

Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge

Volume 6

Issue 3 *Thich Nhat Hanh's Sociological Imagination:
Essays and Commentaries on Engaged Buddhism*

Article 19

1-1-2008

Engaged Buddhism In Retreat

Lisa Kemmerer

Montana State University - Billings, lkemmerer@msubillings.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kemmerer, Lisa (2008) "Engaged Buddhism In Retreat," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*: Vol. 6: Iss. 3, Article 19.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture/vol6/iss3/19>

This Response or Comment is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact library.uasc@umb.edu.



Engaged Buddhism In Retreat

Lisa Kemmerer

Montana State University

lkemmerer@msubillings.edu

Abstract: This is a critical account of the author's experience at a meditation retreat associated with the Vietnamese Buddhist Zen teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh. "As the retreat came to a close my questions were unanswered. Flesh was absent, dairy and eggs plentiful; Thich Nhat Hanh appeared simple and humble, yet a nun picked up after him, and Sister Khong was denied special recognition offered only to Thay; alcohol was forbidden but leather shoes popular; silence was indeed golden, but food-waste common; the nuns and monks were dedicated but not above an unfriendly response to a sincere but critical inquiry. Participants similarly reflected the inconsistencies of the Colorado retreat: some greedily grasped at what they might gain, others extended their mindful practice outward. I had learned much that I might share with students, such as silent meals and hugging meditation. I had also bumped into spiritual adepts who lacked both compassion and understanding, and inconsistencies in Thay's religious practice. While no one had answered my questions, I am reminded that nothing and no one is perfect, but all religious paths offer something of great value. Thich Nhat Hanh, the monks and nuns in his presence, and their work with Westerners, would all likely have benefited from considering my questions mindfully. Instead, by their choice, the learning was all one-way, and only I am the richer."

It was just after 5:00 a.m. on September 3rd, 2005. I was wide awake, excited. As I stood in the darkness, Thich Nhat Hanh's words returned: With the first step think, "I have arrived"; with the next step, "I am home." I reminded myself: Be present in each moment, in each step, here and now. I took a deep, cool breath and relaxed into the beauty and wonder of Estes Park. Some forty monks and nuns had gathered to lead eight hundred North Americans through a

Buddhist "Mindfulness Retreat" titled "Finding True Freedom: Opening the Door of Understanding and Compassion."

Eventually a handful of brown-clad monks and nuns stepped into the darkness. They began a slow, meditative walk around the parking lot, waiting for the master, "Thay" (teacher) as he is respectfully called. At 5:30 a.m., Thich Nhat Hanh and an enclave of monks and nuns led us through a short series of leg-stretching,

Lisa Kemmerer earned a BA from Reed College, a Masters from Harvard Divinity, and a PhD in Philosophy from University of Glasgow, Scotland. She has taught philosophy and religions in Alaska, Washington, and Scotland, and currently teaches at Montana State University, Billings. Lisa has written numerous articles, focusing on the area of applied ethics; she has directed, and produced two documentaries on Buddhism, is the author of, *In Search of Consistency: Ethics and Animals* (Brill Academic, 2006), has had her second book accepted by Columbia University Press (*The Buddha, the Bible, and the Beasts*), and is working on a handful of other books. Lisa is an activist, artist, traveler, and adventurer who has hiked, biked, and kayaked widely.

arm-loosening exercises. By chance, I was standing in the direction Thay turned to begin walking meditation, and ended up just inches from the brown-robed founder of Engaged Buddhism.

"I have arrived," I thought. "I am home." Yet even as I relaxed into walking meditation, a cluster of over-eager Westerners pinched in around me, vying for proximity with the famous monk from Viet Nam. I glanced at the milling crowd. "I have arrived; I am home." More jostling. I smiled, noting the irony: The presence of Thich Nhat Hanh stood between the practitioners and their goal. They were not home; they were at a retreat hosted by a famous monk. They had not arrived; they wanted to be yet nearer the master. I was jostled to the edge by a cluster of over-eager Westerners into the stillness of the night.

The mob of practitioners slowly swarmed into a large meadow. Thich Nhat Hanh paused, then sat down; everyone followed his example. We sat in quiet meditation as the first rays of sunlight glowed on high rocky peaks. In that quiet space, I could feel the seasons change. In fact, each morning of our five day retreat grew cooler, until we meditated on frosted grass.

I had used Thich Nhat Hanh's books in ethics and religion classes at Montana State University repeatedly. Conservative, predominantly Christian students fumbled with "mindfulness," objected to interbeing—the idea that we are all partly responsible for the actions of criminals—and smiled dismissively at Thich Nhat Hanh's suggestion that we water the seeds of joy in ourselves and others. Many students rejected his teachings as idealist—lovely but useless. But his books stretched the minds of Montana students, accustomed to Western thinking, a Western lifestyle, and an overwhelmingly Protestant community. Feeling responsible to learn yet more about what I was teaching, I decided to attend Thich Nhat Hanh's retreat in neighboring Colorado. I hoped to witness faith in action,

ponder Buddhist teachings, reflect on my own moral and spiritual commitments, and formulate new and engaging questions for students concerning Thich Nhat Hanh's work. In fact I did all of these, but not as I had anticipated.

Ten or fifteen minutes after sitting in a predawn glow, Thich Nhat Hanh stood up, slipped on his clogs, and moved off into the brisk morning air, leaving his meditation pillow and blanket behind. While it might seem unreasonable to question such a small matter with regard to such a famous and elderly monk, I could not help but raise an eyebrow when a nun quickly collected his blanket, tucked it under her arm, and fell in behind Thich Nhat Hanh. It seemed incongruous for an able-bodied monk, who speaks of equality and humility, to receive such service—even for the sake of respect. Such servitude rubbed against my Western sensibilities and feminist leanings. I tried to understand from within the tradition: The nun is privileged to earn merit by assisting Thay. But would not he also earn favorable merit by helping her in the same way? My students are rarely feminists, but inequality is something they would grasp more easily than mindfulness.

As I pondered these unpleasant thoughts, we crept slowly toward the meditation hall, left our shoes at the door, and sat for silent meditation. Monks and nuns chanted in English, then Vietnamese: "The Bodhisattva Avalokita, while moving in deep course of perfect understanding, shed light on the five Skandhas, found them equally empty..." With my critical feminist antenna stirred from lethargy, I detected that nuns covered their heads and monks did not. I noticed that nuns meditated facing Thich Nhat Hanh, while monks faced the wall in front of the hall. I recalled the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh in search of possible reasons, but could find none. The only explanation seemed to be pervasiveness of patriarchy, and the human ability to become accustomed even to the most dam-

aging trends, in spite of high-minded teachings such as mindfulness.

Vexed by such quandaries, I remembered that each participant had been given a small paper at registration on which to pose questions. The friendly nun who handed me the paper told me that questions would be answered by Thay if placed in his bell. I dug out my slip of paper and formulated a question: "Why do nuns cover their heads and face Thay for meditation while monks do neither?" I delivered my paper, noting a handful of other questions nestled in the bowl of Thay's large, black bell.

When the morning session had ended, Thich Nhat Hanh slipped into his sandals and walked slowly toward the dining hall. I stopped short: were those leather clogs on his feet? I glanced to the right and left. Monks and nuns in leather sandals! Why would monks and nuns at a mindfulness retreat in which no flesh was offered in the dining hall, wear leather? The vegetarian meals made perfect sense; the first precept of Buddhism is "not to kill." But I could not understand why a religious order that does not *eat* animals, would wear their skins. How could wearing a cow's skin be less harmful than taking a bite out of her leg? Thank heavens there was a means of inquiry! I jotted down my second question, and delivered it to the bell: "Given the first precept, and the preferred vegetarian diet, why do monks and nuns wear leather sandals?"

I suspected that my questions were nothing like the questions of other participants. Few people are concerned about suffering of pigs and chickens, cattle and turkeys. Talking to others at the retreat, I quickly learned that almost none of them were vegetarians, let alone vegans.

In the dining hall I discovered my favorite non-event. Meals were taken in "noble silence." On each table were posted "Five Contemplations," carefully worded injunctions to maintain while eating—

mindfulness at the table. *Here was a practice I could embrace wholeheartedly.* Instead of chattering, social posturing, gobbling down food, and clattering dishes, people moved quietly through the dining hall, spoke not a word, acknowledged one another with a respectful nod, and sat in calm silence before taking a single bite. I enjoyed silent meals immensely; such silence was heavenly. Silent meals—this was something students could experience, even as a class. We could even bring snacks and eat in silence, then discuss the experience. I recalled my first experience with silent meals in Fiji, as a teenager. I attended a village gathering, and was amazed to find people sitting together in silence, only rarely speaking. It was my first realization that table chatter was cultural, and not necessarily a good idea.

For better or worse, silent snacking encouraged yet more reflection and critical analysis. I soon noticed that there was a depressing amount of excess food left on plates, and nothing explicitly in The Five Contemplations to discourage waste, or even to encourage taking only what one could eat. I watched a bowl of yogurt disappear behind the plastic flaps that blocked the kitchen from the dining hall. This waste was particularly offensive, and I knew the suffering that was behind that innocent looking bowl of yogurt. If this retreat was about mindfulness and compassion, why eat vegetarian and not vegan food? Why did Thay accept and provide dairy products and eggs?

Veal calves and egg-laying chickens live the most deprived lives of any factory farmed animal. How could it be better to support the misery and premature death of veal calves (drinking milk) or battery hens (eggs or eating chicken) than it is to support the killing of cattle, pigs, or turkeys? In the words of American Buddhist Norm Phelps (*The Great Compassion*), "If we are fully and genuinely mindful of our eating, we will not allow our choice of foods to bring need-

less suffering and death to living beings" (127). It would not be difficult to banish eggs and dairy from the dining hall. Vegan food is abundant and healthy—more healthy—than the average fatty, cholesterol-ridden diet of eggs, cheese, milk, and flesh. Furthermore, our decisions should not be about our health, but about mindfulness and compassion. A diet rooted in animal products, whether dairy, eggs, or flesh, not only causes tremendous suffering and premature death to cattle, pigs, sheep, turkeys, and chickens, but also contributes tremendously to environmental degradation and world hunger. 70% of the world's grain harvest is fed to nonhuman animals, so that we can have eggs, cheese, and beef. If these massive quantities of grain were fed directly to human beings, we could alleviate world hunger. Animal industries also deplete and devastate water resources, are the single greatest cause of dead zones and deforestation, and are second only to cars in contributing to global warming. A vegan diet is morally and spiritually in line with Thay's teachings. Eating eggs and drinking milk—mindlessly supporting the production of battery hens and the slaughter of veal calves is not.

Students in my religion and ethics classes learn the importance of consumer choices, and they learn about the miseries inherent in the dairy and egg industries. How would these newly educated students make sense of a Buddhist retreat that refused meat, but accepted milk, cheese, eggs... and leather sandals? I had noticed that many of Thich Nhat Hanh's books note the importance of protecting the lives of "people, animals, plants, and minerals" (*For a Future to Be Possible* 8). Perhaps this was the root of the problem. Through interbeing, Thay acknowledges the interconnections of all that exists, but fails to make important distinctions that are relevant to the practice of *compassion*. "Protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals," he writes in his first mindfulness training.

Why does he separate people from other animals? Why not speak the truth: "animals" includes people. This would reduce the list to "animals, plants, and minerals." But in asking people to protect the lives of animals, plants, and minerals, Thay fails to help people make a critical distinction for the practice of compassion: only animals are sentient. One can step on a rock, or a mouse, but stepping on the mouse lacks compassion, while stepping on a rock does not. Similarly, one can pull the head off of a ripe head of wheat, or one can pull the head off of a pigeon. One of these acts is blatantly cruel, the other is not. Plants have *life*, which mindfulness ought to protect, but they have no central nervous system; plants cannot suffer. Mindfulness requires us to be aware of this critical difference in decisions that we make. Interbeing acknowledges the importance of all that exists, but we must not allow this to muddy the moral waters. If one must step on a rock or a mouse, we ought to choose the rock. And if one has the choice between eating grains or dairy and eggs, mindfulness and compassion both point to a vegan diet.

I respectfully formed my question and dropped it into the bell, this time begging forgiveness. "I apologize for asking so many critical questions, but could Thay please explain why nonviolence was not extended to veal calves and hens?" I included a couple of lines explaining the dairy and laying hen industries (just in case), and noted that I was a teacher who used his books in the classroom. My students would be wondering, just as I was wondering.

Each day there was leisure time between breakfast and Thich Nhat Hanh's *Dharma* Talk. Although the morning walking meditations were exquisitely magical, I considered Thay's afternoon teachings the most important part of my journey to Estes Park, since I had come to enhance my ability to teach about Thay, contemporary Zen Buddhist practice, and Engaged Bud-

dhism.

While we waited for Thich Nhat Hanh to arrive, monks and nuns sang simple songs with heartwarming and inspiring lyrics, sometimes engaging children, and whoever else was willing to join:

Breathing in, breathing out
Breathing in, breathing out
I am blooming as a flower
I am fresh as the dew
I am solid as a mountain
I am firm as the earth
I am free.

Breathing in, breathing out
Breathing in, breathing out
I am water, reflecting
What is real, what is true,
And I feel there is space
Deep inside of me
I am free, I am free, I am free.

As simple melodies filled the hall, my eyes explored the surrounding area. Toward the front, people were gathering on various forms of cushions, pillows, blankets, and meditation stools. In the back were rows of chairs, which were just beginning to fill. I noticed that many participants were reserving more favorable seats for themselves. By the third day, monks and nuns announced that we ought to share these seats more equitably, but few attendees of "Opening the Doors to Understanding and Compassion" were inclined to share. I marveled at such bold-faced selfishness. Had these participants read the same Thich Nhat Hanh books I had read? Was it unreasonable to expect that participants would take Thay's most basic lessons to heart?

I felt another twinge of disappointment, but knew that this was a phenomenon my students would compare with "Sunday Christians." Many people pay lip service to ideals, but few live into such teachings. Humanity seems a poor indicator of what a religion, or religious teachers,

offer: ideals versus realities.

When Thich Nhat Hanh was present, everyone took cues from him: when he sat, we sat; when he stood, we stood. No one, except perhaps a child, ever stepped in front of him. When he arrived at the entrance to the meditation hall, everyone fell silent. On the first day a nun instructed us to rise as he entered. Thay walked silently, slowly, head tilted, toward the raised platform at the front of the hall—the place of honor and respect.

Each afternoon, Thay sat cross-legged on the platform in the meditation hall, without notes, and offered the *dharma* to rows of silent Westerners. One day he spoke of his recent visit to Viet Nam (his first since he was exiled nearly forty years ago), and how his return was only possible through loving communication, through speaking truth, and through deep listening. Without these, the differences between himself and the government of Viet Nam would have been insurmountable.

A nun rang the meditation bell. Thich Nhat Hanh paused in his talk, returning to mindfulness—"I have arrived; I am home." When the last vestiges of ringing dissipated, he spoke of making family peacetreaties so that families might hold the same home that nations hold. He noted the importance of lovingkindness, of practicing various forms of meditation. He spoke of anger and hatred, and reminded us to plant seeds of joy.

His talk showed ongoing, pervasive relevance of religion. For instance, Thich Nhat Hanh provided an example of loving communication that might help families to express how they really feel about one another, as well as a method for nations to overcome historic hostilities and forge alliances. How could students reasonably suggest that Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings were idealistic and therefore irrelevant when he had proven their efficacy across international boundaries?

My favorite *Dharma* Talk was on being

and nonbeing (Buddhist philosophy from the Pali Canon, revisited). Thay asked a box of matches if the flames were already present. He explained that a flame is all about conditions: oxygen, fingers, motion. He then blew out the flame, noting that conditions were no longer suitable for that flame to continue. The meditation bell rang, Thich Nhat Hanh paused, allowing the ring to bring him back to himself—"I have arrived; I am home."

After a few moments, he continued. Our lives are also, ultimately, about conditions. We arise as apparent entities when the conditions are right. We cease as individuals when conditions are no longer suitable. Thich Nhat Hanh lit another match and asked the flame if it was the same flame, or different from the first. Are we the same or different from what we were as children? Are we the same or different when reborn into another life? Like the flame, Thich Nhat Hanh concluded, we arise and we subside; there is no coming, no going. Being and non-being are mental constructs. We are continuations, we are conditioned.

Thich Nhat Hanh's words were much like his books, and I was pleased to be sitting in the meditation hall.

In the evenings Thay did not speak; we could attend practices and teachings such as Total Relaxation and Touching of the Earth, with Sister Chan Khong. For this highlight, we met in the meditation hall with blankets and pillows in hand. Sister Khong sang lullabies as we drifted in and out of sleep, relaxing our bodies and releasing tension from every shadow of our being.

Sister Khong and Thich Nhat Hanh have been working and practicing together since the earliest days of engaged Buddhism in Vietnam. She has been an engaged Buddhist just as long as Thay, since the sixties. Her teachings showed her experience and her knowledge. Why didn't Sister Khong address us from the elevated seat

where Thich Nhat Hanh sat? Why were we not instructed to rise when she entered (and left) the meditation hall? Sister Khong, a bastion of Buddhist teachings, an icon of mindful action, was a woman; no visible sign of honor was offered her. Was she unworthy of the respect offered Thay?

Whatever course I teach, I always include a section on women, whether feminist religious ethics, women and the history of the church, or women in Buddhism. By the time students leave my courses, if they are amenable to such education, they understand that patriarchy pervades societies and religious traditions. Because of this knowledge, it does not surprise me that a Buddhist "Mindfulness Retreat" on "Opening the Door of Understanding and Compassion" neglects to treat women with equality, even to offer fair representation to a woman of tremendous stature. The problem of women's enforced inferior status in religious traditions is deeper and older than any one tradition, or any one religious leader. While this slight to Sister Khong was blatant, Thay is actively fighting male privilege in his religious order. For example, monks show respect to nuns in ways never before required in any Buddhist order.

Musings on gender equality led me back to dairy/veal and eggs. It would be easy to provide only vegan food, as it would be easy to provide Sister Khong equal respect. My questions were beginning to overlap. "Interbeing" had found fertile ground in my inquiries.

On the third evening, a forty-three year old Vietnamese monk introduced us to hugging meditation. He spoke of his childhood in Viet Nam during the war, how he and his brother passed nights together surrounded by the rumbling and earth-rattling of bombs, how he grew up in a world where family and friends died, where bodies were part of the landscape. He described long years of recovery, how he labored to heal from the despair that set into

his life in those formative years, when he was surrounded by killing and dying. Sorrow changed his voice as he recalled his childhood in war-ravaged Viet Nam. He paused, noting that this topic stirred memories of war, stirred pain and confusion, in spite of years of hugging meditation.

We joined him in practice. Sitting in our seats, we wrapped our arms around ourselves, breathing in, breathing out, in, and out, for several minutes. Once fully relaxed, he asked us to envision someone who loves and accepts us completely, perhaps the Virgin Mary or Avlokiteshvara, maybe a friend or parent. I called to mind a four-footed companion, a dog with a heart that could encompass every heart that ever beat in the breast of a human being. In that safe and relaxed environment, we turned our minds to the deepest and darkest despair in our hearts. We embraced that despair for ten or fifteen minutes: breathing, knowing, accepting.

I am sure I have never had a student in my class who does not hold some inner pain that continues to fester and cause sighs of sadness. Hugging meditation is much needed in our world. Could I create an environment safe enough for students, especially a host of post pubescent male ranchers, to practice hugging meditation?

The battle-weary monk, who led us through a memorable hugging meditation, described how this practice had healed much of his pain. I pondered the children of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the pain and fear settling into their small beings. How would they work through such suffering? Would they find healing in this short life? What are the collective healing mechanisms of the world's faiths, and how can we make them available to those who suffer?

Evenings also provided time for small discussion groups. This was the only scheduled time when participants made personal, direct contact with one another. Most groups were divided regionally, in the hope that we might be with people from

our own area, but we could also join special-topic groups, such as the one I joined, "teachers."

The French nun who presided over our group led me to yet another moment of deep reflection. She asked us to introduce ourselves and provide a "weather report." We stated our names, offered bits of basic information about ourselves, then closed with how we felt about the retreat. From exhausted to overwhelmed, responses were clearly from satisfied (if not awed) customers. I could not flatter falsely; my report was "pending." Several questions troubled me, to which I had, as yet, no answers. I tried to dodge the inquiry, and specifically noted that I preferred not to go into details. When questioned repeatedly, I briefly noted that I did not understand why monks and nuns wore leather, or why flesh-products were off the menu while dairy and eggs were common. Then I noted that I preferred no response to my "pending" weather report, suspecting that there would be little compassion where a critique of the retreat was concerned. Nonetheless, she bluntly replied that the point of the retreat was to focus on ourselves.

Where was the engaged Buddhism which Thich Nhat Hanh and Sister Khong had made famous? Where was the social commitment that drove Thich Nhat Hanh from monastery to war-torn streets of Vietnam, and finally to the negotiating tables of Washington DC? Did the French nun *intentionally* state that it is not my role to question the status quo, or to hope for greater levels of compassion? *Was this retreat really only about me?* I could not even formulate a question for Thay's bell. How would I explain *this* to my students?

As I walked toward my dormitory through the crisp air, surrounded by massive mountain in dim light, reminding myself that I could not expect perfection in a nun, or a priest, or Thich Nhat Hanh. While this nun from France had presumably devoted her life to the teachings and practices

of Thich Nhat Hanh's Zen Buddhism, she was not perfect. In the heat of the moment, perhaps she had made a mistake, and given time and opportunity she might gladly have retracted her words. Perhaps she regretted what she had said. Or perhaps she had spoken as she thought best. Maybe I had missed something somewhere, and the nun was perfectly justified and correct to suggest that I focus only on healing myself. Still, I disagree.

There were plenty of ways to understand why the French nun had dismissed my concerns so abruptly, and none of her reasons were cause for hostility, anger, or even hurt. This was the message I might offer students. The nun had provided a real-life scenario which I could ask students to explore for deeper meaning. Students might note that everyone holds inconsistencies. Or perhaps they would reassert the importance of offering others the benefit of the doubt, especially if their viewpoint differs from our own. Maybe they would discover that mindfulness and interbeing, as taught by Thich Nhat Hanh, can guide us through seemingly hostile interactions peacefully because it helps us to envision the world from the viewpoints of others.

When we were invited to one-on-one discussions with monks and nuns, I jumped at the chance. I asked around, then signed up with an experienced nun. I began by noting that my questions were not of the ordinary sort, and that they might seem critical, but that I was a teacher seeking a deeper understanding of my experiences at the retreat. I asked about the observable differences between nuns and monks. She noted that she preferred to look different from the monks (wearing a hood), but otherwise, could offer no explanation. I asked about monks and nuns wearing leather. She told me these were not the sort of questions I was supposed to ask. I wondered, was Thich Nhat Hanh asking the wrong questions when he sought to reduce, and ultimately end, the suffering and killing in Viet

Nam? If questions of how to live a more mindful and compassionate life are not relevant to the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh, *what is?*

The days unfolded: stretching, walking meditation, sitting meditation, chanting, breakfast, *Dharma* Talks, lunch, followed by small group meetings. On the morning of the final day of the retreat, monks and nuns put on their finest yellow robes for Mindfulness Trainings. After so many days of brown robes, they looked very bright on the stage of the meditation hall. The Five Mindfulness Trainings highlighted a previous question. Thich Nhat Hanh's Mindfulness training soundly and clearly denounce alcohol as harmful, but merely *discouraged* eating flesh. Only later in our spiritual development did the Five Mindfulness Trainings encourage *moving toward* a vegetarian diet—not a vegan diet. Flesh-eating was never forbidden, or denounced.

I was perplexed. Indeed, alcohol *can* be harmful, but it can also be harmless when taken in small quantities in alcohol-safe settings. Taking a bite out of Bessy, however, is *always* deadly. Eating pig or chicken is *always* harmful to the pig and the chicken. In the words of Phelps, eating flesh "is in an altogether different category" from drinking alcohol because eating other creatures "is inherently devoid of mercy" (140). Time was running short; *when would my questions be answered?*

On the final afternoon of the retreat we were permitted to ask questions directly to Thich Nhat Hanh. Some questions were pre-selected from the bell, but there were more questions than time allotted. I remained hopeful, but the day came and went, and I had no answers. In the evening I inquired of a monk whether or not I might address my somewhat critical questions to Thich Nhat Hanh directly. He said this would not be possible. Truly, with so many people attending Thich Nhat Hanh's retreats, with so many eager participants vying to be near a world-famous figure, it has

become nearly impossible for commoners to speak with Thay.

Capitalism has also changed Thich Nhat Hanh's retreats. I took the least expensive option, sharing a room with five other participants, yet the price tag was \$600. Tapes and CDs, perpetually announced and routinely made available wherever lines formed, especially around the dining hall, were high-priced. I noticed a posting in the dining hall announcing that Thich Nhat Hanh was next scheduled to speak in Denver—\$35 per head. Even the paperwork I was handed on arrival spoke of capitalism: the only building marked on the map was the store where we were verbally encouraged to buy books, CDs, tapes, bells, and T-shirts. I had to face the obvious: The teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh are now sold to the wealthy to fund humanitarian causes. Once I faced this fact I turned to the more important question, "Is this a wise policy—compassionate and mindful?" The jury is still out.

As the retreat came to a close my questions were unanswered. Flesh was absent, dairy and eggs plentiful; Thich Nhat Hanh appeared simple and humble, yet a nun picked up after him, and Sister Khong was denied special recognition offered only to Thay; alcohol was forbidden but leather shoes popular; silence was indeed golden, but food-waste common; the nuns and monks were dedicated but not above an unfriendly response to a sincere but critical inquiry. Participants similarly reflected the inconsistencies of the Colorado retreat: some greedily grasped at what they might gain, others extended their mindful practice outward.

I had learned much that I might share with students, such as silent meals and hugging meditation. I had also bumped into spiritual adepts who lacked both compassion and understanding, and inconsistencies in Thay's religious practice. While no one had answered my questions, I am reminded that nothing and no one is per-

fect, but all religious paths offer something of great value. Thich Nhat Hanh, the monks and nuns in his presence, and their work with Westerners, would all likely have benefited from considering my questions mindfully. Instead, by their choice, the learning was all one-way, and only I am the richer.

REFERENCES

- Hanh, Thich Nhat. *For a Future to be Possible*. Berkeley: Parallax, 2007.
- Phelps, Norm. *The Great Compassion: Buddhism and Animal Rights*. New York: Lantern, 2004.