

## VIOLENCE AND CONTEMPLATION

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*Photo, 1990, Thich Nhat Hanh and the author at Plum Village*

Again, violence invades our lives, in the very heart of our urban living, in Paris.  
What attitude could we take facing violence?  
An example comes back to my memory.

That was in 1990. I had invited the Vietnamese monk **Thich Nhat Hanh** at a conference that I organized at Centre Source-Ecole Française of Psychosynthèse in Paris on the theme of *Know how to live, Know how*

*to die.*

Among the speakers there was **Mireille Nègre**, a former famous classical dancer who had become a catholic nun and received permission to live in the world and teach classical dance. There was also **Antoine Trémolières**, a biologist and a researcher at CNRS, the national scientific research organization.

At that time, Thich was almost unknown in France although his monastery was located in the Southwest of France. On the contrary, his work was known in the United States, and many Americans came to see him in France.

**Marilyne Lacabane**, my co-worker and myself, we were waiting for Thich at the entrance of the conference hall. We saw him arriving, with a slow gait, in a black monk dress and with the traditional Vietnamese conical straw hat. An expanded and beautiful quality of presence. Marilyne, immediately said to me: he is a spiritually realized being! He was coming with his assistant, the faithful nun **Chan Khong** who has followed him since the age of 25.

The conference began with a presentation about the biologic dimension of the universe by Antoine Trémolières, who is also a poet and singer. We put in the symposium leaflet one of Antoine's poems about an apple.

It was then, the turn of Thich to speak. He took the example of an apple to describe the experience of the "inter-being", this relational space that connects together people and things.  
*What is, in reality, this apple made of?*

*It is made, in fact, of the Sun, the wind, the earth, the rain, human care and love.*

Antoine said later that he had never heard anyone speaking of an apple like this, and from now on, he will see apples differently.

Thich then, asked sister Chan Kong to sing poems in French and Vietnamese. She sang moving poems of tears and compassion. We were still close to the time of the boat people fleeing away from Vietnam and Cambodia in small boats, exposed to the pirates.

If, in 1990, the flow of refugees had lessened, the economic situation remained worrying in Vietnam with the shortage of food and even, two years of starvation. And the boat people continued to flee throughout the South China Sea. It is estimated that since 1975, two million Vietnamese left their country and thousands have died fleeing by boat.

Chan Khong stopped singing. Thich left the desk.

It was the turn of Mireille Nègre. She spoke briefly about her experience of religious faith and her love of dance. Then, she began to dance a ballet dance on recorded classical music. A perfect performance, in terms of classical dance. Mireille completed her dance.

At that very moment, Deborah, a psychosynthesis practitioner, raised her voice to suggest that Sister Chan Khong could sing again, and Mireille dancing in the same time. The proposal was accepted. The chairs were put aside to create space. The Vietnamese sister sang, and the French sister improvised a dance, without any classical reference: A very emotional moment for all people present, around a hundred people. We had witnessed a moment of love and creativity that could be experienced at different levels. Dancing / singing of the mother and the child? The union of soul and body?

I organized three seminars in 1990-91 in Paris for Thich, to introduce him to the French public. Today, he is well known in France. But at that time, Sister Chan Khong told me that when she and Thich came to visit a French publisher of books on spirituality, they were asked where Thich had copied down what he wrote!!!

Over the past 44 years, I have helped a number of American and European therapists and professionals, and some spiritual figures to make themselves known in France. Some were grateful to me, others not. Their contribution was of a professional worth and / or narcissistic demonstration.

But Thich brought in a wide breath, and in the words of one participant, Thich brought in the experience of an entire new continent: compassion. Enclosed below are two poems by Thich Nhat Hanh. One, recalling the days when boat people were fleeing Vietnam at the peril of their lives, "*Call me by my real name.*" The other, perhaps dedicated to prisoners convicted in camps and to their relatives, "*Promise me.*"

Can we fight against violence with a poem? We might respond to this question by raising another one: can one be effective with hysterical reactions, particularly those of the politicians who pretend to know everything about everything?

Thich Nhat Hanh is not only a man of prayer, a poet and artist. He is also a man of action, a fighter of nonviolence during the Vietnam War. And after the war, between 1975 and 2000, his active community sent medicines, money, donations to alleviate the hardships, poverty and famine endured by the Vietnamese people.

For me, his main contribution is to show a path that can transform violence into real compassion. This is rare in our time to find a person who, having experienced personal and collective drama, could be able to achieve an inner transformation.

Of course, there have always been cases of individual resilience, people who have transcended personal trials. But, here, there is a collective dimension inseparable from the individual tragedy. When we talk about the past with a friend of mine, Professor Barte, a psychiatrist and university professor of Vietnamese origin, we use the term of the “lost generation”, this generation of people who experienced war and exile, whether it be physically real, or inside. We talk about the wounds of the soul, those wounds invisible to the millions of tourists who visit Vietnam and know the country only through hotels and guided tours. The recent economic prosperity does not change the hidden sickness of the soul.

Today, the tragedy of the violence happens here in Europe. What model can inspire us in having the appropriate reactions? Ordinarily, we have already difficulty with our daily stress. Do we respond with speeches of action, or anger or compassion, with political speeches, with journalists’ comments, with psychological interpretations? We cannot even manage the psychic violence with our loved ones.

What to do with violence? Repression? Denial? Pretend that nothing happened? Praying?

Yet, there is a possibility of transformation of violence experienced at both the personal and collective level. One who goes through this maturation path paves the way for others, provided that they do accept personal resonance.

Do we need to reach the level of a Buddhist saint in order to transform violence and fear into a fuller dimension of our humanness? After the killings in Paris and Brussels, some people who lost relatives or loved ones posted very moving messages on the social networks. A man who lost his beloved wife wrote: “Violence took my beloved away, but hate will not take me away”.

I suppose that his message reached the heart of many others and showed a way towards real inner peace.

**Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh**  
*(excerpts from his works published by Parallax press)*

***PLEASE CALL ME BY MY TRUE NAMES (1978)***

Don't say that I will depart tomorrow  
even today I am still arriving.

Look deeply: every second I am arriving  
to be a bud on a Spring branch,  
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,  
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,

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  
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily  
in the clear water of pond.  
And I am also the grass-snake  
that silently 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 twelve-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 all over the Earth.  
My pain is like a river of tears,  
so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,  
so I can hear all my cries and 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 the door of my heart  
could be left open,  
the door of compassion.

***Recommandation*** (1965)

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.