

From Empathy to Interbeing: A Study of Dharma Master Thich Nhat Hanh's Eco-humanistic Concern in the Light of Phenomenology

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Abstract

Dharma Master Thich Nhat Hanh was born in central Vietnam in 1926 and became a monk in 1942 when he was 16 years old. Advocating “engaged Buddhism,” the Master has been writing in lucid and poetic languages to show us how we can increase our awareness of our own body and mind through conscious breathing and how we can be more aware of relationships with others and with the world around us. With this deep humanistic concern, the Master remarked that “[o]ur ecology should be a deep ecology— not only deep, but universal. There is pollution in our consciousness. . . . We need to protect the ecology of the Earth and the ecology of the mind, or this kind of violence and recklessness will spill over into even more areas of life. . . . If the Earth were your body, you would be able to feel many areas where she is suffering.” Transformation of human consciousness lies at the root of Nhat Hanh’s idea of “interbeing” in his efforts of ecological salvation. “Interbeing” is also known in Buddhism as “non-self” (*anatman*) or “emptiness [of a separate self]” (*sunyata*). This understanding not only serves as a cure for the spiritual ailment of modern people but has been employed by some deep ecologists as the catalyst for their actions. Meanwhile, Phenomenology holds that individual human consciousness is formed in the dynamic interrelation of self and other or, according to Evan Thompson, in self-other co-determination. Phenomenology also shows that the human capacity for “empathy” is the precondition for the study of the deeper consciousness of “intersubjectivity.” It is Master Nhat Hanh’s idea of “interbeing” that endows phenomenology with a down-to-earth tone of eco-humanistic concern. The authors of this paper intend to begin with Phenomenology’s analysis of empathy and then move on to Nhat Hanh’s lucid explanation of Buddhist notion of “non-self” (*sunyata*) in terms of “interbeing” in the hope that a more sustainable living environment can be created.

Keywords: empathy, interbeing, Thich Nhat Hanh, non-self, phenomenology

I. Introduction

With the arrival of the 21st century, multi-dimensional facets of environmental problems have become the nightmarish albatross hanging globally around governments' necks. Chlorofluorocarbon emissions, carbon dioxide buildup, ozone depletion, water pollution, soil depletion, air pollution, toxic wastes, land degradation, deforestation, global warming, and species loss, which, when combined to result in the deteriorating loss of biodiversity and ecological crisis, have inflicted serious impacts on human activities. Andrew Dobson, in his *Green Political Thought*, observes that “[n]ow it would be hard to find anyone in the ‘developed’ world who has never heard of these environmental problems, and probably even harder to find anyone in the ‘developing’ world who would not accept that environmental decay was either a cause or a symptom of their social, political and economic difficulties” (1). As more and more resources are being polluted, the well-being of the majority of human population and living creatures is jeopardized, being exposed to unhealthy or even harmful living conditions. There is obviously something wrong with our socio-political practices, as observed by Dobson. What’s more, these wrongdoings are the result of a problematic worldview, which, the author opines, is closely related with our human-centered mentality. To re-direct this problematic mentality and cut the Gordian knot of a looming ecological catastrophe, we are required to take into deep consideration and re-evaluate all our problematic human-centered mentality. If there should be some breakthroughs to be achieved, each and every one of us is required to adjust our mentality, effecting changes and sublimations in our minds and learning to cultivate our individual consciousness in the midst of our dynamic interaction and interrelation between self and others. By doing this, we are gradually endowed with the capacity of “empathy” and learning to accept and respect the “otherness of others.” For Evan Thompson, a professor who has been devoting himself to the study of the operation of human consciousness in the field of phenomenology, “[t]he concrete encounter of self and other fundamentally involves empathy, understood as a unique and irreducible kind of intentionality,” and that human empathy, as the precondition of the science of consciousness, is “inherently developmental: open to it are pathways to non-egocentric or self-transcendent modes of intersubjectivity” (1). Moreover, according to Varela, in order to achieve real progress in the understanding of intersubjectivity, we are required to pursue a “science of interbeing” which integrates “the methods and findings of cognitive science, phenomenology, and the contemplative and meditative psychologies of the world’s wisdom traditions” (qtd. in Thompson 29). Instead of abandoning all that has been scientifically achieved since the 18th century Enlightenment, we are suggested to adopt an interdisciplinary approach by synthesizing all that is best in cognitive science, phenomenology, and the wisdom inherent in some of the world’s wisdom traditions including “Christian mysticism, Jewish Cabala, Sufism, Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta, Taoism, and Neo-Confucianism”

(Thompson 26), a synthesis which Prof. Varela calls the “science of interbeing.”

However, it should be noted that the idea of “interbeing” has long been advocated by the Dharma Master Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk born in central Vietnam in 1926 and still preaching dharma worldwide. This is the primary reason that inspires me to write this paper, to do some in-depth research into his idea of “interbeing,” trying to clarify the human psychological development from “empathy” as advocated by the phenomenology to Thich Nhat Hanh’s “interbeing,” thus to offer some contributions to the cultivation of eco-humanistic literacy in our collective efforts towards ecological salvation.

Dharma Master Thich Nhat Hanh became a monk in 1942 when he was 16 years old. “Thich” is the title given to all Buddhist monks and nuns in the Vietnamese tradition. It is a transliteration of the clan name “Sakya,” meaning that a monk or a nun belongs to the family of Shakyamuni Buddha. “Nhat Hanh” is the name which he was given at the time of ordination. It means “One Action.” In 1966, the Master was invited by the Fellowship of Reconciliation to visit America, delivering speeches to the American and reminding them of the misery the subaltern Vietnamese had been suffering and of the strong desire of the Vietnamese for peace. He urged the U.S. government to put an end to the Vietnam War immediately. In 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King nominated the Dharma Master as the candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize. In the letter of nomination, King highly praised Master Thich Nhat Hanh by saying that “I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize than this gentle Buddhist monk from Vietnam.” In the same letter, the Master is also depicted as a monk who

offers a way out of this nightmare [caused by the Vietnam War], a solution acceptable to rational leaders. He has travelled the world, counseling statesman, religious leaders, scholars and writers, and enlisting their support. His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity (“Nomination of Thich Nhat Hanh”).

Also as a poet and a writer, the Master had published more than 80 books in Vietnamese, English and French. Advocating “engaged Buddhism,” the Master has been using concise and poetic languages to teach us to look deep into the very nature of things. Through “mindfulness,” we understand intuitively that all things and living entities, including humans, are empty in that they lack an independent entity or self-being (*svabhava*). Humans can never survive without the nourishments from the sun, the dewdrops and each and every other sentient being. This is what the Dharma Master calls “interbeing,” also known in Buddhism as “non-self” (*anatman*) or “emptiness [of a separate self]” (*sunyata*). This understanding not only serves as a cure for the spiritual ailment of modern people but has been employed by the environmentalists as the catalyst for their actions. Living in an age when the doomsday prophesy is prevalent, people often fidget and ecological crisis looms large, we have good reasons to study and put into practice the eco-humanistic wisdom inherent in Dharma Master

Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings.

II. Literature Review: the Potentialities of Combining Buddhist Teachings with Eco-criticism

Scholars devoting themselves to the study of Buddhism and ecology have been on the increase in number. In the U.S., an anthology, *Buddhism and Ecology: the Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*, includes more than twenty articles discussing and hashing out the topic. Among these authors, Lawrence E. Sullivan, in the "Preface" to the book, emphasizes the potentiality inherent in religious worldviews in relation to ecology.

Religious worldviews are all-encompassing because they fully absorb the natural world within them. They provide human beings both a view of the whole and at the same time a penetrating image of their own ironic position as the beings in the cosmos who possess the capacity for symbolic thought: the part that contains the whole—or at least a picture of the whole—within itself. As all-encompassing, therefore, religious ideas do not just contend with other ideas as equals; they frame the mind-set within which all sorts of ideas commingle in a cosmology. For this reason, their role in ecology must be better understood (xii).

Sullivan, in spite of the stricter standard he set for the discourse of eco-Buddhism, still looks on the bright side of the potentiality of integrating Buddhism with ecological criticism in that he stressed the natural world and cosmology fully absorbed in religious worldviews, an aspect which Buddhist teachings are quite good at. Also, in "Mountains and Rivers and the Great Earth: Zen and Ecology" (165-75) and "Buddhist Resources for Issues of Population, Consumption, and the Environment" (291-311), Ruben L. F. Habito and Rita M. Gross have begun to explore deep into the positive facets that the "spiritual dimensions of Buddhism" may contribute to the task of environmental protection and ecological salvation.

This return to the spiritual dimension of life is a key issue in the modern world as it is closely associated with "the depth and quality of life" (Davis 84). And, as we can see, it is usually connected with the teachings of religions. T. Patrick Burke gives an excellent explanation which is worthy of full quotation:

To gain an understanding of religion and its role in human life, perhaps one place to start might be with what we may call the *spiritual dimension* of life. Although it is not easy to describe this in words, it is the aspect of life that rises above our usual preoccupation with our individual selves, transcending our personal needs and desires. Our outlook on life is spiritual when we look at things from a broader, a less self-centered, a more impartial or universal perspective, where we become detached from our ego and are no longer

concerned with our own personal fate, at least in this life. The spiritual dimension of life is sometimes described as having the perspective of eternity, because when we are inclined to get wrapped up in some urgent present concern, such as achieving a promotion or obtaining possession of some material object, it asks us to disengage ourselves from the present moment and consider how important this particular thing will be in a hundred years, or perhaps a thousand. Even those most skeptical about religion often see the nobility of such a state of detachment from the narrow confines of the self. For a mature person the spiritual side of life is more important than the material. (1, original italics)

From Burke's analysis, we can conclude that we need something spiritual in our lives, for it enables us to transcend our small self as well as material attachment, a transcendence by which, in Burke's words, we can become a "mature person." For Burke, it seems that there are spiritual dimensions inherent in human beings waiting to be actualized, a cultivation, simultaneously, for the consummation of "a mature person equipped with eco-humanistic concern," the author opines, which can be best achieved by studying and practicing the ideas of Master Thich Nhat Hanh.

III. From Empathy to Interbeing: Dharma

Master Thich Nhat Hanh's Eco-humanistic Concern

"Phenomenology," according to *the Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, refers to the set of philosophy developed by Husserl and some of his followers in the twentieth century.

The term has been used since the mid-eighteenth century and received a carefully defined technical meaning in the works of Kant and Hegel, but it is not now used to refer to a homogeneous and systematically developed philosophical position. . . . In contemporary philosophy there is no system or school called "phenomenology," characterized by a clearly defined body of teachings. Phenomenology is neither a school nor a trend in contemporary philosophy. . . . It has been said that phenomenology consists in an analysis and description of consciousness; it has been claimed also that phenomenology simply blends with existentialism. Phenomenology is indeed the study of essences, but it also attempts to place essences back into existence. . . . For some philosophers phenomenology is speculation on transcendental subjectivity, whereas for others it is a method for approaching concrete existence. Some use phenomenology as a search for a philosophy that accounts for space, time, and the world, just as we experience and "live" them. (Audi, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* 664-65)

It is true that the majority of the researchers in the field of phenomenology have been devoting themselves to the study, analysis, and description of consciousness. These researchers and scholars believe that “cognitive science and phenomenology must complement each other in this fashion if there is to be *a cognitively and ethically satisfying science of consciousness*” (Thompson 23, emphasis added). An effective synthesis of cognitive science and phenomenology is strongly required in order for the emergence of a set of practical science of consciousness that can satisfy the urgent calls for a feasible environmental ethics nowadays, with “transformation of consciousness” at its core. To achieve this goal, Prof. Varela’s suggestion that a “science of interbeing,” a notion which I have mentioned in the “Introduction” part of this paper, has to be taken into account has to be seriously treated by each and every one of us who sincerely hopes for the goal of a sustainable living environment on this planet Mother Earth to be effectively realized. Before entering the discussions on Thich Nhat Hanh’s “interbeing,” I would like to first introduce to the readers some key points about “empathy” from the angle of some so-called phenomenologists.

Edith Stein, in her doctoral dissertation prepared under Husserl’s direction in 1916 *On the Problem of Empathy*, observed that “empathy is a unique and irreducible kind of intentional experience: although it is based on sense perception . . . Rather, *we experience another person as a unified whole through empathy*” (qtd. in Thompson 16, emphasis added). From this quotation, we come to understand that, for phenomenologists, “empathy” plays the key part in the dynamic interaction between self and others and, what’s more, connects self and others on an equal footing. Moreover, Prof. Natalie Depraz, in his “The Husserlian Theory of Intersubjectivity as Alterology: Emergent Theories and Wisdom Traditions in the Light of Genetic Phenomenology,” offers us “four possible kinds of empathy,” which are described as follows:

- (1) The passive association of my lived body with the lived body of the Other.
- (2) The imaginative transposal of myself to the place of the Other.
- (3) The interpretation or understanding of myself as an Other for you.
- (4) Ethical responsibility in the face of the Other.¹

These four kinds of empathy complement each other, emerging progressively in human psychological development. Their progressive unfoldment involves a process of “opening out” or “disembedding” of the egocentric sense of self, the very point which Buddhists have been focusing on. Even though Edith Stein and Natalie Depraz, as phenomenological psychologists, have been endeavoring at explicating the capacity for empathy and intersubjectivity, they are incapable of delving into the interconnection between consciousness and the phenomenal world, a field which Buddhism is quite good at.

¹ Prof. Natalie Depraz offers a detailed account and analysis of “lived empathy,” which forms the basis of Husserlian intersubjectivity. To get a detailed information on the four complementary stages of empathy, please refer to *Between Ourselves: Second-person Issues in the Study of Consciousness*, edited by Evan Thompson, pp. 172-78.

For Buddhism, the ego-bound self is an illusory self-image constructed through the immature consciousness, that is, the substantiated self is in reality an illusion. What we call the self (*atman*) is actually “non-self” (*anatman*). This view of “self as emptiness,” or “*sunyata*” in Sanskrit, is the ultimate truth behind the Buddhist formulation of worldly existence. Before entering the discussion on Thich Nhat Hanh’s idea of “interbeing,” I would like to first introduce Chang Cheng-chih’s interpretation on “*sunyata*.”

The importance of *sunyata* in every field of Mahayana Buddhism cannot be overstressed, and in the Doctrine of Totality of the Hwa Yen School, it is especially significant. . . . *Sunyata* is a combination of the stem *sunya*, “void or empty,” and a participle suffix, *ta*, here rendered as “ness.” *Sunyata* is therefore translated as “Voidness or Emptiness.” . . . *Sunyata* suggests therefore that although things in the phenomenal world appear to be real and substantial outside, they are actually tenuous and empty within. They are not real but only appear to be real. *Sunyata* as a spiritual term denotes *the total liberation from change, impermanence, effort and longing*. As a philosophical term, *Sunyata* denotes *the absence of any kind of self, or selfhood. All things are empty in that they lack a subsisting entity or self-being (Svabhava)*. *Sunya* also means “cipher or zero” in Sanskrit. . . . Zero itself contains nothing, yet it cannot be said to be absolutely or nihilistically empty. . . . *Zero is both nothing and the possibility of everything*. It is definitely not something nihilistically empty, but rather *it is dynamic and vital to all manifestations*. In the same way, *Sunyata* does not mean complete nothingness; *being “serenely vibrant,” it has both negative and positive facets* (Chang 60-61, italics mine).

From Chang Cheng-chih’s in-depth illustration of *sunyata*, we come to know that our understanding of the self should be grounded on the principle of emptiness, in which “the possibility of everything” is “serenely vibrant” and, simultaneously, dynamically limitless. If the doctrine of *sunyata* aims to liberate us from dualistic mode of thinking, then the theory of non-self should not be understood as the negation of the idea of the self in its physicality. Instead, it is to be understood as the emptiness of any kind of “-ness” or “selfhood,” or as Chang Cheng-chih has observed—“the total liberation from change, impermanence, effort and longing,” that is, the summarization of total liberation from the three poisons, “greed, anger and ignorance.” Regarding this, Jin Y. Park provides us with a brilliant explication. Park states that the idea of non-self “is not the issue of either accepting or denying the existence of self,” but rather, the primary purpose in proposing this idea is to change one’s mode of thinking from a substantialist position to a “non-substantialist standpoint” (10).

“Non-substantiality” or “emptiness of selfhood” is the ultimate nature of everything in this world. This mundane world functions in accordance with the principle of dependent origination (*pratityasamutpada*) and is subject to change, is impermanent (*anitya*). All the

phenomena in this world, including what we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, and think, that is, the five consciousnesses, are actually the temporary combination of causal relations. The self is no exception. What prevents us from penetrating into this emptiness is our deep-seated habit of reifying or objectifying the things seen, heard, smelled, tasted, felt, and thought. For an unenlightened person, the things experienced through the five senses are not real in that they lack a thinking subject. This ignorance accounts for the reasons why we need to objectify this thinking subject as “I” and, furthermore, ground it with various means at all costs. This deep-rooted mode of thinking prevents us from fully embracing direct experiences because there is always an intruder called “I” when, in reality, there is nothing between the perceiver and the perceived. In the latter part of this paper, let’s see how Master Thich Nhat Hanh, by his proposition of “interbeing,” further reinterprets and simplifies “emptiness,” “non-self” or “dependent origination” in order that everyone of us can penetrate into the true nature inter-connecting everything in this world.

In his English translation of and insightful commentaries on the *Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*²-- *The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*—Dharma Master Thich Nhat Hanh illustrates the well-known sutra in concise and simple language. He explicates as follows:

. . . So according to Avalokita, when he looked deeply into the nature of these five rivers [the rivers of the five skandhas, the five aggregates, or the five elements], he suddenly saw that all five are empty. And if we ask, “Empty of what?” he has

² The *Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra* was composed of excerpts from the *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra* and simple words were carefully employed to convey profound meanings. Although the Chinese version contains only 260 single characters, nevertheless it embodies the entire *Prajna* literature in all its depth and subtlety. It is chanted and recited daily in monastic and lay communities throughout the world. The Sutra has been undergoing stream of oral transmission since the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, 2,500 years ago. The literature of the Prajnaparamita has been studied and expounded for 2,000 years, first in India, and then in China, Japan, Vietnam, Korea, Tibet, and other countries with a Mahayana Buddhist tradition. The English translation by Master Thich Nhat Hanh in his *The Heart of Understanding* is as follows: The Bodhisattva Avalokita,/ while moving in the deep course of Perfect Understanding,/ shed lights on the Five Skandhas and found them equally empty./ After this penetration, he overcame ill-being./ “Listen, Shariputra,/ form is emptiness, and emptiness is form./ Form is no other than emptiness, emptiness is no other than form./ The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.”/ “Listen, Shariputra, all dharmas are marked with emptiness./ They are neither produced nor destroyed,/ neither defiled nor immaculate,/ neither increasing nor decreasing./ Therefore, in emptiness there is neither form, nor feelings, nor perceptions, nor mental formations, nor consciousness./ No eye, or ear, or nose, or tongue, or body, or mind./ No form, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind./ No realms of elements (from eyes to mind-consciousness),/ no interdependent origins and no extinction of them (from ignorance to death and decay)./ No ill-being, no cause of ill-being, no end of ill-being, and no path./ No understanding and no attainment./ Because there is no attainment,/ the Bodhisattvas, grounded in Perfect Understanding,/ find no obstacles for their minds./ Having no obstacles, they overcome fear,/ liberating themselves forever from illusion, realizing perfect Nirvana./ All Buddhas in the past, present, and future,/ thanks to this Perfect Understanding,/ arrive at full, right, and universal Enlightenment./ Therefore, one should know/ that Perfect Understanding is the highest mantra, the unequalled mantra,/ the destroyer of ill-being, the incorruptible truth./ A mantra of Prajnaparamita should therefore be proclaimed: *Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha* (1-2). The last sentence in sanskrit means “Gone, gone, gone all the way over, everyone gone to the other shore, enlightenment, hurrah!”

to answer. And this is what he said: “They are empty of a separate self [non-self].” That means none of these five rivers can exist by itself alone. Each of the five rivers has to be made by the other four. It has to coexist; it has to inter-be with all the others. . . . But, empty of a separate self means full of everything. . . . Avalokita looked deeply into the five skandhas of form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness, and he discovered that none of them can be by itself alone. Each can only inter-be with all the others. So he tells us that form is empty. Form is empty of a separate self, but it is full of everything in the cosmos. The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. (*The Heart of Understanding* 7-8)

“Avalokita” is the shortened name for the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. *The Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra* is seen through the eyes of Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara who is known in Chinese Buddhism as “Guan Yin Pusa” or “Guan Chih Zai Pusa.” Bodhisattva Avalokita teaches us to look deep into the very nature of “emptiness” inherent in things. All phenomena, whether it is sentient or insentient, are empty, empty of a separate self. However, this emptiness does never diminish and negate the inherent value of the myriads of beings and things in this world because Thich Nhat Hanh instructs us that “empty of a separate self means full of everything” (7). Nothing can exist independently in this world. Everything has to co-exist, must count on each other to survive and flourish. Based on this sympathetic understanding of the intimate interconnectedness among all beings, Master Thich Nhat Hanh proposes the idea of “interbeing” when he says that every being has to “inter-be with all the others” (8). A vividly poetic idea, “interbeing” as the ultimate nature underlying the universe can be subtly detected through this sheet of paper you are reading with your poetic eyes. Thich Nhat Hanh writes that:

You will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are. . . . If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. . . . The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore, the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger’s father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist. Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also” (*Essential*

Writings 55).

Looking deeply into this sheet of paper, you, indeed, cannot point out one thing that is not here. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. “To be” is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is. To put it more tightly and concisely, “the individual is made of non-individual elements” (*Being Peace 52*). Thich Nhat Hanh elaborates on the meanings of emptiness or dependent origination in a simple yet profound way, which is the fundamental logic underlying personal and collective salvation for Buddhism.

The suffering in any person’s heart is actually inter-related to the suffering of people in the entire world. This extension of interbeing is realistically yet beautifully explicated in a poem titled “Please Call Me by My True Names,” which is now collected in *Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh*. Written in 1978 during the time of helping the boat people, Thich Nhat Hanh first read this poem at a retreat in Kosmos Center in Amsterdam, Holland. The poem reads thus:

Don’t say that I will depart tomorrow—
Even today I am still arriving.

Look deeply: every second I am arriving
to be a bud on a Spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
to fear and to hope.
The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.

I am a mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.
And I am the bird
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.

I am a frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond.
And I am the grass-snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate,
And I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo,
with plenty of power in my hands.
And I am the man who has to pay
his “debt of blood” to my people
dying slowly in a forced-labor camp.

My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up
and the door of my heart
could be left open,
the door of compassion.

The “I” in this poem is the all-embracing universal mind that can be occupied by any living being and entity. Therefore, I am arriving every second, to be a bud, a tiny bird or a jewel. The “food chain” inherent in ecological stability is also demonstrated when Thich Nhat Hanh writes that “I am a mayfly metamorphosing/ on the surface of the river./ And I am the bird/

that swoops down to swallow the mayfly./ I am a frog swimming happily/ in the clear water of a pond./ And I am the grass-snake/ that silently feeds itself on the frog.” This ecological food chain is soon related to the cruel facets in human society: “I am the twelve-year-old girl,/ refugee on a small boat,/ who throws herself into the ocean/ after being raped by a sea pirate./ And I am the pirate,/ my heart not yet capable/ of seeing and loving./ I am a member of the politburo,/ with plenty of power in my hands./ And I am the man who has to pay/ his “debt of blood” to my people/ dying slowly in a forced-labor camp.” The twelve-year-old refugee girl and the sea pirate who raped her and also the member of the politburo and the man who pays his debt of blood are all within the all-embracing mind. Based on this idea of inter-being in the forms of the realistic human society containing both the bright and dark dimensions and of the ecological food chain, we can see that Thich Nhat Hanh is proposing the principle of non-violence (*Ahimsa*) as the guiding principle for engaged Buddhist actions to solve the various problems we encounter socially and ecologically. This is what I call the eco-humanistic wisdom of non-self proposed by Thich Nhat Hanh, which can well serve as an effective complement to phenomenology in our endeavor towards an overall ecological salvation.

IV. Conclusion

To rectify the deep-rooted human-centered arrogance brought about by the 18th century European Enlightenment, Margaret Donaldson, a developmental psychologist, in her remarkable book *Human Minds: An Exploration*, suggests that we adopt a second “value-sensing enlightenment” to *complement* the first Enlightenment. Never totally abandoning the reason and science ushered in by the first Enlightenment, Margaret Donaldson hopes for a synthesis of the old and the new, the science and the ancient wisdom traditions. She observed that

The very possibility of emotional development that is genuinely on a par with—as high as, level with—the development of reason is only seldom entertained. So long as this possibility is neglected, then if reason by itself is sensed as inadequate where else can one go but back? Thus there arises a regressive tendency, a desire to reject reason and all that was best in the Enlightenment, a yearning for some return to the mythic, the magical, the marvelous in old senses of these terms. This is very dangerous; but it has the advantage that it is altogether easier than trying to move forward into something genuinely new.

Now we have clearly seen that the cultivation of the advanced value-sensing modes is not of itself new. It has ancient roots. What would be new would be a culture where both kinds of enlightenment were respected and cultivated together. Is there any prospect that a new age of this kind might be dawning? (264, original

emphasis)

The teachings of Dharma Master Thich Nhat Hanh serve a good example of this eco-humanistic synthesis, an effective complement to phenomenological empathy and scientific discoveries. Dharma Master Thich Nhat Hanh employs daily-life language and analogy to simplify the difficult *Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra*, providing us with easy summaries of “non-self” in the forms of “the individual is made of non-individual elements” and “the Buddha is made of non-Buddha elements” (*The Heart of Understanding* 37). The so-called “I” is made of living beings and entities that are “non-I” and is the temporary result of ceaseless inter-penetration of every element in the universe, as demonstrated by the above-quoted poem “Please Call Me by My True Names.” An individual effort, visible or invisible, good or bad in intention, is actually influential at a social level. The suffering in any individual’s heart is, in fact, connected with the suffering of the whole society. In this sense, collective salvation requires personal salvation, and vice versa. With this profound understanding of “dependent origination” or “interbeing,” every one of us is on the right track in carrying out our holistic tasks of self-transformation, societal transformation and, meanwhile, ecological salvation.

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