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Asia's Thich Nhat Hanh

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Abstract: This opening keynote argues that we cannot possibly hope to reform or transform the conditions which threaten and degrade all humans and the environments in which they live, without re-forming the self, the we-self, the inter-being. It also argues, implicitly, that Asia does not any longer have to be pre-occupied with defending itself against imputed identities, such as those linked to the old "Asiatic" label, and can now proudly, through the fruits of its own productivity, use the same term to counter-penetrate, culturally, the terrains where the formerly constructed deformations of its identities had taken place. As well, it says, that victims do not have to be controlled by bitterness—something the historical presence of Mahatma Gandhi unmistakably demonstrated, but can be leaders in the process of collective healing; and that, as Thich Nhat Hanh has taught us, in the pursuit of "deep ecology," neither victim nor wrong-doer can ever have the chance for self-realization by excluding the other.

The term "Asiatic" has had a negative connotation, especially in the West but also in other areas of the globe where Western culture has been dominant. It has purported to capture attributes of a continent and its people in terms which, while superficially wearing the normative background of Western humanism, have been culturally other-ing and dehumanizing.

A man of fearless, scholarly countenance, the late Edward Said, in his book

*Orientalism*¹, among other things, saw the self-serving character of the purported attributes, as well as the embarrassing, and often duplicitous, contradictions these attributes embodied. He devoted his adult life to exposing and subverting the cultural construction called "orientalism" (a form of Asiatic-ism), to creating counter-narratives,

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (NY: Vintage, 1979).

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and—in these two processes—to the opening of an immense space for scholarly discourse and a possible re-orientation toward the meanings we can properly associate with the oriental and occidental worlds.

Despite his mighty accomplishments, Said did not create (except by way of implication) a contrasting normative universe or what may be considered a neutral body of principles by which the peoples of the world could construct a collective future. “The Asiatic modes of liberation” offers a beginning, working through some envisioned and normative categories within Buddhism—engaged Buddhism.

The term “liberating” I understand to mean the act and/or process of liberation, whether that which is liberated be meaning, social interaction, knowledge, or patterns or status of being. “Asiatic modes of liberation” may be used to suggest many things: that Asia has philosophical, ethical, social, economic, ideological, and practical insights that can address major problems which confront humankind; that these insights are grounded on a systems outlook which espouses the interdependence of all things; that self-forming activities or ethical work one performs on oneself, in order to transform that self into an ethical subject, are as important as any philosophical or economic system; that the mode of being at which one aims in behaving ethically should inextricably be part of one’s mode of liberation; and that ideas underlying concepts such as inter-being, species interaction (with ecosystems, for instance), self and non-self, dependent origination, we-self, and mindfulness are not only ways of expressing the total interconnectedness of the universe but the guides to practical steps that might and ought to be taken to help in self-forming activities.² It also says that these activities are critical to any un-

² See Gary Gutting, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 126. Here we have an interesting point of view by Foucault.

derstanding of rights, claims, duties, and responsibilities. It says more.

It says that we cannot possibly hope to reform or transform the conditions which threaten and degrade all humans and the environments in which they live, without re-forming the self, the we-self, the inter-being. It also argues, implicitly, that Asia does not any longer have to be pre-occupied with defending itself against imputed identities, such as those linked to the old “Asiatic” label, and can now proudly, through the fruits of its own productivity, use the same term to counter-penetrate, culturally, the terrains where the formerly constructed deformations of its identities had taken place. As well, it says, that victims do not have to be controlled by bitterness—something the historical presence of Mahatma Gandhi unmistakably demonstrated,³ but can be leaders in the process of collective healing; and that, as Thich Nhat Hanh has taught us, in the pursuit of “deep ecology,” neither victim nor wrong-doer can ever have the chance for self-realization by excluding the other.

The search for inclusion, for the purging of polluted consciousness, and for human wholeness are among the commendable objectives of the papers published in this volume. The celebration of the life and teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh and, thereby, the ideas of Engaged Buddhism, is also an achieved goal.

³ Erik H. Erikson, *Gandhi’s Truth* (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969).