Engaged Buddhism: Thich Nhat Hanh's Interbeing

Chapter · April 2009

CITATION
1

READS
1,043

1 author:

William Edelglass
Marlboro College
34 PUBLICATIONS **41** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Chapter 36

Thich Nhat Hanh's *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*

William Edelglass

Some critics claim that the Buddhist emphasis on liberation from samsara, the cycle of birth and suffering, has been accompanied by a neglect of worldly liberation. Moreover, critics charge, Buddhists have no deep motivation to work for social justice; in a world governed by the universal justice of karma, there are no innocent victims. The law of karma is said to justify the status quo because worldly suffering is recognized as the inevitable ripening of karmic consequences. While scholars debate the historical accuracy of this critique, many contemporary Buddhist leaders, in Asia and in the West, have been working to formulate Buddhist responses to worldly suffering. Engaged Buddhists argue that social and institutional violence, though veiled, is often pervasive and difficult to subvert, even as it causes extensive and extreme suffering. Therefore, Buddhists, who have always been concerned with suffering and violence, are called to take action against social and institutional oppression and injustice. As the Dalai Lama argues, we have a "universal responsibility."

"Engaged Buddhism" arose as a Buddhist response to the widespread trauma—including colonialism, war, social and economic injustice, environmental degradation, genocide, totalitarian government, and the suppression of religion—that has accompanied the advent of modernity in some Asian Buddhist countries. Prominent Asian Buddhist leaders have argued that compassionate, nonviolent, mindful activism is a properly Buddhist response to

structures of oppression.[1] Engaged Buddhism resonates with many Western Buddhists, who appreciate the confluence of their religious practice with Western political and social theory and European Enlightenment values, such as human rights, distributive justice, social progress, and freedom from oppression. In Asia and in the West, engaged Buddhism has taken a multiplicity of forms, including working for: peace and nonviolence, human rights, just and equitable development, liberation from oppressive government, social and economic justice, prison reform, access to education and health care, environmental protection and sustainability, and gender and racial euqality.[2]

Engaged Buddhists draw on a variety of traditional Buddhist doctrines, narratives, and values to justify their worldly engagement on behalf of suffering beings in a Buddhist context. The most basic Buddhist doctrine, the Four Noble Truths, concerns naming and acknowledging suffering, determining its cause, seeing how it can be overcome, and working to overcome it. Therefore, if political and economic structures cause suffering, engaged Buddhists argue, according to the Four Noble Truths, they should be dismantled. Buddhist ethical teachings, such as the cultivation of generosity, moral discipline, patience, compassion, loving-kindness, abstaining from harming others, the monastic code (*vinaya*) with its rules of comportment for monks and nuns, right livelihood, skillful means in alleviating suffering, and the bodhisattva ideal of saving sentient beings from samsara all seem to include a responsiveness to the suffering of others. Beyond ethics, engaged Buddhists draw on other significant concepts in Buddhist thought, for example interdependence and nonduality, which are employed to demonstrate that we are all responsible for each other, and that the suffering of others is significant to the self because self and other are not fundamentally different. Selflessness and emptiness are utilized to encourage practitioners to transform fears, desires, and habits that cause the suffering of others or prevent taking action to reduce suffering. Engaged Buddhists use the doctrine that all sentient beings have the seed of Buddha-nature, the capacity for waking up as enlightened beings, to support the view that every sentient being is intrinsically valuable and deserves to be treated with respect and dignity.

Each of these ethical and metaphysical doctrines plays a role in Thich Nhat Hanh's works on engaged Buddhism. Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen

1. According to the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and other Buddhist teachers, as well as some scholars, engaged Buddhism is continuous with earlier Buddhist traditions, which were, at times, already concerned with various forms of injustice and worldly suffering. Many scholars, however, regard socially engaged Buddhism as a uniquely contemporary response to modernity. Christopher Queen, for example, argues that engaged Buddhism is so different from earlier Buddhist traditions that it constitutes a fourth *yāna* (vehicle) of Buddhist theory and practice, after the Hīnayāna (lesser vehicle), Mahāyāna (great vehicle), and Vajrayāna (vehicle) (Queen 2000: 1–31).

2. See, for example, Queen and King 1996; and Queen 2000.

master and peace activist who is generally credited with coining the term "engaged Buddhism," played a leading role in Buddhist responses to the war in his homeland. In the 1960s, drawing on his Theravāda training in mindfulness practice as well as his Mahāyāna Zen practice, Nhat Hanh founded the Order of Interbeing (Tiep Hien), in the Rinzai lineage of Zen Buddhism. According to its charter, "The aim of the Order is to actualize Buddhism by studying, experimenting with, and applying Buddhism in modern life with a special emphasis on the bodhisattva ideal."[3] During the 1960s, for the Order of Interbeing and other Buddhists groups with which Nhat Hanh was working, "to actualize Buddhism" meant practicing mindfulness, but also protecting villagers under attack, providing medical aid, assisting farmers, rebuilding villages destroyed by the fighting, and advocating an end to the violence without endorsing any political or military faction. Since 1966, when he was forced into exile, Nhat Hanh has eloquently argued that engaged Buddhism is continuous with earlier Buddhist traditions but is also a form of Buddhism that is particularly suited to the contemporary world.

Nhat Hanh's *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism* succinctly formulates his approach to engaged Buddhism. While personal virtue, mindfulness, and transformation are necessary, Nhat Hanh argues, they are insufficient to overcome the great suffering caused by structures of oppression. Thus, the "Fourteen Guidelines" address individual mindfulness practice and cultivation of virtue, but also responsibilities in family life, work, and community.[4] The text is representative of engaged Buddhist interpretations of Buddhist doctrines and practices as rafts—skillful means to alleviate suffering to which one should not get attached; Nhat Hanh explicitly valorizes mindful engagement over the particularity of any Buddhist tradition and interprets Buddhist teachings as ecumenical, nondogmatic, and universal responses to contemporary life.[5]

Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings

1. Openness: *Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance,* we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist teachings are guiding means

3. Nhat Hanh 1998: 105.

4. In conformity with Buddhist traditions, Nhat Hanh first characterized the fourteen rules for the Order of Interbeing as "precepts" (*śīla*), formulated as imperatives proscribing specific acts. During the 1990s, he reformulated the "precepts" as "mindfulness trainings" (Nhat Hanh's translation of *śikṣā*), to further emphasize the way the practice of engaged Buddhism is grounded in individual awareness and motivation, as opposed to the external authority of a command.

5. The following excerpts originally appeared in Thich Nhat Hanh 1998. We gratefully acknowledge permission to republish this work.

to help us learn to look deeply and to develop our understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill, or die for.

Commentary:[6]...The Buddha regarded his own teachings as a raft to cross the river and not as an absolute truth to be worshipped or clung to.... Ideological inflexibility is responsible for so much of the conflict and violence in the world.... According to Buddhist teachings, knowledge itself can be an obstacle to true understanding, and views can be a barrier to insight. Clinging to views can prevent us from arriving at a deeper, more profound understanding of reality.... The Buddhist teachings are a *means* of helping people.... If various kinds of medicine are needed to treat a variety of diseases, Buddhism also needs to propose various Dharma doors for people of differing circumstances.... The teachings and practices found in Buddhism may vary, but they all aim at liberating the mind.

2. Nonattachment to Views: *Aware of the suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions,* we are determined to avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. We shall learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to others' insights and experiences. We are aware that the knowledge we presently possess is not changeless, absolute truth. Truth is found in life, and we will observe life within and around us in every moment, ready to learn throughout our lives....

3. Freedom of Thought: *Aware of the suffering brought about when we impose our views on others,* we are committed not to force others, even our children, by any means whatsoever—such as authority, threat, money, propaganda, or indoctrination—to adopt our views. We will respect the right of others to be different and to choose what to believe and how to decide. We will, however, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness through compassionate dialogue.

Commentary:...Compassionate dialogue is the essence of nonviolent action (*ahiṃsā*). Ahiṃsā begins with the energy of tolerance and loving kindness, which will be expressed in gentle, compassionate, intelligent speech that can move people's hearts. It then moves into the field of action to create moral and social pressure for people to change. Understanding and compassion must be the basis of all nonviolent actions....

4. Awareness of Suffering: *Aware that looking deeply at the nature of suffering can help us develop compassion and find ways out of suffering,* we are determined not to avoid or close our eyes before suffering. We are committed to finding ways, including personal contact, images, and sounds, to be

6. Thich Nhat Hanh has provided his own commentary to each of the mindfulness trainings.

with those who suffer, so we can understand their situation deeply and help them transform their suffering into compassion, peace, and joy.
Commentary:... Suffering can have a therapeutic power. It can help us open our eyes. Awareness of suffering encourages us to search for its cause, to find out what is going on within us and in society.... Too much suffering can destroy our capacity to love. We have to know our limits, to stay in touch with things that are dreadful in life and also things that are wonderful. If the First Truth explains the presence of suffering in life, the Third Truth encourages us to touch life's joy and peace. When people say that Buddhism is pessimistic, it is because they are stressing the First Truth and overlooking the Third. Mahayana Buddhism takes great care to emphasize the Third Truth. Its literature is full of references to the green willow, the violet bamboo, and the full moon as manifestations of the true Dharma....

Teachers who say not to pay attention to the problems of the world like hunger, war, oppression, and social injustice, who say that we should only practice, have not understood deeply enough the meaning of Mahāyāna. Of course, we should practice counting the breath, meditation, and *sūtra* study, but what is the purpose of doing these things? It is to be aware of what is going on in ourselves and in the world. What is going on in the world is also going on within ourselves, and vice versa. Once we see this clearly, we will not refuse to take a position or to act.... To practice Buddhism, it is said, is to see into one's own nature and become a Buddha. If we cannot see what is going on around us, how can we see into our own nature? There is a relationship between the nature of the self and the nature of suffering, injustice, and war....

Staying in touch with the reality of suffering keeps us sane and nourishes the wellsprings of understanding (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) in us. It affirms in us the will to practice the bodhisattva's way: "Living beings are numberless; I vow to help by rowing them to the other shore." If we cut ourselves off from the reality of suffering, this vow will have no meaning.... We must practice in each moment of daily life and not just in the meditation hall.

5. Simple, Healthy Living: *Aware that true happiness is rooted in peace, solidity, freedom, and compassion, and not in wealth or fame,* we are determined not to take as the aim of our life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure, nor to accumulate wealth while millions are hungry and dying. We are committed to living simply and sharing our time, energy, and material resources with those in need. We will practice mindful consuming, not using alcohol, drugs, or any other products that bring toxins into our own and the collective body and consciousness.

Commentary:... We must resolve to oppose the type of modern life filled with pressures and anxieties that so many people now live. The only way out is to consume less, to be content with fewer possessions.... Once we are able to live simply and happily, we are better able to help others. We have more time and energy to share....

6. Dealing with Anger: *Aware that anger blocks communication and creates suffering,* we are determined to take care of the energy of anger when it arises and to recognize and transform the seeds of anger that lie deep in our consciousness. When anger comes up, we are determined not to do or say anything, but to practice mindful breathing or mindful walking and acknowledge, embrace, and look deeply into our anger. We will learn to look with the eyes of compassion at those we think are the cause of our anger.

Commentary:…Only love and understanding can help people change.…If I had been born in the social conditions of a pirate and raised as a pirate, I would be a pirate now. A variety of interdependent causes has created the existence of the pirate. The responsibility is not solely his or his family's, but it is also society's.…Each of us shares the responsibility for the presence of pirates. Meditating on dependent origination and looking with compassionate eyes helps us see our duty and responsibility to suffering beings.…The purpose of meditation is to see and hear.…The eyes of compassion are also the eyes of understanding. Compassion is the sweet water that springs forth from the source of understanding. To practice looking deeply is the basic medicine for anger and hatred.

7. Dwelling Happily in the Present Moment: *Aware that life is available only in the present moment and that it is possible to live happily in the here and now,* we are committed to training ourselves to live deeply each moment of daily life. We will try not to lose ourselves in dispersion or be carried away by regrets about the past, worries about the future, or craving, anger, or jealousy in the present. We will practice mindful breathing to come back to what is happening in the present moment. We are determined to learn the art of mindful living by touching the wondrous, refreshing, and healing elements that are inside and around us, and by nourishing seeds of joy, peace, love, and understanding in ourselves, thus facilitating the work of transformation and healing in our consciousness.

8. Community and Communication: *Aware that the lack of communication always brings separation and suffering,* we are committed to training ourselves in the practice of compassionate listening and loving speech. We will learn to listen deeply without judging or reacting and refrain from uttering words that can create discord or cause the community to break. We will make every effort to keep communications open and to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.…

9. Truthful and Loving Speech: *Aware that words can create suffering or happiness,* we are committed to learning to speak truthfully and constructively, using only words that inspire hope and confidence. We are determined not to say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people, nor to utter words that might cause division or hatred. We will not spread news that we do not know to be certain nor criticize or con-

demn things of which we are not sure. We will do our best to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten our safety. . . .

10. Protecting the Sangha: *Aware that the essence and aim of a Sangha is the practice of understanding and compassion,* we are determined not to use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit or transform our community into a political instrument. A spiritual community should, however, take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.

Commentary: . . . The purpose of a religious community is to guide people on the spiritual path. Therefore, to transform a religious community into a political party is to divert it from its true aim. Religious leaders may be tempted to support their government in exchange for the material well-being of their community. This has occurred throughout recorded history. In order to secure their government's support, religious communities often refrain from speaking out against oppression and injustices committed by their government. Allowing politicians to use your religious community to strengthen their political power is to surrender the spiritual sovereignty of your community.

"A spiritual community, however, should take a clear stand against oppression and injustice . . ." This should be done with a clear voice, based on the principles of the Four Noble Truths. The truth concerning the unjust situation should be fully exposed (the First Truth: suffering). The various causes of injustice should be enumerated (the Second Truth: the causes of suffering). The purpose and desire for removing the injustices should be made obvious (the Third Truth: the removal of suffering). Although religious communities are not political powers, they can use their influence to change society. Speaking out is the first step, proposing and supporting appropriate measures for change is the next. Most important is to transcend all partisan conflicts. The voice of caring and understanding must be distinct from the voice of ambition.

11. Right Livelihood: *Aware that great violence and injustice have been done to our environment and society,* we are committed not to live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. We will do our best to select a livelihood that helps realize our ideal of understanding and compassion. Aware of global economic, political and social realities, we will behave responsibly as consumers and as citizens, not investing in companies that deprive others of their chance to live.

Commentary: . . . Right Livelihood had ceased to be a purely personal matter. It is our collective karma.

Suppose I am a school teacher and I believe that nurturing love and understanding in children is a beautiful occupation, an example of Right Livelihood. I would object if someone asked me to stop teaching and become, for example, a butcher. However, if I meditate on the interrelatedness of all

things, I will see that the butcher is not solely responsible for killing animals. He kills them for all of us who buy pieces of raw meat, cleanly wrapped and displayed at our local supermarket. The act of killing is a collective one. . . .

12. Reverence for Life: *Aware that much suffering is caused by war and conflict,* we are determined to cultivate nonviolence in our daily lives, to promote peace education, mindful mediation, and reconciliation within families, communities, nations, and in the world. We are determined not to kill and not to let others kill. We will diligently practice deep looking with our Sangha to discover better ways to protect life and prevent war. . . .

Commentary: . . . The essence of this training is to make every effort to respect and protect life, to continuously move in the direction of peace and reconciliation. . . .

Our patterns of livelihood and consuming have very much to do with the lives and security of humans and other living beings. There are many types of violence. Among societies, it manifests as war—often caused by fanaticism and narrowness or by the will to gain political influence or economic power. Or violence can be the exploitation of one society by another that is technologically or politically stronger. We can oppose wars once they have started, but it is better to also do our best to prevent wars from breaking out. The way to prevent war is to make peace. We accomplish this first in our daily life by combating fanaticism and attachment to views, and working for social justice. . . .

13. Generosity: *Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression,* we are committed to cultivating loving kindness and learning ways to work for the wellbeing of people, animals, plants, and minerals. We will practice generosity by sharing our time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need. We are determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. We will respect the property of others, but will try to prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other beings. . . .

14. Right Conduct *(For lay members): Aware that sexual relations motivated by craving cannot dissipate the feeling of loneliness but will create more suffering, frustration, and isolation,* we are determined not to engage in sexual relations without mutual understanding, love, and a long-term commitment. In sexual relations, we must be aware of future suffering that may be caused. . . . We will treat our bodies with respect and preserve our vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realization of our bodhisattva ideal. . . .

(For monastic members): Aware that the aspiration of a monk or a nun can only be realized when he or she wholly leaves behind the bonds of worldly love, we are committed to practicing chastity and to helping others protect

themselves. We are aware that loneliness and suffering cannot be alleviated by the coming together of two bodies in a sexual relationship, but by the practice of true understanding and compassion.... We are determined not to suppress or mistreat our body or to look upon our body as only an instrument, but to learn to handle our body with respect....

Commentary: So many individuals, children, couples, and families have been wounded by sexual misconduct. Practicing this training is to prevent ourselves and others from being wounded. Our stability and the stability of our families and society depend on it....

Whatever happens to the body also happens to the spirit. The sanity of the body is the sanity of the spirit; the violation of the body is the violation of the spirit....

Commentary on the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings

The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing are the heart of the Buddha. They are mindfulness in our real lives and not just the teaching of ideas. If we practice these trainings deeply, we will recognize that each of them contains all the others. Studying and practicing the mindfulness trainings can help us understand the true nature of interbeing—we cannot just be by ourselves alone; we can only inter-be with everyone and everything else. To practice these trainings is to become aware of what is going on in our bodies, our minds, and the world. With awareness, we can live our lives happily, fully present in each moment we are alive, intelligently seeking solutions to the problems we face, and working for peace in small and large ways....

Bibliography and Suggested Reading

Chappell, David, ed. (2000) *Buddhist Peacework: Creating Cultures of Peace*. Boston: Wisdom.

Jones, Ken. (2003) *The New Social Face of Buddhism: A Call to Action*. Boston: Wisdom.

King, Sallie B. (2005) *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Nhat Hanh, Thich. (1998) *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*. Berkeley: Parallax Press.

Queen, Christopher, ed. (2000) *Engaged Buddhism in the West*. Boston: Wisdom.

Queen, Christopher, and Sallie B. King, eds. (1996) *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Queen, Christopher, Charles Prebish, and Damien Keown, eds. (2003) *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism*. New York: RoutledgeCurzon.