

The Dhammic Vision of Society

A reading of talks given by Ven. Thich Nhât Hanh on the malaise in society and on the basic requirements for a resolution

by Dharmacharya Marcel Geisser, 2-20-1995

Our world today

We all know that harmony and equilibrium in the individual, society and nature are being destroyed. Individuals are sick, society is sick, and nature is sick as well. We must reestablish such harmony and equilibrium, but how? Where can we begin the work of healing? Should we begin with the individual, with society, or with the environment? In fact we must work in all three domains. People of different disciplines tend to stress their particular areas. For example, political activists consider an effective rearrangement of society as necessary for the salvation of both human beings and nature, and therefore urge that everyone engage in the struggle to change political systems. However it is not correct to believe that the world's situation is in the hands of governments alone, and that if the President would only pursue the correct policies, peace would prevail. The way we live our daily lives is what most effects the situation of the world. If we can change our daily lives, then we can change our governments and can change the world. Our president and governments are us. They reflect our lifestyle and our way of thinking. The way we hold a cup of tea, pick up the newspaper or even use toilet paper are directly related to peace.

Our Earth, our green beautiful Earth, is in danger, and all of us know it. Yet we act as if our daily lives had nothing to do with the situation of the world. If the Earth were our body, we would be able to feel the many areas where she is suffering. If we change our daily lives – the way we think, speak, and act – we change the world. The best way to take care of the environment is to take care of the environmentalist.

Interbeing

Life is one. We do not need to slice life into pieces and call this piece or that piece a "self". What we call the self is made up only of non-self elements. If we look deeply at a flower, we see that everything in the cosmos exists in the flower. Without all the non-flower elements – sunshine, clouds, earth, minerals, heat, rivers, and consciousness — a flower cannot be. That is why Buddha teaches that the self does not exist. We have to discard all distinctions between self and non-self. How can anyone work to protect the environment without this fundamental insight?

If you enjoy the countryside and the forest, you know that forests are the lungs outside our bodies. Yet we have been acting in a way that has allowed millions of square miles of land to be deforested, just as our actions have destroyed the air, the rivers and parts of the ozone layer. We are imprisoned in our small selves, thinking only of ensuring comfortable conditions for these small selves, while we go about the business of destroying our greater self. When we truly understand that

we *inter-are* with the trees, we will realize that it is up to us to make an effort to keep the trees alive. Because we inter-are with the trees, we know that if they do not live, we too will disappear very shortly. Interbeing is the implicit order of all life. In the implicit order we see that all things are contained inside one other. To practice mindfulness and to look deeply into the nature of things is to discover the true nature of interbeing. There we find peace and develop the strength to be in touch with everything. With this understanding, we can easily sustain over the long term the work of loving and caring for the Earth and for one another.

An ethical basis

Throughout his life, Thich Nhat Hanh has been working for the welfare of sentient beings and has taught according to Buddha's basic teachings the causes of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the way or path to suffering's cessation. No matter how far back we look into the history of mankind, we see that suffering has always come about by the inability to see into and experience the fundamental law of nature. Beings have always created a division between themselves and others and – this is the important point – have clung to this view despite the consequences. Spurred on by immense forces of greed and aversion, we continue to act out of ignorance and to violate basic ethical imperatives (*sila*). This is why a central endeavor of all religions is to establish basic guidelines for human contact and action.

In the mid-1960's, at a time when the Vietnam War was escalating significantly, and the teachings of the Buddha were desperately needed to combat the hatred, violence, and divisiveness enveloping his country, Thich Nhat Hanh formed the Order of Interbeing. From its inception, the Order included all four membership categories of the original Buddhist community – monks, nuns, laywomen and laymen. Forged in the crucible of war and devastation, the guidelines provided by the Order's fourteen precepts helped the first six brothers and sisters of the Order develop serenity and learn to look more deeply into things, even amid the tragedy of war. Though they continued to engage in active assistance to war victims, the members of the fledgling Order renewed themselves with a Day of Mindfulness every week.

Basically, the Fourteen Precepts comprise the Buddhist teaching itself. They include the common Five Precepts, which form the foundation of all Buddhist practice, as well as the more extensive Bodhisattva Precepts. It would seem of capital importance that these guidelines be translated again and again, and made meaningful and available to the fast changing society of today. Thich Nhat Hanh has presented us with a new way to look at the Five Wonderful Precepts, and with an extended version of them via the Fourteen Precepts of the Order of Interbeing. The Precepts represent the foundation for individual happiness, the happiness of the family and that of society.

The Fourteen Precepts

1. *Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth.*

2. *Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice non-attachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints. Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge. Be ready to learn throughout your entire life and to observe reality in yourself and in the world at all times.*
3. *Do not force others, including children, by any means whatsoever, to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda, or even education. However, through compassionate dialogue, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness.*

The Fourteen Precepts of the Order of Interbeing remain uniquely applicable to contemporary moral dilemmas. Thich Nhat Hanh was acutely aware of the need for all people to overcome ideological divisiveness, and, accordingly, the first three precepts directly reject fanaticism and political or religious self-righteousness. If we believe in ourselves as people who really have something to say about mankind and human society, we have to serve as role models ourselves. It is of very little use to elaborate great intellectual constructions but forget to examine our own lives. We need to be aware of our prejudices and our beliefs.

4. *Do not avoid contact with suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering, including personal contact and visits, images and sounds. By such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world.*

The fourth precept goes to the heart of Buddhist compassion and directs a challenge to all practitioners: contemplative reflection on the suffering of living beings is not enough; we must help diminish suffering through compassionate involvement. This precept suggests the lotus flower grows most beautifully when planted deep in mud.

5. *Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth or sensual pleasure. Live simply and share time, energy and material resources with those who are in need.*

The fifth precept shows how Right Livelihood has implications beyond simply avoiding harmful professions; that the manner in which we spend our time, energy, and material resources is as much a moral concern as a practical one. The money of a political party, a company or a temple is always originally money of the people. Thus the money must be returned to the people in many ways. As leaders we should not build up privileges while letting others do the so-called simple work. Since the very dawn of mankind, certain human beings have always tried to place themselves in higher positions than others, and to let others do their work for them. The caste system was predominant in Aryan times, but in fact similar structures of injustice are still to be found in all kinds of societies around the world today.

6. *Do not maintain anger or hatred. Learn to penetrate and transform them when they are still seeds in your consciousness. As soon as they arise, turn your attention to your breath in order to see and*

understand the nature of your anger and hatred and the nature of the persons who have caused your anger and hatred.

The sixth precept extends the traditional Buddhist precept concerning anger and directs us to apply an antidote as soon as anger arises, realizing that individual anger has far-reaching social effects. In the next chapter we will talk of some practical tools for working with this problem.

7. *Do not lose yourself in dispersion and in your surroundings. Practice mindful breathing to come back to what is happening in the present moment. Be in touch with what is wondrous, refreshing and healing, both inside and around you. Plant seeds of joy, peace and understanding in yourself in order to facilitate the work of transformation in the depths of your consciousness.*

The seventh precept, forming the core of all of the fourteen precepts, shows us how mindfulness, awareness, and returning to the breath are the keys to maintaining ourselves in the midst of activity. Meditation and social work can complement one other perfectly. It seems to be an important step for many people to begin their spiritual journey by retreating from daily life for a prolonged period or limited amount of time. Meditation and meditation retreats provide space and time for self-inquiry and realization of the law of nature. But life is not limited to the meditation hall nor to the temple.

8. *Do not utter words that can create discord and cause the community to break. Make every effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.*
9. *Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people. Do not utter words that cause division and hatred. Do not spread news that you do not know to be certain. Do not criticize or condemn things of which you are not sure. Always speak truthfully and constructively. Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety.*
10. *Do not use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit, or transform your community into a political party. A religious community, however, should take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.*
11. *Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. Do not invest in companies that deprive others of their chance to live. Select a vocation that helps realize your ideal of compassion.*
12. *Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and prevent war.*

The eighth and ninth precepts address factionalism: communities rent by political, social, and religious division, issues as pressing today as in the war-torn environment in which they were forged. They provide a model of Right Speech and Right Action, never losing sight of the need to speak out about social injustice and oppression with the all-embracing, non-partisan viewpoint of the Dharma. The traditional Buddhist precept against killing is expanded here in the twelfth precept, which enjoins us to not only not destroy life, but to actively protect it. The immense consummation of meat, even in Buddhist countries, also keeps the

wheel of killing turning. Just by reducing the amount of meat that is consumed, great suffering could also be reduced quite easily.

13. *Possess nothing that should belong to others. Respect the property of others, but prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.*

Does not the thirteenth precept on non-stealing speak to the fact that the well-stocked shelves of one country relate directly to the empty shelves of another, that profit-making at the cost of human suffering and the suffering of other living beings is immoral?

14. *Do not mistreat your body. Learn to handle it with respect. Do not look on your body as only an instrument. Preserve vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realization of the Way. (For brothers and sisters who are not monks and nuns): Sexual expression should not take place without love and commitment. In sexual relationships, be aware of future suffering that may be caused. To preserve the happiness of others, respect the rights and commitments of others. Be fully aware of the responsibility of bringing new life into the world. Meditate on the world into which you are bringing new beings.*

The final precept deals with sexuality, and reminds us that respecting life and committing ourselves to ending suffering is as real an issue within the most intimate of human relationships as in the political and social arenas.

The Fourteen Precepts of the Order of Interbeing are guidelines for anyone wishing to live mindfully. By developing peace and serenity through ethical and conscientious living, we can help our society make the transition from one based on greed and consumerism to one in which thoughtfulness and compassionate action are of deepest value. The Order of Interbeing makes real what is implicit in Buddhism and all the world's great religious traditions: that compassionate living, engaged in society, is most effective if based on techniques for centering the self and on appreciation of the sacredness of all things great and small. The teachings and practice of Buddhism engaged in society can help us all.

The six principles of harmony

Even though we try to do our best to live according to the precepts, it may easily happen that in a momentary lack of mindfulness we talk or act wrongly and as a result hurt other people's feelings. This of course also happened at the time of the Buddha. One day a conflict arose between a sutra master and a precept master. Their argument stemmed from an insignificant event, but ended up creating a sharp division in the Sangha. In response, Buddha articulated six principles concerning how a community can live together in harmony:

1. Sharing a common space such as a forest or home.
2. Sharing the essentials of daily life together.
3. Observing the precepts together.
4. Using only words that contribute to harmony, avoiding all words that can cause the community to break.
5. Sharing insights and understanding together.

6. Respecting others' viewpoints and not forcing another to follow your own viewpoint.

Shortly after this, Buddha formulated the Seven Practices of Reconciliation to be used by the monastic Sangha. Today Thich Nhat Hanh offers us a new version of these principles in the form of The Peace Treaty, which can be used by everybody ready to adopt it as a practice.

The Peace Treaty

Because a great deal of suffering arises whenever we become angry or upset with our partner or with other friends, at Plum Village we have created a "Peace Treaty" which we all sign in front of the Sangha. I would like to explain something about this practice. The treaty was written to help us live happily together. It should only be signed after lengthy reflection and extensive Dharma discussions between the concerned individuals. This is because the treaty is about practice. When one person gets angry with another, if they have a copy of this Peace Treaty, they will know exactly what to do as well as what not to do.

When you have signed the Peace Treaty, you must abide by the agreement. The treaty itself takes on the role of the Buddha. We must respect, follow and abide by its terms. Otherwise, it can be very damaging, even dangerous. It is better not to sign the treaty at all, than to sign it and not put it into practice. When the treaty is about to be signed, both of the signatories should practice one Day of Mindfulness, with a lot of walking meditation. It is helpful if the community is present, so that the individuals concerned can sign the treaty in the presence of the Sangha and vow in public to respect and practice according to its provisions.

Basically the Peace Treaty consists of two parts. The first concerns the person who is angry, who is suffering from anger. What should he or she do? What should he or she not do? The second part deals with the behavior of the one who made the first person angry. The Peace Treaty should be signed in the spirit that we both wish to live long and happily together.

When we know that we are angry, it is best not to say or do anything. This would be too dangerous. We should have something like a moratorium on speech and actions. It is our tendency when we are angry to say and do things that escalate the anger in the other person and in ourselves as well. We have to agree that when we get angry, we will refrain from saying and doing things. But we do not suppress our anger. Eventually of course we should express something about the anger we feel, but it is not yet time. There will come a time in the future – even if it is only after the space of three breaths – when it will be safer and wiser to do so. We practice breathing around our anger, taking care of our anger.

Take refuge in the island of yourself. You know that anger is there; you do not suppress it, but you also do not deny it. You touch it with your mindfulness. In order for your mindfulness to be with you in this difficult moment, you nourish it by breathing mindfully. You produce

mindfulness of breathing and you embrace your suffering in the loving arms of mindfulness. "I am angry. I am suffering now."

You have to really touch your anger and your suffering, using your mindfulness. You do not suppress it, ignore it, or deny it. You can do this in several ways – sitting and walking are perhaps the easiest. Go into nature and practice breathing while doing walking meditation. Nature – the vegetation, the fresh air – will help support you. If you need half an hour, spend half an hour. If you need three hours of walking meditation, practice three hours of walking meditation. According to the treaty, you have up to 24 hours to calm yourself. You must tell the other person that you are angry and that you are suffering very much, and you must say it in a calm manner. You must tell him or her within 24 hours. You have no right to hold the anger in longer than that. If you do, it becomes poisonous (you also violate the treaty), and this may harm you as well as the person you love. You may be ready to tell him or her in just five or ten minutes, if you are used to the practice, but the maximum is 24 hours. You can say something like, "Dear friend, what you just said this morning made me very angry. I suffered very much and I want you to know it." That is the substance of the message.

While you are practicing sitting, walking, breathing, looking deeply, and living mindfully in your daily life, you focus your attention on these points:

1. You recognize the fact that you are sometimes not mindful. You are not skillful at times. You see how you have hurt the other person on a number of occasions in the past.
2. You acknowledge to yourself: "I have the habit energy of getting angry very easily, of getting hurt very easily." You have to see this fact and acknowledge it.

When at first you see that the other is angry, do not make fun of him or her. Try not to say, "I haven't done anything, but you're angry." You have to respect the other's feelings of anger. A feeling needs time in order to die down. It has its own life span – a moment to be born, a period in which to flourish, long or short depending on whether conditions are favorable or unfavorable to extend its existence, and then a phase of decline in which the feeling dies down slowly. Even if you see that the other person's anger is completely unfounded, that she is completely mistaken, do not press her to stop being angry right away. That would be against natural law. Help her, or leave her alone to allow her anger to die down.

If you can apologize right away, do it. Don't wait. But when you apologize, do not make any attempt to justify yourself. Do not try to give a reason why you behaved as you did. That would make the apology less effective. Just apologize. "I'm very sorry. I was not mindful and understanding." Then practice breathing, taking refuge in the island of yourself, in order to see that you have the seeds, the habit energy, of unkindness and anger. You have made the other person unhappy before. Acknowledge that, even if in this case you have not seen your responsibility in her suffering. Do not be too sure that you are not responsible this time.

The Peace Treaty is a Dharma practice. You may wish to add one or more articles to it so that it will be more relevant to your situation. Study it deeply and prepare carefully for an occasion to sign it. The best way of signing it is in a meditation hall in the presence of the Sangha. The witness and support of the Sangha is very important for your practice. Be harmonious and happy! We will all benefit from it.

Touching the Earth

As more and more people suffer the pain of being uprooted from their culture, we need more than ever to come into contact with our own heritage and with the positive seeds of our tradition. The moment we feel happy, society already begins to be transformed, and others feel some happiness too. When someone in society discovers his true identity, we all find our identity. This is the principle of *interbeing*. Even though our society has caused us pain, suffering, internal formations and illness, we have to open our arms and embrace society in complete acceptance. We have to go back to our society with the intention to rebuild society and enrich its life by offering the appropriate therapies for its illnesses. I would like to offer an exercise that can help to do this. It is called Touching the Earth.

In each of us, there are many kinds of ideas, notions, attachments, and discrimination. This practice involves bowing down and touching the Earth, emptying ourselves, and surrendering to Earth. You touch the Earth with your forehead, your two hands, your two feet, and you surrender to your true nature, accepting any form of life your true nature offers you. Surrender your pride, hopes, ideas, fears, and notions. Empty yourself of all resentment you feel toward anyone. Surrender everything, and empty yourself completely. To do this is the best way to replenish yourself. If you do not exhale and empty your lungs, how can fresh air enter?

In this practice, the body and the mind work together in harmony to form a perfect whole. We prostrate ourselves six times to help us realize our deep connection to our own roots:

The first bow is directed towards all generations of ancestors in our blood family. Our parents are our most recent, closest ancestors, and through them we connect the generations that have preceded us. If we are on good terms with our parents, the connection is easy. But if we are not, we have to empty our resentment and reconnect with them. Our parents had seeds of love and trust they wanted to transmit to us, but perhaps they were not able to do so. Instead of transmitting loving kindness and trust, they transmitted suffering and anger. The practice is to look deeply and see that we are a continuation of our parents and our ancestors. When we understand the "emptiness of transmission", reconciliation is possible. Bowing down, touching the Earth, we should be able to surrender the idea of our separate self and become one with our ancestors. Only then is true communion possible and the energy of our ancestors able to flow into us.

The second bow is directed towards Buddhist ancestors who came before us, those who have transmitted these teachings and practices to us for more than 25 centuries. The third bow is directed towards

our land and toward the ancestors who made it available to us. The fourth is for channeling and transmitting the energy of loving kindness to those we love. We touch the Earth, look deeply into our relationship, and see how we can improve it.

The fifth bow is directed towards those who have made us suffer. Looking deeply, we see that these people suffer also and do not possess the insight to prevent their suffering from spilling over onto others. Motivated by compassion, we want to share our energy with these persons, hoping it will help them to suffer less and be able to enjoy some peace and happiness.

The sixth bow is directed towards our own spiritual ancestors. If we are lucky, it may be easy for us to connect with representatives of our spiritual tradition – our rabbi, pastor, or priest. But if we have had problems with such persons, our effort is to understand how they themselves were not able to receive the jewels of the tradition. Instead of feeling resentment toward them, we vow to go back and rediscover the jewels of our tradition ourselves. Getting connected with our church, synagogue, rabbi, or priest will enable us to touch all our spiritual ancestors.

Real Buddhism is always engaged

To bring about peace, we must work for harmonious coexistence. If we continue to shut ourselves off from the rest of the world, imprisoning ourselves in our narrow concerns and immediate problems, we are not likely to make peace or to survive. It is difficult for one individual to preserve harmony among the elements within himself, and it is even more difficult to preserve harmony among the members of the human family. We have to understand the human race to bring it into harmony. Our society is a difficult place in which to live. If we are not careful, we can become uprooted, and then we will be unable to help change society to make it more livable. Meditation is a way of helping us to stay in society. Engaged Buddhism does not only mean using Buddhism to solve social and political problems. First of all we have to bring Buddhism into our daily lives. Actually, there is no such a thing as a separate category of Engaged Buddhism – real Buddhism is always engaged.

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