

Mindful suffering: Buddhists practice forgiveness

by [Richard Higgins](#) in the [October 24, 2001](#) issue

This is," Chi Nguyen said, raising one hand and then the other, "because that is." The retired surgeon, a native of Vietnam who lives in Boston, was explaining how Buddhism helped him and other members of a local Buddhist temple forgive those who viciously attacked the temple last year.

The acts of forgiveness, which are still bearing fruit in improved neighborhood and interfaith relations, may hold special meaning for Christians as well as Buddhists, especially after the events of September 11. If Americans can transform their raw suffering into mindful suffering, Nguyen suggests, perhaps they can find a way to forgiveness and compassion.

"This" devastated Temple Vietnam: Three times last year, youths broke into the temple, which Nguyen, his wife and other followers of the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh founded in 1991. It is located in a former day-care center in the working-class Boston neighborhood of Roslindale. The vandals used an ax from the temple toolshed to smash a statue of Avalokitesvara, the goddess of compassion, whom Nguyen calls "our Virgin Mary." They cracked or damaged the front doors, windows and the skylight of the temple's main hall.

"That" is whatever set off the vandals, a 15-year-old boy and an accomplice, eight, who lived in a rundown housing project near the temple and who were identified as the culprits by Boston police. In Buddhist thought, the cause of an action is a co-arising condition. Here, it includes the poverty in which the boys lived, the possible presence of mental illness and the use of drugs, said Nguyen. He noted that the older boy was known to the police as a frequent troublemaker.

About 40 to 50 people, most of them ethnic Vietnamese, attend services weekly, but the temple draws from 500 to 800 people on special occasions, such as the Buddha's birthday. Temple members felt some slight responsibility themselves, because they had been cut off from their surroundings, said Bich Nguyen, the

temple's president and the wife of Chi Nguyen.

"We had never gotten to know our neighbors," she said. While there was an understandable fear of not wanting to be seen proselytizing, "the fact is, we did not reach out," she said. Boston police speculated about a possible motive: in ignorance, the boys may have believed that the temple had stores of fireworks for use in the Chinese New Year celebrations.

Despite initial cries to put the boys in jail, members of the temple decided that the attacks were less likely to have been acts of hate than a random acting-out by disturbed youths, and they asked the police and prosecutors not to press charges in juvenile court. And they did more: One year ago this month, they held a community cleanup and cookout, inviting not only the entire neighborhood but the now-contrite boys themselves.

As Chi Nguyen recalls, there was an extraordinary moment at the temple when he met face-to-face with the 15-year-old leader, whose first name is Angelo. "I told him I was giving him something positive to do," Nguyen recalled. "I said, your name is Angelo, so now I am promoting you to be guardian angel of our temple." Nguyen said the boy professed that if he had known the Vietnamese-Americans before, he never would have done what he did.

Temple Vietnam has had no problems with vandalism since that time. Although Angelo has since moved out of the immediate neighborhood, Nguyen said that for a while they would see him on a street and he would wave sheepishly. Two months ago, the temple erected a new marble replica of Avalokitesvara that it had custom-made in Vietnam and bravely put it back outside, rather than under lock and key. The success of the initial cleanup and cookout has evolved into an ongoing, communitywide cleanup and interfaith tolerance campaign backed by Mayor Thomas Menino of Boston and other religious groups in Roslindale.

This year's cleanup was held September 29. In the morning, 60 people gathered at the temple for coffee and donuts and to gather tools and trashbags before sweeping and picking up litter at the Archdale public housing project. In the afternoon, temple members cooked Vietnamese food and brought it to a cookout at a community center for about 300 people who had tackled other jobs that day.

"Cleaning the streets is a concrete way of being a peacemaker," said Sister Nancy Braceland, a Roman Catholic nun who helped organize the event. She was one of

three nuns who had walked by the temple last year, saw the smashed statue and asked how they could help.

“Forgiveness is not something that Christians have a monopoly on,” Braceland, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph order, said. She said she was impressed that, when something sacred to the Vietnamese Buddhists was destroyed, and even after they learned who did it, “they chose not to prosecute that person, but to walk with him, to find out about his life, and to do what they could to make sure that it didn’t happen again.”

Bich Nguyen sees positive ripples from the incident. “It was a good accident,” she said. “We have more friends because of what happened. People have prayed for us, and they have called to offer help with things. Now we don’t feel so isolated.”

Why did they choose forgiveness? By the time of the third break-in, the one that smashed the skylight, the members were angry. “When we heard the news, we were very upset,” said Nguyen. “Some people said, if we catch who did this, we are going to put them in jail.” The temple’s governing board met and, putting Buddhist theology into practice, counseled members not to let emotional reactions overtake them.

“The teaching of the Buddha is very clear. When you are angry, don’t do or say anything out of that anger. Sit down and be calm and look deeply to understand what happened, what is the cause. We have to look to the root of the problem, and that root will not be changed by punishment.”

According to Chi Nguyen, remaining calm and reflecting allowed the members of Temple Vietnam to look at the environment in which the boys were growing up, and conclude that they were in a “bad situation,” that they acted out of their own suffering. “We asked, does he have love and care from his parents or his teacher? Is he exposed to violence every day through TV, the media? If you look deeply into the individual, you can see how much he’s suffering.”

Buddhist notions of forgiveness, Nguyen said, do not arise from the benevolence and goodness of a transcendent God but from one’s awareness of the interconnectedness of all things. “Compassion is within your power,” he said.

Indeed, the very notion of an “enemy” needing to be forgiven is foreign to Buddhism, said Nguyen. “We are not a separate entity from these boys,” he said.

“Everybody is like a cell in our own body. So if we hit them, it is like we are hitting our right hand with our left hand. The whole body hurts.”

Thich Nhat Hanh himself sounded many of those themes in a statement one week after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. The Vermont-based Zen monk, a native of Vietnam, said that the horror inflicted on September 11 “has been created by misunderstanding, injustice, discrimination and despair.” He urged all people “to recognize the suffering, to embrace it and to understand it,” and he gently reminded Christians that “Jesus never encourages us to respond to acts of violence with violence.”

“We need calmness and lucidity so that we can listen deeply to and understand our own suffering, the suffering of the nation and the suffering of others,” he said. “By understanding the nature and the causes of the suffering, we will then know the right path to follow.”

Calmness, reflection, meditation—what Christians call prayer—are the means by which forgiveness arises, according to Nguyen. “Of course you are angry when something like this happens. At first we thought, it must be discrimination, it must be a plot. But then we start to ask, why did this happen? Nothing happens in a vacuum. We must remember,” he continued, raising first one hand and then the other, “This is because that is.”