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# Oprah Talks to Thich Nhat Hanh

Oprah.com



He's been a Buddhist monk for more than 60 years, as well as a teacher, writer, and vocal opponent of war—a stance that left him exiled from his native Vietnam for four decades. Now the man Martin Luther King Jr. called "an apostle of peace and nonviolence" reflects on the beauty of the present moment, being grateful for every breath, and the freedom and happiness to be found in a

simple cup of tea.

The moment I meet Thich Nhat Hanh at the Four Seasons Hotel in Manhattan, I feel his sense of calm. A deeply tranquil presence seems to surround the Zen Buddhist master.

But beneath Nhat Hanh's serene demeanor is a courageous warrior. The 83-year-old native of Vietnam, who joined the monastery when he was 16, valiantly opposed his own government during the Vietnam War. Even as he embraced the contemplative life of a monk, the war confronted him with a choice: Should he remain hidden away in the monastery tending to matters of the spirit, or go out and help the villagers who were suffering? Nhat Hanh's decision to do both is what gave birth to "Engaged Buddhism"—a movement that involves peaceful activism for the purpose of social reform. It's also what led Martin Luther King Jr. to nominate him for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1967.

As part of his denunciation of the violence inflicted on his countrymen, Nhat Hanh founded a relief organization that rebuilt bombed Vietnamese villages, set up schools and medical centers, and resettled homeless families. Nhat Hanh also created a Buddhist university, a publishing house, and a peace activist magazine—all of which led the Vietnamese government to forbid him, in 1966, to return home after he'd left the country on a peace mission. He remained in exile for 39 years.

Before his exile, Nhat Hanh had spent time in the West (studying at Princeton and teaching at Columbia University in the early 1960s), and it was to the West that he now returned. Seeing an opportunity to spread Buddhist thought and encourage peaceful activism, he led the Buddhist Peace Delegation to the Paris Peace Talks in 1969, established the Unified Buddhist Church in France, and went on to write more than 100 books, including the 1995 best-seller *Living Buddha, Living Christ*—a volume that never leaves my nightstand.

Nhat Hanh eventually settled in Southern France and founded Plum Village, the Buddhist meditation practice center and monastery where he still lives. Thousands of people travel there each year to join him in exploring the tenets of Buddhism—including mindfulness (intentionally tuning in to the present moment), the development

of a practice (a regular activity, such as mindful walking, that redirects you toward right thinking), and enlightenment (the liberation from suffering that comes when you wake up to the true nature of reality). These principles were introduced to the world more than 2,000 years ago by Siddhartha Gautama, or the Buddha, the Indian-born prince who left a life of ease and indulgence in order to seek enlightenment—and founded a religion along the way.

Thich Nhat Hanh—or, as his students call him, *Thầy*, the Vietnamese word for "teacher"—brings along a group of Plum Village monks and nuns to listen in on our conversation. In some spiritual traditions, there is a concept called "holding the space"—or showing up as a compassionate listener. *Thầy*'s friends are the space holders who have traveled with him from France, and as we take a photograph together just before our chat, they usher in a peaceful mood by collectively singing a Buddhist song: "We are all the leaves of one tree; we are all the waves of one sea; the time has come for all to live as one."

Start reading Oprah's interview with Thich Nhat Hanh

**Oprah:** Thank you for the honor of talking to you. Just being in your presence, I feel less stressed than when the day started. You have such a peaceful aura. Are you always this content?

**Nhat Hanh:** This is my training, this is my practice. And I try to live every moment like that, to keep the peace in myself.

**Oprah:** Because you can't give it to others if you don't have it in yourself.

**Nhat Hanh:** Right.

**Oprah:** I see. I know that you were born in Vietnam in 1926. Is there any wonderful memory of your childhood that you can share?

**Nhat Hanh:** The day I saw a picture of the Buddha in a magazine.

**Oprah:** How old were you?

**Nhat Hanh:** I was 7, 8. He was sitting on the grass, very peaceful, smiling. I was impressed. Around me, people were not like that, so I had the desire to be like him. And I nourished that desire until the age of 16, when I had the permission of my parents to go and ordain as a monk.

**Oprah:** Did your parents encourage you?

**Nhat Hanh:** In the beginning, they were reluctant because they thought that the life of a monk is difficult.

**Oprah:** At 16, did you understand what the life would be?

**Nhat Hanh:** Not a lot. There was only the very strong desire. The feeling that I would not be happy if I could not become a monk. They call it the beginner's mind—the deep intention, the deepest desire that a person may have. And I can say that until this day, this beginner's mind is still alive in me.

**Oprah:** That's what a lot of people refer to as passion. It's the way I feel about my work most days. When you're passionate about your work, it feels like you would do it even if no one were paying you.

**Nhat Hanh:** And you enjoy it.

**Oprah:** You enjoy it. Let's talk about when you first arrived in America. You were a student at Princeton. Was it challenging as a Buddhist monk to form friendships with other students? Were you lonely?

**Nhat Hanh:** Well, Princeton University was like a monastery. There were only male students at that time. And there were not many Vietnamese living in the United States. During the first six months, I did not speak Vietnamese. But the campus was very beautiful. And everything was new—the trees and the birds and the food. My first snow was in Princeton, and the first time I used a radiator. The first fall was in Princeton.

**Oprah:** When the leaves are changing.

**Nhat Hanh:** In Vietnam we did not see things like that.

**Oprah:** At the time, were you wearing your monk robes?

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes.

**Oprah:** Never have to worry about buying clothes, do you? Always just the robe.

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes.

**Oprah:** Do you have different robes for different occasions?

**Nhat Hanh:** You have a ceremonial robe, saffron color. That's all. I feel comfortable wearing this kind of robe. And it happily reminds us that we are monks.

**Oprah:** What does it mean to be a monk?

**Nhat Hanh:** To be a monk is to have time to practice for your transformation and healing. And after that to help with the transformation and healing of other people.

**Oprah:** Are most monks enlightened, or seeking enlightenment?

**Nhat Hanh:** Enlightenment is always there. Small enlightenment will bring great enlightenment. If you breathe in and are aware that you are alive—that you can touch the miracle of being alive—then that is a kind of enlightenment. Many people are alive but don't touch the miracle of being alive.

**Oprah:** I'm sure you see all around you—I'm guilty of it myself—that we're just trying to get through the next thing. In our country, people are so busy. Even the children are busy. I get the impression very few of us are doing what you just said—touching the miracle that you are alive.

**Nhat Hanh:** That is the environment people live in. But with a practice, we can always remain alive in the present moment. With mindfulness, you can establish yourself in the present in order to touch the wonders of

life that are available in that moment. It is possible to live happily in the here and the now. So many conditions of happiness are available—more than enough for you to be happy right now. You don't have to run into the future in order to get more.

Thich Nhat Hanh defines happiness and reveals how to achieve it

**Oprah:** What is happiness?

**Nhat Hanh:** Happiness is the cessation of suffering. Well-being. For instance, when I practice this exercise of breathing in, I'm aware of my eyes; breathing out, I smile to my eyes and realize that they are still in good condition. There is a paradise of form and colors in the world. And because you have eyes still in good condition, you can get in touch with the paradise. So when I become aware of my eyes, I touch one of the conditions of happiness. And when I touch it, happiness comes.

**Oprah:** And you could do that with every part of your body.

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes. Breathing in, I am aware of my heart. Breathing out, I smile to my heart and know that my heart still functions normally. I feel grateful for my heart.

**Oprah:** So it's about being aware of and grateful for what we have.

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes.

**Oprah:** And not just the material things, but the fact that we have our breath.

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes. You need the practice of mindfulness to bring your mind back to the body and establish yourself in the moment. If you are fully present, you need only make a step or take a breath in order to enter the kingdom of God. And once you have the kingdom, you don't need to run after objects of your craving, like power, fame, sensual pleasure, and so on. Peace is possible. Happiness is possible. And this practice is simple enough for everyone to do.

**Oprah:** Tell me how we do it.

**Nhat Hanh:** Suppose you are drinking a cup of tea. When you hold your cup, you may like to breathe in, to bring your mind back to your body, and you become fully present. And when you are truly there, something else is also there—life, represented by the cup of tea. In that moment you are real, and the cup of tea is real. You are not lost in the past, in the future, in your projects, in your worries. You are free from all of these afflictions. And in that state of being free, you enjoy your tea. That is the moment of happiness, and of peace. When you brush your teeth, you may have just two minutes, but according to this practice, it is possible to produce freedom and joy during that time, because you are established in the here and now. If you are capable of brushing your teeth in mindfulness, then you will be able to enjoy the time when you take a shower, cook your breakfast, sip your tea.

**Oprah:** So from this point of view, there are endless conditions of happiness.

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes. Mindfulness helps you go home to the present. And every time you go there and recognize a condition of happiness that you have, happiness comes.

**Oprah:** With you, the tea is real.

**Nhat Hanh:** I am real, and the tea is real. I am in the present. I don't think of the past. I don't think of the future. There is a real encounter between me and the tea, and peace, happiness and joy are possible during the time I drink.

**Oprah:** I never had that much thought about a cup of tea.

**Nhat Hanh:** We have the practice of tea meditation. We sit down, enjoy a cup of tea and our brotherhood, sisterhood. It takes one hour to just enjoy a cup of tea.

**Oprah:** A cup of tea, like this? [ *Holds up her cup.* ]

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes.

**Oprah:** One hour.

**Nhat Hanh:** Every moment is a moment of happiness. And during the hour of tea meditation, you cultivate joy, brotherhood, sisterhood, dwelling in the here and the now.

On how community played a crucial role during his 39-year exile

**Oprah:** Do you do the same thing with all food?

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes. We have silent meals eaten in such a way that we get in touch with the cosmos, with every morsel of food.

**Oprah:** How long does it take you to get through a meal? All day?

**Nhat Hanh:** One hour is enough. We sit as a community, and enjoy our meal together. So whether you are eating, drinking your tea, or doing your dishes, you do it in such a way that freedom, joy, happiness are possible. Many people come to our center and learn this art of mindful living. And go back to their hometowns and set up a sangha, a community, to do the same. We have helped set up sanghas all over the world.

**Oprah:** A sangha is a beloved community.

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes.

**Oprah:** How important is that in our lives? People have it with their own families, and then you expand your beloved community to include others. So the larger your beloved community, the more you can accomplish in the world.

**Nhat Hanh:** Right.

**Oprah:** On the subject of community, let's go back to 1966. You were invited to come and speak at Cornell University, and shortly after that, you weren't allowed back into your country. You were exiled for 39 years. How

did you deal with those feelings?

**Nhat Hanh:** Well, I was like a bee taken out of the beehive. But because I was carrying the beloved community in my heart, I sought elements of the sangha around me in America and in Europe. And I began to build a community working for peace.

**Oprah:** Did you feel angry at first? Hurt?

**Nhat Hanh:** Angry, worried, sad, hurt. The practice of mindfulness helped me recognize that. In the first year, I dreamed almost every night of going home. I was climbing a beautiful hill, very green, very happily, and suddenly I woke up and found that I was in exile. So my practice was to get in touch with the trees, the birds, the flowers, the children, the people in the West—and make them my community. And because of that practice, I found home outside of home. One year later, the dreams stopped.

**Oprah:** What was the reason you weren't allowed back in the country?

**Nhat Hanh:** During the war, the warring parties all declared that they wanted to fight until the end. And those of us who tried to speak about reconciliation between brothers and brothers—they didn't allow us.

**Oprah:** So when you were a man without a country, you made a home in other countries.

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes.

**Oprah:** And the United States was one.

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes.

**Oprah:** How did you meet Martin Luther King?

**Nhat Hanh:** In June 1965, I wrote him a letter explaining why the monks in Vietnam immolated themselves. I said that this is not a suicide. I said that in situations like the one in Vietnam, to make your voice heard is difficult. Sometimes we have to burn ourselves in order to be heard. It is out of compassion that you do that. It is the act of love and not of despair. And exactly one year after I wrote that letter, I met him in Chicago. We had a discussion about peace, freedom, and community. And we agreed that without a community, we cannot go very far.

**Oprah:** How long was the discussion?

**Nhat Hanh:** Probably five minutes or so. And after that, there was a press conference, and he came out very strongly against the war in Vietnam.

**Oprah:** Do you think that was a result of your conversation?

**Nhat Hanh:** I believe so. We continued our work, and the last time I met him was in Geneva during the peace conference.

Thich Nhat Hanh describes the best and only way to eliminate terrorism

**Oprah:** Did the two of you speak then?

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes. He invited me up for breakfast, to talk about these issues again. I got caught in a press conference downstairs and came late, but he kept the breakfast warm for me. And I told him that the people in Vietnam call him a bodhisattva—enlightened being—because of what he was doing for his people, his country, and the world.

**Oprah:** And the fact that he was doing it nonviolently.

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes. That is the work of a bodhisattva, a buddha, always with compassion and nonviolence. When I heard of his assassination, I couldn't believe it. I thought, "The American people have produced King but are not capable of preserving him." I was a little bit angry. I did not eat, I did not sleep. But my determination to continue building the beloved community continues always. And I think that I felt his support always.

**Oprah:** Always.

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes.

**Oprah:** Okay. We've been talking about mindfulness, and you've mentioned mindful walking. How does that work?

**Nhat Hanh:** As you walk, you touch the ground mindfully, and every step can bring you solidity and joy and freedom. Freedom from your regret concerning the past, and freedom from your fear about the future.

**Oprah:** Most people when they're walking are thinking about where they have to go and what they have to do. But you would say that removes us from happiness.

**Nhat Hanh:** People sacrifice the present for the future. But life is available only in the present. That is why we should walk in such a way that every step can bring us to the here and the now.

**Oprah:** What if my bills need to be paid? I'm walking, but I'm thinking about the bills.

**Nhat Hanh:** There is a time for everything. There is a time when I sit down, I concentrate myself on the problem of my bills, but I would not worry before that. One thing at a time. We practice mindful walking in order to heal ourselves, because walking like that really relieves our worries, the pressure, the tension in our body and in our mind.

**Oprah:** The case is the same for deep listening, which I've heard you refer to.

**Nhat Hanh:** Deep listening is the kind of listening that can help relieve the suffering of another person. You can call it compassionate listening. You listen with only one purpose: to help him or her to empty his heart. Even if he says things that are full of wrong perceptions, full of bitterness, you are still capable of continuing to listen with compassion. Because you know that listening like that, you give that person a chance to suffer less. If you want to help him to correct his perception, you wait for another time. For now, you don't interrupt. You don't argue. If you do, he loses his chance. You just listen with compassion and help him to suffer less. One hour like

that can bring transformation and healing.

**Oprah:** I love this idea of deep listening, because often when someone comes to you and wants to vent, it's so tempting to start giving advice. But if you allow the person just to let the feelings out, and then at another time come back with advice or comments, that person would experience a deeper healing. That's what you're saying.

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes. Deep listening helps us to recognize the existence of wrong perceptions in the other person and wrong perceptions in us. The other person has wrong perceptions about himself and about us. And we have wrong perceptions about ourselves and the other person. And that is the foundation for violence and conflict and war. The terrorists, they have the wrong perception. They believe that the other group is trying to destroy them as a religion, as a civilization. So they want to abolish us, to kill us before we can kill them. And the antiterrorist may think very much the same way—that these are terrorists and they are trying to eliminate us, so we have to eliminate them first. Both sides are motivated by fear, by anger, and by wrong perception. But wrong perceptions cannot be removed by guns and bombs. They should be removed by deep listening, compassionate listening, and loving space.

Why suffering is important, and how to heal it

**Oprah:** The only way to end war is communication between people.

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes. We should be able to say this: "Dear friends, dear people, I know that you suffer. I have not understood enough of your difficulties and suffering. It's not our intention to make you suffer more. It is the opposite. We don't want you to suffer. But we don't know what to do and we might do the wrong thing if you don't help us to understand. So please tell us about your difficulties. I'm eager to learn, to understand." We have to have loving speech. And if we are honest, if we are true, they will open their hearts. Then we practice compassionate listening, and we can learn so much about our own perception and their perception. Only after that can we help remove wrong perception. That is the best way, the only way, to remove terrorism.

**Oprah:** But what you're saying also applies to difficulties between yourself and family members or friends. The principle is the same, no matter the conflict.

**Nhat Hanh:** Right. And peace negotiations should be conducted in that manner. When we come to the table, we shouldn't negotiate right away. We should spend time walking together, eating together, making acquaintance, telling each other about our own suffering, without blame or condemnation. It takes maybe one, two, three weeks to do that. And if communication and understanding are possible, negotiation will be easier. So if I am to organize a peace negotiation, I will organize it in that way.

**Oprah:** You'd start with tea?

**Nhat Hanh:** With tea and walking meditation.

**Oprah:** Mindful tea.

**Nhat Hanh:** And sharing our happiness and our suffering. And deep listening and loving speech.

**Oprah:** Is there ever a place for anger?



**Nhat Hanh:** Anger is the energy that people use in order to act. But when you are angry, you are not lucid, and you might do wrong things. That is why compassion is a better energy. And the energy of compassion is very strong. We suffer. That is real. But we have learned not to get angry and not to allow ourselves to be carried by anger. We realize right away that that is fear. That is corruption.

**Oprah:** What if in a moment of mindfulness you are being challenged? For instance, the other day someone presented me with a lawsuit, and it's hard to feel happy when somebody is going to be taking you to court.

**Nhat Hanh:** The practice is to go to the anxiety, the worry—

**Oprah:** The fear. First thing that happens is that fear sets in, like, What am I going to do?

**Nhat Hanh:** So you recognize that fear. You embrace it tenderly and look deeply into it. And as you embrace your pain, you get relief and you find out how to handle that emotion. And if you know how to handle the fear, then you have enough insight in order to solve the problem. The problem is to not allow that anxiety to take over. When these feelings arise, you have to practice in order to use the energy of mindfulness to recognize them, embrace them, look deeply into them. It's like a mother when the baby is crying. Your anxiety is your baby. You have to take care of it. You have to go back to yourself, recognize the suffering in you, embrace the suffering, and you get relief. And if you continue with your practice of mindfulness, you understand the roots, the nature of the suffering, and you know the way to transform it.

**Oprah:** You use the word suffering a *lot*. I think many people think suffering is dire starvation or poverty. But when you speak of suffering, you mean what?

**Nhat Hanh:** I mean the fear, the anger, the despair, the anxiety in us. If you know how to deal with that, then you'll be able to handle problems of war and poverty and conflicts. If we have fear and despair in us, we cannot remove the suffering in society.

**Oprah:** The nature of Buddhism, as I understand it, is to believe that we are all pure and radiant at our core. And yet we see around us so much evidence that people are not acting from a place of purity and radiance. How do we reconcile that?

**Nhat Hanh:** Well, happiness and suffering support each other. To be is to inter-be. It's like the left and the right. If the left is not there, the right cannot be there. The same is true with suffering and happiness, good and evil. In every one of us there are good seeds and bad. We have the seed of brotherhood, love, compassion, insight. But we have also the seed of anger, hate, dissent.

**Oprah:** That's the nature of being human.

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes. There is the mud, and there is the lotus that grows out of the mud. We need the mud in order to make the lotus.

**Oprah:** Can't have one without the other.

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes. You can only recognize your happiness against the background of suffering. If you have not suffered hunger, you do not appreciate having something to eat. If you have not gone through a war, you don't

know the value of peace. That is why we should not try to run away from one thing after another thing. Holding our suffering, looking deeply into it, we find a way to happiness.

Learn about the 4 mantras Thich Nhat Hanh uses during meditation

**Oprah:** Do you meditate every single day?

**Nhat Hanh:** We try to do it not only every day but every moment. While drinking, while talking, while writing, while watering our garden, it's always possible to practice living in the here and the now.

**Oprah:** But do you ever sit silently with yourself or recite a mantra—or not recite a mantra?

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes. We sit alone, we sit together.

**Oprah:** The more people you sit with, the better.

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes, the collective energy is very helpful. I'd like to talk about the mantras you just mentioned. The first one is "Darling, I'm here for you." When you love someone, the best you can offer is your presence. How can you love if you are not there?

**Oprah:** That's a lovely mantra.

**Nhat Hanh:** You look into their eyes and you say, "Darling, you know something? I'm here for you." You offer him or her your presence. You are not preoccupied with the past or the future; you are there for your beloved. The second mantra is, "Darling, I know you are there and I am so happy." Because you are fully there, you recognize the presence of your beloved as something very precious. You embrace your beloved with mindfulness. And he or she will bloom like a flower. To be loved means to be recognized as existing. And these two mantras can bring happiness right away, even if your beloved one is not there. You can use your telephone and practice the mantra.

**Oprah:** Or e-mail.

**Nhat Hanh:** E-mail. You don't have to practice it in Sanskrit or Tibetan—you can practice in English.

**Oprah:** Darling, I'm here for you.

**Nhat Hanh:** And I'm very happy. The third mantra is what you practice when your beloved one is suffering. "Darling, I know you're suffering. That is why I am here for you." Before you do something to help, your presence already can bring some relief.

**Oprah:** The acknowledgment of the suffering or the hurting.

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes. And the fourth mantra is a little bit more difficult. It is when you suffer and you believe that your suffering has been caused by your beloved. If someone else had done the same wrong to you, you would have suffered less. But this is the person you love the most, so you suffer deeply. You prefer to go to your room and close the door and suffer alone.

**Oprah:** Yes.

**Nhat Hanh:** You are hurt. And you want to punish him or her for having made you suffer. The mantra is to overcome that: "Darling, I suffer. I am trying my best to practice. Please help me." You go to him, you go to her, and practice that. And if you can bring yourself to say that mantra, you suffer less right away. Because you do not have that obstacle standing between you and the other person.

**Oprah:** "Darling, I suffer. Please help me."

**Nhat Hanh:** "Please help me."

**Oprah:** What if he or she is not willing to help you?

**Nhat Hanh:** First of all, when you love someone, you want to share everything with him or her. So it is your duty to say, "I suffer and I want you to know"—and he will, she will, appreciate it.

**Oprah:** If he or she loves you.

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes. This is the case of two people who love each other. Your beloved one.

**Oprah:** All right.

**Nhat Hanh:** "And when I have been trying my best to look deeply, to see whether this suffering comes from my wrong perception and I might be able to transform it, but in this case I cannot transform it, you should help me, darling. You should tell me why you have done such a thing to me, said such a thing to me." In that way, you have expressed your trust, your confidence. You don't want to punish anymore. And that is why you suffer less right away.

Thich Nhat Hanh shares what he knows for sure

**Oprah:** Beautiful. Now I'm going to ask just a few questions about monkdom. Do you exercise to stay in shape?

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes. We have the ten mindful movements. We do walking meditation every day. We practice mindful eating.

**Oprah:** Are you vegetarian?

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes. Vegetarian. Complete. We do not use animal products anymore.

**Oprah:** So you wouldn't eat an egg.

**Nhat Hanh:** No egg, no milk, no cheese. Because we know that mindful eating can help save our planet.

**Oprah:** Do you watch television?

**Nhat Hanh:** No. But I'm in touch with the world. If anything really important happens, someone will tell me.

**Oprah:** That's the way I feel!

**Nhat Hanh:** You don't have to listen to the news three times a day or read one newspaper after another.

**Oprah:** That's right. Now, the life of a monk is a celibate life, correct?

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes.

**Oprah:** You never had trouble with the idea of giving up marriage or children?

**Nhat Hanh:** One day when I was in my 30s, I was practicing meditation in a park in France. I saw a young mother with a beautiful baby. And in a flash I thought that if I was not a monk, I would have a wife and a child like that. The idea lasted only for one second. I overcame it very quickly.

**Oprah:** That was not the life for you. And speaking of life, what about death? What happens when we die, do you believe?

**Nhat Hanh:** The question can be answered when you can answer this: What happens in the present moment? In the present moment, you are producing thought, speech, and action. And they continue in the world. Every thought you produce, anything you say, any action you do, it bears your signature. Action is called karma. And that's your continuation. When this body disintegrates, you continue on with your actions. It's like the cloud in the sky. When the cloud is no longer in the sky, it hasn't died. The cloud is continued in other forms like rain or snow or ice. Our nature is the nature of no birth and no death. It is impossible for a cloud to pass from being into nonbeing. And that is true with a beloved person. They have not died. They have continued in many new forms and you can look deeply and recognize them in you and around you.

**Oprah:** Is that what you meant when you wrote one of my favorite poems, "Call Me By My True Name"?

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes. When you call me European, I say yes. When you call me Arab, I say yes. When you call me black, I say yes. When you call me white, I say yes. Because I am in you and you are in me. We have to inter-be with everything in the cosmos.

**Oprah:** [ *Reading from the poem* ] "I am a mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river. And I am the bird that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.... 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.... Please call me by my true names, so I can hear all my cries and laughter 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." What does that poem mean?

**Nhat Hanh:** It means compassion is our most important practice. Understanding brings compassion. Understanding the suffering that living beings undergo helps liberate the energy of compassion. And with that energy you know what to do.

**Oprah:** Okay. At the end of this magazine, I have a column called "What I Know for Sure." What do you know for sure?

**Nhat Hanh:** I know that we do not know enough. We have to continue to learn. We have to be open. And we have to be ready to release our knowledge in order to come to a higher understanding of reality. When you climb a ladder and arrive on the sixth step and you think that is the highest, then you cannot come to the seventh. So the technique is to abandon the sixth in order for the seventh step to be possible. And this is our practice, to release our views. The practice of nonattachment to views is at the heart of the Buddhist practice of meditation. People suffer because they are caught in their views. As soon as we release those views, we are free and we don't suffer anymore.

**Oprah:** Isn't the true quest to be free?

**Nhat Hanh:** Yes. To be free, first of all, is to be free from wrong views that are the foundation of all kinds of suffering and fear and violence.

**Oprah:** It has been my honor to talk to you today.

**Nhat Hanh:** Thank you. A moment of happiness that might help people.

**Oprah:** I think it will.

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