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Pragmatism and 'Engaged' Buddhism **Working Toward Peace and a Philosophy of Action**

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Abstract: Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, has advocated for an 'engaged' Buddhism since the 1960s. This paper explores Hanh's concept of 'inter-being' as a philosophy of action. Often attempts to understand Eastern spirituality and practice are distorted by an occidental standpoint. Marx's own attempts to understand Eastern modes of production have been accused of being 'orientalist', and it remains a challenge to Western sociologists to let Eastern standpoints represent themselves. Nhat Hanh challenges Western views which juxtapose self and society, yet recognizes that taking steps towards solving some of humanity's greatest crises necessitates recognizing the individual's ability to affect worldwide systemic change. Nhat Hanh's 'engaged Buddhism' stands as a unique approach, even within Buddhism, to address and ameliorate suffering both at the individual and collective levels. We compare engaged Buddhism with American pragmatism, suggesting that Hanh's vision is essential to addressing oversimplified dialectics such as body/mind, self/society, and personal/aggregate transformation.

FAILING TO UNDERSTAND HOW TO UNDERSTAND: BY-PRODUCTS OF ORIENTALISM

A full understanding and appreciation of Thich Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism is stymied by a long tradition in Western scholarship which distorts and (often unintentionally) misrepresents Eastern thought and behavior. Edward Said asks "how does one represent other cultures? What is another culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilization) a

useful one, or does it always get involved either in self-congratulation (when one discusses one's own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the 'other')" (1978:325)? Orientalism is argued to be the product of a sustained engagement within an occidental, or Western, standpoint. It is a typification and simplification of non-Western cultures in which they are denied history and agency (Said 1978).

Edward Said argues that "anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient...is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism." Orientalism

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“emerg(ed) very roughly in the late 18th century ...as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (1978:2-3). Influential and foundational sociological scholars have been accused of not criticizing orientalist assumptions, if not reproducing Orientalism themselves. Karl Marx and Max Weber, two of the classic Western founders of the conflict perspective in sociology, essentialized Asiatic modes of production as antithetical to Western material progress. A comparative model of this nature allowed them to draw out the salient differences between cultures and accentuate Eastern asceticism to a more putative industrial Western mind set. Where the East was characterized as struggling to escape the world, the West was seen as embracing rationalism and thus changing the world (Zeitlin 2001:219).

Said comments that Weber, in his study of Protestantism, Judaism, and Buddhism, may also have been influenced by “the very territory originally charted and claimed by the Orientalists. There he found encouragement amongst all those nineteenth-century thinkers who believed that there was a sort of ontological difference between Eastern and Western economic (as well as religious) ‘mentalities’” (1978:259). Buddhism tends to be problematized as inactive, passive and disengaged, while more Western modes of thought are proactive, efficient and practical. For example, in the Western paradigm the concept of surrender is considered passive and weak. However, in Buddhism, surrender is a courageous concept, an active definitional shift in which you embrace the vicissitudes of life with emotional and psychological surrender. One does not run away from the fire, but walks toward it, and in doing so, gets to the root of suffering, bringing about insight and healing.

Influential sociological thinking has often brought in implicitly orientalist assumptions. Karl Marx assumed that an Asi-

atic mode of production is characterized by individuals who were “heavily dominated by their social relations, and anything but free from historical agents” (Archibald 1989:21)—that the “paradigmatic, non-individuated individual was to be found in ancient China,” (ibid.:47) and that due to this, “there was very little social change of any kind in societies with an Asiatic mode of production” (ibid.:64).

Of course many critics have pointed out that there has never actually been an Asiatic mode of production in the first place. We do not want to suggest any intentional ‘conspiracy’ regarding Orientalism; it is best treated as an aggregate affect of unintended consequences. Nevertheless, the way we continue to think about Eastern concepts, attitudes and behaviors, suggests we have not completely extricated ourselves from some fundamentally occidental assumptions. While acknowledging Orientalism, especially in Marxism, and suggesting that ‘communalism’ rather than ‘individualism’ is a preferred orientation in the East, Archibald suggests that, for Buddhists, “the only legitimate resolution of conflict between the communal and authoritarian impulses has been the renunciation of real-world activities in pursuit of passive contemplation” (1989:189). This implies that the Buddhist ‘retreats’ into the private realm of self contemplation, is passive and whose behavior is ultimately inefficacious. It also suggests that ‘action’ and ‘meditation’ are separable units of analysis, and assumes that meditation is not active in and of itself. Buddhist meditation, however, is anything but passive and resigned.

Western dualistic thinking shapes the way we understand Eastern spirituality and philosophy. Cartesian dualism suggests the clear delineation between mind and body, subject and object, the mental and physical, and like an occidental lens, it acts to refract into binaries any attempt to appreciate Eastern phenomenological experience (see also Markus and Kitayama,

1991:227). Hanh's engaged Buddhism, as a philosophy of action, will continue to be misunderstood by Western observers, academics and activists unless Orientalist assumptions are addressed.

Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggest that cross-cultural sociological and psychological research often do not properly address fundamental differing conceptions of self in cultures which foster an 'independent' vs. 'interdependent' view of self. They argue that "the notion of an interdependent self is linked with a monistic philosophical tradition in which the person is thought to be of the same substance as the rest of nature" (ibid.:227). In Japanese culture, for instance, individuals are "most fully human" in the context of others (ibid.); even their word for 'self' refers to "one's share of the shared life space" (ibid.:228 [Hamaguchi 1985]). The Eastern view of self impacts perception on a basic ontological level, affecting everything from emotional response and motivation (ibid.). Western explorations of individuation often assume a spectrum model with varying degrees of individuation and associated levels of agency. It is not our intention to review cross cultural differences reflecting varying conceptions of self, though it is important to acknowledge that Western explorations of Eastern thought which try to explore individuation given this spectrum model do not appreciate how the Buddhist notion of 'inter-being' transcends objective indicators of self in relation to society.

Hahn has influenced many with his notions of 'inter-being' and 'engaged Buddhism'. His goal is addressing large-scale global problems such as poverty, racism, bigotry, and systemic inequalities. Where Hahn's message differs is the starting point to the solutions of these issues—self contemplation. A large aspect of the appeal of Hanh as a teacher of Buddhist ethics comes from his simple presentation of Buddhism, stripped from 'romanticized' (and Orientalist) exaggerations that 'everything is suf-

fering and an illusion'. Hanh's vision does not succumb to pessimism or the facile nihilism that we argue often (but not always) characterizes and immobilizes postmodernism. We concur with Prus, who suggests that "postmodernism is characterized by an extreme scepticism in the viability of all forms of knowing" (Prus 1996:217).

AMERICAN PRAGMATISM AND THICH NHAT HANH'S ENGAGED BUDDHISM

Much closer to engaged Buddhism, perhaps the closest comparable Western philosophic tradition, is American pragmatism. Pragmatism has its roots in the grounded systematic thought of Charles Sanders Pierce, John Dewey, William James and George Herbert Mead. These thinkers were concerned with developing a non-dualist approach to understanding the relationship between nature, self, mind, and society. They avoided grand philosophical abstractions and absolute claims of truth, favoring experiential truth in its fluidity and relevance, and in terms of what social and individual consequences it holds for those who share a perspective or reject that same perspective (see James 1907).

American pragmatism stands close to Hanh's engaged Buddhism as a philosophy of action. We integrate pragmatism with engaged Buddhism in order to explore the possibility of further advancing *Buddhist Sociology* (Bell 1979). Such an effort may minimize the orientalist critique of constructing the 'other' and lend more credence to, and encourage more exploratory theoretical work in merging East-West paradigms (see Said 1978). As with those subsequently inspired by pragmatism (see Blumer 1969; Strauss 1993; Prus 1996; Maines 2001), Hanh emphasizes the phenomenology of human lived experience. While influencing 'interpretist' approaches such as symbolic interactionism and social

constructionism, pragmatism can also be seen as an approach to affect social change at the systemic level. By avoiding both the absolute truths of idealism and the security of an unchanging reality, pragmatism, much like Hanh's interbeing, carries an epistemology that is adaptable to the complexities and contingencies of an everyday life in constant flux. We seek a working ontology that concerns itself with understanding and minimizing human suffering at both individual and collective levels. With such a mandate, one can imagine integrating a number of Buddhist and sociological thinkers in which to draw out ideas of freedom and suffering. Yet, compared to the many psychologists that participate in this undertaking (see Safran 2003), there are very few sociologists who attempt this style of meta-theory (but see Bell 1979; McGrane 1993, 1994). We further advance this neglected tradition in an effort to avoid the reification and privileging of Western thought while still maintaining our sociological eye (Hughes 1971).

One of the central tenets of pragmatism is that human action and knowing is always in flux and more than just an instinctual response to stimulus. Although human experience for the most part is routine, the reflective actor emerges when routine action is blocked or interrupted. Frustrated goals call forth interpretation and self-reflection vis-à-vis a re-evaluation of situations, others, and self as a means to adapt to an ever-changing environment. Pragmatism explores the dialectical process whereby individuals are shaped by their social and natural environments and how these environments are in turn being shaped by self-reflecting human action (Dewey 1922; Mead 1934; Strauss 1993). For Hahn, the very process of engaging involves interacting and adapting to the exigencies of existing environments. However, his goals of collective transformation are themselves frustrated by a Western individualism which reifies private troubles

from collective aggregations. Why practice engaged Buddhism? Hanh argues that the goal of practice is "to realize non-self and interconnectedness. This is not just an idea or something you understand intellectually. You have to apply it to your daily life" (Hanh 2006:52). Hanh stresses that the individual, in transforming her/himself, directly affects the transformation of society.

Linking Hanh's interbeing with pragmatism enables a stronger sociological imagination in which personal troubles within the context of public issues awaken us from our misrecognition of isolated suffering, to an understanding of our interdependent fragile existence (c.f. Mills 1959). Moreover, Sociology may benefit from an Eastern approach to the nature of suffering and how one uses such experiences as a vehicle for spiritual awakening. Hanh's 'interbeing' and the 'here and now' lived experience of an engaged Buddhism is a fail safe to protect inquiry of this nature from Western dualism and the (often inadvertent) Orientalist underpinnings that occur from time to time within social science circles (see Clifford 1980; Fabian 1983). Hanh's sociological imagination is deeply concerned with how human beings can liberate themselves from the yoke of ego and societal-economic-political constraints. Synthesizing both Eastern and Western thought establishes a praxis-oriented understanding of freedom in its non-dualistic form. In the final analysis Hanh's engaged sociological imagination offers a form that is neither East nor West but just 'is'.

THE PRAGMATICS OF THICH NHAT HANH'S "INTER-BEING"

In September 2005 Thich Nhat Hanh gave some calligraphies to the magazine *Shambhala Sun*. They consisted of inked circles, within which were placed different texts; four of these are:

This is it
 Peace is every step
 I have arrived
 I am home

He speaks of the 'three jewels' of Buddhism: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, each separate but one simultaneously. The Buddha is not a 'god' extracted from the world and exempt to its influence—the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, was a real person, preaching selfless regard for others, compassion and applying this faith in every moment. He challenged the orthodoxy of his time, for example allowing women to become students and Buddhists themselves. The Buddha was also careful to suggest that his teachings, which became the Dharma ('the way') as they were passed down over hundreds of years, not be treated as static entities. Hahn repeatedly stresses that it is not enough to 'read' Buddhism or 'understand' Buddhism. Buddhism is a philosophy of action. "We should preserve the practical nature of the Buddhadharmā," Hanh argues, "otherwise we will become philosophers and not practitioners" (1993:84). Buddhism recognizes the 'practicality' of distinguishing individual vs. society in what sociology often refers to as levels of analysis. Often the Western ideal of individualistic usurpation of the system is reinforced by a culture of individualism. The individual who dissociates from society is best able to confront and challenge sedimented social norms and inequities. However an engaged Buddhism suggests that "it's not by cutting yourself off from society that you can realize" personal and collective transformation, since the self and society are indistinguishable.

Hahn rejects escapism, suggesting instead full participation with the social world as the most selfless way to effect both individual and collective change. An important aspect of practicing engaged Buddhism and experiencing 'interbeing' is to connect with what Hanh calls the sangha.

Sangha refers to the present moment community of Buddhist practitioners, which is essential to foster in order to support the cultivation of applied ethics. While it is true that the importance is placed on the individual to connect with the group, it is within the *process* of connection that the divide between the individual and sangha is *experienced* as ephemeral. Hahn explains:

We say, 'I take refuge in sangha,' but sangha is made of individual practitioners. So you have to take care of yourself. Otherwise you don't have much to contribute to the community because you do not have enough calm, peace, solidity, and freedom in your heart. That is why in order to build a community, you have to build yourself at the same time. The community is in you and you are the community. You interpenetrate each other. That is why I emphasize sangha-building. That doesn't mean that you neglect your own practice. It is by taking good care of your breath, of your body, of your feelings, that you can build a community, you see. (2006:54)

As a philosophy of action, Hahn stresses that Buddhism is not only concerned with the individual and 'society' *per se* but the environment and ecology that are directly affected by our actions. If 'the environment' as subject and 'the individual' as object are not seen as separate, then changes to the individual, either positive or negative, will have repercussions on the environment as a whole. Changing a vandalized and decrepit neighbourhood begins by picking up a single piece of trash. Before helping eliminate poverty in the Third World, we must be aware of how we are living, what foods we are eating, how we interact with others, the 'little things' we do every moment that can serve as examples

to others to follow and build sangha. It is not a 'religion' to follow that is separate from other modes of inquiry, such as science. Hahn says "you have to look at it, you have to try it and put it into practice, *and if it works*, if it can help you transform your suffering and bring you peace and liberty, you can believe it in a very scientific way (2006:57, our emphasis)." Like pragmatism, truth is what ends up working.

Engaged Buddhism is meant to be applied, not just read about or intellectually digested. Western Buddhist 'practitioners' often read significant amounts of information on Buddhism but remain relegated to a discursive understanding with over-simplified notions that 'everything is suffering' or 'everything is impermanent'. However, while Buddhists *do* often speak of the notion of non-attachment, 'no self' and impermanence, Hahn warns practitioners not to get 'stuck' at this 'level' of insight. "In Buddhism," he says, "the highest view is no view at all. No view at all! You say that permanence is the wrong view. So you use the view of impermanence to correct the view of permanence. But you are not stuck to the view of impermanence. When you have realized the truth, you abandon not only the view of permanence, but you also abandon the view of impermanence" (2006:57, 98).

Often Westerners drawn to Buddhism are attracted to the idea of emancipation and 'finding enlightenment' or Nirvana. They seek the bliss associated with embracing interbeing. Hahn acknowledges that "if you touch the phenomena deeper and deeper, you touch the ultimate (yet) the ultimate is not something separated from the phenomena" (2006: 55). He continues, "when you practice looking deeply and you find the insight of impermanence, then the insight of permanence will burn away that notion of impermanence" (2006:98). Both the emphasis on action and a dialectical ontology is comparable to pragmatism. The effects are that the individual, meditating on these insights, realizes that s/he is

never without the support of the solid ground of the present moment. Nirvana is not an abstracted state from our common-sense world. "Sameness and otherness are notions. Nirvana is the removal of all notions, including the notions of sameness and otherness. So interbeing does not mean that everything is one or that everything is different. It will help you to remove both, so you are not holding a view" (2006:100). Essential to this contemplation, which is anything but 'passive', is the *application* of insight. "This insight should be something that animates our daily life," Hahn argues (2006:102). Hahn is known to be critical of even Eastern practitioners of Buddhism that relegate their practice strictly to the 'devotional', instead of applying their insights. "You enter the path of transformation when you begin to practice the things you pronounce" (1999:72); "our Dharma body should be a living body and not just a set of dogmas or ideas" (1999:93).

Sometimes oversimplified understandings associating Buddhism with nihilism also associate it intellectually with postmodernism. However engaged Buddhism is closer to pragmatism than it is postmodernism given its confidence in arriving at a certain, moral truth through applied investigation of the phenomenological world. Postmodernism sometimes suffers from a discursive solipsism suggesting that nothing is tangible and real beyond our representations of reality. Yet experiencing 'interbeing' is grounded in the experience of a morality not attached to any specific universe of discourse. Devotional Buddhism's focus on rhetoric and routine is criticized by Hahn, as is 'talking the talk' without 'walking the walk.' Dawson and Prus have also criticized postmodernism for this reason, arguing that

The preponderant emphasis that postmodernists place on language and metaphors serves to disembodify humans from their selves,

their actions (and interactions), and the products of their 'blood, sweat, and tears.' Without these elements, without activity, without the ongoing struggle implied in human lived experience, however, language is nothing more than an empty shell (Dawson and Prus 1993:169).

We do not wish to over-simplify the postmodern position, nor suggest there is not any insight or merit from often brilliant postmodern minds. What is 'taking action', a postmodernist may ask, without discourses which ultimately make sense of our actions and interpret our social world? They may argue that representations of morality, of truth, are all we have and will ever have. Perhaps Hanh's engaged Buddhism is itself another representation within this tangled web. Where Hanh's approach differs is his unequivocal certainty in what is moral and right given present moment awareness. This awareness is mitigated by a more fully engaged communication with the body (see below), which can be considered a means to tap into the extra-phenomenological, or noumenological realm.

A popular Zen koan may be useful to illustrate this. A koan is a short poem, of sorts, designed to disrupt a mind which is 'stuck' thinking in Cartesian dualisms.

Mountains are mountains, rivers are rivers
 Mountains are not mountains, rivers are not rivers
 Mountains are mountains, rivers are rivers

In these three lines reside the insights necessary to understand Hanh's philosophy of action. The first line refers to what sociologists consider to be 'reified' reality; the 'mundane ontology' (Pollner 1987) of everyday life. The second line taps into the insights often gleaned from cross cultural

comparisons, or viewing society through a 'sociological eye/imagination' (Mills 1959; Hughes 1971), and especially the relativity highlighted by postmodernism. In its more 'extreme' forms, this applies to meditations on paradox and the notion that we can never ultimately 'know' anything, yet alone come to some agreement on 'truth'. The contribution Buddhism makes (especially Hanh's 'engaged' Buddhism) is not to shy away from 'impermanence' nor 'uncertainty', but to 'come full circle' and look again at the same world as suggested in line 1, but by line 3 understand your embeddedness within this world. By 'beginning where you are' (see Chodron 2003) and making concrete changes in one's everyday activities, the 'ripple effects' are a positive outgrowth that transforms communities. Postmodernism can lead to a hesitation to act, since one can never be certain that what one is doing is 'moral', 'ethical' or 'truthful'. These issues continue to beget paradox given an ontology oriented by the language we acquire—a language which helps us 'adapt' to our environment; yet a language which divides and reifies 'this' and 'that'.

Listening first to the body is a crucial step in breaking away from an occidental ontology and finding a moral center. Listening to the body also induces the ability to more effectively listen to others, since the gap of separation between subject and object becomes not quite as daunting. Gendlin, a Western psychotherapist, offers the notion of 'focusing' (1981) to establish a connection with the body, akin to Hanh's meditation exercises (see below). It helps the individual better relate to the body's felt sense. This felt sense *is*; only the discursive self, trying to make retroactive sense of somatic experience, either ignores or obfuscates this felt sense. Gendlin discusses techniques very similar to Hanh's which serve the same purpose—bringing into focus the felt sense of present-moment lived reality, not as a separable entity, but a fully embed-

ded physiological and social process. Similarly influential, Keleman argues that “culturally we (are) only prepared to suppress the body and force a world view of the life of the mind on ourselves” (1979:11). Much like Hanh’s critique of the way in which the pursuit of happiness is inextricably attached to an individualistic paradigm, Keleman argues that “the contemporary idea of emancipation has really to do with power, not somatic experience” (ibid.:98).

Working on listening to the body and living and acting with consideration of our embodied nature is a (deceptively and seemingly simple) process equating to Hahn’s inter-being. Keleman, like Hahn, recognizes that “we need to know how to create relationships that are emotionally gratifying and how to evolve social structures that are fulfilling. This is the crisis of our time” (ibid.:101). Gendlin and Keleman, as well as other Western practitioners and psychotherapists who have challenged occidental ways to truth, all advocate methods of living fully in line with Hahn’s notion of inter-being. Sociology has not explored this noumenological area to any significant degree since it is a discipline tied to the examination of phenomenological experience, which is often rendered meaningful through discourse. Listening to the body implies reaching a cognizance of its interdependence, acting to disrupt our sense of ownership over the embodied self.

Hanh suggests that “in modern life, people think that their body belongs to them and they can do anything they want to it. ‘We have the right to live our own lives.’ When you make such a declaration, the law supports you. This is one of the manifestations of individualism” (1993:60). Of course Hahn challenges any bifurcation of body and mind, arguing that whatever affects the mind affects the body, and vice versa (1993:26). Breathing in, breathing out, breathing in, breathing out—the practice Hahn advocates is one that calls the Buddha nature of everyone back to the body,

the pre-discursive somatic experience where self is mountains, self is rivers—where self ‘is’.

HANH’S MINDFULNESS TRAININGS AND PRAGMATIC APPLICATIONS

Buddhists often speak of being mindful. This refers to the importance of being directly aware of present moment reality. Often people ruminate about the past, or fret about the future. Being mindful of the body, of thoughts that enter and physical sensations associated with these thoughts, is very important considering people often act without mindful reflection.

Hanh suggests five mindfulness trainings that are geared towards modern times.

First is a mindfulness not to harm or kill, including the prevention of others from killing, and not to condone in any way any act of killing in the world. The cultivation of compassion is a cornerstone for this and all other mindfulness trainings.

The second mindfulness training involves not stealing or possessing anything that does not belong to us. This also includes preventing others from stealing or profiting from stealing.

Thirdly, mindfulness of sexuality and abstaining from sexual misconduct is critical in preserving both physical and emotional intimacy with others. This also includes preventing sexual abuse and the protection of children. Happiness for both couples and families is cultivated by being responsible and maintaining integrity in relationships.

Being mindful of speech, specifically how damaging unmindful speech can be, is the fourth mindfulness training. Deeply listening to others can generate much happiness and heal much sorrow. Even spreading rumors and gossiping violates the fourth mindfulness training; gossiping is seldom about concern for others, and more about the needs of the individual finding

gratification in the abasement of others.

The fifth mindfulness training involves not consuming intoxicants, including certain foodstuffs, alcohol, certain TV programs, movies and other media, as well as conversations which are poisonous to the self and soul. These prescriptions are not 'set in stone' dictates that must be followed to the letter. Hanh offers them humbly as what seems to 'work' for him, acknowledging that he himself is learning along the way. "What is the way to practice the mindfulness trainings? I do not know. I am still learning, along with you" (1993:3).

All mindfulness trainings are interconnected. By practicing any one of them, Hanh argues you cultivate your appreciation for all the others. Hanh's inter-being is underscored through practice of the mindfulness trainings, since they connect the individual with the collective. This is especially a problem in a Western hyper-individualized society. "The feeling of loneliness is universal in our society," Hahn writes. "There is no communication between ourselves and other people, even in the family" (1993:25, 34). For instance, when one contemplates the third mindfulness training concerning sexuality, all the other inter-being issues regarding the self's connection with others and society is addressed simultaneously.

Sometimes we feel that we have love for the other person, but maybe that love is only an attempt to satisfy our own egoistic needs. Maybe we have not looked deeply enough to see the needs of the other person, including the need to be safe, protected. If we have that kind of breakthrough, we will realize that the other person needs our protection, and therefore we cannot look upon her just as an object of our desire. The other person should not be looked upon as a kind of commercial item (Hahn 1993:38).

Hahn discusses the consequences of neglecting the mindfulness trainings. Not consuming alcohol may not be perceived as a 'big deal' to some, but a pregnant mother

consuming alcohol can ultimately lead to serious situations such as fetal alcohol poisoning (1993:61). The connection between mother, child, and later that child's impact on society is all a seamless concern. An unhealthy sexuality can also manifest in more serious ways such as child molestation. Hahn argues that "(child) molesters are sick, the products of an unstable society" (1993:39). His choice of words suggests a mindfulness not to individualize culpability. For Hanh, assigning blame is not fruitful; instead the collective needs to take responsibility for the environment it produces and the individuals that grow up in that environment. Hahn suggests that

...the problem is never a few rotten apples. We have to change the society from its roots, which is our collective consciousness, where the root-energies of fear, anger, greed, and hatred lie. ... Meditation should not be a drug to make us oblivious to our real problems. It should produce awareness in us, and also in our families and in our society. Enlightenment has to be collective for us to achieve results. (1993:66- 67)

However, change starts not at the collective but at the personal level. "If we create true harmony within ourselves, we will know how to deal with family, friends, and associates" (1993:11). Hahn may well seem like he is having his cake and eating it too. He speaks of collective transformation but that the individual must transform her/himself before any collective transformation can occur. This seemingly tautological logic is only putatively paradoxical from a Western vantage point. An Eastern perspective sees only convenient labels—the self vs. society—that separate an indistinguishable whole.

Hahn encourages engaging in Buddhist practice, not just talking about it or

contemplating it. Part of what makes it difficult for Westerners to understand Buddhism is that they often engage Buddhist ideas on the idea level alone. Buddhism is not philosophy per se—it is a philosophy that is meant to be engaged. In practice, Hahn suggests, the apparent paradoxes melt away. Precepts which seem doctrinal are followed simply because they seem to work. Hahn offers that

... these trainings are the right medicine to heal us. We need only to observe ourselves and those around us to see the truth. ...If you look at individuals and families who are unstable and unhappy, you will see that many of them do not practice these trainings. You can make the diagnosis by yourself and then know that the medicine is there. (1993:26)

He fully acknowledges that many who first try to follow one or two of the mindfulness trainings will start small. In fact he surmises that it is literally impossible to be 'perfect' and follow every precept at all times. Yet, cultivating responsibility given the contingencies of one's environment is all that matters. Once the practice is engaged, an appreciation of inter-being follows. Contemplation of inter-being also suggests that contemplation of both mindfulness and behavior is inextricable. Hahn suggests that "devotion in Buddhism is not accepting a theory without touching the reality" (1993:73) and that "our Dharma body should be a living body and not just a set of dogmas or ideas. Our Sangha body should be a living community" (1993:93, 94).

There is a certain simplicity and elegance to Hanh's engaged Buddhism that suggests an appreciation of action/consequence. Ultimately eyeing the consequences of our behavior, following the mindfulness trainings extends beyond requiring faith. Instead of blindly following

precepts or values because of ingrained habit, or not having confidence in pursuing any path towards positive change given a skepticism that such a path is itself illusory, Hahn suggests that "you enter the path of transformation when you begin to practice the things you pronounce" (1993:72). Devotional Buddhism and 'lay-Western' Buddhism is discouraged since the consequences of not following through an intellectual appreciation may be serious and global. "The Buddha has to be in society," Hahn argues. "He cannot remain in the temple any longer, because people are suffering too much. ...That (principle) became the ground of our philosophy of social service, engaged Buddhism" (1993:54).

FAITH, KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE

We become aware of the fact that we are observing the world from a moving staircase, from a dynamic platform, and, therefore the image of the world changes with the changing frames of reference which various cultures create. On the other hand, epistemology still only knows of a static platform where one doesn't become aware of the possibility of various perspectives and, from this angle, it tries to deny the existence and the right of such dynamic thinking. (Rock 1979:86 [Mannheim 1959])

In Buddhism, knowledge is regarded as an obstacle to understanding, like a block of ice that obstructs water from flowing. It is said that if we take one thing to be the truth and cling to it, even if truth itself comes in person and knocks at our door, we won't open it. For things to reveal themselves to us, we need to be ready to abandon our views about them (Hahn 1987:49).

How can we be sure of the things we know? How do I 'know myself', especially in relation to my position in society? Without the ability to reconcile these basic epistemological questions, how can we be certain of our proposed solutions to affecting change, both for ourselves and our sangha? Do all paths necessarily lead to existential doubt and postmodern paradox?

Thich Nhat Hanh's vision is essentially a 'back to basics' argument for social change, though its simplicity of approach is often misconstrued as complex if occidental assumptions, often taken-for-granted, are not addressed. Buddhism is often labeled a religion, albeit a uniquely 'deity free' one, and as such is perceived to require 'faith' in a higher power/being of some sort. Hahn's teachings, much like Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, challenge those who devote themselves to a belief but do not follow that belief in action; an inaction undergirded by a resignation of separateness. All methods are traps, suggests Ram Das (2004), similar to the invocation, "Kill the Buddha, because you should resume your own Buddha nature" (Suzuki 1970:15).

The pragmatic truth is to be found in the present, not even so much through a dialectical engagement with self and society, because there are no 'things' to engage. While perhaps close to postmodernist critiques of methodology and epistemological assumption, Hahn's engaged Buddhism suggests the importance of action, and that certainty comes, not through faith alone, but through the phenomenological experience of what works in a moral capacity. While American pragmatism, we argue, is closely akin to this approach, Hahn further explores the importance of paying attention to somatic processes, and how they ultimately relate to aggregate sedimentation within the sangha—our society. Paying attention to breathing is significant since it addresses what paradigms which only consider discourse do not: the body, without

which no horizon of sensibility can be conceived or perceived.

In cultures characterized by Western individualism, we are often deaf to what the body wishes us to listen to. Ecological concerns at the global level are addressed, to start, when we consider what we eat, how much we consume, what we breathe, how our bodies feel as organic beings inhaling interacting with and processing the external environment. Listening to our bodies is the first step to affecting positive action in regards to the body's engagement with objective surroundings (Gendlin 1981; Keleman 1982 [1979]). When we take heed of ourselves, our bodies, Hanh suggests we cultivate a positive sangha, or community. We lead by example, not words. Actions taken at the individual level lead to greater effects which may positively affect communities and, eventually, broader global social problems. Big, looming problems such as environmental evisceration, hatred and genocide, epidemic hunger and famine, greed, jealousy and waste often seem overwhelming and impossible to broach. Hahn characterizes the twentieth century as one mired by individualism, when

... more than one hundred million people perished because of wars. Too much violence, too much destruction of life and environment ...If we want the twenty-first century to be different, if we want healing and transformation, the realization that we are all one organism, that the well-being of others, the safety of others, is our own safety, our own security—that kind of realization is very crucial (2006:102)

Hanh does not offer skepticism or suggest we relegate ourselves to the reality of 'suffering'. Neither is Hahn's philosophy a facile approach designed to make individuals feel better while social problems remain

at large. Hahn suggests to us: try it! Sit, shut up and breath! “The nature of the bombs, the nature of injustice, the nature of the weapons, and the nature of our own being are the same. This is the real meaning of engaged Buddhism” (Hahn 1987:77). Meditation is a recognized practice of Buddhists, though seldom is it explicitly considered as a methodology of liberation which ultimately can affect collective change.

...[T]he kind of suffering that you carry in your heart, that is society itself. You bring that with you, you bring society with you. You bring all of us with you. When you meditate, it is not just for yourself, you do it for the whole society. You seek solutions to your problems not only for yourself, but for all of us... Meditation is not an escape from society. Meditation is to equip oneself with the capacity to reintegrate into society, in order for the leaf to nourish the tree” (Hahn 1987:52, 53).

The somatic understanding that accompanies meditation is integral to this process. “Meditation is to be aware of what is going on—in our bodies, our feelings, in our minds and in the world... Life is both dreadful and wonderful. To practice meditation is to be in touch with both aspects” (1987:14); furthermore, “meditation is not to get out of society, to escape from society, but to prepare for a reentry into society. ...in [engaged] Buddhism there is no such thing as an individual” (1987:51).

Hahn’s engaged Buddhism is a pragmatic philosophy of application that can be specifically catered to Western implementation. He shows little interest in romanticizing or essentializing world views; rather, he invites us to participate in a playful synthesis between Eastern and Western thought. “When combined with the Western way of doing things, the Buddhist prin-

ciple of seeing and acting nondualistically will totally change our way of life...Buddhism, in order to be Buddhism, must be suitable, appropriate to the psychology and the culture of the society that it serves” (1987:85, 86). Begin where you are!

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