

# Thích Nhất Hạnh

National bestselling author of *Anger*  
and *Living Buddha, Living Christ*

no death,

no fear

Comforting Wisdom for Life

**NO DEATH, NO FEAR**

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**NO DEATH, NO FEAR**

***Comforting Wisdom for Life***

# **THICH NHAT HANH**

RIVERHEAD BOOKS

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NEW YORK

2002

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RIVERHEAD BOOKS

a member of

Penguin Putnam Inc.

375 Hudson Street

New York, NY 10014

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Published simultaneously in Canada

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nhât Hanh, Thích.

No death, no fear: comforting wisdom for life / Thich Nhat

Hanh. p. cm.

ISBN: 978-1-1012-1855-6

1. Spiritual life—Buddhism. 2. Buddhism—Doctrines. I. Title

BQ4302.N43 2002 2002021358

294.3'444—dc21

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## ***Foreword***

**O**ne day, over lunch, my father said to me, “The last time I saw my father, he was in a basket in the living room.” We were sitting together at the outdoor dining area of a Mexican restaurant in Key West, Florida. He looked up from his plate of beans and rice, and continued. “My father was a working man. He was a baker; he worked at the co-op in downtown Fitchburg on Leominster Street.”

“Tell me about your father’s death,” I said.

“I don’t know anything,” he replied.

“What did people say?”

“No one ever said anything. And I never asked.” He returned to the silence that I knew all too well.

Sacred Heart Church is two blocks from the house on Sanborn Street in West Fitchburg, Massachusetts, where my father said good-bye to the grandfather I never knew. This was my family’s spiritual center when I was growing up. It was a refuge from the daily grind of factory work, arguing spouses, unpaid bills and excess alcohol. This is where I was baptized and where I was sent for my spiritual education. Every Monday afternoon, after a full day at public school, I reluctantly trudged up Water Street to this building for two hours of catechism.

I still remember the first day, sitting next to my cousin Patty, our fresh new catechism books in hand. As two nuns stood in front of the class, we were told to open our books to page one and to memorize three questions and their three answers. “Who made me?” “God made you.” “Why did God make me?” “To love and serve him.” “What happens when I die?” “You will live forever with God in Heaven.” For the fathers of the church there was no doubt: my soul is eternal and I will live forever.

Reading *The Boston Globe* one Sunday, I was struck by an article about a woman facing the possibility of terminal cancer. The story began, “A Young Life Interrupted...Adriana Jenkins doubts God exists. Or fate.” “When we die,” she says, “we are gone ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust.’” But she imagines death often—the pain, floating upward, looking down on mourners around her hospital bed, a shimmer of light and finally nothing: “off like a light switch.” This has become the main

alternative for those to whom doubt itself has become a faith; when we die we are gone, we are nothing.

The first funeral I ever attended was in 1968. It was for my mother's father, my grandfather, Sam Rameau. Since then, more than two dozen times, I have stood at the edge of a freshly dug grave, confused, lost and wondering what to think and what to feel about death, asking myself, Are there really only two options to consider, the belief in an eternal soul, or annihilation?

Doubting the belief in an eternal life and dreading the idea of oblivion, I have lived with a dull fear, a kind of cosmic background noise, throughout my life. Which one is true, forever remaining as me or nothingness? Is there an eternal soul and, if there is, will I be in heaven or in hell? Bored forever or in bliss? Alone or with God?

During the Buddha's life, he was questioned many times by scholars and theologians about the opposite philosophies of eternalism and nihilism. When asked if there was an eternal soul, the Buddha replied that there is no permanent self. When asked if we were extinguished into oblivion upon our death, the Buddha said that we are not annihilated. He rejected both of these ideas.

I have a dear friend who is a famous marine biologist. Like many people he believes that when we die we are extinguished forever. He believes this not from a loss of faith or from despair but because of his trust in science. His faith is in the natural world, in the beauty of the unfolding universe around him and in the ability of humans to understand and gain knowledge of that universe.

Thich Nhat Hanh also has an abiding faith in the ability of humans to gain understanding. But his goal is more than the accumulation of scientific knowledge; it is the attainment of liberation and deep personal wisdom based on pure inquiry. Writing in these pages from his own experience, Thich Nhat Hanh proposes a stunning alternative to the opposing philosophies of an eternal soul and nihilism. He tells us: "Since before time you have been free. Birth and death are only doors through which we pass, sacred thresholds on our journey. Birth and death are a game of hide-and-seek. You have never been born and you can never die" and "Our greatest pain is caused by our notions of coming and going." Over and over again, he invites us to practice looking deeply so we can know for ourselves the freedom and joy of the middle way between a permanent self and oblivion. As a poet, he explores the paradoxes of life and gently lifts the veil of illusion, allowing us, maybe

for the first time in our lives, to see that our dread of dying is caused by our own misperceptions and misunderstandings.

His insights into life and death are subtle and elegant, and, like all things subtle, best appreciated slowly, in quiet contemplation. Out of the deep wellspring of Thich Nhat Hanh's humanity and compassion comes the balm to heal our hearts.

PRITAM SINGH

*One*

## **WHERE DO WE COME FROM? WHERE DO WE GO?**

**I**n my hermitage in France there is a bush of japonica, Japanese quince. The bush usually blossoms in the spring, but one winter it had been quite warm and the flower buds had come early. During the night a cold snap arrived and brought with it frost. The next day while doing walking meditation, I noticed that all the buds on the bush had died. I recognized this and thought, *This New Year we will not have enough flowers to decorate the altar of the Buddha.*

A few weeks later the weather became warm again. As I walked in my garden I saw new buds on the japonica manifesting another generation of flowers. I asked the japonica flowers: "Are you the same as the flowers that died in the frost or are you different flowers?" The flowers replied to me: "Thay, we are not the same and we are not different. When conditions are sufficient we manifest and when conditions are not sufficient we go into hiding. It's as simple as that."

This is what the Buddha taught. When conditions are sufficient things manifest. When conditions are no longer sufficient things withdraw. They wait until the moment is right for them to manifest again.

Before giving birth to me, my mother was pregnant with another baby. She had a miscarriage, and that person wasn't born. When I was young I used to ask the question: was that my brother or was that me? Who was trying to manifest at that time? If a baby has been lost it means that conditions were not enough for him to manifest and the child has decided to withdraw in order to wait for better conditions. "I had better withdraw; I'll come back again soon, my dearest." We have to respect his or her will. If you see the world with eyes like this, you will suffer much less. Was it my brother that my mother lost? Or maybe I was about to come out but instead I said, "It isn't time yet," so I withdrew.

## *Becoming Nothing*

Our greatest fear is that when we die we will become nothing. Many of us believe that our entire existence is only a life span beginning the moment we are born or conceived and ending the moment we die. We believe that we are born from nothing and that when we die we become nothing. And so we are filled with fear of annihilation.

The Buddha has a very different understanding of our existence. It is the understanding that birth and death are notions. They are not real. The fact that we think they are true makes a powerful illusion that causes our suffering. The Buddha taught that there is no birth, there is no death; there is no coming, there is no going; there is no same, there is no different; there is no permanent self, there is no annihilation. We only think there is. When we understand that we cannot be destroyed, we are liberated from fear. It is a great relief. We can enjoy life and appreciate it in a new way.

## *Finding a Lost Loved One*

The same thing happens when we lose any of our beloved ones. When conditions are not right to support life, they withdraw. When I lost my mother I suffered a lot. When we are only seven or eight years old it is difficult to think that one day we will lose our mother. Eventually we grow up and we all lose our mothers, but if you know how to practice, when the time comes for the separation you will not suffer too much. You will very quickly realize that your mother is always alive within you.

The day my mother died, I wrote in my journal, "A serious misfortune of my life has arrived." I suffered for more than one year after the passing away of my mother. But one night, in the highlands of Vietnam, I was sleeping in the hut in my hermitage. I dreamed of my mother. I saw myself sitting with her, and we were having a wonderful talk. She looked young and beautiful, her hair flowing down. It was so pleasant to sit there and talk to her as if she had never died. When I woke up it was about two in the morning, and I felt very strongly that I had never lost my mother. The impression that my mother was still with me was very clear. I understood then that the idea of having lost my mother was just an idea. It was obvious in that moment that my mother is always alive in me.

I opened the door and went outside. The entire hillside was bathed in moonlight. It was a hill covered with tea plants, and my hut was set behind the temple halfway up. Walking slowly in the moonlight through the rows of tea plants, I noticed my mother was still with me. She was the moonlight caressing me as she had done so often, very tender, very sweet...wonderful! Each time my feet touched the earth I knew my mother was there with me. I knew this body was not mine alone but a living continuation of my mother and my father and my grandparents and greatgrandparents. Of all my ancestors. These feet that I saw as "my" feet were actually "our" feet. Together my mother and I were leaving footprints in the damp soil.

From that moment on, the idea that I had lost my mother no longer existed. All I had to do was look at the palm of my hand, feel the breeze on my face or the earth under my feet to remember that my mother is always with me, available at any time.

When you lose a loved one, you suffer. But if you know how to look deeply, you have a chance to realize that his or her nature is truly the nature of no birth, no death. There is manifestation and there is the cessation of manifestation in order to have another manifestation. You have to be very keen and very alert in order to recognize the new manifestations of just one person. But with the practice and with effort you can do it.

So, taking the hand of someone who knows the practice, together do walking meditation. Pay attention to all the leaves, the flowers, the birds and the dewdrops. If you can stop and look deeply, you will be able to recognize your beloved one manifesting again and again in many forms. You will again embrace the joy of life.

### *Nothing Is Born, Nothing Dies*

A French scientist, whose name is Lavoisier, declared, "*Rien ne se crée, rien ne se perd.*" "Nothing is born, nothing dies." Although he did not practice as a Buddhist but as a scientist, he found the same truth the Buddha discovered.

Our true nature is the nature of no birth and no death. Only when we touch our true nature can we transcend the fear of non-being, the fear of annihilation.

The Buddha said that when conditions are sufficient something manifests and we say it exists. When one or two conditions fail and the

thing does not manifest in the same way, we then say it does not exist. According to the Buddha, to qualify something as existing or not existing is wrong. In reality, there is no such thing as totally existing or totally not existing.

We can see this very easily with television and radio. We may be in a room that has no television or radio. And while we are in that room, we may think that television programs and radio programs do not exist in that room. But all of us know that the space in the room is full of signals. The signals of these programs are filling the air everywhere. We need only one more condition, a radio or a television set, and many forms, colors and sounds will appear. It would have been wrong to say that the signals do not exist because we did not have a radio or television to receive and manifest them. They only seemed not to exist because the causes and conditions were not enough to make the television program manifest. So at that moment, in that room, we say they do not exist. Just because we do not perceive something, it is not correct to say it does not exist. It is only our notion of being and non-being that makes us confused. It is our notion of being and non-being that makes us think something exists or something doesn't exist. Notions of being and non-being cannot be applied to reality.

### *No Above, No Below*

It is like the notion of above and below. To say they exist is also wrong. What is below for us is above for someone else somewhere else. We are sitting here and we say that above is the direction over our head and we think that the opposite direction is below.

People practicing sitting meditation on the other side of the world would not agree that what we call above is above because for them it is below. They are not sitting on their heads. The ideas of above and below always mean to be above something or to be below something, and the ideas of below and above cannot be applied to the reality of the cosmos. These are only concepts to help us relate to our environment. They are concepts that give us a point of reference, but they are not real. Reality is free from all concepts and ideas.

## *Trapped by a Notion*

The Buddha offered an interesting parable concerning ideas and notions. A young tradesman came home and saw that his house had been robbed and burned by bandits. Right outside what was left of the house, there was a small, charred body. He thought the body belonged to his little boy. He did not know that his child was still alive. He did not know that after having burned the house, the bandits had taken the little boy away with them. In his state of confusion, the tradesman believed the body he saw was his son. So he cried, he beat his chest and pulled out his hair in grief. Then he began the cremation ceremony.

This man loved his little boy so much. His son was the *raison d'être* of his life. He longed for his little boy so much that he could not abandon the little boy's ashes even for one moment. He made a velvet bag and put the ashes inside. He carried the bag with him day and night, and whether he was working or resting, he was never separated from the bag of ashes. One night his son escaped from the robbers. He came to the new house built by his father. He knocked excitedly on the door at two o'clock in the morning. His father called out as he wept, still holding the bag of ashes.

"Who is there?"

"It's me, your son!" the boy answered through the door.

"You naughty person, you are not my boy. My child died three months ago. I have his ashes with me right here." The little boy continued to beat on the door and cried and cried. He begged over and over again to come in, but his father continued to refuse him entry. The man held firm to the notion that his little boy was already dead and that this other child was some heartless person who had come to torment him. Finally, the boy left and the father lost his son forever.

The Buddha said that if you get caught in one idea and consider it to be "the truth," then you miss the chance to know the truth. Even if the truth comes in person and knocks at your door, you will refuse to open your mind. So if you are committed to an idea about truth or to an idea about the conditions necessary for your happiness, be careful. The first Mindfulness Training is about freedom from views:

*Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist*



*teachings are guiding means to help us learn to look deeply and to develop our understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill or die for.*

This is a practice to help free us from the tendency to be dogmatic. Our world suffers so much from dogmatic attitudes. The first mindfulness training is important to help us remain free people. Freedom is above all else freedom from our own notions and concepts. If we get caught in our notions and concepts, we can make ourselves suffer and we can also make those we love suffer.

### *No Coming, No Going*

For many of us, our greatest pain is caused by our notions of coming and going. We think that the person we loved came to us from somewhere and has now gone away somewhere. But our true nature is the nature of no coming, no going. We have not come from anywhere, we shall not go anywhere. When conditions are sufficient, we manifest. When conditions are no longer sufficient, we no longer manifest. It does not mean that we do not exist. Like radio waves without a radio, we do not manifest.

Not only do the notions of coming and going not express reality, neither do the notions of being and non-being. We hear these words in the Prajnaparamita Sutra: "Listen Shariputra, all dharmas [phenomena] are marked by emptiness, they are neither produced nor destroyed, neither increasing nor decreasing."

The meaning of emptiness here is very important; it means first of all to be empty of a separate self. Nothing has a separate self, and nothing exists by itself. If we examine things carefully we will see that all phenomena, including ourselves, are composites. We are made up of other parts. We are made of our mother and father, our grandmothers and grandfathers, our body, our feelings, our perceptions, our mental formations, the earth, the sun and innumerable non-self elements. All these parts depend on causes and conditions. We see that all that has existed, exists or will exist is interconnected and interdependent. All that we see has only manifested because it is a part of something else, of other conditions that make it possible to manifest. All phenomena are neither produced nor destroyed, because they are in a constant process of manifesting.

We may be intelligent enough to understand this, but to understand it intellectually is not enough. To really understand this is to be free from fear. It is to become enlightened. It is to live in inter-being.

We have to practice looking deeply like this to nourish our awakened understanding of no birth and no death in our daily lives. In this way we can realize the wonderful gift of non-fear.

If we just talk about inter-being as a theory, it will not help us. We should ask: "Piece of paper, where do you come from? Who are you? What did you come here to do? Where are you going to go?" We can ask the flame: "Flame, where do you come from and where will you go?" Listen to the reply closely. The flame, the piece of paper, is replying by its presence. We only have to look deeply and we can hear it reply. The flame is saying: "I do not come from anywhere."

That would be the answer of the japonica flowers also. They were not the same and not different. They did not come from anywhere and they did not go anywhere. If there is a baby who is lost, we should not be sad. It is because there were not sufficient causes and conditions for it to arrive at that time. It will come again.

### *Sadness Lies in Ignorance*

The Great Being Avalokiteshvara was a disciple of the Buddha. One day, when he was concentrating in the course of deep understanding, he suddenly saw that everything is without a separate self. Seeing this, he overcame all ignorance, which means he overcame all his suffering.

Looking deeply, we should also see that there is no birth, there is no death; there is no coming, there is no going; there is no being, there is no non-being; there is no same, there is no different.

If we don't learn this practice, it is a terrible waste. We can learn many practices to lessen our sadness and our suffering, but the cream of enlightened wisdom is the insight of no birth, no death. When we have this insight we will have no more fear. We can then enjoy the immense inheritance our ancestors have handed down to us. We should make time to practice these deep and wonderful teachings in our daily lives.

## *Respecting Our Manifestations*

If you look at a friend with the eyes of a meditator, you will see in him or her all generations of their ancestors. You will be very respectful to them and to your own body because you will see their body and your body as the sacred home of all our ancestors.

You will also see that our bodies are the source of all future generations. We will not damage our bodies, because that wouldn't be kind to our descendants. We do not use drugs and we do not eat or drink things that have toxins or that will harm our bodies. This is because our insight of manifestation helps us to live in a healthy way, with clarity and responsibility.

The ideas of inside and outside are also like this. If we say that the Buddha is in us, our parents are in us, our parents are outside of us, or the Buddha is outside of us, these ideas of inside and outside are not applicable. We are caught in ideas, especially ideas of coming and going and being and not being. Only when we rid ourselves of all these ideas can reality appear, the reality of nirvana. When all ideas of is and is not have been extinguished, then reality will manifest itself.

## *There Is Nothing Like Experience*

We can use an example that is easy to understand, of a tangerine or a durian fruit. If there is a person who has never eaten a tangerine or a durian fruit, however many images or metaphors you give him, you cannot describe to him the reality of those fruits. You can only do one thing: give him a direct experience. You cannot say: "Well, the durian is a little bit like the jackfruit or like a papaya." You cannot say anything that will describe the experience of a durian fruit. The durian fruit goes beyond all ideas and notions. The same is true of a tangerine. If you have never eaten a tangerine, however much the other person loves you and wants to help you understand what a tangerine tastes like, they will never succeed by describing it. The reality of the tangerine goes beyond ideas. Nirvana is the same; it is the reality that goes beyond ideas. It is because we have ideas about nirvana that we suffer. Direct experience is the only way.

## THE REAL FEAR

**W**e are afraid of death, we are afraid of separation, and we are afraid of nothingness. In the West, people are very afraid of nothingness. When they hear about emptiness, people are also very afraid, but emptiness just means the extinction of ideas. Emptiness is not the opposite of existence. It is not nothingness or annihilation. The idea of existence has to be removed and so does the idea of nonexistence. Emptiness is a tool to help us.

Reality has nothing to do with existence and nonexistence. When Shakespeare says: "To be, or not to be—that is the question," the Buddha answers: "To be or not to be is not the question." To be and not to be are just two ideas opposing each other. But they are not reality, and they do not describe reality.

Not only does awakened insight remove the notion of permanence, but it also removes the notion of impermanence. The notion of emptiness is the same. Emptiness is an instrument, and if you are caught in the notion of emptiness you are lost. The Buddha said in the Ratnakuta Sutra: "If you are caught by the notion of being and non-being, then the notion of emptiness can help you to get free. But if you are caught by the notion of emptiness, there's no hope." The teaching on emptiness is a tool helping you to get the real insight of emptiness, but if you consider the tool as the insight, you just get caught in an idea.

If you have a notion about nirvana, that notion should be removed. Nirvana is empty of all notions, including the notion of nirvana. If you are caught in the notion of nirvana, you have not touched nirvana yet. This deep insight and discovery of the Buddha took him beyond fear, beyond anxiety and suffering and beyond birth and death.