

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE TALK  
BY HIS HOLINESS THICH NHAT HANH ORGANISED  
BY  
THE BUREAU OF PARLIAMENTARY STUDIES  
AND TRAINING**

**HELD ON**

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HOUSE LIBRARY**

(a/snb)

SECRETARY-GENERAL, LOK SABHA: Respected Speaker, Lok Sabha, Shri Somnath Chatterjee; Hon. Thich Nhat Hanh; Hon. Members of Parliament, ladies and gentlemen: It is a matter of great honour for me to extend a warm welcome to this talk on “Leading with Courage and Compassion” organised by Bureau of Parliamentary Studies and Training. We have here this morning His Holiness, Thich Nhat Hanh, an apostle of non-violence and peace to speak to you.

Hon. Speaker, Sir, we are deeply indebted to you for your kind presence here this morning and express our gratitude for acceding to our request to grace this occasion despite your extremely busy schedule. This lecture series started on your initiative with a view to facilitating a purposive and meaningful exchange of views between the Members of Parliament and the experts on various issues of socio-economic importance has proved to be immensely beneficial.

Our distinguished guest, hon. Thich Nhat Hanh needs no introduction. Thich Nhat Hanh has earned reputation as a world-renowned Zen Master, writer, poet, scholar and peace activist. Born in Central Vietnam, he became a monk at the age of 16. Eight years later he co-founded the An Quang Buddhist Institute in Saigon. In 1961 he went to the United States to study and teach comparative religion at Columbia and Princeton Universities. He returned to Vietnam two years later to help lead the Buddhist peace efforts based entirely on Gandhian principles. In 1964 he established a monastic and lay order, the Order of Interbeing. He also founded the Van Hanh Buddhist University and the School of Youth for Social Service in Saigon, a grassroot relief organisation that rebuilt destroyed villages set up schools and medical centres and resettled homeless families during the Vietnam war. Two years later, he left Vietnam to call for peace. His untiring efforts to bring peace to his divided country moved Martin Luther King Jr. to nominate him for the Noble Peace Prize in 1967. He also served the Chair of Buddhist Peace Delegation to Paris Peace Talks. In 1969, Thich Nhat Hanh established the Unified Buddhist Church in France.

In 1982 he set up a retreat, Plum Village in South-West France where he still lives with fellow nuns and monks. Hon. Thich Nhat Hanh continues to be active in sponsoring retreats for Israelis and Palestinians and encouraging them to listen to each other. He was honoured with the Courage of Conscience award in June, 1991 for his outstanding contribution to promote peace, compassion and forgiveness.

His Holiness has published more than 85 books and conducts international retreats. His widely acclaimed works include: *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*; *Call Me by my True Names: Living Buddha Living Christ*; *Teachings on Love and Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*. Affectionately called Thay by his followers, he is a pioneer of the concept of Engaged Buddhism which intertwines meditation with active non-violent civil disobedience and has drawn millions to his unique teachings. His philosophy is not confined to pre-existent religious structures but speaks to the individual's desire for wholeness and calm. His mode of expression is indeed simple, yet his message reveals the quintessence of the deep understanding of reality that comes from his monastic training, his dedicated work in the world and extensive scholarship.

His Holiness Thich Nhat Hanh will speak to us today on the theme "Leading with Courage and Compassion", the two core human values which are of fundamental importance and relevance in today's materialistic society. I am sure the lecture of Thich Nhat Hanh will enlighten us to develop and promote peace within ourselves as well as in the world.

With these words, I welcome His Holiness Thich Nhat Hanh.

May I now request the hon. Speaker to deliver the introductory remarks.

Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Most distinguished Teacher, Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh; Hon'ble Members of Parliament; Secretary-General, Lok Sabha, Ladies and Gentlemen:

We are indeed honoured to have with us this morning, the distinguished Zen master Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh the greatly respected seer, philosopher and peace-activist, to speak to us on 'compassion and courage', a theme most relevant to our contemporary times than ever before. I respectfully welcome him to address this distinguished gathering.

Hon'ble Thay needs no introduction to this august gathering. His role and contribution towards restoration of peace and development in the war-ravaged Vietnam is well known and his has been a voice of sanity and reason for the world at large, in the past several decades. He is not just a preacher, but an activist and a promoter of peace and compassion. His life and deeds are the sterling examples of untiring efforts to bring peace and happiness to the victims of violence of all kinds. Through his painstaking efforts, he has rebuilt villages ravaged by war, and set up numerous schools and medical centres, to bring relief to the victims of violence.

Preaching peace and harmony is Thay's passion and pursuit of life. At a time when the world community, including our own country, is experiencing so much of strife, mostly created deliberately by misguided elements for short-term gains, his words of wisdom would provide the much needed beacon of hope and a healing touch to many.

The most powerful message that went out to the world from our centuries long struggle for freedom was the futility of violence in achieving any objective, howsoever lofty it could be. The world formally recognized and endorsed this message when the United Nations declared 2 October, the Birth Anniversary Day

of Mahatma Gandhi, one of the greatest apostles of peace and non-violence, as the International Day of Non-Violence.

Hon'ble Thich Nhat Hanh rightly, if I may so, reminds us that violence only begets violence and that the only antidote to violence, anger and hatred is compassion. The world should always remember his message that 'violence and strife, which we notice today in contemporary society, are the symptoms of the deep-seated social malice, which needs to be addressed by understanding and with compassion'.

We are happy that Venerable Thay is able to spare his valuable time to speak to us, the Parliamentarians, as Parliament is the ultimate conflict resolution forum, particularly in a democratic form of government. It is here that the hopes, aspirations, fears and frustrations of the people should be articulated and resolved through dialogue, debate, deliberations and discussions and through a process of conciliation. In spite of all its imperfections, which one may point out, we do not have any better alternative to this great people's institution which needs to be constantly nurtured and strengthened and be cleansed of its aberrations, to make it more receptive to people's problems and for finding solutions.

With these few words, I have great pleasure in inviting Hon'ble Thich Nhat Hanh to address us. Thank you.

(b1/0910/brv)

HON. THICH NHAT HANH: Hon. Speaker, hon. Secretary-General, distinguished Members of Parliament, at the very outset, I would like to say that in this time of turmoil, in this time of a lot of violence, anger, fear and despair, everyone of us suffers. It is not only the people who suffer but also the leaders who suffer. A spiritual dimension brought to the life of our leaders may help in more insight and peace so that our leaders could find a way out for all of us. Is it possible to bring down the level of violence, fear, anger and pain? To me, the answer is “yes.” Those in the society who believe that they are victims of discrimination and injustice, they blame it on the society and their leaders. They have the impression that no one has listened to them; no one has understood them. They have tried but they have never succeeded in making themselves understood. So, the practice of deep listening, the practice of compassionate listening should be possible in order to instil in them this sense.

In a nation, in a country, there are those of us who are capable of being calm, who can sit down quietly and listen with compassion. Our leaders may like to invite them to come, sit and listen to the sufferings of the nation, to the sufferings of the people. This is the kind of a practice that is needed to every one – not just for the political leaders alone. Suppose a father does not have time to listen to his son or daughter. That father would not be able to understand the sufferings and the difficulties of his son or daughter and cannot make them happy if the father is so busy. Even if the father has some time to spare in order to sit down and listen, if in the father there is so much of anger, so much of pain and despair, the quality of listening could not be good enough. That is why, to listen to the sufferings of the other people, we should be able to listen to our own sufferings. But, in the society of ours, not many people have the time to listen to their own sufferings, to their own difficulties in order to understand. If we are able to listen to our own sufferings and if we understand the true nature and roots of our sufferings, then, we will suffer less. We would see a way out. After that, we can

listen to our beloved ones, we can listen to our community, to our nation and listening like that can bring a relief because the people who are listened through with that kind of a spirit have the impression that they are now understood.

If the Parliament organises a Session of deep listening inviting wise people, spiritual people – many of them are not well known but they have a lot of compassion, a lot of insight - they can come and sit down with our political leaders. Then, we can invite those who have been thinking that they are victims of social injustice, social discrimination to come and we can tell: “Dear people, we are here. We are ready to listen to you. We can listen to you during the many Sessions. You have to tell us what is in your heart or what are your sufferings or your difficulties or your despair.” Preparation like that may take some time. So, the Session of deep listening and compassionate listening like that can be televised so that the whole nation can participate in it. If the quality of listening is deep and good, people will have the impression that they begin to be understood and then the level of anger, violence and the suspicion in our society will come down everyday. With the practice of deep listening and compassionate listening, it will come down.

In our community of friends, we have tried this practice in many ways. We always succeed. Every year, we invite a group of Palestinians and the Israelis to come and practice with us. Of course, when they come first, they could not look at each other, they could not talk to each other. There is a lot of fear, anger, suspicion and so on. For them, we have the first practice of mindful breathing, mindful walking and recognising the pain, sorrow, fear in them. We try to understand their feelings and emotions. They get some relief in their body and emotion. That practice is supported by the international community of meditation. After about 10 days, we initiate them to the practice of deep listening and loving speech. One group has the right and time to tell the other group about all the sufferings it has undergone, what kind of pain, what kind of injustice and what kind of fear and despair it has experienced. They ask us to tell everything. At times, we use the

kind of loving speech. Then, they do not condemn, blame or accuse each other. They are the group of people who have listened, who have been able to listen more easily. So, the practice of deep listening, compassionate listening goes together with the practice of loving speech. You can tell everything in your heart but refrain from accusing, blaming and using the kind of language that is bitter. So, to help the other group, they are partly to understand it first.

(c/0920/rs)

When you are in a group that sits and listen, you have to practice mindful breathing in and out and to remind yourself that, listening like this, we have to listen with compassion. We have the mission to speak out because may be in past they may have had no one to listen to them like that. Now, we are able to listen peacefully with compassion. We know that if we can sit and listen calmly like that for one hour, they will suffer less and have the feeling that they are being understood. Sessions after sessions of listening and loving speech can transform the situation.

When the other group of people are expressing themselves, there may be a wrong perception, misunderstanding, or fear or anger that has no foundation, but we would not interrupt them because interruptions will make them lose the inspiration to speak out. So, we continue to listen and we tell ourselves that later on, may be three days later or five days later, we will provide them with some information so that they may correct their perceptions later but not now. Now is only the time to listen and that is the kind of practice called compassionate listening and it always brings relief to the other party who tries to express themselves.

While listening like that we can earn a lot of insights. We can see how the other group of people has got that kind of wrong perception that they have and fear, anger, violence and hate are born on that wrong perception. We tell ourselves that later on we will help them, we will offer them information in order



to help them to remove these wrong perceptions that are very much the foundation of their anger, hate and violence.

During listening, we might find out that we ourselves have been victims of our own wrong perceptions, we have misunderstood ourselves, we have misunderstood them. In the process of listening we can correct our own perceptions and later on we might tell them that we have had wrong perceptions that have brought about fear, anger and hate and now as we have already removed the wrong perceptions, we feel much better.

The fact is that after a few sessions of listening like that, one tries to begin to see the other side as human beings also, who have suffered exactly like on this side. They should not have undergone exactly the same kind of suffering that our side has undergone. When they begin to look at the other group with that kind of understanding and compassion, they feel very much better because never before they were looked on with that kind of eyes or attitude; they suffer less. You are looking at them with the eyes of understanding and compassion realising that they are human beings like you, you feel much better within yourself. So, the practice of deep listening, compassionate listening and loving speech always brings reconciliation and always help to remove wrong perceptions.

So, in the third week, groups of Palestinians and Israelis are able to sit down and share a meal, they can hold hands to do walking meditation, enjoy nature and reconciliation took place. At the end of the retreat, they always come up as one group to report about the progress of their practice to us and always inform us that when they go back to the Middle-East, they will organise sessions of practice like that for other Palestinians and Israelis to come and practice.

The difficulties between husband and wife, mother and daughter, father and son can be resolved with that kind of practice of deep listening and loving speech. If a father does not understand the sufferings or the difficulties of the son, how could he love him and make his son happy? So, understanding is the foundation of love and understanding here first means understanding the sufferings and

difficulties of the other person. We have seen that if we do not understand our own suffering, our own difficulties, it would be hard to understand the suffering and difficulties of another person.

In France where we live and practice, everyday some 23 or 25 young Frenchmen or young Frenchwomen commit suicide. Every year, about more than a thousand young people commit suicide because they do not know how to handle strong emotions like anger and despair. When you speak of terrorists, we know that in a terrorist, there must be a lot of anger and despair, and that anger, violence and despair have got from somewhere. They have become victims of the kind of information, the kind of consumption that they have had because the amount of fear, anger and violence in them is very big. When people have the impression that they are not understood, no matter what they have tried to do, people do not listen to them, so the final thing they may have recourse to is violence. To me terrorists are victims of wrong perceptions and many people become their victims. In order to help the terrorists, we have to listen to them, try to understand them and help them to remove wrong perceptions that they have had. They may think that we are trying to destroy them as a relation, as a way of life, as a civilisation, and on that conviction they want to punish.

To me, looking deeply into the matter, I see that the roots of terrorism are wrong perceptions, and this has brought us to anger, fear, suspicion and the willingness to punish. Our political leaders should be able to listen, to help them to remove the wrong perceptions. We cannot remove wrong perceptions by using bombs and guns. How can you bomb a wrong perception? That is why, violence does not work and to remove terrorism, it should be done with that instrument: the practice of deep listening, the practice of compassionate listening and the practice of loving speech. If we do not have the time, if we are so busy, how could we do it? That is why, we have to arrange; we should have the time to listen to our own sufferings as well as listen to the sufferings of our own family, and our own nation.

Just by listening deeply with compassion, we can bring relief and reduce the sufferings in the family, in the community and in the nation.

(d/snb)

I was invited by the Times of India as a guest teacher on November 02. On that day there were series of blasts in the city. What should we do on such a thing? After having breathed I said that we have to report about events in such a way that why such violent actions continue to happen. We have to see that anger, violence, fear that are borne from wrong perceptions disappear. If we ourselves understand, then they may be able to do something to help remove wrong perceptions, fear and anger. If we do not know how to do it, then we will create collective fear and collective disaster and anger that would be very dangerous for the whole nation. The role of the journalists is to report in such a way that promotes understanding and compassion.

Another thing I said was that journalists would have to report more on positive things in order to counter balance all the negative things that we are reading on newspapers and seeing on television. After finishing elementary school they have seen on television one thousand acts of violence and they consume violence and fear everyday and that is why the amount of violence and anger and fear that this young generation consume is very large. We have allowed the producers of television all films and other programmes to consume, see and poison our minds. I have a conviction that the Members of Parliament may like to have the time to discuss on this because we are consuming anger, violence everyday in many ways. When another person tells us something, while telling us, he expresses a lot of fear and anger. If we sit and listen we will get poison into us.

When we are reading an article, or watching a programme on television we may consume the fear. If we know the way to practice in order to transform them, that is good. That is why when we look at the situation, there are two kinds of practices that help bring down fear, violence. One is the practice of compassionate listening and second is the practice of mindful production and mindful consumption. In my

Buddhist traditions we learnt that everything and nothing can survive without food. Violence and anger also need food because we do not practice mindful production and mindful consumption. I would like to draw the attention of the hon. Members of Parliament to reflect on this. We need production and consumption. That is the root of our evils of society. Mindful consumption seems to be the only way out and when we have been able to practice mindful consumption we can protect ourselves, our families and our nation with the practice of deep listening and we will be able to remove wrong perceptions and transform violence, fear, anger that are already in us.

I would like to offer a story that I had shared with the Members of the Congress about discrimination. My right hand can do many things that my left hand does not do. When I write, I always write with my right hand. When I use a bell, I use my right hand. Yet my right hand does not ever complain to the left hand saying that 'well I do everything and you do not seem to be very useful'. My right hand does not say something like that to my left hand. My right hand has a kind of wisdom of non-discrimination. My left hand does not suffer from the complex of inferiority and that is why my left hand does not suffer at all. One day I was called to hang a picture. On that I was not very mindful and I found my finger bleeding and immediately my right hand came to take care of the left hand by throwing down the hammer. It did not tell the left hand that you will have to remember that I have helped you and in future you have to do something. My left hand told me that you have done injustice. You have made me suffer giving me that hammer. In my left hand and right hand there is wisdom of non-discrimination. That is why my left hand and right hand live perfectly in peace and harmony.

If the father and the son, the mother and the daughter look into deeply, the son is the child of the father and it is the son who brings him into the future. If he makes his son suffer than he himself suffers. When you are able to make your father smile, you are happy because your father is happy. It is your own happiness in relationship, like happiness is an individual matter.

(e1/0940/brv)

If we speak of the Israelis and the Palestinians, we can say that peace, joy and the safety of one side have to do very much with the peace, joy and the safety of the other side. So, to take care of the peace, well-being and the safety of the one side is to take care of the peace, joy and safety of the other side. The same thing is true with the Protestants, Catholics, Muslims and the Hindus. We are all like the hands of the same body. If we know that our happiness is not the individual matter, then we can take care of the happiness and safety of our brethren. So, the insight of non-discrimination is the foundation of harmony and peace. Often, we educate our young people about that. Once we realise that either we suffer together or die together as a planet, as a nation, that kind of an insight can help us to reconcile and transform the anger and suffering in us.

With these words, I would like to thank you very much for having listened to me.

(Ends)