

Facing Suffering

—How Thinkers of the Past & Present React to the Inevitable and What Their Responses Mean to Us

Ng Ingrid Yin Yue

Mina, a rape victim who had just escaped from the imprisonment of war, was running for her life. She did not know for how long she had run, and one night she arrived at her hometown, only to find it in ruins.

Exhausted from her effort, and knowing that she had no family left alive, Mina sat on a rock and wept.

The sound of robes flapping in the piercing wind drew Mina's attention. A man in dull brown clothes was gazing at her, his eyes full of sympathy.

"Hello, what is troubling you?" asked the man. "I am Nhat Hanh, a follower of the Buddha. Let me sit beside you so that I may understand."¹

"Master Thich Nhat Hanh!" gasped Mina.

"Please, do not call me master. We are all empty of a separate self, and therefore we live in each other.² I am not existing alone; you are one cause for my existence," said Nhat Hanh. "Now, why are you crying?"

1 See Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra* (New York: Parallax Press, 1997). Paragraph (hereafter para.) 21 reads, "To comprehend something means to pick it up and be one with it"; "There is no other way to understand something."

2 *Ibid.*, para. 18: "It is empty of a separate self . . . [and this] means [it is] full of everything."

“My life is over,” Mina sobbed. “All my family members are dead, my home is destroyed, and I have nowhere to go. There’s no end to this terrible war. I’ve barely escaped death.”

“Yes, the world is at war, but your life isn’t over,” said Nhat Hanh. “Things are forever changing,³ so do not dwell on what has already happened. Because of impermanence,⁴ you are able to share empathy with other people who are suffering in the world. And, by the way, your family is still here.”

“Where?”

“Within you,” Nhat Hanh replied, placing his hand on Mina’s shoulder. “Everything is filled with everything else, just as a piece of paper is filled with the tree that it came from, and the tree is full of rain, sunshine and the soil.⁵ When you were conceived, your parents filled you up. Everything inter-are,⁶ your parents inter-are with air and water, and you inter-are with your parents. Nothing is destroyed,⁷ so do not be misguided by the idea of birth and death. Your family is always here.”

“Yes, thank you,” said Mina. “I know that my parents’ existence continues in everything. I can feel them in myself now. Still I’m disturbed, because I am not clean. When a man commits forbidden sex on a virgin, the girl is forever doomed.”

“Child, do not call yourself filthy, for we are all filthy,”⁸ explained Nhat Hanh. “Because of that assault, no one can be either defiled or immaculate.”⁹

3 *Ibid.*, para. 33: “Without impermanence nothing is possible.”

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, para. 8.

6 *Ibid.*, para. 6.

7 *Ibid.*, para. 35, quoting *Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*: “They are neither produced nor destroyed.”

8 *Ibid.*, para. 63: “No one among us has clean hands.”

9 *Ibid.*, para. 58, quoting *Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*: “Neither defiled nor immaculate.”

Every person is responsible for the suffering of everyone else.¹⁰ You are only bearing the fruit of the whole world, and I can see your pain inside me.¹¹ Remember that everyone has purity and impurity. You are full of purity, but also impurity because of another person. So do not suffer.¹² When you realize this, you know what to do, because you have no reason to feel guilty about your impurity anymore. Live in a way so that you can make peace with yourself and with the world.”¹³

“I understand. I will go and help others who are suffering from rape. I will proclaim peace to the world,” said Mina.

Just then, a man in windswept yellow robes walked past Mina and Nhat Hanh. “Oh people, believe in God and worship Him! Do not take what is not yours, for the Lord shall provide for you,”¹⁴ he cried. Soon he noticed the two people there, so he stopped to talk.

“Are you two refugees? I am willing to help you as God wills. I am Job, God’s humble servant. Pleased to meet you,” the man in yellow said, shaking hands with Mina and Nhat Hanh.

The three of them discussed about the people suffering in war. At one point, Job said, “If it is believed that everything inter-is, then some people will say that their misdeeds exist in order that goodness exists. They will attempt to justify evil with the conscionable things that other people do. Isn’t that absurd?”

“No, that isn’t what I mean,” replied Nhat Hanh. “I am only stating that when suffering is inevitable, we should release ourselves from the pain of

10 *Ibid.*, para. 63: “No one . . . can claim it is not our responsibility.” And para. 98: “. . . everyone is responsible for everything that happens in life.”

11 *Ibid.*, para. 73.

12 *Ibid.*, para. 64: “. . . so please do not suffer.”

13 *Ibid.*, para. 103: “. . . make peace with ourselves and with the world.”

14 Job 1:20.

suffering by realizing that we are not the only people who suffer. Nor are we the sole reason for our own suffering.”

“Well, that is contentious,” said Job. “An original way of removing pain. I think pain is there to test our faith in God. Pain is what we experience when we misunderstand God’s ways.”

“Why is God so important to you?” inquired Mina.

“I used to have a family and great wealth, until all of them were taken away from me. I cursed God for my great suffering, but He made me realize that I was in no position to question my fate. Everything I own is provided by God.¹⁵ The Lord Almighty knows more about everything than I do. He has the ability to operate the world,¹⁶ while an ignorant man like me decided to doubt his management. He created the world, and I have no right to challenge His.¹⁷ I was humbled before God,¹⁸ and I prayed that He forgave me. Thus I had my fortunes restored in double,¹⁹ and I understood that I was at God’s mercy.”

“You are talking about natural disasters, which no one can avoid. Can the presence of God really relieve all the pain of suffering?” Mina asked. “Not everyone who believes in God can receive His so-called blessings. In a war where human evil is evident, many infants die before they know God. Shouldn’t we *do* something to erase evil from the world?”

“Yes, we should try to reduce suffering in the world by sharing compassion with others, but it is impossible to erase suffering from the

15 *Ibid.*, 14.

16 *Ibid.*, 38:1–39:30.

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*, 42:2–42:6.

19 *Ibid.*, 42:10.

world,” said Job. “Human evil is the result of humans following Satan.²⁰ God has His own reasons not to get rid of Satan, so we should face suffering as an opportunity to consolidate our faith in God. Suffering cannot make us painful unless we do not live with God. Live in accordance with God; He will provide for you.”

“You haven’t answered all my questions,” said Mina. “I cannot believe in God yet. In places where sanitation and medical technology is deficient, pregnant women often have miscarriages, and babies who get through the delivery process might have to live with deadly diseases.”

“Suffering is a process,” said Nhat Hanh. “Do not ask why there is suffering. Without suffering, you might not be able to experience the feeling of soaring over difficulties. Great happiness and hope are feelings that you can attain after struggles.”

“God is hope; God is joy. Place your anxieties in God when you suffer,” said Job.

While Nhat Hanh was lost in thought, an uncanny man suddenly sat down beside him. “Good morning! What’s all this talk about? Can I join?” the man asked. He was wearing a blue chiffon dress and a bonnet too large for his head.

“I’m Zhuang Zhou,” the man continued. “Are you talking about poor babies who have no quality of life? It’s impossible to judge the life of people who have a much shorter lifespan. ‘The locust doesn’t know the difference between spring and autumn, but the tortoise who lives long knows of a spring

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:6–1:13: “So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD” and “The Chaldeans . . . made a raid on the camels . . . killed the servants . . .”

and autumn that lasts five hundred years.²¹ Why do you suffer for a baby when you don't even know his or her feelings? And I think you did talk about how to face suffering. You should not be bound by suffering. Why must people obstinately try to find an ultimate solution to suffering? Live in nature,²² and you will be happy.”

“Zhuang Zhou, you have been eavesdropping for quite a long time! If you have any substantial advice, please help this girl here,” said Job.

“The war has affected you severely and made you grievous. But do you know that you are experiencing small changes all the time?”²³ Zhuang Zhou spoke. “Then don't be surprised of bigger changes. *You* should decide whether a change is devastating or not—a simple matter of personal preference.²⁴ Release yourself from the conventional human emotions of grief,²⁵ and merge with the Way.”²⁶

“So do you think there is a best way to face suffering?” asked Nhat Hanh.

“I know not the answer. In such a case, I stop seeking the ‘best way’²⁷ and just deal with life,” said Zhuang Zhou, smiling.

“How should I live, Zhuang Zhou?” asked Mina.

“Live casually,”²⁸ said Zhuang Zhou. “You cannot interfere with how

21 Chuang Tzu, *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*, 4.

22 *Ibid.*, 6–7: the account of the spirit man.

23 *Ibid.*, 10: “Sir Wanderer of Countenance Complete said, ‘The one who is leaning against the table now is not the one who was formerly leaning against the table.’”

24 *Ibid.*, 16: “Why are things so? They are so because we declare them to be so.”

25 *Ibid.*, 58: The story of Sir Chariot falling ill. Sir Chariot became a crooked man but he did not let his condition impede his carefree life.

26 *Ibid.*, 16: “. . . all revert to join in Unity.”

27 *Ibid.*, 19: “Therefore, she who knows to stop at what she does not know has attained the ultimate.”

28 *Ibid.*, 52: “The true man . . . casually . . . went and casually . . . came.”

things naturally work,²⁹ so learn to maintain Tranquility in Turmoil.³⁰ Face the complications and variety of changes in life with inner tranquility. You needn't be affected by anything if you live with the Way.”

“That’s good advice,” said Mina cheerfully. “The only problem with your way of thinking, Zhuang Zhou, is that if a person goes to extreme in finding the Way, the person will be entirely detached from the human world. The person will tend to be apathetic, which I think is rather selfish. However, I do not reject your ideas, because they are very handy. I am less obstinate about getting rid of suffering anymore.”

The sky was darkening, so Mina led the three men into a shed that was fortunately intact. Mina felt much lighter after sharing her pain with them. To release herself from agony, she knew what she could do. She would take responsibility for other people’s suffering, make peace with the world, have trust in God when she felt vulnerable, and deal with life, come what may.

Works Cited

Chuang Tzu. *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*. Trans. Victor H. Mair. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998.

Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries of Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*. New York: Parallax Press, 1997.

Job from *The Holy Bible*. New Revised Standard Version. Anglicized edition. London: Collins, 2007 [1995].

29 *Ibid.*, 53: “What men are unable to interfere with are the attributes of all things.”

30 *Ibid.*, 57: The made-up dialogue between Sir Sunflower of Southunc and Woman Hunchback. Woman Hunchback said, “Tranquility in Turmoil may be defined as that which is brought to completion after passing through turmoil.”

Teacher's comment:

There is something appealing about the way Ingrid tells the story of Mina. She awakes our senses, gives us a sense of place, and invites us into Mina's world. There, we begin to listen.

Mina is suffering, but she is not blinded by it. She thinks independently, and is herself an attentive listener. She acknowledges multiple perspectives on suffering and is willing to doubt authoritative ideas at the same time.

With the character Mina, Ingrid adapts ideas from the Heart Sutra, the Book of Job, and *Zhuangzi* in a sensitive way. She demonstrates awareness of the prominent features and concerns of the texts. Her interpretation shows that she has read the texts purposefully. In juxtaposing these positions, Ingrid explores questions regarding the meaning of her life—questions that she assures us, by the end of the essay, that we can prepare for, but never tire of. (Yeung Yang)