

The Sun My Heart



The teachings of interdependence, of interbeing, and interpenetration — that the one is the all and the all are the one — are some of the deepest teachings of Buddhism, though they are not easily understood. I always thought that understanding these teachings was the result of insight that could be achieved only after decades of concentration. From Thây I learned that once we have the capacity to dwell in the present moment with the help of our conscious breathing and awareness, we can immediately look deeply into the nature of all that is.

Before I met Thây I had struggled for years trying to understand the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra. I had read many commentaries, which only left me more confused. When, at a retreat in England in 1986, I first heard Thây teach about the interbeing nature of a piece of paper, I was astounded. How could something which had always sounded so complex and had inspired thousands of pages of commentary turn out to be so simple? Thây simply held up a white sheet of paper and told us what its nature was, how it did not have a separate self, but was just a composite of different causes and conditions including the clouds, the sunshine, the Earth, and the bread which the logger ate. Thây asked us, "Can you see the cloud in this piece of paper?" It was so simple that even a young child could understand. Yet, as Thây spoke, there was a deeper transmission, a

connection of energy between *Thây* and the audience, so that the interbeing nature of the piece of paper was something that went beyond words.

The same thing happened early one morning in 1988 when I was standing in Bodhgaya with *Thây* gazing at the red ball of fire which we call the rising sun. *Thây* told me to take a look at the sun: That sun is your heart, he said. It is your heart because without the sun you would not be alive. The sun is not outside of the lettuce and the sun is not outside of you. We often stop to enjoy the magnificence of the sunset or the sunrise. Looking at the sun at these times does not hurt our eyes, and these are moments when we dwell in the present moment and we can smile to the sun and feel how our life and the life of the sun "inter-are." This is insight and it is not theory. The insight is born when we are really present.

—Sister Annabel Laity

INTERBEING

The sun has entered me.
 The sun has entered me together with the cloud
 and the river.
 I myself have entered the river,
 and I have entered the sun
 with the cloud and the river.
 There has not been a moment
 when we do not interpenetrate.

But before the sun entered me,
 the sun was in me —
 also the cloud and the river.
 Before I entered the river,
 I was already in it.

There has not been a moment
 When we have not *inter-been*.

Therefore you know
 that as long as you continue to breathe,
 I continue to be in you.

—Call Me by My True Names

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper *inter-are*. "Inter-being" is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix "inter" with the verb "to be," we have a new verb, *inter-be*. Without a cloud, we cannot have paper, so we can say that the cloud and the sheet of paper *inter-are*.

If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine *inter-are*. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore, the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger's father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. You cannot point out one thing that is not

here — time, space, the Earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word “inter-be” should be in the dictionary. “To be” is to inter-be. You cannot just *be* by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is.

Suppose we try to return one of the elements to its source. Suppose we return the sunshine to the sun. Do you think that this sheet of paper will be possible? No, without sunshine nothing can be. And if we return the logger to his mother, then we have no sheet of paper either. The fact is that this sheet of paper is made up only of “non-paper elements.” And if we return these non-paper elements to their sources, then there can be no paper at all. Without “non-paper elements,” like mind, logger, sunshine and so on, there will be no paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.

— *The Heart of Understanding*

ROSES AND GARBAGE

Defiled or immaculate. Dirty or pure. These are concepts we form in our mind. A beautiful rose we have just cut and placed in our vase is immaculate. It smells so good, so pure, so fresh. It supports the idea of immaculateness. The opposite is a garbage can. It smells horrible, and it is filled with rotten things.

But that is only when you look on the surface. If you look more deeply you will see that in just five or six days, the rose will become part of the garbage. You do not need to wait five days to see it. If you just look at the rose, and you look deeply, you can see it now. And if you look into the garbage can, you see that in a few months its contents can be transformed into lovely vegetables, and even a rose. If you are a good organic gardener and you have the eyes of a bodhisattva, looking at a rose you can see the garbage, and looking at the garbage you

can see a rose. Roses and garbage inter-are. Without a rose, we cannot have garbage; and without garbage, we cannot have a rose. They need each other very much. The rose and garbage are equal. The garbage is just as precious as the rose. If we look deeply at the concepts of defilement and immaculateness, we return to the notion of inter-being.

In the city of Manila there are many young prostitutes, some of them only fourteen or fifteen years old. They are very unhappy young ladies. They did not want to be prostitutes. Their families are poor and these young girls went to the city to look for some kind of job, like a street vendor, to make money to send back to their families. Of course this is true not only in Manila, but in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam, in New York City, and in Paris also. It is true that in the city you can make money more easily than in the countryside, so we can imagine how a young girl may have been tempted to go there to help her family. But after only a few weeks there, she was persuaded by a clever person to work for her and to earn perhaps one hundred times more money. Because she was so young and did not know much about life, she accepted, and became a prostitute. Since that time, she has carried the feeling of being impure, defiled, and this causes her great suffering. When she looks at other young girls, dressed beautifully, belonging to good families, a wretched feeling wells up in her, and this feeling of defilement has become her hell.

But if she could look deeply at herself and at the whole situation, she would see that she is like this because other people are like that. “This is like this, because that is like that.” So how can a so-called good girl, belonging to a good family, be proud? Because their way of life is like this, the other girl has to be like that. No one among us has clean hands. No one of us can claim it is not our responsibility. The girl in Manila is that way because of the way we are. Looking into the life of that young prostitute, we see the non-prostitute people. And looking at the non-prostitute people, and at the way we live our lives,

we see the prostitute. This helps to create that, and that helps to create this.

Let us look at wealth and poverty. The affluent society and the society deprived of everything inter-are. The wealth of one society is made of the poverty of the other. "This is like this, because that is like that." Wealth is made of non-wealth elements, and poverty is made by non-poverty elements. It is exactly the same as with the sheet of paper. So we must be careful. We should not imprison ourselves in concepts. The truth is that everything is everything else. We can only inter-be, we cannot just be. And we are responsible for everything that happens around us. Only by seeing with the eyes of interbeing can that young girl be freed from her suffering.

We are not separate. We are inextricably inter-related. The rose is the garbage, and the non-prostitute is the prostitute. The rich man is the very poor woman, and the Buddhist is the non-Buddhist. The non-Buddhist cannot help but be a Buddhist, because we inter-are. The emancipation of the young prostitute will come as she sees into the nature of interbeing. She will know that she is bearing the fruit of the whole world. And if we look into ourselves and see her, we bear her pain, and the pain of the whole world. — *The Heart of Understanding*

THE SUN MY HEART

We know that if our heart stops beating, the flow of our life will stop, and so we cherish our heart very much. Yet we do not often take the time to notice that there are other things, outside of our bodies, that are also essential for our survival. Look at the immense light we call the sun. If it stops shining, the flow of our life will also stop, and so the sun is our second heart, our heart outside of our body. This immense "heart" gives all life on Earth the warmth necessary for existence. Plants live thanks to the sun. Their leaves absorb the sun's energy, along with carbon

dioxide from the air, to produce food for the tree, the flower, the plankton. And thanks to plants, we and other animals can live. All of us — people, animals, and plants — "consume" the sun, directly and indirectly. We cannot begin to describe all the effects of the sun, that great heart outside of our body. In fact, our body is not limited to what lies inside the boundary of our skin. Our body is much greater, much more immense. If the layer of air around our Earth disappears even for an instant, "our" life will end. There is no phenomenon in the universe that does not intimately concern us, from a pebble resting at the bottom of the ocean, to the movement of a galaxy millions of light years away. The poet Walt Whitman said, "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars. . . ." These words are not philosophy. They come from the depths of his soul. He said, "I am large, I contain multitudes."

— *The Sun My Heart*

THE FLOWER IS STILL BLOOMING

There is a practice called Meditation on True Emptiness, in which the practitioner lets go of habitual ways of thinking about being and non-being by realizing that these concepts were formed by incorrectly perceiving things as independent and permanent. When an apple tree produces flowers, we don't see apples yet, and so we might say, "There are flowers but no apples on this tree." We say this because we do not see the latent presence of the apples in the flowers. Time will gradually reveal the apples.

When we look at a chair, we see the wood, but we fail to observe the tree, the forest, the carpenter, or our own mind. When we meditate on it, we can see the entire universe in all its interwoven and interdependent relations in the chair. The presence of the wood reveals the presence of the tree. The presence of the leaf reveals the presence of the sun. The presence of the apple

blossom reveals the presence of the apple. Meditators can see the one in the many, and the many in the one. Even before they see the chair, they can see its presence in the heart of living reality. The chair is not separate. It exists only in its interdependent relations with everything else in the universe. It *is* because all other things *are*. If it *is not*, then all other things *are not* either.

Every time we use the word "chair" or the concept "chair" forms in our mind, reality is severed in half. There is "chair" and there is everything which is "non-chair." This kind of separation is both violent and absurd. The sword of conceptualization functions this way because we do not realize that the chair is made entirely from non-chair elements. Since all non-chair elements are present in the chair, how can we separate them? An awakened individual vividly sees the non-chair elements when looking at the chair, and realizes that the chair has no boundaries, no beginning, and no end.

To deny the existence of a chair is to deny the presence of the whole universe. A chair which exists cannot become non-existent, even if we chop it up into small pieces or burn it. If we could succeed in destroying one chair, we could destroy the entire universe. The concept of "beginning and end" is closely linked with the concept of "being and non-being." For example, from what moment in time can we say that a particular bicycle has come into existence and from what moment is it no longer existent? If we say that it begins to exist the moment the last part is assembled, does that mean we cannot say, "This bicycle needs just one more part," the prior moment? And when it is broken and cannot be ridden, why do we call it "a broken bicycle"? If we meditate on the moment the bicycle is and the moment it is no longer, we will notice that the bicycle cannot be placed in the categories "being and non-being" or beginning and end."

Did the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore exist before his birth or not? Does he exist after his death or has he ceased to exist? If you accept the principle of "interpenetration" or the

principle of "interbeing," you cannot say that there has ever been a time when "Tagore *is not*," even the times before his birth or after his death. If Tagore is not, the entire universe cannot be, nor can you or I exist. It is not because of his "birth" that Tagore exists, nor because of his "death" that he does not exist.

I have heard several friends express regret that they did not live at the time of the Buddha. I think that even if they passed him on the street, they would not recognize him. Not only Tagore and Shakyamuni Buddha, but all of us are without beginning and without end. I am here because you are there. If anyone of us does not exist, no one else can exist either. Reality cannot be confined by concepts of being, non-being, birth, and death. The term "true emptiness" can be used to describe reality and to destroy all ideas which imprison and divide us and which artificially create a reality. Without a mind free from preconceived ideas, we cannot penetrate reality. Scientists are coming to realize that they cannot use ordinary language to describe non-conceptual insights. Scientific language is beginning to have the symbolic nature of poetry. Today such words as "charm" and "color" are being used to describe properties of particles that have no conceptual counterpart in the "macro-realm." Some day reality will reveal itself beyond all conceptualizations and measurements.

—*The Sun My Heart*

HAPPY CONTINUATION

What is the date on which you were born, your birth date? Before that date, did you already exist? Were you already there before you were born? Let me help you. To be born means from nothing you become something. My question is, before you were born, were you already there?

Suppose a hen is about to lay an egg. Before she gives birth, do you think the egg is already there? Yes, of course. It is in-

side. You also were inside before you were outside. That means that before you were born, you already existed — inside your mother. The fact is that if something is already there, it does not need to be born. To be born means from nothing you become something. If you are already something, what is the use of being born?

So, your so-called birthday is really your Continuation Day. The next time you celebrate, you can say, "Happy Continuation Day." I think that we may have a better concept of when we were born. If we go back nine months, to the time of our conception, we have a better date to put on our birth certificates. In China, and also in Vietnam, when you are born, you are already considered one year old. So we say we begin to be at the time of our conception in our mother's womb, and we write down that date on our birth certificate.

But the question remains: Before even that date did you exist or not? If you say, "Yes," I think you are correct. Before your conception you were there already, maybe half in your father, half in your mother. Because from nothing, we can never become something. Can you name one thing that was once a nothing? A cloud? Do you think that a cloud can be born out of nothing? Before becoming a cloud, it was water, maybe flowing as a river. It was not nothing. Do you agree?

We cannot conceive the birth of anything. There is only continuation. Please look back even further and you will see that you not only exist in your father and mother, but you also exist in your grandparents and in your great grandparents. As I look more deeply, I can see that in a former life I was a cloud. This is not poetry; it is science. Why do I say that in a former life I was a cloud? Because I am still a cloud. Without the cloud, I cannot be here. I am the cloud, the river, and the air at this very moment, so I know that in the past I have been a cloud, a river, and the air. And I was a rock. I was the minerals in the water. This is not a question of belief in reincarnation. This is the history of life on Earth. We have been gas, sunshine, water, fungi,

and plants. We have been single-celled beings. The Buddha said that in one of his former lives, he was a tree. He was a fish. He was a deer. These are not superstitious things. Everyone of us has been a cloud, a deer, a bird, a fish, and we continue to be these things, not just in former lives.

This is not just the case with birth. Nothing can be born, and also nothing can die. Do you think that a cloud can die? To die means that from something you become nothing. Do you think that we can make something a nothing? Let us go back to our sheet of paper. We may have the illusion that to destroy it all we have to do is light a match and burn it up. But if we burn a sheet of paper, some of it will become smoke, and the smoke will rise and continue to be. The heat that is caused by the burning paper will enter into the cosmos and penetrate other things, because the heat is the next life of the paper. The ash that is formed will become part of the soil and the sheet of paper, in his or her next life, might be a cloud and a rose at the same time. We have to be very careful and attentive in order to realize that this sheet of paper has never been born, and it will never die. It can take on other forms of being, but we are not capable of transforming a sheet of paper into nothingness.

Everything is like that, even you and I. We are not subject to birth and death. A Zen master might give a student a subject of meditation like, "What was your face before your parents were born?" This is an invitation to go on a journey in order to recognize yourself. If you do well, you can see your former lives as well as your future lives. Please remember that we are not talking about philosophy; we are talking about reality. Look at your hand and ask yourself, "Since when has my hand been around?" If I look deeply into my hand I can see it has been around for a long time, more than three hundred thousand years. I see many generations of ancestors in there, not just in the past, but in the present moment, still alive. I am only the continuation. I have never died once. If I had died even once, how could my hand still be here?

The French scientist Lavoisier said, "Nothing is created, and nothing is destroyed." Even the best contemporary scientists cannot reduce something as small as a speck of dust or an electron to nothingness. One form of energy can only become another form of energy. Something can never become nothing, and this includes a speck of dust.

One autumn day, I was in a park, absorbed in the contemplation of a very small but beautiful leaf, in the shape of a heart. Its color was almost red, and it was barely hanging on the branch, nearly ready to fall down. I spent a long time with it, and I asked the leaf a lot of questions. I found out the leaf had been a mother to the tree. Usually we think that the tree is the mother and the leaves are just children, but as I looked at the leaf I saw that the leaf is also a mother to the tree. The sap that the roots take up is only water and minerals, not good enough to nourish the tree, so the tree distributes that sap to the leaves. And the leaves take the responsibility of transforming that rough sap into elaborated sap and, with the help of the sun and gas, sending it back in order to nourish the tree. Therefore, the leaves are also the mother to the tree. And since the leaf is linked to the tree by a stem, the communication between them is easy to see.

We do not have a stem linking us to our mother any more, but when we were in her womb we had a very long stem, an umbilical cord. The oxygen and the nourishment we needed came to us through that stem. Unfortunately, on the day that we call our birthday, it was cut off and we received the illusion that we are independent. That is a mistake. We continue to rely on our mother for a very long time, and we have several other mothers as well. The Earth is our Mother. We have a great many stems linking us to our Mother Earth. There is a stem linking us with the cloud. If there is no cloud, there is no water for us to drink. We are made of at least seventy percent water, and the stem between the cloud and us is really there. This is also the case with the river, the forest, the logger, and

the farmer. There are hundreds of thousands of stems linking us to everything in the cosmos, and therefore we can be. Do you see the link between you and me? If you are not there, I am not here. That is certain. If you do not see it yet, look more deeply and I am sure you will see. As I said, this is not philosophy. You really have to see.

I asked the leaf whether it was scared because it was autumn and the other leaves were falling. The leaf told me, "No. During the whole spring and summer I was very alive. I worked hard and helped nourish the tree, and much of me is in the tree. Please do not say that I am just this form, because the form of leaf is only a tiny part of me. I am the whole tree. I know that I am already inside the tree, and when I go back to the soil, I will continue to nourish the tree. That's why I do not worry. As I leave this branch and float to the ground, I will wave to the tree and tell her, 'I will see you again very soon.'"

That day there was a wind blowing and, after a while, I saw the leaf leave the branch and float down to the soil, dancing joyfully, because as it floated it saw itself already there in the tree. It was so happy. I bowed my head, and I knew that we have a lot to learn from the leaf.

A wave on the ocean has a beginning and an end, a birth and a death. But the wave is empty. The wave is full of water, but it is empty of a separate self. A wave is a form which has been made possible thanks to the existence of wind and water. If a wave only sees its form, with its beginning and end, it will be afraid of birth and death. But if the wave sees that it is water, identifies itself with the water, then it will be emancipated from birth and death. Each wave is born and is going to die, but the water is free from birth and death.

When I was a child I used to play with a kaleidoscope. I took a tube and a few pieces of ground glass, turned it a little bit, and saw many wonderful sights. Every time I made a small movement with my fingers, one sight would disappear and another would appear. I did not cry at all when the first spectacle disap-

peared, because I knew that nothing was lost. Another beautiful sight always followed. If you are the wave and you become one with the water, looking at the world with the eyes of water, then you are not afraid of going up, going down, going up, going down. But please do not be satisfied with speculation, or take my word for it. You have to enter it, taste it, and be one with it yourself. And that can be done through meditation, not only in the meditation hall, but throughout your daily life. While you cook a meal, while you clean the house, while you go for a walk, you can look at things and try to see them in the nature of emptiness. "Emptiness" is an optimistic word; it is not at all pessimistic. I have seen people die very peacefully, with a smile, because they see that birth and death are only waves on the surface of the ocean, are just the spectacle in the kaleidoscope.

So you see there are many lessons we can learn from the cloud, the water, the wave, the leaf, and the kaleidoscope. From everything else in the cosmos, too. If you look at anything carefully, deeply enough, you discover the mystery of interbeing, and once you have seen it you will no longer be subject to fear — fear of birth, or fear of death. Birth and death are only ideas we have in our mind, and these ideas cannot be applied to reality. It is just like the idea of above and below. We are very sure that when we point our hand up, it is above, and when we point in the opposite direction, it is below. Heaven is above, and Hell is below. But the people who are sitting right now on the other side of the planet must disagree, because the idea of the above and below does not apply to the cosmos, exactly like the idea of birth and death.

So please continue to look back and you will see that you have always been here. Let us look together and penetrate into the life of a leaf, so we may be one with the leaf. Let us penetrate and be one with the cloud, or with the wave, to realize our own nature as water and be free from our fear. If we look very deeply, we will transcend birth and death.

Tomorrow, I will continue to be. But you will have to be very attentive to see me. I will be a flower, or a leaf. I will be in these forms and I will say hello to you. If you are attentive enough, you will recognize me, and you may greet me. I will be very happy.
— *The Heart of Understanding*

INTERPENETRATION

There is no phenomenon in the universe that does not intimately concern us, from a pebble resting at the bottom of the ocean, to the movement of a galaxy millions of light years away.

All phenomena are interdependent. When we think of a speck of dust, a flower, or a human being, our thinking cannot break loose from the idea of unity, of one, of calculation. We see a line drawn between one and many, one and not one. But if we truly realize the interdependent nature of the dust, the flower, and the human being, we see that unity cannot exist without diversity. Unity and diversity interpenetrate each other freely. Unity is diversity, and diversity is unity. This is the principle of interbeing.

If you are a mountain climber or someone who enjoys the countryside or the forest, you know that forests are our lungs outside of our bodies. Yet we have been acting in a way that has allowed millions of square miles of land to be deforested, and we have also destroyed the air, the rivers, and parts of the ozone layer. We are imprisoned in our small selves, thinking only of some comfortable conditions for this small self, while we destroy our large self. If we want to change the situation, we must begin by being our true selves. To be our true selves means we have to *be* the forest, the river, and the ozone layer. If we visualize ourselves as the forest, we will experience the hopes and fears of the trees. If we don't do this, the forest will die, and we will lose our chance for peace. When we understand that we inter-are with the trees, we will know that it is

up to us to make an effort to keep the trees alive. In the last twenty years, our automobiles and factories have created acid rain that has destroyed so many trees. Because we inter-are with the trees, we know that if they do not live, we too will disappear very soon.

We humans think we are smart, but an orchid, for example, knows how to produce noble, symmetrical flowers, and a snail knows how to make a beautiful, well-proportioned shell. Compared with their knowledge, ours is not worth much at all. We should bow deeply before the orchid and the snail and join our palms reverently before the monarch butterfly and the magnolia tree. The feeling of respect for all species will help us recognize the noblest nature in ourselves.

An oak tree is an oak tree. That is all an oak tree needs to do. If an oak tree is less than an oak tree, we will all be in trouble. In our former lives, we were rocks, clouds, and trees. We have also been an oak tree. This is not just Buddhist; it is scientific. We humans are a young species. We were plants, we were trees, and now we have become humans. We have to remember our past existences and be humble. We can learn a lot from an oak tree.

All life is impermanent. We are all children of the Earth, and, at some time, she will take us back to herself again. We are continually rising from Mother Earth, being nurtured by her, and then returning to her. Like us, plants are born, live for a period of time, and then return to the Earth. When they decompose, they fertilize our gardens. Living vegetables and decomposing vegetables are part of the same reality. Without one, the other cannot be. After six months, compost becomes fresh vegetables again. Plants and the Earth rely on each other. Whether the Earth is fresh, beautiful, and green, or arid and parched depends on the plants.

It also depends on us. Our way of walking on the Earth has a great influence on animals and plants. We have killed so many animals and plants and destroyed their environments.

Many are now extinct. In turn, our environment is now harming us. We are like sleepwalkers, not knowing what we are doing or where we are heading. Whether we can wake up or not depends on whether we can walk mindfully on our Mother Earth. The future of all life, including our own, depends on our mindful steps.

Birds' songs express joy, beauty, and purity, and evoke in us vitality and love. So many beings in the universe love us unconditionally. The trees, the water, and the air don't ask anything of us; they just love us. Even though we need this kind of love, we continue to destroy them. By destroying the animals, the air, and the trees, we are destroying ourselves. We must learn to practice unconditional love for all beings so that the animals, the air, the trees, and the minerals can continue to be themselves.

Our ecology should be a deep ecology — not only deep, but universal. There is pollution in our consciousness. Television, films, and newspapers are forms of pollution for us and our children. They sow seeds of violence and anxiety in us and pollute our consciousness, just as we destroy our environment by farming with chemicals, clear-cutting the trees, and polluting the water. We need to protect the ecology of the Earth and the ecology of the mind, or this kind of violence and recklessness will spill over into even more areas of life.

Our Earth, our green beautiful Earth is in danger, and all of us know it. Yet we act as if our daily lives have nothing to do with the situation of the world. If the Earth were your body, you would be able to feel many areas where she is suffering. Many people are aware of the world's suffering, and their hearts are filled with compassion. They know what needs to be done, and they engage in political, social, and environmental work to try to change things. But after a period of intense involvement, they become discouraged, because they lack the strength needed to sustain a life of action. Real strength is not in power, money, or weapons, but in deep, inner peace.

If we change our daily lives — the way we think, speak, and act — we change the world. The best way to take care of the environment is to take care of the environmentalist.

— *The Sun My Heart*

PARADISE

As a novice I was required to read Buddhist philosophy. I was only sixteen and unable to grasp concepts like Interdependent Co-Arising, and Oneness of Subject and Object. It was difficult to understand why the perceiver could not exist independently from the object being perceived. I managed to get a high mark on my philosophy exams, but I didn't really understand. I reasoned that, thanks to awareness, the finite world of phenomena could partake of the transcendent realm of consciousness. Being can only be defined in opposition to non-being, and if there is no awareness of either being or non-being, it is as though nothing exists. The deeper implications were not at all clear.

As I write these lines, no one else has read them yet. These lines that contain my thoughts, feelings, paper, ink, time, space, and handwriting, as well as all the other phenomena that have contributed to their existence, exist only in my consciousness. Readers who may one day read these lines also lie within my consciousness. All phenomena — Vietnam with her flowering grapefruit and orange trees, graceful coconut trees, and towering areca palms, and the lively city of New York, with its sun, snow, clouds, moon, and stars — lie within my own consciousness. They are merely concepts. My world, including all my friends and readers, all the grapefruit and starfruit trees I have ever touched or thought about, is a world of concepts. When you read these lines, will you see me in them? This city as well as my thoughts and feelings will then become concepts in your consciousness. For you, these concepts are not the result of direct contact with the objects of my consciousness.

Void of physical reality, these concepts are shared through the medium of consciousness. The physical basis of consciousness, both personal and collective, has disappeared.

In the conceptual world, subject and object are two sides of the same coin. This became clear to me late one night less than two years ago, when I was staying at Bamboo Forest Temple. I awoke at 2:30 a.m. and could not get back to sleep. I lay quietly until I heard the first bell. Then I sat up and tried to locate my slippers with my feet, but they must have been too far beneath the bed. So I walked to the window barefoot. The cool floor beneath my feet felt totally refreshing and invigorating. I leaned against the windowsill and peered outside. It was still too dark to see anything, but I knew that the plants in the garden were still there — the oleander bush still stood in the same corner and the wildflowers still grew beneath the window. I experienced how the subject of awareness cannot exist apart from the object of awareness. The oleander and the wildflowers were the objects of consciousness. Subject and object of consciousness cannot be aware of anything. Mountains and rivers, Earth and sun, all lie within the heart of consciousness. When that realization arises, time and space dissolve. Cause and effect, birth and death, all vanish. Though we dwell a hundred thousand light years from a star, we can cross that distance in a flash. The saints of the past can return to the present in a microsecond, their presence as vivid as a bright flame.

I stood by the window and smiled. Someone seeing me grinning like that might have thought me deranged. The curtain of night was totally black, but not without meaning. This was infinitely clear in my consciousness. All of miraculous existence was illuminated by that smile.

You are there, because I am here. We inter-are. If we do not exist, nothing exists. Subject and object, host and guest, are part of each other. I knew that when morning came, I would not find anything new or unusual about the visible world. The blue sky in the west and the pink horizon in the east exist only in

my consciousness. Blue does not have a separate life, nor does pink. They are only blue and pink in my consciousness. It is the same with birth and death, same and different, coming and going. These are all images in our consciousness. If you look into my eyes, you will see yourself. If you are radiant, my eyes will be radiant. If you are miraculous, my consciousness will be miraculous. If you are distant and remote, I will be distant and remote. Look into my eyes and you will know if your universe is bright or dark, infinite or finite, mortal or immortal.

As my smile flashed in the dark night, I felt as gentle as a cloud, as light as a feather floating on a stream of cool water, my head held by the little waves. Looking up, I saw the blue sky and white clouds that had passed during the day. The clouds were still white, the sky was still blue, perhaps even whiter and more blue. Is that not a sign of the birthless and deathless nature of reality? I heard the autumn leaves rustling in the forest, grasses in the fields.

Then I spotted a star in the sky and immediately returned to the place where I was standing, my feet touching the cool floor and my hands resting on the windowsill. "I am here," the star said. "Because I exist, the universe exists. Because I exist, you exist. Because I exist, the pebbles and the distant clouds exist. If all of these can't truly exist, how can I? The existence of a speck of dust makes everything else possible. If dust does not exist, neither does the universe, nor you, nor I."

I am happy to be on this Earth. The river reflects everything in herself. Thanks to the river's flow, the flux of life is possible. And death lies within life, because without death there could be no life. Let us welcome the flow. Let us welcome impermanence and non-self. Thanks to impermanence and non-self, we have the beautiful world praised by Zen poets — the sheen of banana trees, the tall and perfumed areca trees reaching to the sun. The Earth is filled with dust. Our eyes are filled with dust. There is no need to seek a Pure Land somewhere else. We only need lift our heads and see the moon and the stars. The essential quality

is awareness. If we open our eyes, we will see. I am sure that heaven has areca, starfruit, lime, and grapefruit trees. I laugh when I think how I once sought paradise as a realm outside of the world of birth and death. It is right in the world of birth and death that the miraculous truth is revealed.

Vietnam has extraordinary rainstorms. One day, I sat by the window of a friend's home and watched a scene I could have watched forever. Across the street was a low-roofed dry goods store. Coils of rope and barbed wire, pots and pans hung from the eaves. Hundreds of items were on display — fish sauce and bean sauce, candles and peanut candy. The store was so packed and dimly lit, it was difficult to distinguish one object from another as the rainstorm darkened the street. A young boy, no more than five or six, wearing a simple pair of shorts, his skin darkened by hours of play in the sun, sat on a little stool on the front step of the store. He was eating a bowl of rice, protected by the overhang. Rain ran off the roof making puddles in front of where he sat. He held his rice bowl in one hand and his chopsticks in the other, and he ate slowly, his eyes riveted on the stream of water pouring from the roof. Large drops exploded into bubbles on the surface of a puddle. Though I was across the street, I could tell that his rice was mixed with pieces of duck egg and sprinkled with fish sauce. He raised his chopsticks slowly to his mouth, savoring each small mouthful. He gazed at the rain and appeared to be utterly content, the very image of well-being. I could feel his heart beating. His lungs, stomach, liver, and all his organs were working in perfect harmony. If he had had a toothache, he could not have been enjoying the effortless peace of that moment. I looked at him as one might admire a perfect jewel, a flower, or a sunrise. Truth and paradise revealed themselves. I was completely absorbed by his image. He seemed to be a divine being, a young god embodying the bliss of well-being with every glance of his eyes and every bite of rice he took. He was completely free of worry or anxiety. He had no thought of being poor. He did not compare his simple

black shorts to the fancy clothes of other children. He did not feel sad because he had no shoes. He did not mind that he sat on a hard stool rather than a cushioned chair. He felt no longing. He was completely at peace in the moment. Just by watching him, the same well-being flooded my body.

A violet shadow flitted across the street. The boy looked up for an instant, his eyes startled by the blur of bright color, and then he returned his gaze to the water bubbles dancing on the puddle. He chewed his rice and egg carefully, and watched the rain in delight. He paid no more attention to the passersby, two young women dressed in red and purple *ao dai*, carrying umbrellas. Suddenly he turned his head and looked down the street. He smiled and became so absorbed in something new, I turned to look down the street myself. Two young children were pulling a third child in a wooden wagon. The three did not have a stitch of clothing on and were having a grand time splashing in the puddles. The wheels of the wagon spun round and round, spraying water whenever the wagon hit a puddle. I looked back at the boy on the doorstep. He had stopped eating to watch the other children. His eyes sparkled. I believe my eyes reflected his in that moment, and I shared his delight. Perhaps my delight was not as great as his, or perhaps it was even greater because I was so aware of being happy.

Then I heard him call out, "Coming, Mama," and he stood up and went back into the shop. I guessed his mother had called him back in to refill his rice bowl, but he did not come out again. Perhaps he was now eating with his parents, who scolded him for dawdling so long over his first bowl. If that was the case, poor child! His parents did not know he had just been in paradise. They did not know that when the mind divides reality up, when it judges and discriminates, it kills paradise. Please do not scold the sunlight. Do not chastise the clear stream, or the little birds of spring.

How can you enter paradise unless you become like a little child? You can't see reality with eyes that discriminate or base

all their understanding on concepts. As I write these lines, I long to return to the innocence of childhood. I want to play the Vietnamese children's game of examining the whorls of a friend's hair — "one whorl your allegiance is with your father, two whorls with your mother, three whorls with your aunt, many whorls with your country." I'd love to make a snowball and hurl it all the way back to Vietnam.

— *Fragrant Palm Leaves*

ARMFULS OF POETRY, DROPS OF SUNSHINE

(This poem has a lot of interbeing in it. The sun is green, because you can recognize it in the vegetables. Poetry is born from the wood that is burning in the stove. Without it, I cannot write. The last lines of the poem speak about the work of helping hungry children. — Thich Nhat Hahn)

Sunshine rides on space and poetry on sunshine.
Poetry gives birth to sunshine, and sunshine to poetry.

Sun treasured in the heart of the bitter melon,
poetry made of steam rising from a bowl of soup in
Winter.

The wind is lurking outside, swirling.
Poetry is back to haunt the old hills and prairies.
Yet the poor thatched hut remains on the river shore,
waiting.

Spring carries poetry in its drizzle.
The fire sparkles poetry in its orange flame.

Sunshine stored in the heart of the fragrant wood,
warm smoke leading poetry back to the pages
of an unofficial history book.

Sunshine, though absent from space,
fills the now rose-colored stove.

Sunshine reaching out takes the color of smoke;
poetry in its stillness, the color of the misty air.

Spring rain holds poetry in its drops
which bend down to kiss the soil,
so that the seeds may sprout.

Following the rain, poetry comes to dwell on each leaf.

Sunshine has a green color, and poetry a pink one.

Bees deliver warmth to the flowers from the sunshine
they carry on their wings.

On sunshine footsteps to the deep forest,
poetry drinks the nectar with joy.

With the excitement of celebration,
butterflies and bees crowd the Earth.

Sunshine makes up the dance, and poetry the song.

Drops of sweat fall on the hard ground.

Poems fly along the furrows.

The hoe handily on my shoulder, poetry flows from the
breath.

Sunshine wanes away down the river
and the silhouette of the late afternoon lingers reluctantly.

Poetry is leaving for the horizon

Where the King of Light is blanketing himself in clouds.

A green sun found in a basketful of fresh vegetables,
a tasty and well-cooked sun smells delicious in a bowl of
rice.

Poetry looks with a child's eyes.

Poetry feels with a weather-beaten face.

Poetry stays within each attentive look.

Poetry — the hands that work the poor and arid land
somewhere
far away.

The smiling sun brightening up the sunflower;
the ripe and full sun hiding itself in an August peach;
poetry follows each meditative step,
poetry lines up the pages.

Discreetly,
within closed food packages,
poetry nurtures love.

— *Call Me by My True Names*