



Forgiveness and Buddhism

By Anh-Huong

My family escaped from Vietnam in a very small boat in 1979. We spent 10 months in a refugee camp in Malaysia before coming to the United States. It was said that half us boat people died at sea. The other half arrived to the shores in Southeast Asia, but even then we were still not safe.

There were many young girls among the boat people who were raped by sea pirates. Even though the United Nations and many individual countries tried to help the government of Thailand prevent that kind of piracy, the pirates continued to inflict much suffering on us refugees. When I was staying at Pulau Bidong Island, the biggest refugee camp in Malaysia at that time, I saw so many teen age girls and young women being carried from their boats into the camp upon their arrival. They were weeping, sometimes screaming with tremors. They had been raped by sea pirates. There was a story about a 12 year-old girl on a small boat who was raped by a Thai pirate who jumped into the ocean and drowned herself. There was another story of a father who was thrown into the ocean in the middle of the night because he was trying to stop the pirates from taking his teen-age daughter away from their fishing boat. There were so many heart-breaking stories like these.

When we first learned of this, we became angry at the pirates. We naturally took the side of the girls and of the father who failed to save his daughter. It was easy for us to take the side of the little girls. But in the practice of meditation, of looking deeply, we saw that if we had been born into the family and the village of the pirates and raised under the same conditions as they were, there was a great likelihood that we would have become pirates. Many babies are born along the Gulf of Siam every day, and if we who are educators, social workers, or politicians do not do something to change the situation, in 20 years a number of these babies will become sea pirates. If you or I were born today in those poor fishing villages, we might become sea pirates in 20 years. All of us are responsible for this situation. With the practice of meditation, we can look at the 12 year-old girl and the sea pirates and recognize ourselves in each of them and them in each of us.

In Buddhist teaching, happiness can only be recognized against the background of suffering. To be really happy, we should cultivate understanding and compassion. It is by getting in touch with the suffering that understanding comes and compassion arises. But sometimes when we suffer so much, we just can't forgive. Or we don't want to forgive. We are afraid that if we forgive someone for his cruel act, our suffering won't be adequately heard. So we let these acts of cruelty continue. In the midst of our pain and

fear, we remember everything except that the other person caused us to suffer because he has so much suffering in his heart. Like garbage and flowers, anger and love - as well as suffering and happiness - have an organic nature. A good organic gardener doesn't see the garbage as his enemy. He knows that he can use the garbage to make compost to enrich the soil, and the garbage can be transformed into flowers. He doesn't have a dualistic viewpoint. That is why he is at peace with the flowers and at peace with the garbage. Without the garbage, he can't have beautiful flowers and fresh vegetables.

Without understanding and compassion, which are the fruits of the practice of calming and deep looking, the endless cycle of resentment, anger, fear, despair and suffering will continue to turn; and we will continue to suffer, one generation after another.

The question is not "to forgive" or "not to forgive." This question will not help us find a breakthrough in our habit of dualistic thinking: oneself vs. the others, good vs. evil, right vs. wrong. A more helpful question would be, "How can I better understand myself *and* the other person?" Dualistic thinking is misleading. It can encourage a belief that good and evil are enemies and that good needs always to be fighting evil. This kind of theology causes a lot of suffering and destruction.

When we see that our suffering, our hatred and our fear are organic, we don't try to run away from them. Through the practice of calming, resting and deep looking taught by the Buddha, we can transform our loneliness, hate, fear and despair into elements of understanding which can nourish our compassion, happiness and well-being. We don't feel the need to fight against our fear or anger anymore, because we see that our anger and fear are a genuine part of ourselves. So we try to handle them in the most tender, non-violent way. We take care of our anger and fear in the way that best gives them the chance to turn into understanding, love and compassion.

It's so important to train ourselves to look in a non-dualistic way. We know from our own experience that if the other person is not happy, it's very difficult for us to be happy. The other person may be our daughter, our partner, our friend, our mother, our son, our father, or our neighbor. The other person may be the Christian community, the Jewish community, the Buddhist community, or the Islamic community. Because we know that safety and peace aren't individual matters, we will naturally act for the collective good.

The practice of forgiveness is the practice of understanding and compassion. Understanding is the substance of true love and true compassion. If love is in our heart, every thought, word, and action can bring about a miracle.

QUESTIONS

Anh-Huong is a Buddhist teacher and author. She lives in Northern Virginia and teaches meditation with her husband, Thu B Nguyen. She is the niece of Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. She says some interesting things in her article. Perhaps these observations will create a good conversation for your group. What Do you understand her to be saying when she says:

- We can look at the 12-year-old girl and the sea pirates and recognize ourselves in each of them and them in each of us.
- We are afraid that if we forgive someone for this cruel at, our suffering won't be adequately heard.
- Understanding and compassion are the fruits of the practice of calming and deep looking.
- Like garbage and flowers, anger and love – as well as suffering and happiness – have an organic nature.
- We see that our anger and fear are a genuine part of ourselves so we try to handle them in the most tender-non-violent way.

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