

Hanh's Concept of Being Peace: The Order of Interbeing¹

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Abstract: After being nominated by Martin Luther King, Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize, the "gentle and fearless" Vietnamese Buddhism monk Thich Nhat Hanh established a worldwide movement called the Order of Interbeing, which deals with major human conflicts with ancient Buddhist teachings. By drawing from original Buddhist texts, Hanh has created an authentic type of religious activism based on mindfulness of our connectedness that has real potential for peace, because of its twin focus on resolution and prevention. In this paper, I discuss how the Order has come into existence, its framework, its cause, how it educates its members, and how effectively it is creating a culture of peace by examining the history of the Order, reading Hanh's wisdom books and poetry, analyzing its structure, and interviewing a local Sangha on their mystical experiences. I argue that Thich Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism has the potential to make a significant impact on mankind.

Keywords: Thích Nhất Hạnh, Mindfulness, Interbeing

Amid Crossfire

Thich Nhat Hanh's influence on Buddhism began in Saigon amidst the crossfire of the Vietnam War. He saw suffering firsthand in the form of warfare. He became a Dharma teacher at the age of forty, writing articles, publishing books, and editing magazines and a journal to "promote the idea of a humanistic, unified Buddhism" (Hanh 1998, 7). In his personal journal, he writes about the "nature of war," which he saw as a great evil. In 1946 when the Vietnamese were at war with imperial France in the French-Indochina War Hanh writes that one incident sticks out in particular in his memory. Two French soldiers came to a temple where Hanh was living and demanded all of its rice. The monks complied. But what Hanh realized through this incident was that something was fundamentally wrong with this interaction. For Hanh, this incident was a microcosm of the war. It illustrated how warfare is fundamentally destructive and unnatural. Hanh saw that the war had inevitably situated him and the soldiers as enemies. Under different circumstances, Hanh imagined that they might have become close friends. Looking deeper, Hanh saw that the first person to suffer in war is the person who perpetrates violence because they are ignorant and aversive, that is, soldiers misunderstand the true nature of things (they think in good/evil) and they have a fear of getting what they do not want. In all the warfare Vietnam has seen, Hanh and the rest of the monks did not perpetrate violence. Instead, they remained neutral. He chose the Middle Path of peace. As Hanh preaches, "peace is not simply the absence of violence; it is the cultivation of understanding, insight, and compassion, combined with action" (Hanh 2003, 5). Hanh understands that "two sides in a conflict are not really opposing, but two aspects of the same reality" (Queen and King 1996, 346). For that reason, Hanh advocates the practice of mindfulness. As he writes, "the only way out of violence and conflict is for us to embrace the practice of peace, to think and act with compassion, love, and understanding" (Hanh 2003, 6). Hanh thinks that mindfulness is an important step to a more peaceful world.

Forever moved by his encounter with the French soldiers, Hanh had a thirst for finding a new answer to the old problem of building a peaceful society. He describes his yearning to work amid any danger:

I felt the urge to leave civilization behind, throw away my bookish knowledge, tear off my cloths, and enter the forest naked. To do what? I didn't know. But I would

¹ Sieber, A. (2015). Hanh's Concept of Being Peace: The Order of *Interbeing*. *International Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Society*, 5(1), 1-8.

enter the forest's depths. Even if wild animals devoured me, I knew I would feel no pain, terror, or regret. I might even enjoy being devoured. I stood at the window for a long time, struggling with the call of the forest and the moon. (Hanh 1998, 23)

Ultimately, Hanh's response to this struggle was creating "engaged" Buddhism, a form of justice activism influenced by Buddhism, to which he has dedicated his life.

Hanh's journal entries from this early period of developing engaged Buddhism read like a manifesto in that he proposed something radically different for society. In the cacophony of the Vietnam War, motivated by the injustices of both American and North Vietnamese forces along with an oppressive regime, Hanh sought to make a new community with the help of Buddhism. He began in Saigon as a pamphlet writer. In his journal, he writes that the Vietnamese community needed "a literature that guides and heals, and helps [it] open to the truth about our situation" (Hanh 1998, 174). Hanh was calling for awareness above all else, because according to Buddhist thought suffering comes from ignorance and the cure is to overcome ignorance with mindfulness. Mindfulness is understood in Buddhism as the vehicle to reach awareness. Hanh applied Buddhist theory about awareness to the ills of Vietnam. This teaching goes all the way back to the Buddha's original teachings:

The path to the Deathless is awareness;
Unawareness, the path of death.
They who are aware do not die;
They who are unaware are as dead. (Ross and Palihawadana 2008, 21)

Further advocating mindfulness, in February of 1965, Hanh wrote about the importance awareness plays in maintaining personal peace:

In the depths of our consciences dwell the seeds of our potentials, including poisonous snakes, phantoms, and other unsavory creatures. Though hidden, they control our impulses and our actions. If we want freedom, we must invite those phantoms up to our conscious mind, not to fight with them, like the old man fishing for snakes, but to befriend them. (Hanh 1998, 180)

Hanh explains that one's greatest adversary can become a friend, and befriending is the first step towards peace.

In 1950 Hanh helped start the Quang Buddhist Institute to put his vision into practice. There he published numerous wisdom books and poetry. Hanh aligned himself with the left wing of the Buddhist Church in Vietnam. Politically, he favored neither side. Both the right and left of the Vietnamese government condemned his works, and eventually, the ruling government of Vietnam banned Hanh's poetry. Hanh remained active, calling for an end to the war. Hanh's movement (consisting of monks, nuns and students) clashed with the government on numerous occasions. He led marches, strikes and fasts only to be squelched by the ruling government. The movement was based on the simple premise that Buddhists have a responsibility to be involved in their community. Hanh and his followers persisted as an impartial entity that became a force in the peace movement. They gained the favor of Vietnamese villagers because they did not want war. As Hanh wrote, "Peasants in these villages hated both sides;" and they told him "We do not follow either. We follow the one who can [*sic*] end the war and guarantee that we can live" (King and Queen 1996, 332). The villagers' attitudes can be explained by the death toll. One American congressman estimated that "an average of two civilians were killed for every Viet Cong" (King and Queen 1996, 332). And, according to Viet Cong estimates, "six civilians to one enemy

soldier” were killed (King and Queen 1996, 333). After the South Vietnamese regime ended, the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam found that of “1,870 prisoners in Chi Hoa Prison, Saigon, 1,665 were listed on the daily census as ‘Buddhists,’ fifty as ‘Communists’” (King and Queen 1996, 334). Judging from the statistics, Hanh’s thesis of the war as irrational and peace was the answer for Vietnam makes sense.

The movement was largely crushed, but resurged in a different capacity; it became a struggle mainly against political oppression and for peace. After Diem’s fall, Hanh’s Buddhist activists were freed, and consequently, gained much influence in Vietnam. The story of the Vietnam War was not a success story for Hanh and his brand of Zen, but it was the beginning of a worldwide movement. Hanh understood that his movement would have to adapt in order for nonviolent resistance to become adopted worldwide. Hanh saw a need to reassess the immediate situation and the context of Buddhist values to each a wider audience. In spite of its local roots, the international community embraced engaged Buddhism, as Martin Luther King, Jr. nominated Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967.

In 1966 Hanh founded the *Tiep Hien* Order (the Order of Interbeing); the literal translation is “in touch with the present time.” A person of this order is thus not living with attachments to the past or future, but is living in the now. The movement was based on “four spirits:” “the spirit of nonattachment from views; the spirit of direct experimentation on the nature of interdependent origination through meditation; the spirit of appropriateness; and the spirit of skillful means” (Queen 2000, 40). These spirits were the religious scaffolding for Hanh’s movement. The Order’s proclaimed goal was “to realize the spirit of the Dharma in early Buddhism, as well as in the development of that spirit through the history of the Sangha, and its life and teachings in all Buddhist traditions” (Queen 2000, 40). Hanh has “modernized Buddhism, making it ‘appropriate’ to contemporary culture and conditions, while adhering to the ‘basic tenets’ of Buddhism, which for him mean the Four Noble Truths, the vows of the bodhisattva, interbeing/emptiness, and compassion,” writes Sallie B. King (Queen and King 1996, 354). Traditional Buddhism is typically confined to the monastery, where “action” is done purely internally. Hanh adapted the religious scaffolding of traditional Buddhism for his new form of peace activism, engaged Buddhism.

The Order of Interbeing

Hanh’s Order of Interbeing has proven to be popular in America and abroad. According to their website, “by 2006 the Order had grown to include approximately 1,000 lay practitioners and 250 monastic practitioners outside of Vietnam” (The Order of Interbeing, 2012). And, according to a mid-90s survey, 500 to 800 centers exist in the United States. What sets Hanh’s order apart from other American Zen movements is that engaged Buddhism encompasses “all aspects of life, from family practice to public policy and culture” (Queen 2000, 35-36). So, what exactly does Hanh mean by engaged Buddhism?

Hanh’s Engaged Buddhism uses the Buddha’s teachings to work for the collective social good. According to Peter Harvey of the Buddhist Ethics Network, “engaged Buddhism” is a movement that draws “on traditional Buddhist ethical and social teachings [...] Engaged Buddhism seeks to apply them to social life as well as to social issues, thereby engaging them for social good” (Puri, 2006, 4). This makes Hanh’s Buddhism different from traditional Zen Buddhism, where one is meditating for one’s own enlightenment in a monastery. In his retreat speeches at Plum Village in southern France, he explains, “The thing that we called engaged Buddhism or Buddhism in daily life has been in existence for a long time in Vietnam” (Queen 2000, 36). Hanh called the Order of Interbeing a “new branch of an ancient tree” (Queen 2000, 40). This means that Hanh sees his Buddhism as part of the original core of the Buddha’s Eight Fold Path to finding peace. So, what is its *raison d’être*?

The purpose of engaged Buddhism is to bring social change in order to make the world freer from suffering or *dukkha*. Hanh's vision for freedom from suffering starts out with being peace — not being peaceful but being peace itself. In Hanh's book *Being Peace*, he writes, "If we are peaceful, if we are happy, we can smile and blossom like a flower, and everyone in our family, our entire society, will benefit from our peace" (Hanh and Kotler 1987, 3). Based on the Buddha's teaching of *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent arising, which means that all things arise in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions), Hanh teaches that sentient beings and nature are interconnected. Every good and bad deed therefore has its repercussions. Hanh maintains that through these interconnections, if one devotes oneself to mindfulness, one can awaken and understand the *interbeing* between all things, and then one can begin to look outward to evaluate systems and institutions that create suffering and create peace. Hanh believes that in order to achieve peace through mindfulness one must meditate. Meditation would lead to an understanding of interconnectedness.

Ultimate Dimension

Hanh's Dharma talk, "Definition of Engaged Buddhism," at Plum Village clarifies what he calls the "ultimate dimension", a stage in meditation. He says that the basic part of his branch of Zen is to meditate "alive in very moment of your daily life, you should be there in order to attend to what is happening in here and now, in the realm of the body, realm of mind, the realm of environment" (Hanh 2009). Hanh promotes this mindfulness because according to him, engaged Buddhism is a response "to what is happening in body, mind, and environment, this is a simple definition, to [*sic*] response to physiological formation, mental formation, and physical formation" (Hanh 2009). The mind must be returned to its natural state to reach this clear, enlightened state of being in the ultimate dimension. Hanh argues that "airplanes, fighting guns, bombs, cannot remove terrorism, cannot remove wrong perception, only loving speech and compassionate listening can help bring about information that can help people to correct their wrong perception" (Hanh 2009). In Hanh's engaged Buddhism model, right perception therefore aids peace efforts.

Interbeing

Right perception through meditation leads to the understanding of interbeing, which literally means, "to be mutual." In *Peace is Every Step*, Hanh argues that humans cannot "just *be* by ourselves alone. We have to inter-be with every other thing" (Hanh and Kotler 1991, 96). Hanh therefore claims that people should not be strangers. This connection between people can only be realized by exercising what Hanh calls the "eye of compassion" (Hanh and Kotler 1991, 118). With this insight one can see that every sentient being has the same importance. Hanh teaches, "The wellbeing of humans depends on the wellbeing of animal, vegetables and mineral. Humans are made of nonhuman elements, and these nonhuman elements are animal, vegetables and minerals" (Hanh 2009). Ultimately, says Hanh, "if you destroy this nonhuman being elements [*sic*] you destroy yourself, [*sic*] this is the teaching of interbeing" (Hanh, 2009). Therefore, Hanh sees it is crucial to have compassion for all beings to achieve peace.

In his poem, "Call Me by My True Names," Hanh has several lines that explicate interbeing. He situates himself as a sentient being, portraying two beings intimately linked together in a vulnerable fashion. One example of this interconnectedness is "to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower" (Queen and King 1996, 338). Hanh expresses a strong sense that there is a natural harmony between sentient beings, as they thrive off of one another in a beautiful way. Hanh tries to show how life is truly one. He writes, "The rhythm

of my heart is the birth and death of all that are alive" (Queen and King 1996, 338). Other examples of interbeing can be found in the poem, such as life supporting life. Hanh concludes that if man does not support other sentient beings, there is no life for man and if the environment is not protected, then man and nature suffer together. For this reason, the right vision is to see nature and ourselves as a living and breathing one: "I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface on the river, and I am the bird which, when spring comes, arrives in time to eat the mayfly" (Queen and King 1996, 338). These lines convey how vital sentient beings are to one another. Hanh is at once an innocent frog and its prey, the grass snake. Hanh thinks that all beings are one, and that nature has no murderers. Instead, beings are interdependent. Hanh presents one more example of interbeing in "Call Me by My True Names." He writes about seeing himself as a child in Uganda who goes hungry while he is also the arms dealer that sells to Uganda. As it relates to interbeing, Hanh shows in this poem that interbeing has no borders. He implies that *paṭiccasamuppāda* will prevail and bad karma will be generated through the greed of one man, the arms dealer. The most notable lines on the interconnectedness of sentient beings and interbeing from "Call Me by My True Names" are:

Please call me by my true names,
 So I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,
 So I can see that my joy and pain are one. (Queen and King 1996, 339)

The couplet on the bottom includes repetition, which intensifies the message. The narrator uses joys, cries, joy and pain with the word "my," as if the narrator wants an unveiling to experience Truth itself. Hanh expresses a yearning for one sentient being to feel for all sentient beings. There is no hedonism here, only a disciplined request for enlightenment. Hanh's use of poetry is effective in conveying the beauty of interbeing.

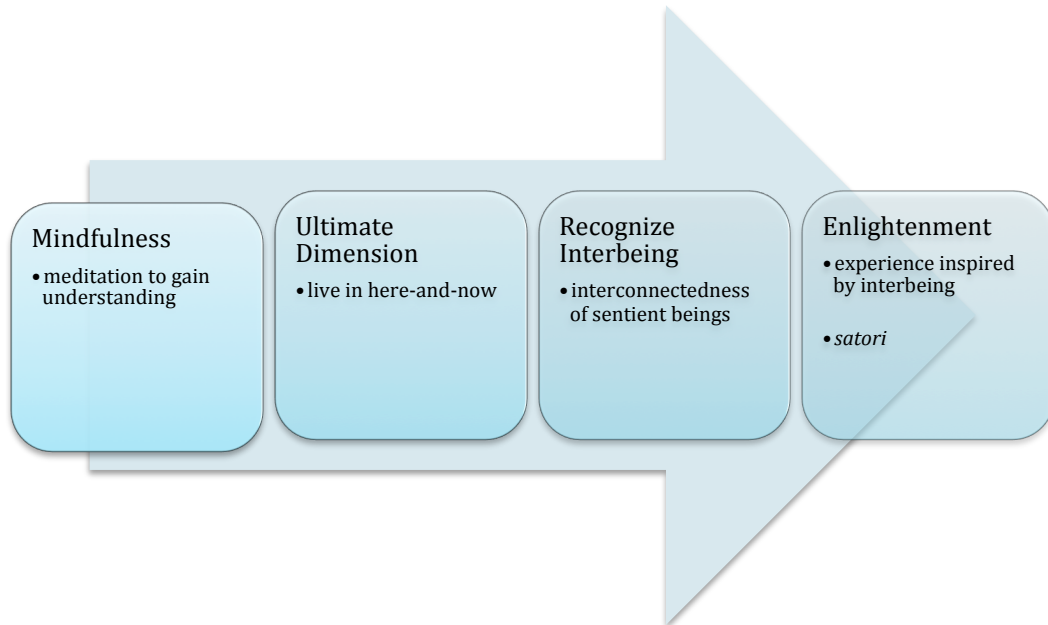


Figure 1: Path to Enlightenment

Structure

Hanh has not only written about interbeing as a philosophical concept; he has also tried to structure an institution around this concept, called the Order of Interbeing. Hanh's order is based on the traditional idea of the Sangha, which is a community of Buddhists that follow the teachings of the Buddha, and tries to understand interbeing through dharma talks and wisdom books. His order has appealed to people outside the Buddhist tradition because, as Hanh writes, "What they need is something to believe in, something that proves to them that life is meaningful. We all need something to believe in" (Hanh 2000, 520). Hanh thinks guidance and stability are vital for practice. Like in any other order, members take refuge in the Sangha. A particular transformation takes place over time. Meditation becomes easier with the trust that comes with being in the Sangha. As Hanh writes, Sanghas provide places where interbeing can be grasped. Without a sense of oneness that a Sangha provides, achieving the ultimate aim understanding interbeing can be next to impossible. Hanh writes that Sangha members "must be rooted if we want to have a chance to learn and practice meditation" (Hanh 2000, 527). Therefore, meditation is paramount.

Today, the Order of Interbeing aims to resolve and prevent conflict. Resolution is very important to engaged Buddhism, because it is through the process of resolution that realization is affirmed and peace can begin. Armed with the understanding of interbeing, meditators can meet with former foes and make a critical cognitive connection that destroys any ill will between them. Fellow Engaged Buddhist leader and Nobel nominee Sulak Sivaraksa calls this "Culture and Reconciliation." Hanh's approach to resolution avoids the curse of good/evil, East/West, knowledge/institution dichotomies. By focusing on interbeing, victims are more likely to forgive and even the wrongdoer can make peace. In fact, engaged Buddhism is making brothers out of war veterans and peaceful men out of hardened criminals. For example, in the film *The Dhamma Brothers*, four convicted murderers take refuge in the Buddha's teaching and become better inmates and people. There is potential for peace, but as Sivaraksa notes, it takes time to heal. Resolution is part of a larger world vision of *kalyanamittas*, or circle of the virtuous. Hanh foresees a world where everyone sees Buddha-nature in even the worst among us.

The second cause of the Order is prevention of conflict. Hanh says that:

To prevent war, to prevent the next crisis, we must start right now. When a war or crisis has begun, it is already too late. If we and our children practice ahimsa in our daily lives, if we learn to plant seeds of peace and reconciliation in our hearts and minds, we will begin to establish real peace and, in that way, we may be able to prevent the next war. (Hanh 1999, 159)

This quote shows how dedicated Buddhists must be to prevent the next conflict. A model of engaged Buddhism, Hanh focuses on moving out of the monastery and into the world. He sees issues like colonialism, commercialization, oppression, and environmental degradation as issues Buddhists should be active against. Centered on the first of the Order's fourteen precepts, nonviolence, Hanh calls for nonviolent resistance (*ahimsa*), because for a Buddhist to allow for suffering to happen is tantamount to committing a violent act. Therefore, Hanh calls for Order members to train their minds towards nonviolence. Interbeing can have an impact too as it can separate one's mind from anthropocentric thinking to holistic understanding. Therefore, solutions to the large

conflicts of our time, like the Israel Palestine conflict, are now possible to alleviate with the help of engaged Buddhism.

Hanh's engaged Buddhism fails to take into account that prevention is difficult to establish among diverse parties because it relies so heavily on cooperation. Not everyone is willing enough to come to the table of meditation and compassion. It takes a community to stop, for example, the destruction of the rainforests. To overcome this limitation, the networking side of the Order comes into play. Their website and Parallax Press provides information for aspirants and members as well as a conflict resolution guide. Although there is leadership, the Order of Interbeing is a bottom-up organization.

Snowflower Sangha

I investigated the Order of Interbeing at ground level in order to find out more on the organization of the Order. I was lucky enough to observe and take part in the Snowflower Sangha of Madison, Wisconsin, where I was also able to record a few testimonials. After the Sangha sessions, I asked specifically about enlightenment and interbeing. One described the experience of enlightenment (or "satori" as they called it) not as a "concept" but rather a "gift." Interbeing is "right there in front of you" (Personal Interview 2012). As Hanh wrote, "when we look deeply into the heart of anything it will reveal itself" (Hanh 1991, 120-121). Another said that seeking enlightenment would only lead to failure, but letting it expose itself would lead to success. One member likened satori to an awakening that is fleeting and for that reason is a gift and not earned through intellectual assent. All one can do is heighten his awareness of what is around him.

By all indications, Sangha members agreed that meditating with others (other Sangha members) helped them come closer to experiencing interbeing. Generally, members found significant results in moments of deep knowing. One such exercise of mindfulness is simply to focus on one's own breathing. One begins to realize that the Sangha is sharing the same air. One member remarked, "I really find it fascinating" (Personal Interview 2012). This blessing of the Buddha drives enlightenment seekers on to greater devotion. It also shows how accessible mindfulness can be and is a clear indicator of how potent the Order of Interbeing is, which I find remarkable. Another member likened interbeing to a hospital. In a hospital you have a different reality in each room. For example, one room has a cancer patient, the next a stroke patient, etc. Walking down the hospital hallway, it can be perceived as a "symphony" (Personal Interview 2012). Everyone can (mentally) feel this, not just the doctors but also the patients. Another member started meditation because it was part of his Alcoholics' Anonymous recovery program. For him, spirituality could be found through mindfulness and not through dogma. In every case, Hanh's Zen is a refreshing, potent, and accessible way to improve lives and communities.

As far as the structure of the organization goes, the Order has the "Core Community" which consists of "those who have taken the vow to observe the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order and the Five Mindfulness Trainings, and who have been ordained as brothers and sisters in the Order" (Order of Interbeing 2014). Then there is the vast "Extended Community," which is the (bottom-up) Order's majority (Order of Interbeing 2014). The Extended Community on the other hand:

While trying to live up to the spirit of the Order of Interbeing, have not formally taken the vow to observe the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, nor received ordination in the Order of Interbeing. The members of the Core Community accept the responsibility to organize and support a local Sangha, and help sustain Mindfulness Training recitations, days of mindfulness, and mindfulness retreats. (Order of Interbeing 2014)

This means that virtually anyone can participate. On the Order's website, the aspirant has information for getting started, a Sangha directory to get involved, and a toolkit for mindfulness training. The Order also makes use of biopower by printing a member's only blog. The Order of Interbeing is making ancient wisdom education accessible to the twenty-first century audience with the effort to spread world peace.

Conclusion

The Order of Interbeing is helping create a culture of peace around the world. Its bottom-up organization is making it one of the largest and fastest growing religious groups in the world, giving the movement real potential for changing the world. Thich Nhat Hanh's work is truly admirable, because, while it remains authentically Buddhist, it ambitiously prods members to become active in the world. For a student of Buddhism like myself, it is wonderful to see this peace-seeking monk making Buddhism accessible to almost everyone. He has created a new third rail, or Middle Path by presenting a form of Buddhism that is accessible and acceptable to people of any or no faith; Hanh is making effective peacemaking, peacekeeping and peace building strategies possible.

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