

Creating True Peace, by Thich Nhat Hanh

reviewed by [Michael G. Long](#) in the [November 29, 2003](#) issue

The language of necessity, spoken by earnest politicians and faith leaders alike, has saturated public debates about war and peace in this age of terror. Overflowing our nation's pulpits, bully and ecclesial, has been the passionate argument that preemptive war is necessary--that we have no choice but to strike at terrorists before they attack us with demonic force.

The pervasiveness of this argument makes Thich Nhat Hanh's book--a magnum opus that marks more than 60 years of peacemaking in the tradition of engaged Buddhism--especially important. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen Buddhist monk, argues that "violence is not inevitable." Even in an age of terror "peace is there for us in every moment. It is our choice." Thich Nhat Hanh is firmly convinced that the condition of peace reflects both our "true nature," with its capacity for understanding and compassion, and the Spirit of God. "When we generate peace, loving-kindness, and understanding in ourselves," he writes, "we are generating the energy of God within us."

Its emphasis on practices for enacting peace in everyday life make *Creating True Peace* the best example of practical ethics in recent years. Unlike Christian ethicists, who write only generally about the importance of practices, Thich Nhat Hanh describes the practices of peacemaking specifically, in the kind of detail found in exercise manuals. The practices are deeply Buddhist, ranging from mindful breathing and walking to compassionate listening and speaking to writing love letters and peace treaties, but their Buddhist quality does not make them inaccessible to Christians. On the contrary, the practices are eminently practical for anyone who chooses to be a peacemaker. If they seem inaccessible or even impossible, it is because no one has trained us Christians in the artful details of living peacefully.

Thich Nhat Hanh focuses on practices because of his fundamental belief that individual people are the ones who ultimately choose peace or war. While not denying the significance of social institutions, he argues that the transformation of individual hearts and minds is the requisite condition for social peace. Though Thich Nhat Hanh does offer public policy recommendations (such as his proposal for a congressional committee on compassionate listening and speech), ultimately he wants people to cultivate clean hearts dedicated to right action--the pursuit of peace and its linkages through the personal, familial, communal, national and global dimensions of life.

The book's greatest power lies in its touching stories of individuals who have deliberately chosen a life of peace. In these stories we encounter both hopeful joy (the transformation of individuals formerly committed to violence) and deep sadness (the deaths of peacemakers).

The stories of tragedy show that Thich Nhat Hanh makes no grandiose claims for the practical effects of peacemaking. He clearly believes that the creation of true peace (understanding, love and compassion) is the best option for combating violence, and that wars on terrorism only create more terrorists. But equally clear is his experientially grounded sense that peacemakers, no matter how faithful their practice, sometimes find themselves in the hands of murderers who do not understand or respect the virtue of peace. In such situations, Thich Nhat Hanh advises, "you must meditate on compassion in order to forgive those who kill you. When you die realizing this state of compassion, you are truly a child of the Awakened One. Even if you are dying in oppression, shame and violence, if you can smile with forgiveness, you have great power."

This power of forgiveness should be deeply familiar to those who treasure the story of the crucified Jesus. Remembering the story of one who willfully chose nonviolence when confronted by a violent government is not an easy practice in an age of terror; it is far easier to dismiss Jesus' story as an impossible option for people who want to preserve lives. But before we dismiss the nonviolence of Jesus we should take time to read Thich Nhat Hanh's hopeful stories--everyday stories of the concrete ways in which nonviolent practices have safeguarded individuals, communities and nations. Thich Nhat Hanh helps us remember that while the power of nonviolence does not solve all of our problems, it has protected endangered lives, and has done so in ways that faithfully express the character of a God of love.