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Essays and Commentaries on Engaged Buddhism*

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## Editor's Note: Thich Nhat Hanh's Sociological Imagination

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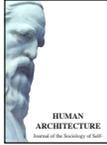
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## *Editor's Note*

### **Thich Nhat Hanh's Sociological Imagination**

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**Abstract:** This issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* is dedicated to an exploration of Thich Nhat Hanh's Engaged Buddhist philosophy and spiritual theory and practice from a sociological and social scientific vantage point, in order to highlight the significance his teaching bears for the development not only of a self-reflective, but also a globally humanist, as well as environmentally concerned, sociological imagination. This issue is comprised of four parts that follow an opening keynote by the Interim Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at UMass Boston. In the first part several recent talks, letters, and a poem, by Thich Nhat Hanh on the meaning and practice of Engaged Buddhism—in regard to issues ranging from war and conflict, the environment, food industry and consumption, and history of Engaged Buddhism, are included. The second part of the volume is devoted to four articles that put Thich Nhat Hanh's views on and practice of Engaged Buddhism in social science and sociological contexts., specifically exploring the overlapping landscapes of Engaged Buddhism with Pragmatism, Deep Ecology, sociological discourse and imagination, and ideological analysis. The third part includes seven contributions of varying lengths that are highly illustrative of the ways in which Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings have engaged with issues such as: international political conflict; bringing mindfulness and meditation to the classroom in educational context; introducing spiritual awareness and mindfulness practices to policing strategies in U.S. cities; incorporating mindfulness and meditative healing practices in Massachusetts among traumatized populations due to war and conflict in East Asian context; introducing the central concepts of Engaged Buddhism into economic theory and practice; reflections on the significance of Engaged Buddhism for developing successful strategies to tackle the environmental crisis and climate change; and finally brief personal reflections on the meaning of Engaged Buddhism in facing family loss and trauma. Finally, in the final part, a critical commentary by a participant's experience of attending one of Thich Nhat Hanh's retreats in 2005 is included. It is followed by a response and reflections from a representative of Thich Nhat Hanh Plum Village community in France.

*... Break the chain, ... be free, ... O boy!  
How long will you remain that gold's toy?!  
Say you have oceans, but how can you pour  
All oceans in a single day's jar, more and  
more?!  
The greedy's eye-jar will never fill up;  
No pearl, if oyster's mouth doesn't give up. ...*  
—Rumi, from the Song of the Reed

#### **“ASIATIC MODES OF” ...LIBERATION**

Karl Marx developed, borrowing from Hegel, his rather derogatory concept of the static “Asiatic mode of production” as one determined by the arid conditions thought to have characterized the landmass spanning west, south, central, and east Asia. It was believed that the need for channeling water to

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cultivate the land necessitated the building of massive structures that in turn laid the economic basis for the rise of highly centralized states dominated by despots claiming god-like status. Given the materialist, secular, atheist, antireligious, and orientalist frameworks shaping the classical Marxist view of the East and of Asia in particular, it was not surprising to note its minimal appreciations of the intellectual innovations brought on, in religious form, by the often inaccessible and esoteric mystical traditions emergent from the region—traditions that were themselves often shaped in distinction from the more visibly and institutionally dominant political, cultural/religious, and economic milieu of the world-systems housing them.

The inner subjectivist, culturally determined, and enchanted modes of liberation informing Asian mysticisms in their diverse regional forms—such as esoteric fountainheads of Buddhism in east, Hinduism in south, and Islam and generally monotheism in west and central, Asia—subject the global, politico-economic, and scientific/secular frameworks of modern antisystemic thinking and movements to critical scrutiny. As such, they can provide opportunities for fostering new conversations in favor of infusing the complex geographies of inner experience into the largely global and world-historical geographies of what Immanuel Wallerstein (1998) has called utopistics (simultaneous exercises in politics, morality, and science) in favor of its comparative variant utopystics (integrative explorations in utopia, mysticism, and science) (Cf. Tamdgidi 2007, 2008).

Western discourses on the nature of the just society have often oscillated between arguments for private or collective property ownership; in the mystical traditions, by contrast, the possessive and “attached” attitude toward things (be they physical things, ideas, feelings, sensations, relations, or processes, etc.), individual or collective, is the very factor that is problematized as being the source of much of the human suffering. In one the purpose is a “world to win,” in another, it is to lose habitual attachments to it. In one the earth belongs to humanity, in another, hu-

manity to the earth. One may choose to interpret this difference in the narrow sense of a distinction between asceticism and world-embracing behavior. But in a different vein one may regard such a consideration in terms of the awareness of the challenges the human propensity to habituation pose to the development and application of human creative powers to understand and transform the inner and broader human social landscapes in favor of a just global society.

### **THICH NHAT HANH’S ENGAGED BUDDHISM AND SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION**

The events in Burma (Myanmar) more recently, and those surrounding Tibetan struggle for independence during the past several decades, have highlighted the socially engaged role Buddhism is playing and/or can play in world spirituality and politics. However, one of the most sociologically instructive, conceptually distinctive, and philosophically innovative traditions in Buddhism today that has for decades made simultaneous self- and social knowledge, engagement, and transformation, a centerpiece of its spiritual practice, is that associated with the teachings of the Vietnamese Buddhist, Zen master, poet, and peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh—also known as Thay, or “Teacher,” in Vietnamese—who was nominated in 1967 by Martin Luther King, Jr., for a Nobel Peace Prize.

This issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* is dedicated to an exploration of Thich Nhat Hanh’s Engaged Buddhist philosophy and spiritual theory and practice from a sociological and social scientific vantage point, in order to highlight the significance his teaching bears for the development not only of a self-reflective, but also a globally humanist, as well as environmentally concerned, sociological imagination. Particular attention is devoted to Thay’s notion of “interbeing,” of his sociology of meditation as a moving (and not just sitting) “mindfulness” in the midst (and not in retreat) from life, as well as the extent to which

these and others of his conceptual frameworks and practices acquire their true meaning in the midst of the “engaged Buddhism” advocated and practiced by Thich Nhat Hanh throughout the past decades.

Another important dimension of the theme explored in this issue is to set Thich Nhat Hanh’s contributions to theorizing and practicing alternative spiritual and social emancipatory strategies as exercises in the sociological imagination—that is, the study of how biography and history, personal troubles and increasingly global public issues, interrelate so as to enable more effective, deeper, and more transformative intervention in favor of a just global society. This effort will hopefully be pursued elsewhere and in the future in terms of enriching the notion and practice of the sociological imagination as introduced by C. Wright Mills (1959) in a cross-cultural context, and in terms of exploring Thich Nhat Hanh’s teaching as an example of the extent to which other mystical traditions associated or not with Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Native and Latin American spirituality, etc., may overlap and/or contrast with the hybrid self and broader liberatory concerns as may be attributable to a critical sociological imagination.

## IN THIS ISSUE

This issue is comprised of four parts that follow an opening keynote by Winston Langley, Interim Provost, Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, and professor of Political Science and International Relations at UMass Boston. The opening essay sheds light on the essential contributions Asian traditions and paradigms, such as that of Thich Nhat Hanh’s Engaged Buddhism, have made and continue to make to the broader human conversations toward a just global society.

In the first part several recent talks, letters, and a poem, by Thich Nhat Hanh on the meaning and practice of Engaged Buddhism are included. To begin with a short biography and a poem by Thich Nhat Hanh are reprinted (courtesy of Parallax Press). Thich Nhat

Hanh’s views on Engaged Buddhist attitudes regarding war, conflict, and terrorism are then amplified by a talk he delivered to a Peace Forum in 2003. Thay’s views on the environment, and food industry and consumption, are the subjects of various talks, letters, and mindfulness contemplations that are included next. A most recent Dharma talk on the biographical origins and history of Engaged Buddhism, delivered by Thich Nhat Hanh in May 2008 while guiding a treat/conference on “Engaged Buddhism for the 21st Century” in Hanoi, Vietnam, as part of the annual United Nations Day of Vesak celebrations and conferences, is also included in the first part of the volume.

The second part of the volume is devoted to four papers that put Thich Nhat Hanh’s views on and practice of Engaged Buddhism in social science and sociological contexts. The paper by Michael C. Adojran and Benjamin W. Kelly is an excellent contribution that sheds much needed light on the significance of engaging with, rather than dismissing, the East-West discourse on human development and social transformation, specifically cultivating the overlapping landscapes of Thich Nhat Hanh’s Buddhism with that of Pragmatism in Western academic discourse. Julie Gregory and Samah Sabra persuasively explore the link between Thich Nhat Hanh’s Engaged Buddhism and Arne Naess’s deep ecology paradigm, further inviting their readers to problematize the dualisms of science and religion and East-West divides in favor of creative conversations on more fruitful efforts in self and social transformation toward a just global society and renewable environment. Darren Noy’s essay, lucidly written and argued, sheds further insightful light on the relevance of Thich Nhat Hanh’s views and practice in the context of sociological theory and practice. And the dialogue between Sujin Choi and Marc Black, contrasting Marx’s discourse of ideology with the discourse of Manas (“the sense of separate self”) in Buddhism further interrogates the extent to which ideological constructs in both worldviews can be consciously tackled in favor of liberatory outcomes in self and society.

The third part includes seven contributions of varying lengths that are highly illustrative of the ways in which Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings have engaged with issues such as: international political conflict as in the case of the experience of Palestinians living in Israel as passionately reported by Samiyeh Sharqawi; bringing mindfulness and meditation to the classroom in educational context as creatively practiced and reported by Richard Brady; introducing and applying spiritual awareness and mindfulness practices to policing strategies in U.S. cities as innovatively reported by Michael J. DeValve and Cary D. Adkinson; incorporating mindfulness and meditative healing practices in the New England area among traumatized populations due to war and conflict in East Asian context as reported by Robert Wall; introducing the central concepts of Engaged Buddhism into economic theory and practice, as advanced by Glenn Manga; reflections on the significance of Engaged Buddhism for developing successful strategies to tackle the environmental crisis and climate change, as persuasively noted by Angela Tam; and finally personal reflections on the meaning of Engaged Buddhism when facing family loss and trauma, as reported by Karen Hilsberg.

Finally, in the final part, a critical commentary by Lisa Kemmerer regarding her experience of attending one of Thich Nhat Hanh's retreats in 2005 is included. It is followed by reflections from Bhikshuni Chan Tung Nghiem (Barbara Newell) of the Plum Village in France, whose response was solicited by this editor in order to fulfill the wishes expressed by Kemmerer in receiving feedback to the questions she had posed.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is certainly impossible to do any justice to any of the contributions included in this volume by further summarizing their contents. It is of course best to consult each of the essays and commentaries included in this volume to appreciate the sharpness of focus and the vitality of sociological thinking, imag-

ination, and practice that emerges when engaging with Thich Nhat Hanh's spiritual, social, and environmental emancipatory theory and practice. Each contribution is preceded with a detailed abstract, often excerpted from the text itself, that can aid gaining an overall familiarity with the ideas advanced in each contribution before proceeding to reading each essay.

As editor, I wish to thank all the contributors to this volume for making this vital conversation possible, and sincerely hope that it will continue in future issues of the journal. In particular, I would like to appreciate the kind and timely assistance and cooperation extended by Sister Jewel and Sister Pine of the Plum Village, France, and Janelle Combelic, Managing Editor at *The Mindfulness Bell: A Journal of the Art of Mindful Living* ([www.mindfulnessbell.org](http://www.mindfulnessbell.org)) for making possible the inclusion of the contributions of various Vesak 2008 presentations in this issue of the journal. I would also like to thank Parallax Press and *The Mindfulness Bell* for extending permissions to reprint in this volume various talks delivered by Thich Nhat Hanh. A special thanks go to the artist Robert Andrew Parker for his kind permission to use the creative rendering of Thich Nhat Hanh that adorns the cover of this issue. The illustration was originally printed in a *Time Magazine* special titled "60 Years of Asian Heros" (2006).

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