

those around us suffer. By ingesting the right kinds of mental, physical, and spiritual food, we grow in wisdom, compassion, and nonviolence. We become mindful of our consumer behavior so that we support the well-being of our society and civilization.

For the fourth kind of food, consciousness, the Buddha gave us the example of a gentleman who was sentenced to death for his criminal deeds. On the morning of his execution, the king ordered the soldiers to pierce the man with one hundred swords. At noon the soldiers reported that the man was still alive, and the king ordered them to pierce him again with one hundred swords. In the evening, the soldiers reported that the man was still alive, and the king ordered his soldiers to pierce him again with one hundred swords, and again the man survived. When we consume unmindfully, it is as if we are stabbing ourselves morning, noon, and night with one hundred swords, damaging not only ourselves but all our ancestors and all our descendants.

Looking back on history, we see that many civilizations have destroyed themselves. Our civilization will be no different if we do not wake up. We have to wake up so we can stop the course of destruction brought on by our unmindful way of living. To learn the way out, we have to look carefully as members of communities, cities, and nations, and as members of our planet into what and how we are consuming. And we have to do this collectively. Our survival is no longer an individual matter.

C H A P T E R F O U R

RIGHT ACTION COMES FROM RIGHT UNDERSTANDING

In 1968 I was in the United States to call for cessation of the American bombing in Vietnam. In May of that year, the bombing of Saigon became so fierce that the whole area around the School of Youth for Social Service, which my students and I had organized, was destroyed. More than ten thousand refugees came to the campus, many of them wounded, and we had to take care of them. We were not at all equipped for this in terms of food, basic hygiene, and medical supplies, and it was very dangerous to travel outside the campus to get provisions. When we had used up our supply of bandages, the young women tore their long dresses to make more bandages.

In this desperate situation, we had to evacuate the seriously wounded from our campus. But to do so, we had to cross the battle zone to bring them to the hospital. We decided to use the five-colored Buddhist flag to replace the Red Cross flag. The monks

and nuns put on their sanghatis, their monastic ceremonial robes, and carried out the wounded. The Buddhist flag and the sanghati robes signaled that we were a peaceful group. Fortunately, it worked and we were able to evacuate these patients; otherwise, many would have died.

On the third day of the bombing, panic broke out on our overcrowded campus: there was a rumor that the anti-Communists were going to bomb the school because there were so many Communists among the refugees. When people heard this, many collected their belongings and started to leave, but the bombing was so heavy they were driven back. The Communists and the anti-Communists were fighting at the very edge of our campus. At that moment Thay Thanh Van, a twenty-five-year-old monk and the school's director, took a large megaphone and was about to announce that people should not leave when he suddenly asked himself, "What if the bombing really takes place?" Thousands of people would die, and how could the young monk bear such a responsibility? So he slowly put down the megaphone and did not make the announcement.

Thay Thanh Van realized that he needed to speak to both warring parties. To do this, he had to crawl across the fire zone; otherwise, one side or the other would have shot him. First he went to the anti-Communists and persuaded the commanding officer to instruct their planes not to bomb the campus filled with refugees. Then he went to the Communist guerrillas, who had set up anti-aircraft guns just at the corner of the campus. He asked them not to shoot at enemy planes; otherwise the campus would be bombed in retaliation. Both sides were moved by his request and did as he asked. It was a miracle. On this mission he did

not carry anything with him except his courage, love, and compassion.

In a situation like that, you have to be extremely mindful. Sometimes you have to react quickly while remaining calm, but if you were angry or suspicious, you could not do this. You have to be clear-minded. In the context of war, we grew deeper in our practice of nonviolence. Nonviolence is not a set of techniques that you can learn with your intellect. Nonviolent action is born naturally from compassion, lucidity, and understanding within yourself.

The Basis of Right Action: *The Four Noble Truths*

The Buddha always taught that we should practice the Four Noble Truths:

1. There is suffering.
2. There is an origin of suffering.
3. The end of suffering is possible.
4. There is a path to the end of suffering.

With the practice of mindfulness we are already working with the Four Noble Truths. When we practice mindfulness, we learn to stop and to calm ourselves; then we naturally recognize our suffering and the suffering of others. By looking deeply we see into the causes of suffering and the way to transform our suffering and the suffering of others. When you can transform the war and

violence in yourself, then you can truly begin to help others find peace.

Suffering is a part of life. As bodhisattvas in training, we have vowed to use our Mind of Love to alleviate and transform suffering. By listening deeply to those who suffer, by recognizing suffering and the roots of suffering, we put into action the First and Second Noble Truths. By looking deeply, we can see the cause of suffering, we can see that it's possible to end suffering, and we can also see the path that leads to the end of suffering. This puts into action the Third and Fourth Noble Truths.

Taking action to stop suffering is Right Action. Understanding is the foundation of every good action. No action can be called Right Action without Right Understanding. In order to understand, we have to listen, but how do we know we have Right Understanding? If you try to help someone but your actions only worsen the situation, then you did not have Right Understanding. If your government passes an unjust law, it is because your representatives did not have Right Understanding of the problem they were trying to address. All actions—all our personal, political, and humanitarian activities—must be based on a clear understanding of yourself, of your situation, of your own people, of your country.

Deep listening and loving speech are wonderful instruments to help us arrive at the kind of understanding we all need as a basis for appropriate action. You listen deeply for only one purpose—to allow the other person to empty his or her heart. This is already an act of relieving suffering. To stop any suffering, no matter how small, is a great action of peace. The path to end suffering depends on your understanding and your capacity to act

without causing harm or further suffering. This is acting with compassion, your best protection.

IN 1964 I WAS on my way to Da Nang to survey relief work for flood victims. I had to take a military plane because there were no flights for civilians. While I was waiting on the military airfield, an American army officer arrived to wait for his plane. It was just the two of us on the airfield. I wanted to speak to him because I could see he was lonely and worried. Out of compassion, I asked him if he were afraid of the Vietcong, the Communist guerrillas. Immediately I realized that I had made a big mistake: my question touched off his fear. To American soldiers, guerrillas were everywhere. They all felt they could be ambushed and killed at any time. My question made him shiver. He put his hand on his gun and asked, "Are you a Vietcong?"

Because I listened deeply to him, I was aware of what was going on in him. I kept still and just followed my breathing. With a calm and quiet voice, I explained that I was a monk from Saigon on my way to help flood victims. By speaking in such a mindful way, I was able to restore his calm. Had I not taken this care, he might have shot me right there, simply out of fear. But we were able to overcome his fear, and we continued our journey with a little more understanding between us.

Misperception Is the Enemy

Our enemy is never another person; our enemy is the wrong perceptions and suffering within him, within her. When a doctor sees a person who is suffering, he tries to identify the sickness within

the patient, to remove it. He does not try to kill his patient. The role of the doctor is not to kill people but to cure the illnesses within them. It is the same with a person who has suffered so much and who has been making you suffer—the solution is not to kill him but to try to relieve him of his suffering. This is the guidance of our spiritual teachers. It is the practice of understanding and love. In order to love truly, we must first understand.

***When You Have Difficulty with Someone,
Both of You Suffer***

When you suffer, you must practice to find the cause of the suffering within yourself and the other person. You must reflect on your emotions, transform them, and then be willing to listen to the other person. Then you must take Right Action to eliminate the causes. If you can help the other person remove the roots of suffering within herself, then she will no longer suffer, and she will stop making you suffer.

Perhaps a friend has been making you suffer by what she has said and done. Her speech is full of bitterness, wrong perceptions, condemnation, and blame, and because of this you suffer very much. You also suffer because of her way of thinking. You have to remember, however, that you are not the only one who is suffering. Keep in mind that this person may have suffered very deeply in order to speak that way, to do things like that. If this person were not suffering, she would not say and do such things. This is a simple insight, but perhaps you do not see it because of your own pain. If you understand this, then you will try your best to help her not to suffer. When she no longer suffers, she will leave you in peace; you will no longer suffer. Helping her is help-

ing yourself. This is very clear and very simple. You have to recognize that the other person is suffering, that you are not the only one. Looking deeply, you recognize that if the other person continues to suffer, you will continue to suffer as well.

You may try going to the other person and saying, "My dear friend, I know that you have suffered quite a lot in the past. I'm sorry I did not understand your suffering, and I have contributed to it by my way of reacting to what you have said and done. I don't want you to suffer. I don't want to destroy you. I really want you to be happy, because I know that if you are happy, I'll have a chance to be happy, too. I know that you have a lot of perceptions and ideas about me. You must have thought of me as evil, as a monster. I am sorry. Because I didn't understand your suffering, I wasn't able to help you, and I have made the situation worse. I'm very sorry; I don't want this to continue.

"If you care to talk to me, if you care to tell me what is in your heart, what were the unskillful things that I have done to you, then I promise that I will do my best to help you and in the future refrain from doing and saying the things that make you and me suffer." This is the practice, and if you are honest and you say it with all your heart and you are motivated by the desire to help, then the other person will open up and tell you what is in her heart.

Escalation of Peace

Suffering, unhappiness, violence, and war escalate when we are overcome with anger and try to punish and inflict suffering on the other side. We act this way because we believe that as a result

we will suffer less, but of course this action only leads to the other side desiring revenge. This is the surest course of destruction. Deep down, we know this is childish, unintelligent behavior, but still most of us act this way. When we suffer, we blame the other person or group. We hope that if we can punish them and make them suffer, we will feel better and gain some relief. We know the disastrous effects of such behavior, yet we continue to follow this course. The result is more unhappiness, more terrorism, more violence, and more war.

Sometimes, people who cannot find any way to resolve a problem with someone else are tempted to eliminate the problem by eliminating the other person. They wish the other person would just go away, die, or disappear. That desire may be strong enough to lead them to kill. Killing another person is not an act of freedom but an act of despair and great ignorance; it will not bring freedom or peace.

Let us train ourselves to act with Right Understanding and compassion and move in the opposite direction. We can live our lives in such a way that we cause an escalation of peace to occur within our family, our school, and our society. Offering a calm and gentle smile—this is an act of peace. Looking with the eyes of compassion, making a peaceful step—these are gestures of peace and nonviolence that you can offer every day. Speak peacefully, walk peacefully, think peacefully, and your peace will radiate out in all directions.

Deep Listening

Deep, compassionate listening is essential to the creation of peace—personal, interpersonal, community, national, and in-

ternational peace. In this practice you listen with all your mindfulness and concentration in order to give someone who is suffering a chance to speak out. Even if his speech is full of condemnation, bitterness, and blame, you still listen, because you know that to listen like this is to give him a chance to move in the direction of peace. If you interrupt, deny, or correct everything he says, he will have no chance to make peace. Deep listening allows the other person to speak, even if what he says contains wrong perceptions, bitterness, and injustice.

The intention of listening is to restore communication, because once communication is restored, everything is possible. I have seen many couples practice deep listening and loving speech and restore difficult or broken relationships. Many fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, and husbands and wives have brought happiness back to their families through this practice. They have practiced mindful breathing and walking to calm themselves. Then, with the practice of deep, compassionate listening and loving speech, they have reconciled.

Listening to someone with compassion can turn her into a friend. It may be that no one else has been able to listen to her; perhaps you are the first one capable of listening to her and giving her the relief she needs. You become a bodhisattva, a being who ends suffering. You lose an enemy and win a friend.

During the war in Vietnam, both sides operated and reacted out of fear. During any war—the war within you, the war with your parents, partner, children, the war with your neighbors, a war between nations—we act and react out of fear. When you act out of fear, you cause harm and destruction to yourself and others. Fear is a product of ignorance and lack of compassion, which

are the very atmosphere of war. Fear feeds off ignorance, whereas compassion and lucidity flower from understanding. Deep listening and loving speech can stop new anger and fear from arising as well as transform long-held misperceptions and suffering. With mindfulness, we can protect ourselves from danger.

Lotus in a Sea of Fire: Engaged Buddhism

From a very young age, I had a strong desire to put the Buddha's teachings into practice in order to improve the lives of the people around me, especially those of the poor peasants. Many monks, including myself, had a deep desire to bring Buddhism into every walk of life. For us, taking action according to the principles of what I called Engaged Buddhism—Right action based in compassion—was the answer.

I started reflecting and writing on the possibility and practice of Engaged Buddhism in the 1950s, and in 1964 I wrote the book *Engaged Buddhism*. In an essay titled "The Basic Ideals of Buddhist Youth for Social Service," I suggested how to apply Buddhist ideals to improve the conditions of life in a time of war and social injustice. In a later book, *Actualized Buddhism*, I advocated a kind of Buddhism that could be practiced in all areas of life: economics, education, and art, among others. These writings document the birth of the Engaged Buddhism movement in Vietnam. Engaged Buddhism was a product of suffering and war—a lotus flower blooming in a sea of fire.

As a novice, I understood that social work could not be successful if the people engaged in it were not calm and solid in their practice of mindfulness and compassion. I knew even then that social workers and social activists had to transform their own suffering and cultivate freedom of mind and spirit and lead a simple life to be effective. I also knew personally how challenging that was, particularly in a time of war.

In those years practitioners in the monasteries particularly felt the suffering of the people around us. When the warplanes came and dropped bombs around us, we heard the sounds of our people crying out in pain and anguish. There were wounded children and destroyed houses and refugees to take care of. We could not ignore them and just sit quietly in our meditation halls. We had to go out and help, but we knew we would become exhausted if we did these things without nurturing our own spirit. We set aside one day a week as a Day of Mindfulness so we could nourish and sustain ourselves as we brought relief to the people suffering around us. We used the teachings of the Buddha about self-protection and self-healing in our personal practice and then took them out into the world. This was Engaged Buddhism in its purest form.

Self-Help Villages

As part of our practice of Engaged Buddhism during the war in Vietnam, we set up self-help villages on the front lines. We studied the kibbutzim in Israel to learn from their experience of communal living, which combined family life with the life of the village. We learned which activities would best unfold in the con-

text of the family unit, and in which ones all the people in the village would participate. We tried to combine collective and individual efforts to increase harmony and to share expenses.

For instance, each villager had his own plot of land to grow vegetables; in addition, there were lands that belonged to the entire community. Sometimes villagers worked on their own plots of land, and sometimes they worked together with other families on communal land. In this way it was not necessary for every family to buy every piece of farm equipment. The whole community owned and shared a tractor, and every family had the right to borrow it for their own use. There were also community-owned cars that could be used by anyone on occasion. This sharing not only saved money but also helped the people in the village to establish deeper relationships with other families in the community.

We could offer only a small amount of financial aid to these villages, as we ourselves did not have much, yet we were still able to be of help with our goodwill, technical knowledge, concern, and loving-kindness. Because of the ongoing war, we knew it would be a long time before we could receive help from the government.

In the early 1960s I visited India, the Philippines, and other countries to make inquiries about other ways to help community development, and in 1964 a group of friends and I set up the School of Youth for Social Service in Vietnam. Our program was focused on four areas: rural education, health, economics, and organization. Our guiding principle was to begin with what we had and what we knew. Combining the technical know-how of our social workers with that of the farmers, we were immediately able to improve the quality of the villagers' lives.

When we announced the opening of the School of Youth for Social Service, hundreds of young people volunteered. They were eager to help and wanted to be trained right away. Among them were monks and nuns and students about to graduate from medical, law, and other professional schools. The students' expertise proved very useful. For example, many of the village children did not have birth certificates, which at that time were required to enroll in public school. Though we had set up our own schools in the villages, we wanted some of the children to be able to go to public school. To issue a birth certificate, a judge and two witnesses were needed. One day the law students brought a judge into one of our pilot villages, and we arranged an open-air meeting place where the judge and witnesses could work. We quickly issued dozens of birth certificates.

We also set up simple health centers under thatched roofs, each with only one doctor and a few nurses. For the first time, people in the villages did not have to wait for months for needed medical treatment. This was a revolutionary solution at that time and place. There was an atmosphere of great joy among us because we were able to do so much for the people.

One night as I slept in the small thatched house of a peasant, a scorpion came out from under the roof and bit me. It was very painful. I did not have any ointment or medicine with me, so I had to massage the wound for hours to survive the night. This was the condition that peasants lived in all the time. Many of the children had diseases and often had trouble with their eyes. Every Saturday and Sunday, we invited a doctor and a nurse to come to a village to treat these children with the assistance of the recently graduated medical students. These kinds of experiences gave

those of us who practiced Engaged Buddhism realistic insights into how to help.

As social workers from the School of Youth for Social Service, we came into the villages dressed more or less like peasants. It was important not to dress like city people, because government officials came to the villages dressed as city people, creating an immediate gap between them and the poor peasants.

As social workers we began with the children. We talked to them and won their sympathy. We would teach them how to sing, how to read the alphabet and to write. We did not need a schoolhouse. We just sat down under a tree and played with the children. We cut their nails and bathed them in the river. When parents saw that we were helping their children read and write, they became grateful, and we won their hearts as well. Then, when it rained and we had to move our classes indoors, a villager would allow us to run into his or her house for cover.

Soon we had a big group of children who wanted to learn, and we asked the villagers to help set up a school. One family would agree to give a piece of land, another promised to give twenty bamboo trees, and still another family gave fifty coconut leaves to make the roof. In a short time we had the collaboration of everyone in the village. Setting up a school like this was rewarding and joyful. We would have had to wait a long time for the government, so we did it on our own, beginning with what we had and what we knew. The peasants knew how to build their own houses, so they were perfectly capable of building a beautiful school.

In Binh Khanh village in the province of Gia Dinh, I participated in building the people's first school ever, which we called

the Nightingale School. I taught the students and the young monks and nuns how to construct the building to keep the heat inside. We made the walls with bamboo and finished by putting mud and straw around them. Inside it was warm and cozy during cold weather. When villagers establish and build a school with their own hands, they protect it, and if repairs are needed they do the maintenance themselves. No one can come and destroy or close down the school. If it had been a government school, however, the villagers would not have protected it with the kind of love they had for what they themselves had created.

The School of Youth for Social Service workers took turns leading class. Later we hired a teacher, offering a small salary, just enough for him or her to live simply. Yet the teacher was content, because instructing children and making them happy was reward enough.

Not only did we teach children but we also helped the adults. We offered night courses so they could learn to read, write, and study subjects crucial to their health and living. We brought technicians into the village to teach better ways to take care of chickens and pigs, how to make compost, and how to organize a cooperative.

We shared a great deal of knowledge with the farmers so they could organize themselves in the areas of education, health, and economics. We suggested making various handicrafts that could bring additional income to the families. We also helped the villagers organize entertainment, like music and concerts for the children and young adults. Otherwise, they might have grown bored with village life and moved to the city, leaving the country-

side bereft of young people. We set up libraries and organized festivals like the full moon festival. We also offered vocational training for the young people to learn traditional skills.

In six months we were able to transform a village. The young people and the Buddhist monks and nuns liked this kind of social work very much. To this day, we continue to support this kind of work for village development in Vietnam in spite of difficulties under the current regime.

Compassion and loving-kindness are not philosophical notions; they are translated into daily reality. These efforts are compassion in action.

Even the Buddha Goes Out to Help

There was a young man named An in our School of Youth for Social Service. When he came to the villages, he taught the children to read, and he also cared for the sick late into the night. He worked so diligently that a woman asked him how much he earned for his work from the government. He replied, "I'm not an employee of the government. I am a Buddhist. We are working to perform merits." "Performing merits" is a popular term in Buddhism, used by laypeople who offer their time and energy to help with temple work. The woman said, "People get merit in the temple, not out here." The young man replied, "Dear Aunt, in this time of suffering, we choose to perform merits here and not in the temple. The children have no one who cares for them. I believe that serving them is serving the Buddha." The woman understood right away what An was saying and wholeheartedly supported our efforts. An's statement is a wonderful and simple explanation of Engaged Buddhism.

In the School of Youth for Social Service, I did not teach traditional Buddhism. Instead I taught students how a social worker should behave when he is sent to a village, how she can win the hearts of children and adults. I taught that they first had to win the trust of a family, behaving like sons or daughters of the family so that they could become fully integrated. Once a family accepted them, they were protected. The family they stayed with should be trusted and respected by the villagers. Once they were aligned with a family who loved, trusted, and protected them, they could begin to contribute to the life of the village.

We tried not to offer money to villagers. Instead the workers had to go to the villages empty-handed. The first thing they offered was their deep listening. After coming to understand the needs of the villagers, the workers offered their knowledge and love. Our policy was to help people to learn to help themselves. We offered money only after the villagers were already empowered to take care of their situations.

Once our social workers had been accepted by a family, they had to win the support of the Buddhist temple in the area. Most Vietnamese people are Buddhist, so in each village there is a temple, the spiritual home of the village. With the support of the temple, the social workers would not have difficulties. They spent time with the senior monk and told him where they had come from and what their intentions were. If the monk accepted them, they could succeed in helping the village.

Practicing Engaged Buddhism Today

If you want to become a social worker, you can adapt these principles to your own community and country. If you live in a coun-

try where Christianity is the main religion and wish to perform community service, you can go to the Protestant minister or the Catholic priest in your area. You can help the community and then ask the temple or church to shelter you and your fellow workers, to allow you to sponsor classes for adults or children.

Your knowledge and experience of the practice of mindfulness is crucial; it lies at the heart of your ability to taken Right Action and engage with the world. You have to train yourself to be an agent of peace and reconciliation wherever you are—in your host family or church or temple. You are teaching the way of mindfulness without the title of teacher. You are doing social work without the title of social worker. You are nobody at all, but you can be everything to the people who need your help.

There is a mathematics teacher from North America who has come to several retreats at Plum Village. He was always an excellent teacher, but for many years he had a difficult time in his classroom because he would become angry easily. Before he learned the practice of nonviolence, he used to yell or throw chalk at his students when they upset him. Sometimes in fits of irritation he would write comments on their homework such as "How can you be so stupid?"

After he had practiced mindfulness for a while, he transformed dramatically. He entered the classroom in slow walking meditation. He went over to the blackboard and erased everything in a mindful way. His surprised students asked, "Teacher, are you sick?" He replied with a smile: "No, I'm not sick, I'm just trying to do things mindfully." He shared the practice of mindfulness with them, proposing that every fifteen minutes a student should clap his hands so that the entire class could stop and practice

breathing and smiling. His students enjoyed practicing with him and grew to love him more and more. Instead of writing on their work, "How can you be so stupid?" he now wrote, "You don't understand, it's my fault." His class made great progress. Soon every class in the school adopted his techniques. When he reached retirement age, this teacher was asked to stay on for a few more years. He is now a mindfulness teacher—and a mindful teacher.

This is a real example of practice, of progress, and of peace. Slowly, with mindful action, we can transform ourselves, our family, school, workplace, neighborhood, city hall, national government, and the global community. If you are a schoolteacher, a parent, a journalist, a therapist, or a writer, you can use your talent to promote this change. We should practice meditation collectively, because looking deeply into our situation is no longer an individual matter. We have to combine our individual insights into collective wisdom.

A Nonviolent Army

During the war in Vietnam, we in the School of Youth for Social Service often worked in dangerous places. Because we won the hearts of the people so easily, each warring party suspected us of belonging to the other side and wanted to eliminate us. Both sides were afraid of us. They thought we had a political motive, but we did not. In a situation of war, practitioners of peace do not take sides. Instead, they promote reconciliation and try to bring the two sides together. This is a very dangerous position to take. Even though we were motivated only by our Bodhicitta, the Mind of Love, both warring parties did not understand and killed many of us.

Yet it was misunderstanding that was the killer. We were a nonviolent army that carried only love and our intention to help as our weapons, but we suffered casualties just like other armies. Brother Nhat Tri, along with seven other social workers, was murdered while traveling to a remote village. I considered them all my sons and daughters and felt just as a father would who had lost eight children of his own blood at once. I suffered tremendously, and the marks of this suffering are in many of my poems.

I wrote this poem in 1965 especially for the young people in the School of Youth for Social Service who risked their lives every day during the war, recommending that they prepare to die without hatred. Some had already been killed violently, and I cautioned the others against hating. Our enemy is our anger, hatred, greed, fanaticism, and discrimination, I told them. If you die because of violence, you must meditate on compassion in order to forgive those who killed you. When you die realizing this state of compassion, you are truly a child of the Awakened One. Even if you are dying in oppression, shame, and violence, if you can smile with forgiveness, you have great power.

Rereading the lines of this poem, I suddenly understood the passage in the "Diamond Sutra" that speaks about *ksanti*, endurance or tolerance:

*Your courage intact, your eyes kind,
Untroubled
(Even as no one sees them),
Out of your smile
Will bloom a flower.*

*And those who love you
Will behold you
Across ten thousand worlds of birth and dying.*

If you die with compassion in mind, you are a torch lighting our path.

RECOMMENDATION

*Promise me,
promise me this day,
promise me now,
while the sun is overhead
exactly at the zenith,
promise me:*

*Even as they
strike you down
with a mountain of hatred and violence;
even as they step on you and crush you
like a worm,
even as they dismember and disembowel you,
remember, brother,
remember:
man is not our enemy.*

*The only thing worthy of you is compassion—
invincible, limitless, unconditional.
Hatred will never let you face
the beast in man.*

*One day, when you face this beast alone,
with your courage intact, your eyes kind,
untroubled
(even as no one sees them),
out of your smile
will bloom a flower.
And those who love you
will behold you
across ten thousand worlds of birth and dying.*

*Alone again,
I will go on with bent head,
knowing that love has become eternal.
On the long, rough road,
the sun and the moon
will continue to shine.*

Tragedy from misunderstanding happened much more than that once. The first time our workers were massacred by one of the warring parties was when some soldiers came to the School of Youth for Social Service campus heavily armed and threw grenades into our dormitories, killing two social workers, both young women. Another young woman was extensively wounded—three hundred pieces of shrapnel entered her body. That night she lost most of her blood and almost died. The hospital was four hours away and, in any event, had no blood bank. Masako Yamanouchi, a Japanese volunteer who worked with us, saved the wounded student's life by donating blood. The wounded woman had to be treated in both Vietnam and Japan for several years,

and she still carries within her more than one hundred pieces of shrapnel.

One night in 1966, a group of armed men came to a village where six of our young men were staying. They went to the house, woke them up, tied their hands, and brought them to the riverbank. Although they took our workers by force, they did not speak harshly to them. At the riverbank, the armed men asked our workers whether they were part of the School of Youth for Social Service. They answered yes. The men asked a second time to make sure and then said to our friends, "We are very sorry, we have to kill you." They then shot all six of them on the riverbank. They had received orders from their superiors, who considered us their enemies, to kill anyone from our school because we had dared to work in the villages.

The armed men thought they had killed the whole group, but one of them survived. The next day Sister Chan Khong, my student and later one of the cofounders of Plum Village, went with a number of our other friends and carried the surviving young man to the hospital, where he told them what had happened.

Although we had come with pure hearts, they mistook us as their enemies. We just wanted to love and to help. We did not have any political motive, yet we were victims of suspicion and violence.

When the attack happened, I was in Paris. I was preparing to give a series of talks in France, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Japan. The night I heard that five of my students had been murdered, I could not even cry. It took many months before I was able to do so. These young people, too, were my children. They had listened to my teachings on En-

gaged Buddhism and joined with us to serve, and then suddenly they died. It was a difficult time for me and for all of the members of our group. I needed to practice and transform my suffering before I could voice my grief. It was only months later, in New York City, after I had finished writing the play *The Path of Return Continues the Journey*, that I could begin to cry—and as I cried, I began to release my pain.

After each attack Sister Chan Khong and other leaders of the School organized funerals where they read a text confirming that our intention was only to love and help, not to hate or kill. They would read, "Dear friends, you don't understand us, and that is why you have killed us. Our intention is not to do harm to anyone. We only want to help." There was neither bitterness nor hate in our speech.

Sometimes when villages were bombed, our social workers feared for their lives and wanted to flee. But I had asked them not to abandon the peasants because, unlike them, the villagers could not escape the situation. So the social workers stayed and helped rebuild the bombed villages. When the same villages were bombed again, we patiently rebuilt them once more. It was important to restore the houses, but it was even more important to give our psychological support to the villagers so that they would not give up hope.

During this time of great loss, I was again back in Paris, but I knew our friends and colleagues in the School of Youth for Social Services were undergoing difficult times in Vietnam. Nevertheless, I trusted that they would overcome. We actually were able to suffer less than the people who considered us their enemies because we held fast to the spirit of openness, love, and compas-

sion. Our diligent, solid practice of love and mindfulness after each attack eventually moved the hearts of the killers and they stopped trying to kill us. Ultimately, our loving speech showed them that we were not their enemy.

Compassion Is the Best Protection

To understand both sides in a conflict, and to see what to do and what not to do, we must have confidence in our own view, in our own experiences and understanding of the difference between truth and wrong perceptions. We must be able to withstand the influence of public opinion and propaganda. This strength comes from looking deeply with compassion and from solid practice. Those who make the news and those who make political strategies have a strong effect on us. Political parties and politicians are always trying to persuade us. They try to change the way we think and feel, so we must be rooted in ourselves and our practice, looking deeply so that we will not be misled. If we do not maintain our own stability and insight, we can be easily swayed. Please remember that Right Action comes only from Right Understanding and that we must practice deep listening in order to understand. With this in mind you become a bodhisattva of peace and reconciliation.