



# Message to the Youth

## by Thich Nhat Hanh

Excerpts from the book Nói với Tuổi Hai Mươi (1965),  
compiled and translated by brother Promise and friends

### Revolution

It is not just the elderly who have abandoned their dreams. Many young people have also abandoned their dreams. They might seem like the “living dead” to you, but give them space. They need love, like the rest of us. We are here today because we are aware of the situation in our society. We do not want to live in illusion or die in illusion. We must rebel against the forces that lead to a meaningless and illusory life. The secret is knowing *how* to rebel. There are ways of rebelling which only create more bondage and suffering. However, there are ways of rebelling that can offer us real freedom. This is what I want to talk to you about today.

Do not expect change to come from the outside. Yet, if inside, you are overwhelmed by loneliness and fear, you won't be able to do anything either. In the past, many have rebelled, but their rebellion was a rebellion of confusion and separation. Society punished, despised, and ignored them. In turn, their loneliness and hatred only grew.

### Loneliness

We sometimes feel very alone. Even within our own family, we are alone. We withdraw into our shell, hoping to find peace, but without success. Then we lose ourselves in the crowd. But when the party is over, we are more alone than

before. We do not have the courage to face our loneliness. We continue to run day after day. Do not continue to drown in the ocean of loneliness you have created. Learn to still your mind, so that the storm within you can calm and the sky can clear. Remind yourself of our common humanity, as this will allow you to transcend your suffering. You are not alone and life is worth living. Life is wonderful. The blue sky within your innocent eyes is a miracle. Your eyes are also a miracle. Please cherish your body and mind. They are manifestations of life, of truth, of the divine.

### Deep needs and superficial needs

I find it tragic that so many people are wasting their lives. They do not know how to live fully. They do not know how to listen to their hearts. They continue to chase after unnecessary things without seeking what is most precious in life.

We have created so many artificial needs for ourselves. Many of us "need" to drink alcohol, to use drugs. We have grown addicted to them and have allowed them to rule our lives. The reality is that we've never needed alcohol or drugs. They do not help us to grow; on the contrary, they destroy us. Our true needs lift us up and bring us peace, joy and freedom.

There are those who cannot sit still when they hear a friend has had an accident. Rain or shine, night or day, they leave home without hesitation to go help. They also do this because of a need: the need to love. This deep need moves them to express and develop their highest character.

Your success depends on your ability to discern between what you really need and what you don't. If you take time to listen to your heart, you will hear your deepest needs for growth, understanding, and love and you will give them a chance to blossom. I assure you: I don't want to make you into a "perfect Buddhist." Nor do I ask you to give up the joys of youth. Rather, I want to see you

free, free to grow and touch real happiness. I want to see you free, but please be aware that freedom without understanding can be a source of suffering. You are free to choose what to eat, but if you do not know which foods are good for your body, sooner or later you will suffer the consequences. To be truly happy, freedom must go hand in hand with understanding.

### Aspiration

To hear what your heart desires is already to touch happiness. You do not need to "create" a dream, an aspiration. Your dream is already in you, as the destination is already in the path. You only have to adjust the direction. Redirect the course of your life while there is still time. Use your energy.

You sometimes have the impression that your elders have more power than you do. You criticize them for not using it wisely and for failing to help society. However, if you were in their shoes, you would realize that they have their own difficulties. Do not expect too much from them, do not get discouraged and do not lose hope. This will save you a lot of energy. Do not think that only a revolutionary government can lead to a revolution. You might wait forever. Instead, use your own intelligence, your own talent, and the resources at your disposal. Do what you can with the abilities you have. Revolution is built from the bottom up. Anything positive you offer will influence society for the better. I have no doubt you can help to create a better world, as I have no doubt about the immeasurable potential of youth.

### Education

Let's talk about education. Why do we study? To pass exams? To have a degree? To achieve a position in society? Are these the only reasons? No. Studying is first and foremost for the joy of learning, the joy of opening new horizons.

There is so much to discover, yet we must not close our eyes to the problems of our society. Studying is therefore also to meet the real needs of society. In recent years, I've reduced my studies of Buddhism and religious philosophy in order to have more time to study community building, social work, and agriculture. In the past, I had little interest in these subjects, but I now enjoy researching them because I know how powerful and important this knowledge can be.

However, be careful with mere intellectual knowledge because it can be too abstract. Stay in touch with reality, examine everything you learn, and keep only what is grounded in real life experience.

Don't think that you can't go beyond your teachers. Keep learning. Don't get caught in what you've already learned, because this will prevent you from recognizing and embracing new ideas and insights.

## Love

Love is a basic need. Only love, in any form, provided that it is healthy and true, can break the walls of loneliness.

For most of us, our mother was the first person to teach us love. We were born so tiny, so weak, unable to defend ourselves. Whenever we needed our mother, we only had to cry and she appeared like an angel beside us. It is only then that we felt complete and happy. Love is always a response to a need, a lack, a suffering.

As you grew more independent, you came to need your mother and father less and less. That is why your love for them might have diminished. However, the stream of love between you and your parents is still alive, deep inside of you. You only have to return to it and allow it to refresh your relationship.

Now, I would like to share with you about romantic love. You might question on which basis a monk can talk about romantic love. However, I still have my own vision of things which I would like to share with you. At your age, romantic love is a strong call that can easily cover up other callings in your heart. I say cover up, but not silence.

Love has great power. It can help you heal deep wounds and realize great aspirations, provided that you know how to wait for it, how to recognize it, how to welcome it, how to go with it, how to protect it, how to nourish it, and how to direct it. For sure, you will meet difficulties and sorrows. But don't worry. Learn from your experiences so as to be able to love better and better.

A bitter romantic relationship, full of suffering, can be very destructive. You know that your relationship is constructive when it helps you to love life and fills you with enthusiasm, courage, strength and dedication. It is not easy to find the right partner. Do not think that physical beauty, talent, or reputation are enough to guarantee a fulfilling relationship. Try to understand the other person -their character, their preferences, their aspirations and vision of life. Then ask yourself if they suit you. To suit does not mean to be alike, but rather not be in conflict, to complement each other. Intelligent lovers know to harmonize their deep aspirations. Finding a suitable partner and being able to love in such a way is a great happiness. Remind yourself often, and let the other person know, how lucky you are to be with them. This awareness will help you to cherish the relationship and to avoid damaging it through carelessness. You won't be able to avoid moments of frustration and jealousy. Keep calm, do not do anything rash and don't blow things out of proportion.

Romantic love responds to natural needs of the human body and spirit. While some might perceive it as nothing more than a comfortable arrangement between two people, romantic love can also be a doorway to a wider and greater love. Love, like all things, is born, lasts for a while, and then passes away. Like a

beautiful tree in your garden, your love needs your care and protection in order to stay healthy for a long time.

Finally, love is not just tenderness. Love is also patience, courage, and sacrifice. Love is a basic human need, which is why you cannot afford not to love.

## Spirituality

The aim of religion is to connect. True religion never separates.

Religion, for most people, is little more than a set of customs and rituals handed down from family and society. Out of laziness or lack of interest, many are satisfied with a superficial understanding of their religion. They do not examine the truth of the teachings in the light of their own experience, let alone practice those teachings to better themselves and heal. These kinds of people are more likely to express dogmatism and intolerance.

If you follow a religion, don't be like them. Study your religion intelligently, in all its depth and beauty, so that it can nourish your spiritual life. A healthy religion is a living religion. It should be able to evolve and learn to respond to the difficulties of our time.

Meet with friends from other religions. Open your hearts to one another and learn to work together. Work with the pure intention to serve people, and not to expand the power and influence of your own group.

Religion must serve humanity, not humanity religion. Don't let anyone suffer or lose their life in the name of religion. The atmosphere is often still heavy in religious communities. We need the openness, creativity, and skillfulness of the youth.

## Conclusion

Thank you for following me up to this point. In talking with you, I have not appealed to authority or any figure of authority. I want us to make use of our own faculties to look directly at ourselves and people around us. I have shared with you my own perspective about our common human need for love and understanding.

It is love that can help you transcend fear and isolation. It is understanding that can bring you to the heart of humanity, life, and the cosmos. Understanding and love will open you up to the real situation of society and the planet, and will guide you in your choices.

Your bags are packed. It's time to go.