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Turning Arrows Into Flowers

On the night before his enlightenment, the Buddha was seated beneath the Bo tree, in deep meditation, when he was attacked by Mara — the Tempter, the Evil One. Mara and his army of demons shot off thousands of arrows at the Buddha. But as the arrows neared him, they turned into beautiful, fragrant flowers and fell harmlessly at his feet.

This is an important story in the Buddhist canon, and one of the most important lessons to which the beloved Vietnamese monk Thích Nhất Hạnh returned countless times. The lesson is a directive to practice so that we might bear witness to violent words and actions aimed at us and transform them into flowers.

Thích Nhất Hạnh, known as Thầy, the Vietnamese word for “teacher,” died on January 22nd at the age of 95. This morning, I want to introduce you to this beautiful teaching through some stories from his remarkable life.

Thầy said, “It is possible to water the seeds of compassion in ... a situation of adversity. When we see clearly with the eyes and heart of ... compassion, we no longer feel that we are the victims of ... [others’] violence. We can even open the heart of the person [who] is trying to hurt us. We can turn our enemies into friends.”¹

It sounds impossible, doesn’t it?

Let’s see. To begin, here are just three paragraphs of Thầy’s teaching on Turning Arrows Into Flowers.

“As you begin your practice of nonviolence,” he writes, “... you become aware that violence is all around you. You become aware of the seeds of anger, fear, and hatred in your own consciousness. You may feel a huge block of suffering

¹ Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Creating True Peace*, p. 13-14

inside you.... When we have allowed violence to accumulate in us, ... we spew forth our ... pain onto those around us. We are victims of our own suffering, [and] we hurt others [when] we are in pain....

“As you begin to transform your own ... pain, you ... transform [other] people’s anger and hatred into flowers. You soon see that arrows shot at you come out of other people’s pain. You do not feel injured; ... you [feel] only compassion. Your compassion transforms the speech and actions of [others].... Instead of watering the seeds of violence, you will cultivate the seeds of compassion and bring relief to yourself and others — a victory for yourself and for humanity. Your smile is ... the smile of the Buddha when he defeated Mara.”

“Each of us must become responsible for [transforming our own pain] in order to save ourselves and those we love....²

How can we even begin?

Thích Nhất Hạnh was born in Vietnam in 1926. In 1946, fighting broke out between the French forces and their Việt Minh opponents; the United States entered the war in 1961. It didn’t end until 1975. All in all, Thây’s county was at war from the time he was 20 until he was 49 years old. When he speaks of arrows, he means real arrows; when he speaks of the enemy, he means an enemy that was literally trying to kill him and his loved ones. These teachings were very, very real to him. I want to share with you three stories from Thây’s experience of the war, as a way of illustrating both the credibility of his teachings and as a call to each of us to this extraordinary practice: turning arrows into flowers.

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Thây is speaking.³

In 1947, the French army was occupying the whole region and had set up a military base where I lived in Hue, not far from the temple where I’d been ordained. We often heard gunfire between the French and the Vietnamese. There were nights when the villagers shut themselves in their homes, bracing themselves against the barrage. In the morning when they awoke, they found corpses [in the streets] from the battle of the previous night. Hardly anyone risked traveling; hardly anyone dared pass through this area.

² *op cit*, pp. 14-15

³ Please note that this is a paraphrase; I have condensed Thây’s words while remaining faithful to his meaning.

One morning, I set out to visit my home temple. It was quite early; the dew was still on the tips of the grass. Inside a cloth bag, I carried my ceremonial robe and a few sutras, the teachings of the Buddha. I carried the traditional Vietnamese cone-shaped straw hat. I felt light and joyful at the thought of seeing my teacher, my monastic brothers, and the ancient, highly-venerated temple.

I had just gone over a hill when I heard a voice call out. Up on the hill above the road, I saw a French soldier waving, and then, behind me, I heard the clomping of a soldier's boots running up behind me. Perhaps my cloth bag looked suspicious to him. A young soldier with a thin, handsome face approached.

“Where are you going?,” he asked in poor Vietnamese. I smiled and answered him in French, “If I were to reply in Vietnamese, would you understand?”

The soldier's face lit up. “I'm going to Bao Quoc Temple,” I continued in French, “— the big temple on the hill near the train station.” The soldier pointed up to a pump house on the side of the hill — his guard post — and said, “Please come up there with me so we can talk for a while.”

We sat outside the pump house and he told this story. Ten days earlier, he and five other soldiers had gone to my temple at 10:00 at night, searching for Việt Minh resisters.”

“We were determined to find them,” he said. “We carried guns. The orders were to arrest, and kill if necessary. But when we entered, we were stunned. Whenever we did searches in the past, people would run away in a state of panic.”

“People have been terrorized so many times that they run away in fear,” said Thây.

“But the Bao Quoc Temple grounds were completely deserted,” the soldier continued. The oil lamps were turned very low. We deliberately stomped our feet loudly on the gravel. I had the feeling there were many people in the temple, but we couldn't hear a sound. It was incredibly quiet. The shouting of a soldier near me made me uneasy — no one replied. I turned on my flashlight and aimed it into a room we thought was empty. Inside, there were fifty or sixty monks sitting in utter silence.

“That’s because you came during our evening sitting period,” said Thây.

“Yes,” replied the soldier. “It was as if we’d run into a strange and invisible force. We were so taken aback that we turned and went back out into the courtyard. The monks just ignored us! They didn’t show the least sign of fear.”

“They weren’t ignoring you,” said Thây. “They were practicing concentrating on their breath.”

“I felt drawn to the calmness,” said the soldier. “It really commanded my respect. We stood quietly outside at the foot of a large tree and waited for perhaps half an hour. Then a series of bells sounded, and the temple came back to life. A monk lit a torch and came to invite us inside, but we simply told him why we were there and took our leave.

“That was the evening I began to change my idea about the Vietnamese people.

“We are homesick,” he continued. “We miss our families and our country. We’ve been sent here to kill the Việt Minh, but we don’t know if we’ll kill them or be killed by them. Seeing the people here work so hard to rebuild their lives reminds me of the lives of my relatives in France after World War II. Why have we come here? What’s the point of killing each other?”

Thây then told the young soldier the story of a friend of his who had enlisted to fight the French. “He was very brave. But one day, during an attack on a fortress, while he was concealed behind some rocks, he saw two young French soldiers sitting and talking. ‘When I saw the bright, handsome, innocent faces of those boys,’ he said, ‘I couldn’t bear to open fire. People can call me weak and soft; they can say that if all Vietnamese soldiers were like me, the whole country would be overtaken. But for a moment, I loved the enemy like my own mother loves me. I knew that the death of these two young men would make their mothers suffer, just as my mother grieves the death of my younger brother.’”

Thây and the young French soldier were quiet for a long time, overcome by the cruel and senseless absurdity of the killing, the calamity of war, and the suffering of so many.

The soldier told him that his name was Daniel Marty. He was 21 years old. He took out photos of his mother and his younger sister and brother and showed them to Thây. And then Thây continued on to Bao Quoc Temple.

In the following months, Daniel visited him on Sunday afternoons, and Thây took him to the mediation hall to practice. Afterwards, they would talk about spirituality and books they loved. When Thây praised French literature, Daniel's eyes lit up with pride. Their friendship became very deep.

Then the time came for Daniel to move to another region of Vietnam, and then on to Algeria. Thây received just one letter from him, promising to write again, but it was not to be; he was gone, without a trace. Thây was comforted by the fact that Daniel Marty had been at peace, forever changed by the profound silence of the temple, turning arrows into flowers.⁴

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In 1964, Thích Nhất Hạnh founded the School of Youth for Social Service, which trained thousands of young people to go out to remote, war-stricken villages to bring humanitarian relief. Thây had led several of them in rebuilding Tra Loc, a village bordering the Demilitarized Zone that separated North and South Vietnam. The rebuilding had taken a full year. Then one day, based on information that Communist guerrillas had infiltrated it, American planes came and bombed it.

Over a period of years, this happened again — not once, not twice, not three times, but four times — the village was bombed, and each time, the young people would rebuild. The temptation to quit was strong, but, says Thây, “we saw that we could not afford not to rebuild. If we gave up on Tra Loc, we would be giving up on hope. If we gave up on hope, we would be overwhelmed by despair. Taking action helps us not to drown in despair. This is why it is important to have a spiritual dimension in our lives. It is very important to come home to ourselves and look deeply to see what we can do every day to help, turning arrows into flowers.”⁵

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Fast forward to the early '90s, when Thây was working with Vietnam vets here in the United States, leading meditation retreats designed to help heal their trauma.

⁴ Thích Nhất Hạnh, *At Home in the World*, pp. 46-51

⁵ *op cit*, pp. 54-55

Many of the vets were suspicious that the retreat might be an ambush, especially since it was being led by a Vietnamese monk.

* During walking meditation, one veteran stayed behind the group, following at some distance, so that if the group were attacked, he explained, he would have time to run away.

* Another vet couldn't sleep inside; he put up a tent in the woods.

* One vet had lost 417 people in one battle, in one day. He had had to live with that ever since.

* Another had not been able to swallow solid food for 15 years. He had stopped talking. But after three or four days of practice — both seated and walking meditation — he had begun to open up and speak. The retreat was the first time in 15 years he'd felt safe in a group of people.

* And one vet had killed five Vietnamese children. Ever since he returned to the United States, he couldn't sleep. If he was in a room with children, it was unbearable; he would rush out as quickly as possible. He could not forgive himself.

Thây met alone with him. "It is true that you killed five children," he said. "But it is also true that today, you can save five children."

"There are children dying everywhere in the world due to violence, poverty, and oppression. In some cases, it would take just a little bit of food, medicine, or clothing to save them. Why don't you use your life to save children like these? You have killed five children, but you have the opportunity to save hundreds of children. In the present moment, you can heal the past."

And so, slowly but surely, this veteran began working for children, and then with children, devoting his life to saving their lives. In the process, the healing began. "The present moment contains the past," says Thây. "If you can live deeply in the present moment, you can heal the past."

"Veterans have an experience that makes them the light at the tip of the candle," says Thây, "illuminating the roots of war and the way to peace. We can all learn a lot from their suffering. Nothing exists by itself alone. We all belong to each other; we cannot cut reality into separate pieces. My suffering is your suffering; my happiness is your happiness." We heal and transform together. We can all turn arrows into flowers.⁶

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⁶ *op cit*, pp. 82-86

Beloved spiritual companions,

Engaging our powers of understanding,
watering the seeds of compassion,
seeing clearly, with the heart,

may we seek to practice
so that we might receive the arrows
of violent words and actions
and transform them into flowers.

It is possible to live in peace.