

# To Be a True Hero

*Excerpt(s) from FRAGRANT PALM LEAVES: JOURNALS, 1962-1966 by Thich Nhat Hanh*

In former days, my friends and I wanted to become heroes who could “shatter misfortune and level calamity.” We did not know what it takes to become a hero, so we tried to imitate the knights of old. I cannot help smiling when I think of our youthful dreams. We hardly looked the part of brave knights as we clutched our bamboo swords and repeated the words of the ancients. Now as I write, surrounded by a cold and bustling city, I feel a bit of the old desire. The world is the same as when we were children, still patiently awaiting the appearance of real heroes.

Before the knights of old descended their mountain training grounds to rescue those in need, they trained a long time with revered masters in the martial arts. My training as a Buddhist novice consisted of one small book, *Gathas for Daily Life*. I learned to cook, sweep, carry water, and chop wood. Some of us did not have enough time to learn the arts of cooking, sweeping, carrying water, and chopping wood before being forced to descend the mountain. Others descended of their own will before they were ready. With our talents and abilities still undeveloped, how could we save others? We may have thought of ourselves as heroic, indispensable, and may even have called ourselves heroes, but society too often accepts those who are heroes in appearance only, making it possible for such people to think they are true heroes. They come to believe that if they were not present, everything would fall apart. And yet when my friends and I left *Phuong Boi*, the world did not disintegrate.

Life patiently waits for true heroes. It is dangerous when those aspiring to be heroes cannot wait until they find themselves. When aspiring heroes have not found themselves, they are tempted to borrow the world’s weapons – money, fame, and power – to fight their battles. These weapons cannot protect the inner life of the hero. To cope with his fears and insecurities, the premature hero has to stay busy all the time. The destructive capacity of nonstop busyness rivals nuclear weapons and is as addictive as opium. It empties the life of the spirit. False heroes find it easier to make war than deal with the emptiness in their own souls. They may complain about never having time to rest, but the truth is, if they were given time to rest, they would not know what to do. People today do not know how to rest. They fill their free time with countless diversions. People cannot tolerate even a few minutes of unoccupied time. They have to turn on the TV or pick up a newspaper, reading anything at all, even the advertisements. They constantly need something to look at, listen to, or talk about, all to keep the emptiness inside from rearing its terrifying head.

When I was a child, I read a funny story about a man who always boasted to his friends about his brave exploits. But at home he was so afraid of his wife, he did not dare look at her crosswise. Present-day heroes are like that. They think they are real heroes because they are so busy, but if we could see their inner lives, we would see desolation. Present-day heroes descend the mountain intending to transform life, but are instead overcome by life. Without fierce resolve and a mature spiritual life, private demons cannot be controlled.

Gathas for Daily Life was a warrior's manual on strategy. As novices, we were handed it when we entered the monastery and instructed to keep it close at hand at all times, even to use it as a pillow at night. The verses it taught us how to stay present with our own minds in order to observe ourselves throughout the ordinary actions of daily life: eating, drinking, walking, standing, lying down, and working. It was as difficult as trying to find a stray water buffalo by following its zigzagging tracks. It is not easy to follow the path of return to your own mind. The mind is like a monkey swinging from branch to branch. It is not easy to catch a monkey. You have to be quick and smart, able to guess which branch the monkey will swing to next. It would be easy to shoot it, but the object here is not to kill, threaten, or coerce the monkey. The object is to know where it will go next in order to be with it. That thin book of daily verses provided us with strategies. The verses were simple, yet remarkably effective. They taught us how to observe and master all the actions of body, speech, and mind. For instance, when we washed our hands, we said to ourselves:

*Washing my hands in clear water;*

*I pray that all people have pure hands*

*to receive and care for the truth.*

The use of such gathas encourages clarity and mindfulness, making even the most ordinary tasks sacred. Going to the bathroom, taking out the garbage, and chopping wood become acts infused with poetry and art.

Even if you have the perseverance to sit for nine years facing a wall, sitting is only part of Zen. While cooking, washing dishes, sweeping, carrying water, or chopping wood, you dwell deeply in the present moment. We don't cook in order to have food to eat. We don't wash dishes to have clean dishes. We cook to cook, and we wash dishes to wash dishes. The purpose is not to get these chores out of the way in order to do something more meaningful. Washing the dishes and cooking are themselves the path to Buddhahood. Buddhahood does not come from long hours of sitting. The practice of Zen is to eat, breathe, cook, carry water, and scrub the toilet – to infuse every act of body, speech, and mind – with mindfulness, to illuminate every leaf and pebble, every heap of garbage, every path that leads to our mind's return home. Only a person who has grasped the art of cooking, washing dishes, sweeping, and chopping wood, someone who is able to laugh at the world's weapons of money, fame, and power, can hope to descend the mountain as a hero. A hero like that will traverse the waves of success and failure without rising or sinking. In fact, few people will recognize him as a hero at all.

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