

From *Peace is Every Step* by Thich Nhat Hanh
(pp 125—126)

“Suffering Nourishes Compassion”

We have been practicing “Engaged Buddhism” in Vietnam for the last thirty years. During the war, we could not just sit in the meditation hall. We had to practice mindfulness everywhere, especially where the worst suffering was going on.

Being in touch with the kind of suffering we encountered during the war can heal us of some of the suffering we experience when our lives are not very meaningful or useful. When you confront the kinds of difficulties we faced during the war, you see that you can be a source of compassion and a great help to many suffering people. And with that intense suffering, you feel a kind of relief and joy within yourself, because you know that you are an instrument of compassion. Understanding such intense suffering and realizing compassion in the midst of it, you become a joyful person even if your life is very hard.

Last winter, some friends and I went to visit the refugee camps in Hong Kong, and we witnessed a lot of suffering. There were “boat people” who were just one or two years old, who were about to be sent back to their country because they were classified as illegal immigrants. They had lost both father and mother during the trip. When you see that kind of suffering, you know that the suffering your friends in Europe and America are undergoing is not very great.

Every time we come back from such a contact, we see that the city of Paris is not very real. The way people live there and the reality of the suffering in other parts of the world are so different. I asked the question, “How could people live like this when things are like that?” But if you stay in Paris for ten years without being in touch, you find it normal.

Meditation is a point of contact. Sometimes you do not have to go to the place of suffering. You just sit quietly on your cushion, and you can see everything. You can actualize everything, and you can be aware of what is going on in the world. Out of that kind of awareness, compassion and understanding arise naturally, and you can stay right in your own country and perform social action.