whose wings are still fragile,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
in order to fear and to hope,
the rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that are alive.

I am the mayfly
metamorphosing on the surface of the river,
and I am the bird which, when spring comes,
arrives in time to eat the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond,
and I am also the grass-snake who,
approaching in silence, feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
and I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the 12-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate,
and I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo,
with plenty of power in my hands,
and I am the man
who has to pay his "debt of blood" to my people,

dying slowly in a forced labor camp.

My joy is like Spring,
so warm it makes flowers bloom in all walks of life.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so full it fills up the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and my laughs at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are but one.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart can be left open,
the door of compassion.

Thich Nhat Hanh

Themes²

Courageous Awareness
Understanding Interconnectedness
Compassionate Action

Thematic Amplification

Courageous Awareness

While reading a newspaper, Thich Nhat Hanh heard the story of a 12-year-old girl who was one of the refugee boat people crossing the Gulf of Siam. She was raped by a sea pirate and afterwards killed herself by drowning in the sea. Her story included the sea pirate who was born in another village of Thailand. Together with the girl and the pirate is the person hearing of this incident: the reader, in this case Thich Nhat Hanh, the modern Zen Buddhist teacher from Vietnam, now living in France in exile. In response to his feelings about this incident, he wrote this poem entitled “Please Call Me by My True Names.”

For the bystander, contacting the suffering of others, either through news or gossip, becomes an opportunity for courage in the face of another’s pain or pleasure. This courage is characterized by the willingness to let another’s experience become one’s own, rather than avoiding or ignoring the reality that we live in the world with other people who also laugh and cry just like us. At the moment of encountering the story of the rape of the refugee girl, he demonstrated the courage of contacting another’s suffering and meditating on its significance to his personal life.

By going beyond his personal experience to include the experience of others, Thich Nhat Hanh expands his awareness to include those people and events that seemingly have nothing to do with his own life. *Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow because even today I still arrive.* Arriving is a metaphorical description of the active process of becoming aware of living reality. Awareness, itself, realizes in a moment-by-moment experiential process of arising, sustaining and decaying thoughts, feelings and sense-perceptions. *Look deeply: I arrive in every second to be a bud on a spring branch, to be a tiny bird, whose wings still fragile, learning to sing in my new nest, to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower, to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.* The courage of seeing through the barrier of one's personal boundaries allows for the experiencing of another's inner frustrations and obsessions, as well as another's inner serenity and joy.

Thich Nhat Hanh's aim of feeling happy when others are happy and of feeling sad when others are sad describes the manner one participates in the successes and failures of the world by establishing one's connection with every person and event in the world. *I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry, in order to fear and to hope, the rhythm of my heart is the birth and death of all that are alive.* Thus Thich Nhat Hanh responds with the courage to be aware of another's sorrow and suffering as an open invitation to knowing the transformative experience of empathy.

Understanding Interconnectedness

The relationship of victim and victimizer is heavily emphasized in Thich Nhat Hanh's poem. But by not isolating victim and victimizer from the circumstances in which they were born and raised, one begins to appreciate through understanding interconnectedness that the real victimizer is the illusion of separateness between a person and fellow human beings. This illusion stems from ignoring the feelings of others—a form of spiritual inconsiderateness.

Through clear images of innocent joy in the experience of being alive, Thich Nhat Hanh's poem deliberately does not anticipate the violent actions of the victimizer by creating clear images of the victim-to-be's innocent joy in the experience of living. *I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river. I am the frog swimming happily in the clear water of a pond.* The violent interruption of their happiness emphasizes the momentariness of the pleasures of living in the world. They are innocent as they proceed in their daily activities and even after they become the victims of another's greed and anger.

Yet, devastating stories of people's lives do not always begin in happiness. Some people are born and raised in frustrating circumstances. *I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones, my legs as thin as bamboo*

sticks. I am the 12-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat. Victims of thoughtless decisions made by their leaders, these children suffer the consequences, all-the-while hoping for a better life, maybe in the future, maybe somewhere else. Such victims are powerless against the economic and political forces that shape the contemporary world.

In the same light, however, the victimizers become victims. They are also the products of a horrible reality in which hurting others is taught to be a viable source of income and livelihood. *I am the bird, which, when spring comes, arrives in time to eat the mayfly. I am also the grass-snake who, approaching in silence, feeds itself on the frog. I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to Uganda. I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving. I am a member of the politburo, with plenty of power in my hands.* The pain of others does not touch the hearts of the victimizers, so the practice of harmful actions and its consequent suffering on others remains a horrible but commonplace reality. These victimizers were born and raised on principles of violence, anger, greed and selfishness. They could not help being victimizers any more than the victims could help being victims. Both, then, are victims of the real enemy, the real victimizer: the illusion of separateness.

Compassionate Action

The vicious pattern of victim and victimizer has been taught from generation to generation without interruption because the bystanders do not understand their part in the maintenance of this vicious relationship and their power to make a difference. *Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up, and so the door of my heart can be left open, the door of compassion.* Indifference or apathy shuts off the possibility for experiencing empathy, which has the potential to constantly expand to include all peoples and all events, everyone's joys and sorrows. *My joy is like Spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom in all walks of life. My pain is like a river of tears, so full it fills up the four oceans.*

All of these examples in Thich Nhat Hanh's poem were chosen from the news of the day. These are current problems in the world. Though they are the living realities of others, with no seemingly direct bearing on our personal lives, Thich Nhat Hanh shows through extreme examples that the same theme of victim-victimizer exists in our own lives but in subtler variations during our interactions with others on a day-to-day basis. *Please call me by my true names, so I can hear all my cries and my laughs at once, so I can see that my joy and pain are but one.* Letting go of the distinction between my own welfare and the welfare of others brings full view of the giant interconnected web of people and events that serves as our living reality.

Seeing the “big picture” is hearing our own laughter and crying in the voices of others. Acting on this “big picture” is helping both the victim and the victimizer so that my pain and joy are one in purpose and practice. Breaking this cycle for the bystander begins with the courage to empathize with others and leads to compassionate action to help both victim and victimizer because of the bystander’s deepened awareness and insight into the interconnectedness of all sentient beings.

Reflective Synthesis

Experiencing empathy is Thich Nhat Hanh’s personal response to the news of the social horrors happening around the globe, such as human rights violations, international wars, nuclear arms, minority genocide, environmental destruction, and so on. “Please Call Me by My True Names” is his plea frozen in words so that others may remember the unfortunate reality of such tragic events that affect millions of the world’s peoples. His noble response is gentle encouragement to himself and others, to keep the door of our hearts open, to share in the pain of another so that we teach ourselves compassionately not to let these crimes of anger, greed and indifference become ours in any way, shape or form.

The experience of empathy is the virtuous antipathy of apathy. *Do not say that I’ll depart tomorrow because even today I still arrive.* It is the courageous awareness of everyone around us. It is understanding the interconnectedness of our fates as a single family of sentient beings. It is compassionately acting on behalf of those who cannot help themselves. Experiencing empathy, Thich Nhat Hanh believes, is seeing others in ourselves and ourselves in others without distinction or distortion. His humble request to us, his readers is that we see everyone as an important part of ourselves and then relate to each other accordingly, with the insight gained from empathy that hurting others really hurts everyone, including ourselves. Having empathized with both the victims and the victimizers, Thich Nhat Hanh says with the conviction of personal experience: *Please call me by my true names, so I can hear all my cries and my laughs at once, so I can see that my joy and pain are but one.*

Notes

- 1) Nhat Hanh, Thich, *Being Peace*, ed. Arnold Kotler (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1987), pp. 62-64.
- 2) Sunnie D. Kidd and James W. Kidd, *Experiential Method: Qualitative Research in the Humanities Using Metaphysics and Phenomenology* (Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1990).

Reprinted from the *International Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Spirituality*, 2, no. 3 (1993).