

# Our Everyday Actions\*

by Thich Nhat Hanh

## THE ELEVENTH PRECEPT: RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. Do not invest in companies that deprive others of their chance to live. Select a vocation that helps realize your ideal of compassion.

Right livelihood is a branch of the Noble Eightfold Path. It implies practicing a profession that harms neither humans nor nature, physically or morally. Practicing mindfulness at work helps us discover whether our livelihood is right or not. We live in a society where jobs are hard to find and it is difficult to practice right livelihood. Still, if it happens that our work entails harming life, we should try our best to find another job. We should not drown in forgetfulness. Our vocation can nourish our understanding and compassion, or it can erode them. Therefore, our work has much to do with our practice of the Way.

Many modern industries, even food manufacturing, are harmful to humans and nature. Most current farming practices are distant from right livelihood. The chemical poisons used by modern farmers harm the environment. Practicing right livelihood has become a difficult task for farmers. If they do not use chemical pesticides, it may be difficult to compete commercially. Not many farmers have the courage to practice organic farming. Right livelihood has ceased to be a purely personal matter. It is our collective karma.

Suppose I am a school teacher and I believe that nurturing love and understanding in children is a beautiful occupation, an example of right livelihood. I would object if someone asked me to stop teaching and become, for example, a butcher. However, if I meditate on the interrelatedness of all things, I will see that the butcher is not solely responsible for killing animals. He kills them for all of us who buy pieces of raw meat, cleanly wrapped and displayed at our local supermarket. The act of killing is a collective one. In forgetfulness, we may separate ourselves from the butcher, thinking his livelihood is wrong, while ours is right. However, if we didn't eat meat, the butcher wouldn't kill it or would kill less. This is why right livelihood is a collective matter. The livelihood of each person affects all of us, and vice versa. The butcher's children may benefit from my teaching, while my children, because they eat meat, share some responsibility for the butcher's livelihood of killing.

Millions of people make a living off the arms industry, manufacturing "conventional" and nuclear weapons. These so-called conventional weapons are sold to Third World countries, most of them underdeveloped. People in these countries need food, not guns, tanks, or bombs. The United States, Russia, France, Britain, and China are the primary suppliers of these weapons. Manufacturing and selling weapons is certainly not right livelihood, but the responsibility for this situation does not lie solely with the workers in the arms industry. All of us—politicians, economists, and consumers—share the responsibility for the death and destruction caused by these weapons. We do not see clearly enough, we do not speak out, and we do not organize enough

national debates on this huge problem. If we could discuss these issues globally, solutions could be found. New jobs must be created so that we do not have to live on the profits of weapons manufacturing.

If we are able to work in a profession that helps us realize our ideal of compassion, we should be very grateful. Every day, we should help create proper jobs for ourselves and others by living correctly—simply and sanely. To awaken ourselves and others and to help ourselves and others are the essence of Mahayana Buddhism. Individual karma cannot be separated from collective karma. If you have the opportunity, please use your energy to improve both. This is the realization of the first of the Four Great Vows.

## **THE TWELFTH PRECEPT: PROTECTING LIFE**

Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and prevent war.

In every country in the world, killing human beings is condemned. The Buddhist precept of non-killing extends even further, to include all living beings. However, no one, not even a buddha or a bodhisattva, can observe this precept to perfection. When we take a step or boil a cup of water, we kill many tiny living beings. The essence of this precept is to make every effort to respect and protect life, to continuously move in the direction of non-killing. We can try our best, even if we cannot succeed one hundred percent.

This precept is closely linked with the eleventh. Our patterns of livelihood and consuming have very much to do with the lives and security of humans and other living beings. There are many causes of war. War can be caused by fanaticism and narrowness, or by the will to gain political influence or economic power. Or it can be the exploitation of one society by another that is technologically or politically stronger. We can oppose wars once they have started, but it is better to also do our best to prevent wars from breaking out. The way to prevent war is to make peace. We accomplish this first in our daily life by combating fanaticism and attachment to views, and working for social justice. We have to work vigorously against the political and economic ambitions of any country, including our own. If important issues like these are not debated on national and international levels, we will never be able to prevent war.

We begin by studying and observing this precept of no killing in our daily lives, and then we can work to bring out the real issues of war and peace to the whole nation. If we do not live our daily lives mindfully, we ourselves are responsible, to some extent, for the structure of war. The amount of grain used in Western countries to make liquor and feed cattle, for example, is enormous. Professor Francois Peroux, director of the Institute of Applied Mathematics and Economics in Paris, has suggested that by reducing meat and alcohol consumption in the West by fifty percent, the grains that would become available would be enough to solve all hunger and malnutrition problems in the Third World. Deaths caused by automobile accidents and cardiovascular illnesses would also be reduced in the West if the consumption of liquor and meat would decrease.

Defense budgets in Western countries continue to be mammoth, even after the post-Cold War spending cuts. Studies show that if we could stop or significantly slow down the manufacture of weapons, we would have more than enough money to erase poverty, hunger,

many diseases, and ignorance from the world. In our busy daily lives, do we have enough time to look deeply into this precept of non-killing? How many among us can honestly say that we are doing enough to observe this precept?

### **"Please Call Me By My True Names"**

In Plum Village in France, we receive many letters from the refugee camps in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, hundreds each week. It is very painful to read them, but we have to do it, we have to be in contact. We try our best to help, but the suffering is enormous, and sometimes we are discouraged. It is said that half the boat people die in the ocean; only half arrive at the shores in Southeast Asia.

There are many young girls, boat people, who are raped by sea pirates. Even though the United Nations and many countries try to help the government of Thailand prevent that kind of piracy, sea pirates continue to inflict much suffering on the refugees. One day we received a letter telling us about a young girl on a small boat who was raped by a Thai pirate. She was only twelve, and she jumped into the ocean and drowned herself.

When you first learn of something like that, you get angry at the pirate. You naturally take the side of the girl. As you look more deeply you will see it differently. If you take the side of the little girl, then it is easy. You only have to take a gun and shoot the pirate. But we cannot do that. In my meditation I saw that if I had been born in the village of the pirate and raised in the same conditions as he was, I am now the pirate. There is a great likelihood that I would become a pirate. I cannot condemn myself so easily. In my meditation, I saw that many babies are born along the Gulf of Siam, hundreds every day, and if we educators, social workers, politicians, and others do not do something about the situation, in 25 years a number of them will become sea pirates. That is certain. If you or I were born today in those fishing villages, we might become sea pirates in 25 years. If you take a gun and shoot the pirate, you shoot all of us, because all of us are to some extent responsible for this state of affairs.

After a long meditation, I wrote this poem. In it, there are three people: the twelve-year-old girl, the pirate, and me. Can we look at each other and recognize ourselves in each other? The title of the poem is "Please Call Me By My True Names," because I have so many names. When I hear one of these names, I have to say, "Yes."

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, with wings still fragile, learning to sing in my new nest,  
to be a caterpillar in the heart of 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 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.

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\*The Eleventh Precept and The Twelfth Precept are excerpted from *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*, by Thich Nhat Hanh, Parallax Press, 1993, pp. 39-43. The selection "Please Call Me By My True Names" is from *Being Peace*, by Thich Nhat Hanh, Parallax Press, 1987, pp. 61-64.