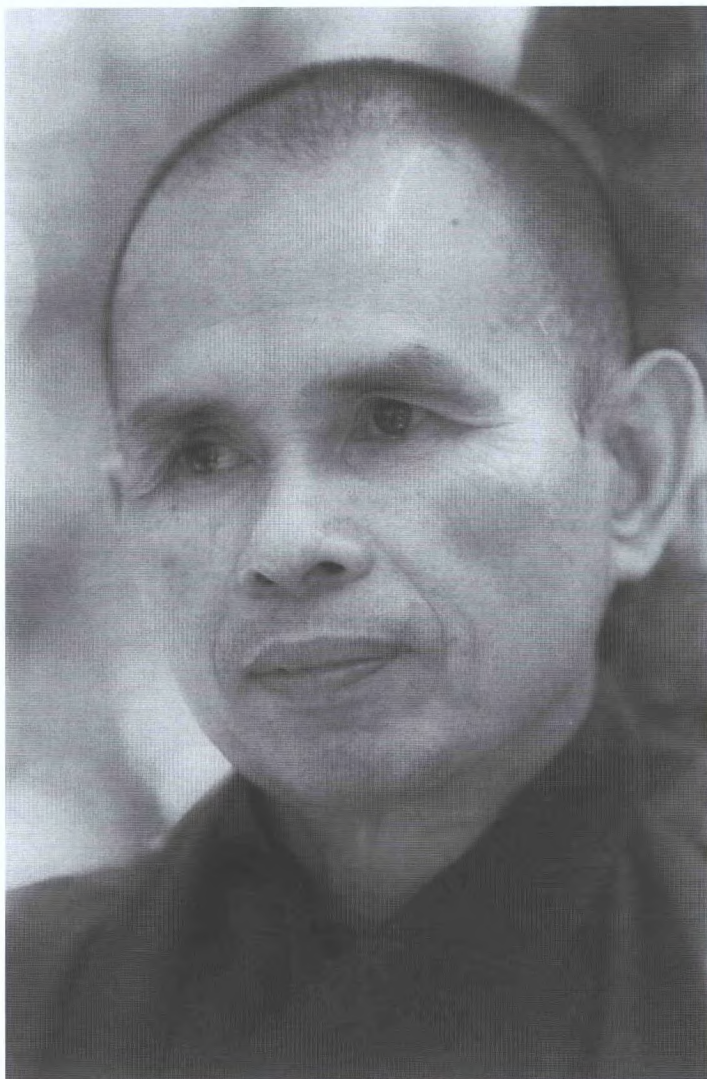


# GOING HOME TO YOURSELF

By *Thich Nhat Hanh*

I had a student, Sister Tri Hai, who graduated in English literature from Indiana University in Bloomington. She had been ordained as a nun. She was caught, arrested, and put into prison for working for peace and human rights. When she was in prison, she practiced walking meditation in her small cell, which she shared with several other women. In order to keep her courage up to survive, she had to practice walking meditation. She was able to help many people in prison. In a situation like that, you survive through your spiritual life; otherwise, you will go insane. You have no hope, you are frustrated, and you suffer so much. That is why the spiritual dimension of your life is so important. If you are overwhelmed by anger, despair, and fear and you are suffering a lot, you cannot help yourself – so how can you help other people?



Anger is fire, and it will continue to burn you. We have gone through the fire and we know how hot it is.

Sister Tri Hai practiced walking meditation all night so she could be herself and not go insane. She went back to her true home within herself. Her true home is not in Paris, London, or Tra Loc, because that home can be bombarded and taken away. Your true home is within yourself, and nobody can take it away from you. The Buddha said, “Go home to the island within yourself. There is a safe island of self inside. Every time you suffer, every time you are lost, go back to your true home. Nobody can take that true home away from you.”<sup>1</sup> The Buddha gave that teaching to

<sup>1</sup> “The Discourse on Taking Refuge in Oneself” in Thich Nhat Hanh, *Plum Village Chanting and Recitation Book* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2000), p. 272.



*If you don't go home to yourself, you continue to lose yourself. You destroy yourself and you destroy people around you, even if you have goodwill and want to do something to help. That is why the practice of going home to the island of self is so important.*

his disciples when he was eighty years old and knew he was about to pass away.

There are days when nothing seems to work out for us. We rely on our intelligence, on our talent, and we think that we can succeed. But there are days when everything seems to go wrong. When things go wrong we try harder, and when we try harder things continue to go wrong. We say, "This is not my day; I am so unlucky today." The best thing to do is to stop trying, go home to yourself, and recover yourself. You cannot just rely on your talent and intelligence and carry on. You have to go home and rebuild yourself, gaining more solidity, freedom, peace, and calm before you can try again.

Many years ago I had a hermitage in a wood about two hours' drive from Paris. One morning I left the hermitage to walk in the woods. I spent the whole day there and practiced sitting and writing poetry. It was very beautiful in the morning, but in the late afternoon I noticed that clouds were gathering and the wind was beginning to blow, so I walked home. When I arrived at my hermitage, it was a mess because in the morning I had opened all the windows and the door so that the sunshine could come in and dry everything inside. The wind had blown all the papers off my desk and they were scattered everywhere. The hermitage was cold and miserable. The first thing I did was to close the windows and the door. The second thing I did was to make a fire. When the fire began to glow I heard the joyful noise of the wind and I felt much better. The third thing I did was to pick up all the scattered sheets of paper, put them on the table, and put a stone on them. I spent twenty minutes doing that. Then, finally, I sat down close to the wood stove. I felt wonderful, and the hermitage had become warm and pleasant.

When you find that your conditions are miserable because the windows of your eyes are open, the windows of

your ears are open, the wind from outside is blowing in, and you have become a victim – a mess in your feelings, your body, and your perceptions – you should not try hard. You should go home to your hermitage; it is inside you. Close the doors, light the fire, and make it cozy again. That is what I call "taking refuge in the island of self." If you don't go home to yourself, you continue to lose yourself. You destroy yourself and you destroy people around you, even if you have goodwill and want to do something to help. That is why the practice of going home to the island of self is so important. No one can take your true home away.

#### FOLLOWING THE LINE OF PEACE

I have been banned from going home to Vietnam since 1966, so I practice having a home within myself. Wherever I go, I feel at home. Don't think that my home is in Plum Village [in France]. My home is more solid than Plum Village, because I know Plum Village can be taken away from us. There were times when the Lower Hamlet was shut down by the French government because we did not meet the building codes – we were too poor to build a fire road, to have the appropriate doors, the kitchen was not up to code, and so on. But we did not suffer so much, because we had our true home inside. If they come and burn your hut and chase you away, of course you suffer, but if you know how to go back to your true home, you will not lose your faith. You know that if your true home is still there inside, you will be able to build another home outside. It is only if you lose your home inside that you lose hope.

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