

Self, Other, and Engaged Buddhist Social Ethics:
An Examination of Self in Buddhist Thought,
Its Application in Engaged Buddhist Social Movements,
and How Such a Conception Might Inform Christian Social Activism

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ABSTRACT

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Self, Other, and Engaged Buddhist Social Ethics: An Examination of Self in Buddhist Thought, Its Application in Engaged Buddhist Social Movements, and How Such a Conception Might Inform Christian Social Activism

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Loriliai Biernacki

In a pair of recent articles, Buddhist Studies professor John Makransky notes a tendency in Christian social activism, particularly that which is influenced by liberation theology, to name an “enemy,” arguing that such a move is reductive and inhibits the work of Christian social activism. He argues that the Buddhist teachings regarding the impermanence of all things, including persons, can inform Christian social activism and lessen the tendency toward reductive labeling. This paper begins with that critique, examining how the Buddhist teachings of no-self, dependent arising, and emptiness inform a conception of persons which inhibits such naming tendencies, and examines the application of these teachings within the movements of Buddhist social activists collectively known as Engaged Buddhists, who see in the Buddhist teachings of no-self, dependent arising, and emptiness an interdependence of all phenomena and, especially, an interdependence of persons and societies. From this view, movements of Engaged Buddhism approach social ills from a stance of nonviolence, nonadversariality, and nonjudgmentalism. The paper then examines three specific Buddhist thinkers—eighth-century Indian writer Śāntideva, twentieth-century Thai writer Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, and contemporary Vietnamese writer and activist Thich Nhat Hanh—considering how these teachings shape their conceptions of the self and how this conception shapes their views on social engagement, attending particularly to how the role of harm-causing agents is understood alternately than as “enemy.” The paper concludes with areas where further research is needed, highlighting especially the emergence of similar ideas within Christian feminist and ecofeminist thought, where the further development of an alternative self-conception within Christianity might inform broader Christian-inspired social activism.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In his 2009 book, *Without Buddha I could Not be a Christian*, Roman Catholic theologian Paul Knitter outlines some of the roadblocks that have developed to his Christian faith over the years, and how a study and practice of Buddhism has helped him re-understand aspects of his Christian tradition. In this theological memoir, Knitter articulates the challenges he has discovered to the logic and reason of his Christianity. The existence of a theistic being, God in his Heaven, separate from the purportedly loved world, save for a few miraculous, divine irruptions; some far-off (in time, if not space) eternal realm where some select continue their personal existence for all of eternity; the efficacy of mouthing words into space in the hopes of their coming true and shaping the material world; all these come under Knitter's growingly skeptical investigation. For each of these faithful impasses, Knitter turns to his encounter with the Buddhist tradition, primarily through Zen, asking what alternatives to these conundrums exist there, and how his own Christianity has been re-imagined in their light.

Knitter relates one story in particular that left him shook, and left him questioning one of the aspects of his Christianity about which he had the fewest questions: the efficacy of Christian social activism. For years, he had been volunteering with Christians for Peace in El Salvador (CRISPAZ), a social justice organization working to oppose the organized drug cartels wreaking havoc on life in El Salvador, as well as Interreligious Peace Council, a group of activists from a variety of religious traditions that "meets every year in a situation of conflict and violence in order to make an interreligious contribution toward a non-violent resolution of the discord."¹ Knitter had studied deeply the Christian theological movement having emerged from Latin America in the twentieth century, liberation theology, which seeks to identify and address the

¹ Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I could Not be a Christian* (Oneworld, 2009), 168.

causes of the social inequality across Latin America by holding the experiences of those marginalized by unequal power structures, and the theological insights growing out of those experiences, as paramount. Key to opposing this inequality, liberation theologians have long held, is an uncowed identification of the oppressor, the enemy, the one whose actions are causing such harm by taking advantage of the structural inequality and thereby perpetuating it; only by identifying this pole of the power structure, and by naming and labeling it as such, could one hope to eradicate it.

It was on one trip with the Peace Council to Chiapas, Mexico, “to help... work out a non-violent resolution to the conflict between the Zapatistas and indigenous people on the one side and the Mexican government and military on the other,” that Knitter’s confidence in this method was shaken. Knitter and his fellow Christian activists were “loud and clear” in their insistence that those wielding the power, the government and the military, be denounced:

After all, one of the pillars of liberation theological approach was that in order to *announce* the truth of the gospel we often had to *denounce* the power of the oppressors. The room still quaked with our righteous declaration when one of the Buddhists at the table calmly raised his hand, and even more calmly stated: “I’m sorry, but we Buddhists don’t denounce anyone.”²

Knitter was stunned. Here were people wielding their power to the disadvantage of the already marginalized, and to further advantage those who already possessed means and power. Of all people, couldn’t they be condemned; and if they couldn’t be condemned, could anybody? The conversation that followed sent Knitter on a quest examining the assumptions undergirding his decades of peace activism and asking if they had made any lasting difference; if they hadn’t, why not; and what might make better building blocks for a Christian social activism?

² Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I could Not be a Christian*, 176.

John Makransky, a Buddhist Studies professor and frequent contributor to Buddhist-Christian dialogues, has raised a similar critique of social activism born of Christian liberation theology.^{3, 4} While both traditions have fostered movements of activists concerned with addressing injustice inequality, “Christian and Buddhist liberation theologies differ in what they identify as the main conditions of suffering, and in the epistemologies they use to disclose their suffering conditions and to address them.”⁵ While each recognizes the existence of suffering and the worthiness of efforts to address and alleviate it, the understandings of the causes of suffering in each scheme differ significantly. For Makransky,

[o]ne weakness in Christian liberation epistemology is a tendency to construct and reify a duality between those who are preferred by God and those who are not, a duality that makes it difficult practically speaking, actually to love *each* person unconditionally in the way that Jesus taught. This difficulty is exacerbated by insufficient attention to layers of suffering in people that drive their unjust actions against others.⁶

This difficulty to love all persons involved in a conflict hinders efforts to alleviate injustice and the work of reconciliation.

Hovering over Makransky’s critique is a question of ontology in these religious traditions. The essentialized selfhood inseparable from the Christian tradition is ineluctably related to the theological dualism that has pervaded the tradition, in one form or another, since its inception. Coming to full fruit in the seventeenth century’s Cartesian split, Walter F. Taylor traces the development of an essentialized selfhood as proto-orthodox Christians debated and argued with Gnostic Christians, who, well-steeped in Greek philosophy, imagined a deity

³ John Makransky, “What Christian Liberation Theology and Buddhism Need to Learn from Each Other,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, No. 34 (2017): 117-134.

⁴ John Makransky, “A Buddhist Critique of, and Learning from, Christian Liberation Theology,” *Theological Studies*, Vol. 75, No. 3 (2014): 635-637.

⁵ John Makransky, “What Christian Liberation Theology and Buddhism Need to Learn from Each Other,” 117.

⁶ John Makransky, “A Buddhist Critique of, and Learning from, Christian Liberation Theology,” 636.

substantially removed from the world; as Christianity expanded into the Greco-Roman milieu and many of the same influences became commonplace even as Gnosticism waned, a thoroughly dualistic universe birthed a dualistic personhood.⁷ While Makransky basis his critique on a misunderstanding of suffering and its causes, his elucidation of personhood in Buddhism as being based on causes and conditions and so fundamentally impermanent, serves as an implicit critique of this universal-cum-personal dualism. A consideration of Makransky's critique, then, requires a consideration of the way that such a dualism has contributed to the naming tendency that Makransky identifies as problematic in Christian social activism. If it is found to be a (or the) contribution factor, the question arises: what alternatives exist?

The nature of persons in Buddhist thought, Makransky articulates, makes such a duality impossible and offers a way of seeing those who are occupying the role of oppressor compassionately, understanding that they too are manifesting actions born of suffering. Drawing on the Buddhist understandings of his Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, and on similar understandings across schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Makransky points out that, here, persons are understood to be empty of any essentialized selfhood, of any inherent nature, and are instead, like all other phenomena in existence, the result of the coexistent causes and conditions. Due to habits and societal conditioning, though, persons routinely “think up a self that can feel ultimately bounded, separate, substantial, concrete, and secure” and are led by this error in perception to grasp and cling to various markers of identity.⁸ It is resistance to this impermanence that leads to suffering, including the suffering

that takes expression in forces of greed, hatred, and oppression in our societies, as people seek stable security by gaining power over goods, wealth, and other persons, none of which can provide lasting safety, intensifying the virulence, for

⁷ Walter F. Taylor, Jr., “NT View of Humanity,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. III, ed. David N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 321-325.

⁸ John Makransky, “What Christian Liberation Theology and Buddhism Need to Learn from Each Other,” 118.

example, with which corrupt regimes defend their power, as if fighting for their very lives.⁹

By denouncing persons who are wielding power over others, by naming as “enemy” those persons who are acting out of the same sources of suffering as all people, Christian social activists mistake social roles which are the results of causes and conditions for the totality of those persons occupying the role of oppressor, and so create a duality between oppressed and oppressor which misunderstands the sources of suffering and prevents the kind of love that is key to their activism. By naming the other as “enemy,” the suffering which leads some to occupy oppressive societal roles is ignored and left unaddressed and those systems of inequality are then perpetuated.

If Makransky’s critique is correct and if Knitter’s experience merits the investigation he believes it does, if Christian liberation theology’s need to name an “enemy/oppressor” harms the Christian activist’s ability to love all people involved in the creation of social inequalities and so hinders reconciliation and causes further harm, then Buddhist insights into the nature of persons and their relationship with social ethics could inform the Christian social activists’ understandings of how to conceive of the persons involved in conflicts and serve to provide a more effective path toward understanding, addressing, and alleviating the suffering that takes place amidst social conflict; that is, if the traditional Christian notion of persons as bounded entities defined by a central essence that imparts inherent characteristics as well as uncompromised agency creates a roadblock to efforts to address social conflict, then an examination of alternative personal conceptions, such as those found in Buddhist thought, could offer insights into a reconsideration of the matter. Further, if such a question occurs in tandem

⁹ John Makransky, “What Christian Liberation Theology and Buddhism Need to Learn from Each Other,” 119-120.

with one of ontology, its presence or lack within Buddhist thought will need to be explicated. To this end, this paper will first examine how the self, within a context of Buddhist views on ontology, is understood in Buddhist thought broadly, before investigating the role of the self within contemporary Buddhist social activist movements, often grouped under the title of “Engaged Buddhism,” noting subtle but key shifts over time. Then, this paper will examine three key Buddhist thinkers, one historical and two modern, asking how the nature of persons is understood in their work. Of specific concern will be how the assumed notion of a permanent selfhood is seen to be harmful, how such a notion is addressed, and how the Buddhist teachings of no-self, dependent arising, and interdependence then inform the construction of social ethics. Concluding, this paper will outline several fronts for further research, one in contemporary Buddhist ethical thought and a number in contemporary Christian theology.

From such a study, it is hoped that an alternative conception of selfhood is presented, such that contemporary currents in Christian theology where an essentialized selfhood is being questioned could be informed by such an alternative. The development of such an alternative conception could then provide Christian social activists with an insight into alternative motivations that shape the actions of harm-causing agents and so, first, be a source of compassion for those who are acting out of their own unseen suffering and, second, better illuminate the motivations for harm-causing actions that they might be more effectively addressed. More broadly, the development of such an alternative might also give rise to a new conception of Christian social ethics, one in which was based on the nondualistic relationships between self and other, self and environment, and self and society.

The three figures whose work will provide the foundation for this essay’s examination are the eighth century Indian Buddhist thinker Śāntideva, author of two works authoritative in

Mahāyāna Buddhism; twentieth century Thai thinker Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu; and contemporary thinker Thich Nhat Hanh, born in Vietnam but long-since living in exile in Southern France. Śāntideva has become a prominent figure in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition since the nineteenth century, as well as a key source for non-Buddhists seeking to understand the structures and shapes of the Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics. His *Bodhicaryāvatāra* and, to a lesser extent, *Śikṣā-samuccaya*, have become important sources for investigating the relationship between (non-) selfhood and ethics in Mahāyāna Buddhist thought and represent authoritative Buddhist commentary. Taking his cue from a traditional standpoint, philosophical answers are not of primary interest to Śāntideva, who subsumes all such questions to the central thrust of his work, how best to address suffering. Within the Theravāda Buddhist tradition of South Asia, Thai monk Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906-1993) stands as a pivotal figure in the question of how traditional Buddhist concepts can shape an ethic quite at home with modern science and reason, but which stands as a pointed challenge to modern notions of individuality. For him, the question of ontology plays a starring role, defining his understanding of the concept of no-self as a kind of a natural law, and how this universal reality should inform the shaping of one's society. Finally, Thich Nhat Hanh (b.1926) stands as one of the most prominent and frequently read of contemporary Mahāyāna Buddhist peace activists, articulating his understanding of the nature of persons (as well as of all else) as "interbeing." His articulation of this concept may represent a mean space between the traditional view Śāntideva and the modern reformist view of Buddhadāsa, serving as pragmatic ontology, a view of the nature of being articulated, not primarily as a descriptor of reality "as it is," but as an (ontological) mean to the end of addressing the social ills Nhat Hanh identifies. Having experienced directly the devastation of the wars in Vietnam, Nhat Hanh's utilization of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy to help

understand what it means to name someone “enemy” serves as a powerful counterexample to this naming impulse in Christian liberation theology.

That these three thinkers were selected should not be taken as a statement about their abilities to represent Buddhism, or their traditions, as a whole. Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu was not chosen to represent Theravāda ethics, and indeed has been criticized for heterodoxically utilizing Mahāyāna concepts;^{10, 11} Thich Nhat Hanh was not chosen to represent Mahāyāna ethics, and his Vietnamese Buddhist education made ample use of concepts found in both traditions which have informed his thought over the years;¹² and Śāntideva was not selected as a bridge between the traditions (though Goodman argues that his thinking was pivotal in developing the Mahāyāna tradition as distinct from the Theravāda¹³) or as a representative of a pristine Buddhism past. However, these three offer an opportunity to witness three answers to the question of how ontology should shape ethics, each within the context of the Buddhist teachings of no-self, dependent arising, and emptiness. Should these teachings offer seeds for a fruitful dialogue with the question of personhood in Christianity, these three articulations of this relationship can serve as a launch-point for reconsiderations within Christianity.

Likewise, the choice to examine engaged Buddhism here should not be understood to make a claim that these movements represent the whole, or best, of Buddhist social activism, nor should those movements or thinkers examined be taken to be representative of engaged Buddhism as a whole; surely there are many individual Buddhists contributing to the betterment of their neighborhoods and societies daily, and many engaged Buddhists articulating fascinating

¹⁰ Donald K. Swearer, “Introduction,” in *Me and Mine: Selected Essays of Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa*, ed. Donald K. Swearer (Albany: State University of New York, 1989), 10.

¹¹ Sallie B. King, “From Is to Ought: Natural Law in Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Phra Prayudh Payutto,” *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2002): 277.

¹² Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009), 4.

¹³ Charles Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), chs. 4 and 5.

rationales for their dedicated work. Engaged Buddhism, and those thinkers within it, were selected due to their contention that their understanding of personhood, informed by Buddhist thought, serves as a primary motivator for their work and so might serve as fruitful conversation partners in a developing Christian anthropological study as it relates to Christian social activism. And, while it is true that some of the Buddhist concepts explored in the following pages have had corollaries in other traditions, including Christianity (some of which will be examined in the final section of this paper), the longevity and variety of their exploration within the tradition gives Buddhism a unique potency in the expression of these concepts.¹⁴

It is hoped that the insights from these thinkers concerning the nature of persons and its relation to suffering may serve as a basis for qualifying the tendency of Christian social activism to name and label an “enemy,” and so provide a path toward addressing the suffering of all persons involved in systems of inequality that better facilitates a future reconciliation. Gratitude is expressed to my family and professors for their patience in enduring my many false-starts; errors that follow are surely my own.

¹⁴ Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press: 2005), 230.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter first examines basic concepts that shape notions of personhood in Buddhist thought (no-self, dependent arising, and emptiness) before providing a brief introduction to Engaged Buddhism and how these conceptions inform the activism of Engaged Buddhists generally.

No-self, Dependent Arising, and Emptiness

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Buddhist thought, present according to the tradition since the Buddha's enlightenment experience under the Bo tree, is the characterization of reality as ever changing and lacking in permanence (P: *anicca*, S: *anitya*),¹⁵ the ignorance, denial, or misapprehension of which is the cause of a fundamental dissatisfaction with human life (P: *dukkha*, S: *duḥkha*).¹⁶ Human beings consistently treat impermanent phenomenon to be permanent and are pained when those expectations are not met. All things change and the futile desire that they would not causes consistent feelings of disappointment and disorientation that color all of existence. As the arising of suffering is directly related to this desire, so too is its cessation; remove this desire, the Buddha's insight revealed, and the suffering too fades.

The teaching applies just as forcefully to the one's conception of the self. Most schools of Indian philosophical and religious thinking, then as now, held that personhood consists in a central essence. This *ātman* is unchanging and immortal, providing a consistency from life to life distinct from the changing phenomenal world. It is "the thinker of thoughts, feeler of

¹⁵ A word about Pālī and Sanskrit terminology: where appropriate, I have done my best to supply both terms for concepts shared by all schools of Buddhism (with Pālī terms designated by "P" and Sanskrit terms designated by "S") and when discussing terms particularly associated with Theravāda and Mahāyāna have supplied the Pālī and Sanskrit, respectively. Pālī and Sanskrit terms in direct quotations appear unaltered, representing the author's choices of terminology, transliteration, and use (or not) of diacritical markings.

¹⁶ Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 2nd Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 34.

sensations, and receiver of rewards and punishments for all its actions good and bad.”¹⁷

Buddhism’s twenty-five hundred-year contention is that such a thing does not exist.

All of existence, the Buddha contended, is in a constant state of flux, changing and impermanent, and the human being does not exist distinctly from this reality: “Impermanence is not just a characteristic of the phenomena of the external world; it applies to oneself.”¹⁸ That sense of “I,” of what the twentieth-century Thai monk and theoretician Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu would come to call “the gut sense of me and mine” (Thai: *Tua-kū-khong-kū*),¹⁹ is a fiction, an illusion born out of an instinct-cum-desire for self-preservation which denies one’s impermanence.²⁰ Far from providing a bulkhead against the existential angst of mortality, however, the Buddha and the subsequent tradition have regarded this illusion as the primary source of suffering, both personal and social.²¹ To personally resist the transience we see around us, we try in vain to associate a permanent identity with impermanent phenomenon, “by grasping to things, circumstances, and people that can never provide lasting safety and well-being since they do not last,”²² thereby giving rise to personal suffering. Existing socially, we also seek to remediate this transience socially, by seeking resources and power:

It is people’s response to this suffering of transience, not fully conscious to them, that takes expression in forces of greed, hatred, and oppression in our societies, as people seek stable security by gaining power over goods, wealth, and other persons, none of which can provide lasting safety.²³

¹⁷ Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught, Revised Edition* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 51.

¹⁸ Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 37.

¹⁹ Donald K. Swearer, “Introduction,” in *Me and Mine: Selected Essays of Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa*, ed. Donald K. Swearer (Albany: State University of New York, 1989), 9.

²⁰ Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 51-52.

²¹ Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 37.

²² John Makransky, “What Christian Liberation Theology and Buddhism Need to Learn from Each Other,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, No. 34 (2017): 119

²³ *Ibid.*, 119-120.

This response, “not fully conscious” to most, manifests as the desire to accumulate goods, wealth, and power, often at the expense of others. While, for most, this does not take the form of explicit and intentional participation in corrupt political regimes or the knowing endorsement of systems of oppression, the very same desires can serve to blind us to the ways which the social systems in which we participate do contribute to the unequal power dynamics that are the cause of so much social suffering throughout the world, convincing us that the inequality and suffering we see is simply natural and inevitable rather than the result of the structures shaping our societies.

In addition to leading one to grasp for permanence amid transience, there is another sense in which this false notion of selfhood can be seen to cause suffering. In the first, above, suffering is born of trying and failing to resist a personal sense of transience, of believing that one exists in an ultimate sense and resisting and denying the intimations that this is not so. This leads to both personal and social suffering when one’s futile desires manifest as the accumulation of wealth, goods, and power at the deprivation of others. However, suffering also arises from this false notion of self by acting on the mistaken belief that one’s needs and wants can be attended to without regard for the needs and wants of others. If I am a bounded entity, and my well-being is a product of factors that can be said to be of “me” and that which is “mine,” a self-preservation is justified and it makes sense to nurture and care for those factors, even as it gives rise to harm for others.²⁴ This false view manifests itself as disregard for the well-being for others and justification for their harm. In this second sense, it is the belief that one’s needs and wants are bounded by an established selfhood and so can be regarded separately from the needs

²⁴ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009), 20.

and wants of others that gives rise to social suffering. As Walpola Rahula succinctly puts it, summarizing the harm caused in both senses:

[T]he idea of self... produces attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and other troubles in the world from personal conflicts to wars between nations. In short, to this false view can be traced all the evil in the world.²⁵

In both senses, that of attending to one's existential needs in the first and to one's temporal needs in the second, addressing the suffering born of misunderstanding of one's impermanence through the accumulation of goods, wealth, and power leads to harm. It is the concept of dependent arising that articulates why this is so.

Since, as the Buddha taught, all phenomena are constantly changing, then all things exist, not in and of themselves, but as the result of causes and conditions. Nothing arises on its own and nothing exists by its own virtue:

When necessary conditions are present to support a thing's existence, it comes to be. As those conditions change and new conditions appear, the thing changes. When the conditions for the thing's existence are finally removed, the thing ceases to be. This principle applies not only to the existence of phenomena but also to the quality of things.²⁶

This teaching (P: *paṭicca-samuppāda*, S: *pratītya-samutpāda*), which comes to be known variably in English as conditioned genesis, dependent co-arising, co-dependent arising, or simply—as the usage favored here—dependent arising, points to an underlying causality throughout existence.

The Buddha offered this teaching in a specific context, that of the Buddha's articulation of the Twelve *Nidānas*, an explanation of how “the entire mass of suffering” arises in the world

²⁵ Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 51.

²⁶ Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 39.

and how one can cut its causal chain.²⁷ There is disagreement about whether a general sense of causality gives rise to the *nidānas* or vice versa. For some, the teaching of dependent arising refers only to this causal chain that gives rise to suffering and should not be “used as a basis for personal interrelation, and is only problematically interpreted as interconnection.”²⁸ For others, dependent arising is a general causality and the *nidānas* are “a more specific version” of the teaching.²⁹ Even among those who stress the association of the teaching with the *nidānas*, a general sense of causality can be ascertained. In explaining the teaching of the Twelve *Nidānas*, Walpola Rahula writes, “It should be clearly remembered that each of these factors is conditioned as well as conditioning. Therefore they are all relative, interdependent and interconnected,” wryly calling the teaching of dependent arising “the Buddhist theory of relativity.”³⁰ Further, Charles Goodman points out that the texts which identify dependent arising with a general sense of causality (specifically, with the later teaching of *śūnyatā*) are not clearly Mahāyāna in origin,³¹ arising at a time when such distinctions were not yet clear. Whether it is consistent with the original intention of the Buddha’s teaching or not, it is clear, as we shall see, that a multitude of thinkers, writers, and activists draw from the teaching of dependent arising a general principle of interrelativity, or interdependence, and so see a universe where all phenomena exist as conditioned by and conditioning all else.

Those that do so are certainly not without precedent. With the emergence of the writings from which Mahāyāna Buddhism would arise comes the teaching of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), the

²⁷ “Selection from the *Mahānidāna Suttanta* (The Great Discourse on Causation,” in *Original Buddhist Sources: A Reader*, ed. Carl Olson (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 39-42.

²⁸ Stephen Jenkins, “Compassion and the Ethics of Violence” in *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, ed. Steven M. Emmanuel (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 469.

²⁹ Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 39.

³⁰ Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 53-54.

³¹ Charles Goodman, “Philosophy of the *Training Anthology*,” *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva*, tr. Charles Goodman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), lv.

articulation that all phenomena are lacking in inherent nature (*svabhāva*).³² While the teaching of no-self denies the existence of a personal, immaterial essence, and the teaching of impermanence recognizes the fundamental inconsistency in all phenomena, the teaching of emptiness sees in all things a lack of essence and a lack of inherent characteristics. Charles Goodman explains:

“When things are empty, what are they empty of? [...] The answer... is that they are empty of *svabhāva*—a Sanskrit term that has no single equivalent in English. Its etymology is similar to the Latin derivation of the word ‘essence,’ and in fact, *svabhāva* is often used to mean something much like the Western concept of essence. Thus, the doctrine of emptiness can be viewed as a form of antiessentialism. But the doctrine goes beyond the denial of essence. *Svabhāva* can also mean ‘intrinsic character.’ Thus, for things to be empty of *svabhāva* is in part, for all their characteristics to be defined and constituted by their relations to other things, and not by what they are in themselves, independently of anything else.”³³

It is because of this lack, Mahāyāna Buddhism holds, that phenomena can only be understood as conditioned and conditioning,³⁴ and it is this realization, that all things lack any essence, that allowed the influential Mahāyāna thinker Nāgārjuna, writing around 200 CE, to equate the teaching of dependent arising with the teaching of emptiness.³⁵ If the Buddha’s original articulation of dependent origination was intended for its more specific application, in Nāgārjuna’s poetic philosophy, the more general principle of interdependence is given its grounding; for Mahāyāna Buddhists, and for some Theravāda Buddhists, this is in keeping with the intention of the Buddha’s teaching.

³² Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 105.

³³ Charles Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 123.

³⁴ Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 105.

³⁵ *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, tr. Jay L. Garfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), XXIV.18.

Like the earlier articulation of impermanence, this later articulation applies just as forcefully to persons. Just as any phenomenon is said to be lacking inherent nature, that is existence independent of surrounding causes and conditions, so too must a person be understood as without a central essence. That a person is fundamentally empty means that

each one of us comes into being and is constructed not only by and through our parents, but also through the causal and conditioning influences of the air we breathe, the Earth we stand upon, the food we eat, the love or abuse we receive from family, the ideas we learn from teachers, the images impressed upon our minds by media, the trust and suspicion we develop through peer relationships, the culture that gives us language and concepts, and so forth. We do not exist for a moment in isolation from all these things.³⁶

While it may seem as if human beings exist separately from one another and separately from their surroundings, this teaching places the person into a web of connectivity, interdependent with all else in existence.

Lest the term emptiness be taken as a kind of nihilism, it is important to note here what is and what is not negated. To say that persons are empty of inherent nature is not to say that persons (or any other being) can be summarily dismissed as lacking value; such a conceit is rooted in the prejudiced view that it is the nonmaterial that imparts worth to a being. As Sallie King explains, though, to negate a nonmaterial essence at a person's core is not to negate the existence of persons. She writes that the concepts of no-self and emptiness "[mean] only that there is no independent, unchanging metaphysical entity within a human being. There is, however, still a perfectly real set of interdependent events, experiences, thoughts, physical processes, and so forth that constitutes human being."³⁷ That is, what is negated is not the existence of persons, but the existence of persons centered around a fixed, unchanging,

³⁶ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 18-19.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

permanent essence. These teachings, then, qualify what we mean by the term “person.”

Whereas, this term is often assumed to mean an independent person existing by virtue of its own nature, in the light of no-self and emptiness, the word person comes to mean one who is “empty of a separate self and full of the nonself components that have come together to constitute what is called ‘self.’”³⁸ The teachings of no-self and emptiness are aimed, not at the value and worth of persons, but at the belief that value and worth are located in an unchanging selfhood.

Buddhism, here, comes to speak of two truths. On the one hand, there can be stated an ultimate truth (P: *paramattha-sacca*, S: *paramārtha-satya*), articulating the reality of emptiness, that, phenomena do not exist in an ultimate sense, independent of causes and conditions; they lack *svabhāva*. On the other hand, however, there can be stated a conventional truth (P: *sammuti-sacca*, S: *saṃvṛti-satya*), articulating the reality of everyday language, that the word “person” signifies an entity with a physical and social location, wants, needs, hopes and dreams, all of which are acknowledged only ever to be conditioned and conditioning realities. Rather than existing as entities unto themselves, phenomena, including persons, exist in a world of relationship.

While these descriptors serve as useful descriptors, the tradition has been reluctant to impart the status of ontology to them, preferring generally to see these views as instrumental to Buddhism’s primary concern of reducing the suffering of sentient beings. Such reluctance, writes Donald Mitchell, has been a hallmark of the tradition since its earliest days. While philosophical questions permeated religious discussions during the time, the Buddha stood as notably reluctant to address such matters. Beings in existence, the Buddha taught, were

³⁸ Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press: 2005), 15.

suffering, like those who had been shot by a poisoned arrow. What mattered most in such a dire circumstance was the removal of the arrow, the address of persons' suffering. Those who were interested in philosophy were like those lying in the street, slowly dying of their wounds, and wondering whence the arrow came and the name of the one who fired it. The Buddha's teaching, he told his early followers, was to remove the arrow, not to provide answers to every ancillary and speculative question that arose. "[N]o matter what particular answers one might learn concerning the philosophical questions," the Buddha's teachings held, "the dissatisfactory condition of ordinary, unenlightened life would remain like a poisoned arrow."³⁹ It was not a comprehensive philosophical system that the Buddha was concerned to articulate, but a method for addressing the suffering present in the life of every sentient being. Matters such as the correct answers to ontological questions did not fit the circumstances.

Such reluctance continued with the development of another descriptor of reality, the Mahāyāna teaching of emptiness and its further elucidation of the two truths. "[I]t is tempting," Jay Garfield writes, "since one of the truths is characterized as an ultimate truth, to think of the conventional as 'less true,'" and so set emptiness as an absolute reality in its own, ascribing to it a permanence, a Reality, that lets it be the rock on which all else is built.⁴⁰ "This would," Garfield writes, "ascribe a special, nonconventional, nondependent hyperreality to emptiness itself. Ordinary things would be viewed as nonexistent, emptiness as substantially existent."⁴¹ According to Nāgārjuna, though, such a move would instantiate a dualism between the phenomenal world and another, that of emptiness, a possibility which the tradition has

³⁹ Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 33-34.

⁴⁰ Jay L. Garfield, "The Text and Commentary," *Fundamental Wisdom*, 297.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 303.

emphatically denied. Rather, Garfield explains, “[e]mptiness and the phenomenal world are not two distinct things. They are, rather, two characterizations of the same thing.”⁴²

The matter becomes clear with an illustration. Consider a table, Garfield suggests. Upon examination, no *svabhāva*, no table-essence, can be found; the table is impermanent, made of non-table parts and the result of causes and conditions; it is, in a word, empty. But what of this emptiness; can it be said to exist in a way that is significantly different than the table, to have an existence beyond its conventional designation? It would seem a possibility, if the emptiness of the table is an unchanging reality. However, Garfield writes, nothing can be said of this emptiness that is its own; rather one can only speak of “the table’s lack of inherent existence. No conventional table, no emptiness of the table.” That is, the emptiness of the table is not an unchanging reality, but a description of the table’s reality; as the table has come into existence and will go out of existence, so too its emptiness.⁴³ Emptiness, then, is itself empty of any self-substantiated existence, and exists itself as a conventional designation. The “ultimate nonexistence” of phenomenon “and their conventional existence are the same thing.”⁴⁴ Any attempt, then, to place emptiness as an ontological reality in-and-of-itself falls apart.

For Śāntideva, this is evinced by the absence of an ontology throughout his corpus; his singular goal, and the aim of his counsel, is the amelioration of suffering, not a description of reality as it is. Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, however, places on ontology—Dhamma or Nature—at the center of his thinking, though he argues that this is a recovery of the Buddha’s original teaching and not a departure from it. For Thich Nhat Hanh, his conception of reality as interbeing functions as an ontology, while coexisting with Nhat Hanh’s cautionary reticence to claim that

⁴² Jay L. Garfield, “The Text and Commentary,” *Fundamental Wisdom*, 305.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 316.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 320.

any such thing is possible; in this way, then, presenting interbeing as an ontology may be seen as a deliberate choice, an instrumental or pragmatic ontology, presented in the service of the larger goal of addressing and preventing suffering.

For Buddhists, Sallie King writes, this is a powerful word of hope. Rather than understanding oneself, one's personality, one's weaknesses and foibles, as the result of a fixed and unchangeable nature, one is free to see a range of possibilities within oneself, to be "constantly becoming other-than-we-were."⁴⁵ And for those Buddhists, in particular, who are motivated by their tradition to affect change in their societies, the teachings of no-self and emptiness point toward a world of possibilities. Commenting on the emergence of contemporary Buddhist social activism, Ken Jones writes that the teachings of no-self, dependent arising, and emptiness point toward a reality "pregnant with the potentiality of liberative, energizing creativity."⁴⁶ For him, it is the teaching emptiness, whose Sanskrit term *śūnyatā* "also carries the meaning of swollen, or pregnant," which grounds and motivates a sense potential within social activism. He continues:

There is here [in the teaching of emptiness] an immense potential to transform our awareness of reality, and for this radically different consciousness to sustain the vision and confidence to effect previously impossible social changes.⁴⁷

Rather than being passive recipients of a world beyond one's control, this understanding reveals the potential to have a significant shaping impact. The world, including persons and the social structures they inhabit and construct, is not the result of fixed and unchanging realities, but rather is the result of causes and conditions, a realization which reveals a potential to affect those causes and conditions and so also the resultant world. Jones, as we will see, is hardly alone.

⁴⁵ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 20.

⁴⁶ Ken Jones, *The New Face of Social Buddhism: A Call to Action* (Boston: Wisdom Books, 2003), 13.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

Engaged Buddhism

While the recent decades of increased visibility of Buddhism in the West, especially the prominence of the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh who are known for their social engagement, may have done much to complicate the image, for some there remains a stereotype of the Buddhist who withdraws to meditate in isolation, unconcerned with the mundane goings-on of the world. Sallie King writes that this image is not without precedent, that there exists a reasonable reading of the tradition that concludes that the world is “intrinsically and irremediably flawed and that the wise will therefore cease caring about it, detach themselves from it, have as little as possible to do with it, and earnestly try to leave it.”⁴⁸ She points toward the Fire Sermon, an early teaching of the Buddha in which he describes a host of body parts as “burning” and counsels revulsion at their existence, as well as the venerable tradition of charnel ground meditations, in which monks are instructed to contemplate corpses in varying states of decomposition in order to view without delusion the reality of death and decay.⁴⁹ However, she points out, there is also a scriptural and interpretative thread, extant since the first days of the tradition, of engagement, beginning, of course, with the Buddha’s own decision to remain in the world after his enlightenment and to share his discovery for the benefit of others. Indeed, of the disciplines of Noble Eightfold Path,

only Right Concentration... has to do with withdrawal from the world, and even there the Buddha made it clear in his teachings on meditation that concentration itself does *not* have liberating power. [...] When one considers the other seven practices on the list, it is clear that they are practices for living in the world in a perfected manner, not for withdrawing from the world.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 40.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

Further, she writes, there is a rich tradition of encouraging Buddhist lay persons, as well as monastics, “to cultivate the virtues of giving, loving-kindness, and compassion... which can be realized in”—and indeed, are only applicable to—“social relationships.”⁵¹ There is a tension, she writes, among these divergent threads present in the tradition since its inception, between withdrawal from the world and engagement with it. Further, this engagement is not merely for the purpose of Buddhist teachings, as if the primary reason to engage, traditionally, was the spread of Buddhism. Rather, Buddhist thinkers like Walpola Rahula⁵² and A. T. Ariyaratne⁵³ have argued that Buddhist monastics have long been engaged with the world around them, in both “spiritual” and “mundane” ways.

The presence of these two seemingly contradictory threads points one toward the teaching of no-self. King writes that this teaching imbues one with a sense of selflessness, as opposed to selfishness, which lessen the tendency to behave in selfish and egotistical ways.⁵⁴ Kenneth Kraft also sees here “a creative tension between withdrawal and involvement, an underlying synonymity between work on oneself and work on behalf of others.”⁵⁵ Or, as José Ignacio Cabezón succinctly summarizes, “Without some commitment to personal spiritual transformation... talk of peace is only so much rhetoric.”⁵⁶ To put it all another way, if it is a misapprehension of the self as a permanent, unchanging entity, bounded and existentially isolated from the rest of the world that is the cause of so many social ills, then it is within a deepening understanding of the teachings of no-self, dependent arising, and emptiness that the

⁵¹ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 42.

⁵² Christopher S. Queen, “Introduction,” in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, eds. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 14-16.

⁵³ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 9, 42.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁵ Kenneth Kraft, “Introduction,” in *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence*, ed. Kenneth Kraft (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 3.

⁵⁶ José Ignacio Cabezón, “Buddhist Principles in the Tibetan Liberation Movement,” in *Engaged Buddhism*, 300.

potential to redress these ills lie. There is certainly, then, a tradition of withdrawal from the world, but it is, according to these writers, a purposeful withdrawal, for the sake of engagement.

At the heart of Engaged Buddhism social activism, then, is a robust understanding of the Buddha's teaching of dependent arising. While this teaching may be interpreted variously, according where one lays the primacy in the Buddha's teaching of causality, all of the Engaged Buddhist thinkers profiled here consider it central to their social activism. Perhaps Sulak Sivaraksa, a Thai activist and thinker whose *International Network of Engaged Buddhists* "[f]acilitates conferences, education, and training based on Buddhist values and practices that support and strengthen socially active individuals and groups,"⁵⁷ gets at the centrality of this teaching Buddhist social activism when he writes that dependent arising is "the crux of Buddhist understanding."⁵⁸

Beginning with an understanding of the teaching as the causal chain of the Twelve *Nidānas*, Sulak locates the suffering a person experiences, first, in ignorance, particularly about the nature of reality, noting that this teaching also contains the key seed of hope: that by dispelling ignorance, the causal chain can be halted and suffering brought to an end.⁵⁹ But Sulak, representative of so many Buddhist activists, says more, writing that this teaching reveals "an interdependence" between all phenomena and a nonduality between what had been previously understood to be distinct entities. Understanding the application of this teaching to personhood reveals that "an atomized sense of self and a self/other dualism are the antithesis of interdependence and is an obstacle to achieving the peace of enlightenment."⁶⁰ "Without you,"

⁵⁷ "About," International Network of Engaged Buddhists, Accessed February 9, 2018, <http://inebnetwork.org/about/>

⁵⁸ Sulak Sivaraksa, *Conflict, Culture, Change: Engaged Buddhist in a Globalizing World* (Boston: Wisdom, 2005), 71.

⁵⁹ Sulak Sivaraksa, "Buddhism in a World of Change: Politics Must be Related to Religion," in *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Fred Eppsteiner (Berkeley: Parallax, 1985), 10.

⁶⁰ Sulak Sivaraksa, *Conflict, Culture, Change*, 71.

Sulak writes succinctly, “there could not be a *me*.”⁶¹ The teachings of no-self and dependent arising, for Sulak, reveal a teaching of interdependence.⁶² The universe itself is interdependent and this includes persons.

This understanding shapes Sulak’s understanding of the goals of Buddhist practice. As there cannot be a distinct line between self and other, neither can there be a distinct line between the spiritual goals of self and other. Any conception of “individual salvation,” writes Sulak, is simply an expression of self-interest, is contrary to this central Buddhist understanding, and is in fact a source of division and suffering in the world:

This way of thinking breeds division and conflict not dissimilar to nationalism, racism, and other *-isms*. [...] The crux of the Buddha’s teachings transcends the notion of individual salvation and is concerned with the whole realm of sentient beings or the whole consciousness.⁶³

Additionally, it is in this understanding of interdependence that Sulak sees a Buddhist impetus for social engagement. Just as person is not separable from person, neither is a person separable from the surrounding world, either materially or with regard to the societies in which people are located. These central Buddhist teachings lead Sulak to conclude “that Buddhism *requires* an engagement in social, economic, and political affairs.”⁶⁴ The interdependence that Sulak sees among phenomena he sees also among the person and society. Persons are seen, then, to be nondual in their relations with one another, with the material world, and with social structures.

It is from this insight, articulated above by Sulak and woven through much of the thinking behind Engaged Buddhist movements, that the movements of Engaged Buddhism make their “signature contribution,” namely the realization that connection between inner peace and

⁶¹ Sulak Sivaraksa, *Conflict, Culture, Change*, 57.

⁶² Sulak Sivaraksa, “Buddhism with a Small ‘b’,” *Fellowship*, Vol. 65, No. 1-2 (February 1999).

⁶³ Sulak Sivaraksa, *Conflict, Culture, Change*, 40.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 40. Emphasis mine.

peaceful personal interactions can be applied societally, “that work for *world* peace should be based upon a platform of *inner* peace”⁶⁵—indeed, that it can’t be other. Put another way, Engaged Buddhists see that, just as the Buddhist teachings of no self, dependent arising, and emptiness point toward an interdependence of individual phenomena, so too do they point toward an interdependence of collective phenomena; just as individuals are interdependent with one another, so too is the individual with the surrounding society.⁶⁶ In this way, the traditional notion of suffering is extended beyond the pain born of clinging to false notions of self to include “worldly suffering from brutal governments, hunger, etc.,”⁶⁷ and the concept of liberation is extended from a metaphysical “notion of liberation to a social, economic, this-worldly liberation.”⁶⁸ What makes Engaged Buddhism, then, a distinct and valuable contribution is this application of what was a personal diagnosis and cure to a societal one.

This application is particularly vivid when Buddhist insights about the relationship between self and other are brought to bear on societal conflicts. Because the teachings of no-self, dependent arising, and emptiness reveal an interdependence between self and other, and bring to the fore the necessary dependence of persons, conventionally understood, on the world and on one another, the interests of self and other can be seen “coinhere.”⁶⁹ This insight, in particular, colors the approach activists bring to situations of conflict. Conflict resolution in Engaged Buddhism, then, can be said to be nonviolent, nonadversarial, and nonjudgmental.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 48. Emphasis mine.

⁶⁶ Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence*, 92.

⁶⁷ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 44.

⁶⁸ Christopher S. Queen, “Introduction,” *Engaged Buddhism*, 10.

⁶⁹ Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence*, 92.

⁷⁰ I have adapted this from Sallie King’s characterization of Buddhist ethics, generally, as “nonjudgmental, nonadversarial, and developmental” (*Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 27).

Just as nonviolence, as the first of the Buddhist Five Precepts, is a hallmark throughout the tradition, it likewise plays a central role in Engaged Buddhist social activism, especially as it applied to conflict resolution. In tracing the history of nonviolence in Buddhist practice, Luis O. Gómez notes that the nonviolence began as a way to distinguish the early Buddhist community from its surrounding social milieu, then became a kind of talisman for self-protection, before becoming a result of the Buddhist teachings on the self.⁷¹ This conviction, that the Buddhist teaching of nonviolence is best seen as an product of the teachings of no-self, dependent arising, and emptiness, is evinced by Kenneth Kraft, in introducing a collection of essays on the relationship between Buddhism, both in its historical and contemporary iterations, and nonviolence, writing that the rationale for nonviolent engagement “is the conviction that all things, near and far, are fundamentally related.”⁷² Any sort of violent engagement, then, is counterproductive, harming the interests of all involved.

Peace work, here, is also extended beyond merely opposing violence to include also fostering the conditions for more peaceful societies. “Peace is a proactive, comprehensive process of finding ground through open communication and... the sharing of resources,” writes Sulak. “Creating a culture of peace is an active process.”⁷³ This understanding extends beyond a negative imperative against violence and argues for a peace work which is undertaken even without the presence of open conflict. In this way, the labeling of a harm-causing agent as “enemy,” can be seen as precluding the work of nonviolence. Such a label instantiates an oppositional relationship rather than one on which parties can see themselves on “common ground.”

⁷¹ Luis O. Gómez, “Nonviolence and the Self in Early Buddhism,” in *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence*, ed. Kenneth Kraft (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 31-48.

⁷² Kenneth Kraft, “Introduction,” in *Inner Peace, World Peace*, 2.

⁷³ Sulak Sivaraksa, *Conflict, Culture, Change*, 7.

Understanding the interdependent nature of reality also compels a nonadversarial approach to conflict resolution. Instead of envisioning a conflict between two parties as necessitating the defeat of one side, a nonadversarial approach to conflict resolution seeks a solution in which the interests of all sides are considered, since those interests can only be seen to “coinhere.” “Buddhism teaches that there is no such thing as the isolated self,” Sulak reminds us; “our entire reality is made up of nonself elements.”⁷⁴ These nonself elements, then, necessarily include shared elements between self and other. As this is the case, a conflict cannot be effectively resolved by a “stance of solidarity with some that [excludes] equal solidarity with the others,”⁷⁵ as such a stance can only be an illusion. Any resolution that seeks a solution that is “for some” and “against others” will be based in a false conception of self and other and so will only lead to future conflict. The naming of another as “enemy,” then, can only be seen to arise from such a misunderstanding, one that justifies the necessary distance to implicate another and not one’s own self. Rather, “[k]nowing that we are interconnected and that our interests are interconnected, when we are in a conflict situation, we ought... to look for a win-win outcome that will fulfill the true interests of everyone involved,”⁷⁶ a view which can only arise when temptations toward such labeling are resisted or overcome. A solution which has the interests of all parties in mind is more likely to be a solution with lasting peace.

This nonadversariality is born of the nonjudgmentalism that informs Engaged Buddhist activism. An understanding of the Buddhist teaching of causality shapes Engaged Buddhist activism by qualifying the actions of those involved in conflict situations, even those who may be considered “enemies,” as arising as the result of causes and conditions. Recalling the

⁷⁴ Sulak Sivaraksa, *Conflict, Culture, Change*, 56.

⁷⁵ John Makransky, “What Christian Liberation Theology and Buddhism Need to Learn from Each Other,” 121.

⁷⁶ Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence*, 72.

example from the opening pages, then, the Buddhists gathered around the table with Knitter who refused to condemn the powerful and violent persons involved in the nearby conflict as enemies, recognized that their actions grew out of a result of their societal positioning; they were birthed, not from a bad, personal identity that needed to be condemned, but from social conditioning and learning which resulted in harmful actions. Moreover, Sulak writes, interdependence forbids the distance that is required for judgmentalism to take hold, since, “[f]rom a nondualist perspective, we are all both aggressors and victims”⁷⁷; any judgment that renders another guilty is also self-indicting, since one cannot establish the independence from the other necessary to implicate the other without also implicating oneself. Acknowledging this reality allows the activist to engage compassionately with all sides in a conflict. Rather than “choosing sides to confront one group on behalf of another,” the activist motivated by this understanding can make a different choice: “The choice is not for some against others. The choice of unconditional love and compassion is always *for* every person.”⁷⁸ Further, it is only by considering all sides involved in a conflict empathetically, writes Ken Jones, that viable solutions to conflicts can be found.⁷⁹ In these ways, then, the Engaged Buddhist activists apply their understanding of the Buddhist concepts of causality and interrelatedness to craft an approach to conflict resolution which is nonviolent, nonadversarial, and nonjudgmental.

The term Engaged Buddhism is applied to a number of Buddhist-inspired social movements having arisen within East and South Asia during the twentieth century in order to address a number of emerging social crises. In cataloging the litany of destructive developments having taken place in the region, Sallie King notes that “Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and much of the

⁷⁷ Sulak Sivaraksa, *Conflict, Culture, Change*, 31-32.

⁷⁸ John Makransky, “A Buddhist Critique of, and Learning from, Christian Liberation Theology,” *Theological Studies*, Vol. 75, No. 3 (2014): 641.

⁷⁹ Ken Jones, *The New Face of Social Buddhism*, 15.

rest of Southeast Asia” were the location of massive and global military engagements; that Cambodia witnessed the emergence and devastation of a genocidal regime; and that widespread colonialism instantiated mass poverty and long-term political turmoil in much of the region. Combined with the late twentieth-century “forces of rapid modernization, Westernization, and globalization,” the region saw a number of acute crises emerge related to the resultant widespread social and economic inequality.⁸⁰ While some earlier examinations of these movements saw the seeds for their methods and techniques arriving with Western colonizers,⁸¹ more recent scholarship has noted how this view has overlooked the distinctly Buddhist character of these movements.

Acknowledging the influence of Western education on several movements’ earlier leaders, Sallie King rightly points out that reducing the subsequent social movements to Western influence erases the agency of those very leaders: “Engaged Buddhism leaders have not been passive recipients of Western ideas and practices. They have embraced Western ideas that they have found useful, such as human rights, and largely left alone those that they have not found compatible with their Buddhist worldview.”⁸² Further, and perhaps more importantly, there is quite a bit more to Engaged Buddhist movements than whatever can be attributed to Western-influenced education. That these movements arose in the wake of Mahatma Gandhi’s nonviolent campaign for Indian independence, for instance, is surely no coincidence, as the movement he led provided a powerful example of the potential of “spiritually based, nonviolent social engagement,” inspiring leaders throughout Asia and the world.⁸³ Whatever influences on the movements’ early leaders could be attributed to the West, these influences have been

⁸⁰ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 2-3.

⁸¹ See, for instance, Christopher S. Queen, “Introduction,” *Engaged Buddhism*, 19-20.

⁸² Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 11.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 2.

incorporated into “a *Buddhist* intellectual and spiritual world.”⁸⁴ Finally, King notes: that such questions of East and West rather miss the point in a world that has been globalizing rapidly:

We live in a time in which the world is shrinking, as news and ideas instantly circle the globe electronically; people, products, and pollution travel with small attention to national boundaries; and cultures and societies become ever more tightly knit together. In such a triple world, the Engaged Buddhists skillfully balance their roles as transmitters of traditions and values, transformers of tradition, and negotiators of tradition in a world in which the old boundaries are falling down.”⁸⁵

Within this globalizing and modernizing world, where the boundaries between cultures and nations are becoming increasingly difficult to discern, the following thinkers and activists attempt to apply these insights to the suffering they encounter.

Upon the ground of the Buddha’s enlightenment experience, his lifetime of teaching, and the tradition’s subsequent interpretations, Engaged Buddhist social movements look to a deepening understanding of the teachings of no-self, dependent arising, and emptiness, where they find a sense of interdependence between the phenomena of existence. Additionally, Engaged Buddhist social movements see also an interdependence between persons and societal structures, realizing an inseparability between the two. This realization illumines the ways that these structures can be a cause of suffering but also how they can be shaped and affected as a means of alleviating suffering. As the persons go, so too go the surrounding societies; as the societies go, so too go the persons within. It is from this insight that Engaged Buddhists take their cue, addressing the social ills they see around them by means that nonviolent, nonadversarial, and nonjudgmental. The following thinkers—one of whom long predates talk of Engaged Buddhism and two of whom stand as the most influential thinkers of the contemporary

⁸⁴ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 12.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Buddhist social activism—offer insights into how these conceptions are applied, shaping persons who are shaping their world.

III. ŚĀNTIDEVA

While little is known about this eighth century Indian figure Śāntideva, the two works that bear his name have enjoyed authoritative status in Mahāyāna Buddhism, serving as the definitive outlining of what it means to dedicate one's self to the amelioration of suffering and influencing centuries of Buddhists and students alike, from the Dalai Lama to novice students seeking a deepening understanding of the relationship between no-self, dependent arising, and emptiness and ethical engagement. Today, the texts are recognized as canonical commentaries on the tradition and expound upon how one ought to take up the mission and addressing the suffering experienced by every sentient being. The aspects of Buddhist doctrine elucidated in the texts are ordered into the service of this singular task. Aligned with the tradition's earliest assertions about the Buddha's teachings, Śāntideva treats no-self and dependent arising as methods for removing the poisoned arrow of suffering, enlisting the matter of ontology to a means to this end.

Background

Born into a life of a privilege and comfort, the eighth-century Indian writer and thinker Śāntideva may at first seem an unlikely candidate for centuries of influential religious thought.⁸⁶ Certainly, Śāntideva's peers thought so. After having taken up a meditation practice and finding himself deeply affected, the crown prince left his home and arrived at Nālandā, a sprawling university complex that stood out among the Buddhist monastic centers of learning. There, he distinguished himself, not in his skills in rhetoric, learning, or religious practice, but in his

⁸⁶ Except where noted, the historical background of Śāntideva and his works, including the traditional account of his life and the composition of his works, comes from the introduction ("The *Training Anthology* in Its Cultural and Religious Contexts") of Charles Goodman's *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva: A Translation of the Śikṣā-samuccaya* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), ix-xii.

apathy, earning the ignoble title of *bhusuku*, “a kind of Sanskrit acronym composed of the words meaning ‘eat, sleep, and defecate.’”⁸⁷

In an effort to shame him into either motivation or departure, Śāntideva was told he that he would soon be required to recite a text of his choosing before his peers at a religious festival. When the day arrived, Śāntideva asked his gathered audience if they should like to hear him recite a known text or one of his own composition. Doubtlessly chagrined by his impudent boldness, the crowd chose the latter. Taking his place on a mocking throne his peers had erected for him, Śāntideva began to recite what would become the more famous of his two-known works, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, vanishing from their sight during a teaching on the tranquility of the mind and reciting the conclusion of his work hidden from their sight. Even without such a portent, to the audience “[i]t would have been clear very quickly that this was one of the greatest works of poetry every composed in the Sanskrit language.”⁸⁸

Less is known of the background to Śāntideva’s second text, *Śikṣā-samuccaya*, which Charles Goodman has translated as both “The Training Anthology,”⁹² and “Compendium of the Trainings.”⁹³ This work follows a different format, featuring much less original writing by Śāntideva in favor of quotations of lengthy passages from valued scriptures that illustrate the compiler’s thinking. Jay Garfield has “commented that the [*Bodhicaryāvatāra*] is like the textbook for a university course, and the *Training Anthology* is like a coursepack with supplemental readings.”⁹⁴ It’s unclear which work came into existence first, though Śāntideva

⁸⁷ Charles Goodman, “The *Training Anthology* in Its Cultural and Religious Contexts,” *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva*, x.

⁸⁸ Ibid., x-xi.

⁹² as in *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva*.

⁹³ as in *Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁹⁴ Charles Goodman, “The *Training Anthology* in Its Cultural and Religious Contexts,” xii.

does make reference in *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (V.105) to a work which may be *Śikṣā-samuccaya*.⁹⁵

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Self and Ethical Action in Śāntideva

Through both works, Śāntideva clearly “[intends] to bring about significant change in the reader,” writes Charles Goodman. “Specifically, these texts seek to encourage an emotional transformation that will move practitioners away from the constantly changing reactive emotions,” of the kind that might move someone to label another *enemy* and so hinder the work of peaceful conflict resolution, “and towards the stable, blissful, compassionate awareness that is characteristic of Buddhas.”⁹⁷ In places, Śāntideva aims to accomplish this transformation through inspiration, as when he sings the praises of *bodhicitta*,⁹⁸ “the attitude of mind that tends toward Buddhahood, the enlightened state,”⁹⁹ exhorts his readers to persevere in their dedication to the well-being of others and their quest for enlightenment,¹⁰⁰ or describes the fruit of wisdom for oneself or others.¹⁰¹ In other places, he operates through generating a fear in his readers of the consequences of failing to make such a change, as in when he warns of the hellish rebirths that are possible,^{102, 103} of the consequences of a failure to maintain mental discipline,¹⁰⁴ or of the dangers of reactive emotions like anger.¹⁰⁵

Perhaps most often, though, Śāntideva hopes to effect this change in his reader by arguing that it simply makes no sense, given the Buddhist teachings of no self and dependent

⁹⁵ Charles Goodman, “The *Training Anthology* in Its Cultural and Religious Contexts,” xi.

⁹⁶ *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, 202n73.

⁹⁷ Charles Goodman, “The Philosophy of the *Training Anthology*,” *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva*, xxxvi.

⁹⁸ e.g., Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, III.8-10.

⁹⁹ “Introduction,” *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, 2.

¹⁰⁰ e.g., Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, IV.55-58 and VII.14-19.

¹⁰¹ e.g., Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, IX, 36-37, 52.

¹⁰² e.g., Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, IV.25.

¹⁰³ e.g., Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, IV.5-6.

¹⁰⁴ e.g., Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, IV, 16-18, 25-27.

¹⁰⁵ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, VI.1.

arising, to regard one's own welfare as more important than anybody else's and that, in fact, one should dedicate one's entire life to caring for the well-being of others by working to positively address their suffering.¹⁰⁶ Śāntideva does this by deconstructing the essentialized selfhood that the reader assumes to exist. By showing that a person is the result of causality, conditioned by all other phenomena in existence, Śāntideva decenters the reader's sense of identity. Also, treating the nature of persons as existing relatively, and experiencing suffering which is worthy of redress, Śāntideva exhorts the reader to be committed to alleviating the sufferings of others with utmost dedication, including those any one might consider naming *enemy*. As Śāntideva names the misunderstanding of the nature of persons as the chief addressable cause of suffering, he also counsels the reader to remain mindful of the empty nature of persons, as well as all other phenomena. The arguments that Śāntideva employs appear throughout his works as they pertain to various parts of his transformative project.

While not the most prominent argument, a key foundational move made by Śāntideva within his writings is arguing that upon examination of a person nothing like an essence, no *svabhāva*, is to be found. The reader may look in vain, he counsels, but nothing of the sort will be discovered: "For instance, we may take banana trees— / Cutting through the fibers, finding nothing. / Likewise analytical investigation / Will find no 'I,' no underlying self."¹⁰⁷ Wherever one is tempted to locate such an identity, the poet relentlessly points out that none of these options could prove viable.

Such a self, Śāntideva argues, cannot be attributed to thoughts that arise in the mind, since those are fleeting and ephemeral. If a thought arises, then dissipates to be forgotten

¹⁰⁶ Charles Goodman, "The Philosophy of the *Training Anthology*," xxxvii.

¹⁰⁷ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, IX.74.

altogether, what then of the self; has it too vanished?¹⁰⁸ Likewise, Śāntideva argues, feelings, too, make an untenable basis for the sense of self, since the feeling and the feeler of the feeling can't be distinguished: "No subject exists separately, / Distinct from feeling."¹⁰⁹ Nor can the experience of the phenomenal world be the basis of such a lasting selfhood; like thoughts, experiences are fleeting and like feelings, they are inseparable from subject.¹¹⁰ In fact, it is this mutability, the poet claims, that represents an argument against the existence of an unchanging self. After all, if selfhood were an unchanging essence, a person would be left unreactive, as any reaction would require an impossible change.¹¹¹

Should one wish to locate a selfhood, not within the ephemera of the mind, but within the material reality of the body, a search here, too, will be in vain. The body's origins, after all, are no mystery: it arises from "[a] drop of others' blood and sperm," and so cannot be the source of unchanging selfhood.¹¹² Having arisen, then, where among its parts could a self be found?

What we call the body is not feet or shins; / The body, likewise, is not thighs or loins. / It's not the belly nor indeed the back, / And from the chest and arms the body is not formed. / The body is not ribs or hands, / Armpits, shoulders, bowels, or entrails. / It is not the head, and it is not the throat. / What is the 'body,' then, in all of this?"¹¹³

Clearly, not in its members is a self to be found. Should the body be taken as a whole, then, and as an entity be taken to be a self? No, Śāntideva, argues, for a whole cannot reside in the sum of

¹⁰⁸ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, IX.73.

¹⁰⁹ Śāntideva, *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva*, 233; *Sūtra on Chanting the Dharma Together*. The reference numbers give for *The Training Anthology* (233, in this instance) refer to "a set of standard page numbers based on the pagination of the first modern published edition of the text, edited by Cecil Bendall in the Bibliotheca Buddhica series (1897-1902)," according to standard practice. See Goodman's "The *Training Anthology* in Its Cultural and Religious Contexts," page xii, for more. As the vast majority of the work is Śāntideva's quotations of other works, the text from which Śāntideva takes the quotation will follow this page number (here, *Sūtra on Chanting the Dharma Together*). When no such text is listed, the quoted material is Śāntideva's original writing.

¹¹⁰ Śāntideva, *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva*, 233; *Sūtra on Chanting the Dharma Together*.

¹¹¹ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, VI.29.

¹¹² Ibid., VIII.158b

¹¹³ Ibid., IX.78-80.

its parts, lest there be innumerable bodies in each member—and, if this is case, no self. If the body is the location of selfhood, one might as well take a similarly shaped pile of stones to be a person.¹¹⁴ The relationship between whole and parts, the Dalai Lama argues similarly, is such that one cannot be separated from the other in an identifying manner: “Without parts, there can be no whole; without a whole, the concept of parts makes no sense. The idea of ‘whole’ is predicated on parts, but these parts themselves must be considered to be wholes comprised of their own parts.”¹¹⁵ Applied to the body, as Śāntideva does here, means that the parts of the body cannot result in selfhood because they too can be understood as composites of parts. The body, then, either as a whole or through its parts, cannot be taken as a location for selfhood.¹¹⁶

Just as its origins are knowable, so too is the body’s end well-known, as any trip to the charnel grounds, Śāntideva points out, will reveal the body’s unsuitability as a location for a selfhood. While convincing his reader not to attach to the bodies of the sexual attractive, Śāntideva writes “Go off into the charnel grounds; / Observe the fetid bodies there abandoned.”¹¹⁷ He later concludes, “Dust and ashes are the body’s final state— / This body which, inert, is moved by other forces. / This form so frightening and foul— / Why do I so regard it as my ‘self’?”¹¹⁸ Clearly, for the poet, one shouldn’t. The body is forever changing, growing until it begins the inexorable march toward decay and no self can be located in a body that arises, changes, and is eventually destroyed.

No self can be found, Śāntideva argues, and misunderstanding this reality is the cause of the entirety of the world’s suffering. Luis O. Gómez, cutting to the heart of the matter, writes

¹¹⁴ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, IX.80-83.

¹¹⁵ His Holiness the Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), 37.

¹¹⁶ See also *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, IX.56-59 for a similar argument.

¹¹⁷ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, VIII.63cd.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, VIII.178.

that, for Śāntideva, “the notion of a self and the attachment which originates in it are the only causes of all suffering in this world.”¹¹⁹ This is so because such a notion “inflicts reactive emotions upon us, and leads to greed, fear, selfishness, and suffering.”¹²⁰ Charles Goodman writes, commenting on Śāntideva’s understanding of the matter. Quoting a lengthy passage from the *Rice Leaf Sūtra* in the *Śikṣā-samuccaya*, Śāntideva’s work attributes this costly error to a fundamental and pervasive ignorance. As part of his effort to dispel such an ignorance, the poet seeks to make his readers aware of just how detrimental such a false view can be.

A misunderstanding of the nature of the person causes suffering for deluded individual, Śāntideva writes, because it imbues the person with a false sense of pride. The accomplishments at which one can look are taken to be intrinsic and possessed by the person, worth taking sole credit for, when in fact, one’s positive attributes are merely “accidental.” This false sense of pride has a reverse as well: just as a false notion of self leads one to take credit for their positive attributes, it also leads one to cast blame on others for their shortcomings.¹²¹ A false sense of self, then, causes strife and division by clouding one’s sense of persons, attributing too much credit to one and too much blame toward another, and so distorting relationships.

This false sense of self is also the source of emotions that lead to suffering. Early in *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Śāntideva shows solidarity with others who fear their inevitable death. Just as others are “transfigured by [their] fear” of death, so too can the poet relate to such terror: “No need to say how stricken I shall be / When overcome and sick with dreadful fear, / I’m seized by forms so horrible to see, / The frightful Lord of Death.”¹²² “Who can give me safe protection,” he asks grievously, before pointing himself (and the reader) toward the Buddha’s teaching. Fear

¹¹⁹ Luis O. Gómez, “Emptiness and Moral Perfection,” *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (July 1973): 364.

¹²⁰ Charles Goodman, “The Philosophy of the *Training Anthology*,” lvi.

¹²¹ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, VIII.160-165.

¹²² Ibid., II.43-44.

is only possible, Śāntideva writes, because of a sense of self and so beings who are enthralled by such a notion are also susceptible to the deepest of fears, fears which paralyze one from acting positively in the world for the sake of others.¹²³ But it is not only fear; even emotions that are experienced as positive are a source of suffering. Combined with a false notion of self, these positive emotions become an unstable basis of action, leading one to seek joy, only to sink into despair when it is found to be fleeting. All who seek contentment in the experiences of emotions “are deeply troubled, or else thrilled with joy. / They suffer, strive, contend among themselves, / Slashing, stabbing, injuring each other: / They live their lives engulfed in evil and travail.”¹²⁴ A sense of self becomes a basis for positive emotions, which engender a desire to accumulate and experience them, as well as of negative emotions which can color all of one’s days with fear.

Such pain and suffering is caused by this false notion of so much that Śāntideva is left to lament:

“All the harm with which this world is rife, / All fear and suffering that there is, / Clinging to the ‘I’ has caused it! What am I to do with this great demon? / If this ‘I’ is not relinquished wholly, / Sorrow likewise cannot be avoided. / If they do not keep away from fire, / People can’t escape from being burned.”¹²⁵

How is it that people can keep away from this fire; how is it that people can slay this great demon “I,” relinquishing it wholly to lessen the harm with which the world is rife? If the suffering is born from a mistaken notion of self, for Śāntideva, it is eased with a correct view of what a person is.

If the search for a self previously undertaken yields no such thing, what is it that such an investigation uncovers? For Śāntideva, it is the reality of causality, that all things that one can

¹²³ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, IX.56.

¹²⁴ Ibid., IX.154-155.

¹²⁵ Ibid., VIII.134-135.

observe can be seen to be conditioned and conditioning all other phenomena. That is, the apparent lack of *svabhāva*, the failure to discover some central core to a person or anything else, points one toward the reality of dependent arising and, specifically, toward the emptiness of all phenomena.¹²⁶ “No aspect of Mahāyāna teachings is as important to him [Śāntideva] as emptiness,”¹²⁷ Goodman writes, and in *Śikṣā-samuccaya*, Śāntideva illustrates its centrality and potency, providing this hypothetical:

[S]uppose a single sentient being were to commit... the worst forms of the ten unwholesome courses of actions. Suppose he were then introduced to the Tathāgata’s Dharma teaching about causes and conditions, as follows: ‘Here there is no self, no sentient being, no life-force, no person, no agent of actions, and no subject of experiences.’ He is introduced to the way things are: not made, not compounded, and illusory; and to the way things are: free from reactive emotions. He is introduced to the natural sheer clarity of everything. He has faith and has confidence in the primordial purity of everything. I say: that sentient being will not go to the lower realms.”¹²⁸

The importance of the teaching of emptiness and its implications are such that karmic consequences for actions that are born of the ignorance of it, even those actions that among the worst possible, are erased by a realization of and faith in “the way things are... the primordial purity of everything.” Emptiness, for Śāntideva, writes Goodman, cannot be understood, though, apart dependent arising. It is not only that “there is no self,” but that what is experienced is seen through the lens of dependent arising. An understanding of one is an understanding of the other.¹²⁹

Because Śāntideva’s investigation into the nature of reality reveals nothing to which a self can be attributed, he is left to articulate his understanding of dependent arising: “All things,

¹²⁶ Charles Goodman, “The Philosophy of the *Training Anthology*,” lv.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, lv.

¹²⁸ Śāntideva, *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva*, 172; *Treasury of the Tathāgata Sūtra*.

¹²⁹ Charles Goodman, “The Philosophy of the *Training Anthology*,” lv.

then, depend on other things, / And these likewise depend; they are not independent.”¹³⁰ Lacking independent existence, the nature of reality, “the way things are,” is one, not of independence, but of interdependence. “The threefold world is changing like an autumn cloud,” Śāntideva writes in *Śikṣā-samuccaya*, comparing all that we experience—birth, death, and every experience in between—as the actions of actors on stage, with the duration of “lightning in the sky,” and with the substance “the moon reflected in water.”¹³¹

If all that we encounter, the poet reasons, has the material of “an image in a mirror,” “[h]ow can true existence be ascribed to it?”¹³² And, for that matter, if we cannot ascribe the kind of reality we expect to phenomena, can we say anything different about human beings? After all, “As long as conditions are assembled, / Illusions, likewise, will persist and manifest. / Why, through simply being more protracted, / Should sentient beings be regarded as more real?”¹³³ In quoting the text, *Inquiry of Ugra*, Śāntideva relates the advice given to a merchant concerning his desires for possessions, wealth, even a family. The text tells him that even his closest loved ones, even he himself, are not other than the result of causes and conditions: “All conditioned things are illusory, having the characteristic of being mentally constructed.”¹³⁴ All of it Śāntideva says, is the result of causes and conditions and nothing, no matter how it might seem, can be described as existing by its own virtue. And this applies just as forcefully to persons.

For Śāntideva, this has life-defining consequences. In considering those who seek to do him harm Śāntideva resists the label “enemy.” Those persons, he argues, are not acting out of a

¹³⁰ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, VI.31.

¹³¹ Śāntideva, *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva*, 204; *Detailed Explanation of the Play*.

¹³² Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, IX.143-144.

¹³³ Ibid., IX.10.

¹³⁴ Śāntideva, *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva*, 180; *Inquiry of Ugra*.

free will and agency that malevolently seeks to harm, but rather are merely manifesting the effects of the present causes and conditions, including karma, and so lack the agency required to receive Śāntideva's anger. Further, for Śāntideva, it is his own ignorance of this that is the primary cause of his suffering. Arguing that harm-causing acts are the result of causes and conditions and that Śāntideva's own negative karma numbers among them, and that his suffering is the result of his own misplaced anger and attachment to his body, Śāntideva finds no suitable location in another for the label enemy.

The doctrine of dependent arising precludes Śāntideva from ascribing the label "enemy" to a person, since that person is, like all phenomenon, the result of various causes and conditions. Another person, in this view cannot be an apt location for one's anger or serve as a fitting recipient for the label "enemy." Since, "All things, then, depend on other things, / And these likewise depend; they are not independent. / Knowing this, we will not be annoyed / At this that are like magical appearances."¹³⁵ This dependency of all things qualifies the actions of others such that they can no longer be the object of anger. Śāntideva draws a parallel between persons whose actions cause pain and "biles and other humors" which give rise to sickness.¹³⁶ If the latter are not appropriate objects of anger—and, indeed, it is clear the poet does not regard them as such—neither, then, can people. Just as germs and other disease-causing agents lack the will or agency to merit our anger, so too do persons who exist and act as a result of causes. This is true, writes Śāntideva, of persons who seem to cause harm habitually—since their predilection should be well-known and their actions expected—as well as those who cause harm rarely—since their harm-causing actions are mitigated by the rest of their behavior.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, VI.31.

¹³⁶ Ibid., VI.22

¹³⁷ Ibid., VI.39-40.

Just as a false notion of self was previously seen to be the source of a harmful pride and propensity to judge other negatively, so too can such a false notion lead one to misapply responsibility for one another's harm-causing actions. That is, in misapplying the will and agency needed to label a person enemy, Śāntideva points out that one then misses the true cause of harm-causing actions: the motivating afflictive emotions in the harm-causing agent. He writes: "Although it is their sticks that hurt me, / I am angry at the ones who wield them, / striking me. / But they in turn are driven by their hatred; / Therefore with their hatred I should take offence."¹³⁸ It is not the person wielding the stick that is worthy of the label enemy and of Śāntideva's anger, but the cause of the person's harm-causing actions: their own afflictive emotions. The actions of those who would do harm are motivated, not by an independent agency and will that freely chooses to harm, but by motivating emotions born of ignorance. It is these, the poet writes, to which one should ascribe blame. Recognizing the causes and conditions which shape actions checks the desire to label any person "enemy," and focuses one's blame where it belongs: on the afflictive emotions that serve as the cause of such actions.

In addition to the causes that have shaped the actions of his assailant, Śāntideva identifies a second cause in the actions of those who would do him harm: Śāntideva's own karma. Through his own past harmful actions, Śāntideva has summoned the harmful actions of others who are merely executing the result Śāntideva's own causes: "In just the same way in the past / I it was who injured living beings. / Therefore it is right that injury / Should come to me their torturer. / [...] / Those who harm me rise against me— / It's my karma that has summoned them."¹³⁹ Further, since Śāntideva's karma is the cause of another's harmful actions, the poet

¹³⁸ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, VI.41.

¹³⁹ Ibid., VI.42, 47.

himself is bringing karmic harm to his assailants. Since they are acting out an effect of Śāntideva's cause, Śāntideva is actually the source of harm to them:

And if through this these beings go to hell, / Is it not I who bring their ruin? /
Because of them, and through my patience, / All my many sins are cleansed and
purified. / But they will be the ones who, thanks to me, / Will have the long-
drawn agonies of hell. / Therefore I am their tormentor!¹⁴⁰

In addition to dependent arising removing the agency required to name an assailant enemy, Śāntideva locates the cause of such harm-causing actions in his own karma, and so assumes responsibility himself for the negative karma generated by the harm-causing actors. With whom, Śāntideva asks rhetorically, will one then be angry?

Śāntideva employs another tactic to convince his reader that persons are not suitable locations for anger, arguing that the harm experienced at the hands of harm-causing actors is only harmful due to one's own ignorance and attachment to one's own body. Above, ignorance of the causes and conditions that result in harm-causing actions and ignorance of the role one's own karma plays in the matter lead one to wrongly ascribe blame to a harm-causing actor and the dispelling of this ignorance properly qualifies this tendency, but it doesn't remove the physical harm; that is, recognizing that an assailant is acting out of causes and conditions, one of which is one's own karma, might remove the impetus to label that person enemy, but it doesn't stop the assault from hurting. For Śāntideva, it is the false identification of the body as his self that leads to his suffering:

Their weapons and my body— / Both are causes of my torment! / They their
weapons, I my body brandished; / Who then is more worthy of my rage? / This
body—running sore in human form— / Merely touched, it cannot stand the pain! /
I'm the one who grasped it in my blind attachment, / Whom should I resent when
pain occurs?¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, VI.47c-49a.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., VI.43-44.

If Śāntideva didn't take his body to be his own self, if he didn't marry the body's fortunes to the experiences of happiness and suffering, what happened to the body would be of no consequence; the body's pain would not lead to suffering if Śāntideva didn't identify so thoroughly with it. His attachment to it, then, becomes a weapon on par with his assailants' and, again, Śāntideva argues that a harm-causing actor cannot possess the agency and responsibility for harm-causing actions to merit the label enemy. "And who indeed should I be angry with?" he asks, since the pain that he is experiencing "is all my own contriving."¹⁴² The pain he is enduring is not the fault of those causing the harm but is the result of his disordered perception of the value of the body.

It is here, then, that Śāntideva finds a suitable location for the label enemy. It is not found in those who would cause harm, since their actions are the result of various causes and conditions, including Śāntideva's own karma, but it is found, rather, in the presence of afflictive emotions. It is the "afflictive passion" which resides within Śāntideva's own mind, the misplaced agency that causes anger to arise at another, the ignorance which leads him to neglect the role of his own karma in his pain, and his attachment to his body that gives that pain such power that is the result of Śāntideva's suffering:

Anger, lust, these enemies of mine, / Are limbless and devoid of faculties. / They have no bravery, no cleverness; / How then have they reduced me to such slavery? / They dwell within my mind / And at their pleasure injure me. / All this I suffer meekly, unrelenting— / Thus my abject patience, all displaced! / [...] / O my enemy, afflictive passion, / Endless and beginningless companion! / No other enemy indeed / Is able to endure so long!¹⁴³ 4.28-29, 32

¹⁴² Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, VI.45ab.

¹⁴³ Ibid., IV.28-29, 32.

Addressing the suffering he is enduring—and the suffering that others endure—is not a matter of labeling the correct person enemy that they might better be neutralized, defeated, or worse. To do so is to misidentify the problem and be faced with the same situation when another harm-causing actor arises. Rather, Śāntideva contends, the true enemy lies within one’s own mind, within one’s own perspective. “The jail guards of saṃsāra,” Śāntideva writes, are not found within others and their harm-causing actions, but rather “lurk within” Śāntideva himself.¹⁴⁴ To label an enemy and to address the suffering that arises in the world, is to locate the harm here, in one’s own misaligned views. A false notion of the independence of beings skews our understanding of ourselves and others and leads to harm and suffering. This misunderstanding, then, and the “afflictive passion” that results, is the only appropriate object of Śāntideva’s anger—all the better motivation to address our own ignorance.¹⁴⁷

However, Śāntideva’s understanding of persons as the result of dependent arising does more for the poet than mitigate his negative feelings toward others. Additionally, it gives rise to and shapes his mission of working to alleviate the suffering in the world by, first, revealing that suffering to be wholly unnecessary and, second, by removing any impetus to locate it in bounded human beings. Regarding the first, recall that, for Śāntideva (as well as for the multitude of Buddhist thinkers surveyed here, as well as a general principle of Buddhist thought and teaching), suffering arises through a misapprehension of the nature of reality and, in particular, of the nature of the self as an independent entity. “All the harm with which this world is rife, / All fear and suffering that there is, / Clinging to the ‘I’ has caused it!” the poet laments in the eighth chapter of *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.¹⁴⁸ This realization, that such a notion of the self is both

¹⁴⁴ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, IV.34-35.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., IV.32.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., VIII.134-135.

false and initiative of great harm, motivates Śāntideva's engagement in the world. Tremendous suffering is experienced by sentient beings who, while having no ultimate existence, have a conventional existence in which the experience of suffering takes place and is (conventionally speaking) real. For the poet, this suffering is both unnecessary and addressable.

The unnecessary of the suffering of sentient beings gives rise to and nurtures the compassion that is the basis of Śāntideva's larger project and, for the poet, that compassion is given its shape by the realization that suffering has no specific location. That is, "[s]uffering as such is abhorrent," writes Barbara R. Clayton, not the suffering of any particular person, not even one's own self.¹⁴⁹ For just as Śāntideva's understanding of dependent arising qualifies beings' identities such that sufficient agency cannot be attributed so as to justify one's anger toward another, so too does it qualify one's own self-identity such that sufficient agency cannot be attributed to justify a primacy of self with regards to ethics. Luis O. Gómez puts it this way: "Once the very notion of self is removed, all attachment to self disappears, then there will be no more attachment to profit."¹⁵⁰ To put the point another way, what could it profit a person to gain anything at all if there was never any self to begin with?

Śāntideva poses the question this way, in the opening root verse of *Śikṣā-samuccaya*:
 "When fear and suffering are disliked / By me and others equally, / What is so special about me,
 / So that I protect myself and not others?"¹⁵¹ "The question is so powerful," in Śāntideva's understanding of dependent arising, comments Charles Goodman, "because it has no cogent answer."¹⁵² Since no basis for the self can be found, no basis for restricting ethical priority or for

¹⁴⁹ Barbara R. Clayton, "Śāntideva, Virtue, and Consequentialism," in *Destroying Māra Forever: Buddhist Ethics Essays in Honor of Damien Keown*, eds. John Powers and Charles S. Prebish (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 2010), 19.

¹⁵⁰ Luis O. Gómez, "Emptiness and Moral Perfection," 362-363.

¹⁵¹ Śāntideva, *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva*, 2.

¹⁵² Charles Goodman, "The Philosophy of the *Training Anthology*," xxxviii.

assigning suffering to persons is found either. Śāntideva comes to the same conclusion, writing in *Bodhicaryāvatāra*:

“Suffering has no ‘possessor,’ / Therefore no distinctions can be made in it. / Since pain is pain, it is to be dispelled. / What use is there in drawing boundaries? / ‘But why dispel the pains of all?’ / You cannot argue in this way! / If ‘my’ pain is removed, so too should that of ‘others.’ / If theirs is not, then neither should be mine.”¹⁵³

Without a basis for locating suffering within the boundaries of a person, there is no basis for prioritizing any one person’s suffering over any others; therefore, Śāntideva concludes, it is suffering itself, wherever it is found and wherever one possesses the means to address it, that should be one’s primary concern.

For Barbara Clayton¹⁵⁴ and Charles Goodman,¹⁵⁵ this approach aligns Śāntideva with a kind of consequentialism,¹⁵⁶ ordering his ethical approach around the best possible consequences like, say, eliminating suffering; Clayton specifically wants to name this an agent-neutral consequentialism, while acknowledging that Śāntideva’s approach makes certain allowances to ethically prefer *some* agents over others—specifically, those beings who are more spiritually developed and so whose ethically preference would then result in a greater reduction of suffering. However, since Śāntideva has, throughout his work, sought to alter his reader’s understanding of the agent, of the way in which persons exist, any claim of agent-neutrality should be slightly qualified.

¹⁵³ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, VIII.102-103.

¹⁵⁴ Barbara R. Clayton, “Śāntideva, Virtue, and Consequentialism,” 23-24.

¹⁵⁵ Charles Goodman, *Consequences of Compassion*, 103.

¹⁵⁶ Both see, also, hallmarks of other ethical orientations, but do not favor them finally. For Goodman, negative utilitarianism offers important insights, but cannot suffice since Śāntideva’s ethic could not abide what is called the “null-bomb” hypothesis (See Goodman, *Consequences*, 101). For Clayton, universalism is an important starting point but is complicated by Śāntideva’s “bodhisattva exception,” since universalism cannot be qualified. She does, however, allow for a hybridized understanding of a “*universalist* consequentialism” (21). Gómez, for his part opts not to utilize any ethical classification for Śāntideva’s work, writing that his outlook is “abolitive” and serves only to “abolish the grasping of conceptions” (Gómez 369). These categories can be helpful, though—particularly in a comparative context—so long as they are held loosely and seen as means to understanding.

It is not, after all, the suffering *of agents* that concerns the poet but suffering-*qua*-suffering. That is, Śāntideva's ethic may not be agent-neutral as much as it is agent-less. Since Śāntideva is operating from the position that "[a]ll things... depend on other things,"¹⁵⁷ including persons, and the conventional reality of persons is such that "fear and suffering are disliked / [b]y me and others equally,"¹⁵⁸ the dispelling of any suffering is to the benefit of all, including Śāntideva. That is, since persons are not bounded and neither is their suffering, the suffering experienced by any person is not relegated to that person; likewise, neither is any alleviation of suffering. The self is not separable and so neither is suffering or its amelioration. The suffering-alleviating work in which the poet engages does not only benefit the beings whose suffering is addressed, but it also benefits the experience of all others, including the one doing the addressing:

"What could a satisfied king give / That would be equal to Buddhahood, / Which someone who has made sentient beings happy / Will indeed experience? / Forget about attaining Buddhahood in the future! / Why don't you see that in this very life, / Good fortune, fame, and favorable circumstances / Come from making sentient beings happy."¹⁵⁹

Dispelling suffering and "making sentient beings happy," then, enriches and the conventional experience of life for those who engage in the undertaking Śāntideva is counseling. This singular focus on eliminating suffering lends an instrumental quality to Śāntideva's work. The understanding that he is describing, the transformation he hopes to accomplish in his readers, the practices he encourages, all become means to the end of addressing suffering.

However, even while this insight illuminates a major focus of the poet, Śāntideva's thinking cannot be reduced to a utilitarianism; the suffering-alleviating work in which he

¹⁵⁷ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, 31.

¹⁵⁸ Śāntideva, *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva*, 2.

¹⁵⁹ Śāntideva, *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva*, 157; *Miscellany for Monks*.

engages is not only motivated by a cognitive understanding of dependent arising, as if it were only the actions of an informed agent, but is itself a manifestation of it:

“When the mind is ready in this way, then someone who has the method of full Awakening, in order to lift the rest of the living world out of the ocean of suffering... should now engage the emptiness of everything. In this way the emptiness of the person is attained.”¹⁶⁰

Likewise, in *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Śāntideva writes, “To free myself from harm / And others from their sufferings, / Let me give myself to others, / Loving them as I now love myself.”¹⁶¹ In this way, then, Śāntideva’s ethic is agent-neutral (allowing for Clayton’s qualification), but not in a sense of being indifferent to (the conventional reality of) agents, but rather in the sense of considering the benefit of all agents, including the poet himself.

It is owner-less suffering, then, that concerns Śāntideva, and, like the tradition’s earliest assertions about the Buddha’s teachings, Śāntideva marshals the tradition’s teachings toward the best ways to reach this goal. Luis Gómez illustrates this point with regard to the poet’s use of no-self. In the eighth chapter of *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, for instance, Śāntideva imagines himself in the place of a beggar. When he does so, “he is not concerned with the beggar’s selflessness. If he were concerned with this, then he be making selflessness into absolute principle.”¹⁶² That is, in Śāntideva’s estimation, assuming the selfhood of the beggar (and of Śāntideva for that matter) to the extent that the poet can imagine himself in the beggar’s position is more likely to result in a reduction of suffering than allowing the teaching of no-self to prevent such an imaginative exercise.

¹⁶⁰ Śāntideva, *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva*, 242; *Miscellany for Monks*.

¹⁶¹ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, VIII.136.

¹⁶² Luis O. Gómez, “Emptiness and Moral Perfection,” 369-370.

This calculation is possible, Gómez argues, because of Buddhism's tradition rejection of ontological reality. Its purpose, exemplified by Śāntideva, is not to provide a neutral assessment of reality as it is, let the chips fall where they may, but rather "to bring about a radical change of thought," in the service of addressing suffering. "It's ontology," Gómez writes, "has been correctly described as an abolitive ontology; its conception of reality only serves the function of abolishing the grasping at conceptions."¹⁶³ In this way, then, the ethic instantiated in Śāntideva's work is instrumental, lacking in an ultimate ontology. Like Nāgārjuna, Śāntideva is operating from the position that reality is characterized as empty, but that nothing, including emptiness, can be given ultimate status.

Meditative Practices in Śāntideva

It is this understanding, then—shaped, as it has been throughout, by dependent arising—that gives rise to the importance of the meditative practices that Śāntideva commends to his readers. These practices are intended to both motivate and shape the ethical undertaking Śāntideva is counseling, and also to provide the practitioner with a direct experience of dependent arising, of the emptiness of all phenomena. Should one fail to heed the poet's advice and incorporate these practices, the wisdom the poet has articulated will be only so many words:

"For those who have no introspection, / Though they hear the teachings ponder them, or meditate, / Like water seeping from a leaking jar, / Their learning will not settle in their memories."¹⁶⁴

The meditative practices in Śāntideva's work, then, first seek to maintain the practitioner's understanding of dependent arising and no-self. Since so much of our world is predicated on a false notion of identity, continually reinforcing this misconception, the poet writes that such a

¹⁶³ Luis O. Gómez, "Emptiness and Moral Perfection," 368-369.

¹⁶⁴ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, V.25.

strong habituation must be counteracted with an equally dedicated diligence.¹⁶⁵ This is done through remaining vigilant and aware—“mindful”—of the reality of dependent arising, reminding oneself of its truth should it be “forgotten or dispersed.”¹⁶⁶

One set of these practices are the meditations on the body, intended to break the natural attachment one has with their physical form. This is accomplished by, first, recognizing that the body itself is composed of parts, many of which—“feces, tears, sweat, mucus, mucus of the nose, fat, saliva, bone-marrow, fatty tissue, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, brain, meninges, and urine”—are unpleasant to consider.¹⁶⁷ While, in a monastic context, such considerations are meant to encourage faithfulness to one’s vow of celibacy, they also serve to point the mind to the body’s “impurities.”¹⁶⁸ Śāntideva also outlines meditations to be undertaken at the charnel grounds, among corpses in various states of rot and decay, to keep practitioners ever-mindful of the body’s temporal nature. Seeing the corpses, one calls to mind the fact that one’s own body “has the same qualities, has the same nature, and is not excluded from that reality.”¹⁶⁹

The second set of practices in Śāntideva’s work are designed to foster a greater sense of dependent arising and the inseparability of person from person. One such practice aims to generate “lovingkindness”—“aiming at, being committed to, and rejoicing in the happiness of others”—towards others as a “remedy for aversion.”¹⁷⁰ The practitioner begins by considering those for whom the generation of lovingkindness comes most effortlessly: Buddhas. Following Buddhas, one generates such feelings for Disciples, Solitary Sages, loved ones, friends, acquaintances, those who happen to be nearby, fellow villagers, and finally, for strangers in

¹⁶⁵ Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, VIII.115-116.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., V.33.

¹⁶⁷ Śāntideva, *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva*, 209; *Cloud of Jewels*.

¹⁶⁸ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009), 41.

¹⁶⁹ Śāntideva, *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva*, 211; *Blessed Lady*.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 212; the writing is Śāntideva’s but he is referencing the *Akṣayamatī Sūtra*.

another village altogether.¹⁷¹ In this way, one remembers dependent arising and the relationality it engenders so that one might be more apt to act from it.

A second practice, outlined in the eighth chapter of *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, involves mentally considering another person and imagining exchanging places with them, a “sacred mystery” for “[t]hose desiring speedily to be / A refuge for themselves and others.”¹⁷² Here, “the sameness of yourself and others,” the basis for so much of Śāntideva’s ethical impetus, becomes a focal point of the practitioner. Considering this sameness, one is encouraged to recognize that the pain and suffering they experience has no “owner,” but is rather the result of misapprehension; likewise, too, the pain that others feel is unnecessary. And since suffering has no personal location, one is encouraged to address it wherever it is found.¹⁷³ Seen in this meditation, writes Clayton, is a “deliberate effort to cultivate an agent-neutral perspective” grounded in the like desires of all and “on the fact that a person is not a unitary, unique, and enduring entity, but rather... impermanent and empty.”¹⁷⁴ This meditation, then, becomes not only a way to keep mindful of the reality of dependent arising so that one’s forgetfulness is decreased or the false notions of the self habituated through so much daily activity are countered, but a direct experience of the reality of dependent arising so that one’s understanding is deepened and one is better suited to address the suffering one encounters.

Conclusion

Seeking a transformation of one’s understanding of the world and so also of one’s ethical orientation, Śāntideva encourages the reader to consider fully whether an assumed sense of self could actually exist. Examining the experiences of thinking, of feeling, and of encountering the

¹⁷¹ Śāntideva, *The Training Anthology of Śāntideva*, 212-213; *Blessed Lady*.

¹⁷² Śāntideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, VIII.120.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, VIII.90-96.

¹⁷⁴ Barbara R. Clayton, “Śāntideva Virtue, and Consequentialism,” 19.

phenomenal world, Śāntideva then turns toward the body as a basis for an enduring selfhood. Finding no basis in these places, he explains how this false sense of self is the cause of all of the suffering in the world. Instead, one should look and see the reality causality, that all encountered phenomena can be seen to be the result of various causes and conditions, such that all can be said to arise dependently, in accordance with the Buddha's teachings. This, for the poet, has life-changing consequences when applied to an assumed sense of self. Removed are the justifications for directing one's anger at another, since their harm-causing actions are merely the result of causes outside their control. Removed, too, are the bases for considering suffering as located within any particular person. Since suffering does not belong to any person, removed also is the justification for prioritizing any one person's suffering—including one's own—over any others. It is the addressing of suffering wherever it is found, born of a misapprehension of the nature of reality, that Śāntideva hopes his readers will undertake. To aid them in this work, Śāntideva describes two sets of meditative practices—the first of which are designed to lessen one's identification with and attachment to one's body and the second of which are designed to generate lovingkindness for other sentient beings who experience needless suffering by emphasizing the likeness of all persons in desiring to avoid suffering—the latter of which is also intended to provide a direct meditation experience of dependent arising.

IV. BUDDHADĀSA BHIKKHU

The work of twentieth-century Thai thinker and writer Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu stands in sharp contrast to the work of Śāntideva and the Buddhist tradition in at least one respect: whereas Śāntideva consciously rejected any conception of ontology and saw doing so as key to his goal of ameliorating suffering, Buddhadāsa consciously and actively employs one, convinced that a proper ontological understanding of the workings of nature is central to shaping the ethical actions of the individual and of forming societies that lead to human flourishing. The Buddha's teaching, Buddhadāsa argues, was not intended to be merely instrumental, but rather was an articulation of reality; the Dhamma was not only a method, but a comprehensive articulation of the nature of the world. Understanding this ontology, then, allows one to act in ways that align with (capital-N) Nature and, in this way, allows one to properly address suffering. Articulating this, Buddhadāsa believes, is not a departure from Buddhist tradition, but rather a reclamation of the Buddha's original thought. Such a move allows Buddhadāsa to articulate a vision for Buddhism which he believes accords with modernism: science and Buddhism both point to the same reality—Nature, Dhamma—and outline a vision of the world, not based in karma, rebirth, and extra-natural realms, but in an interdependent web of phenomena, knowable and engageable.

Background

The life of Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu (1906-1993) spanned a period of Southeast Asian history that witnessed epochal shifts in the shape of societies, as is seen in his homeland's transition from a largely rural land to one dotted with busy, modern cities; from an absolute monarchy to one negotiating the place, role, and shape of democracy; from Siam to Thailand. Amid these transitions, the well-educated Thai monk took on the challenge of representing the Buddha's teachings to an emerging modern world in such a way that his continuity with tradition resonated

with, while still posing challenges to, modern sensibilities.¹⁷⁵ In so doing, Buddhādāsa came to articulate a vision of society based on his understanding of the Buddha's teaching, a teaching that he believed had become corrupted and masked by institutional religion and was in need of recovery, that he hoped would be influential in the shaping of the social structures emerging during his lifetime and beyond. His vision of Dhammic Socialism was an attempt to articulate the shape and character of a modern society based on the centrality of dependent arising to the Buddha's teachings which would provide an opportunity for greater harmony and peace in the midst of increasingly diverse and globalizing communities.

Ngeum, as he was named at birth, spent much of his life in central Thailand, "where the Malay peninsula suddenly widens."¹⁷⁶ His childhood was spent in close contact with the animals and plants of the surrounding forests and waterways, and his experiences with the natural world prove to be a central influence on his later thinking and writing. As a child, he helped care for his family's herd of dairy cows and grew adept at collecting useful herbs from the surrounding woodlands, which was then "still primal, full of trees more than a meter wide."¹⁷⁷ Ngeum's childhood education was typical, taking place at the nearby Wat, "where he learned to read and write, had his introduction to Buddhist ceremonies, heard many traditional stories, and made frequent forays into the forest to collect medicinal herbs for the abbot."¹⁷⁸

At the age of twenty, he intended to complete his education with a three-month Rains Retreat and return to village life, helping to run a series of stores his now-late father had begun. "Phra Ngeum took to the bhikkhu life, however, and had an easy time of his studies. He also

¹⁷⁵ Donald K. Swearer, "Exemplars of Nonviolence in Theravada Buddhism," in *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence*, ed. Kenneth Kraft (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 69.

¹⁷⁶ Santikaro Bhikkhu, "Buddhadasa Bhikkhu: Life and Society through the Natural Eyes of Voidness," in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, eds. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 148.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

became a popular preacher from the very start. Taking what he learned in his daily Dhamma classes, he gave nightly sermons that explained the Buddha's teachings in simple, straightforward terms,"¹⁷⁹ a precursor to the shape of his future life. Choosing to continue his studies, then, Ngeuam made arrangements to study in Bangkok. While he continued to excel in his studies, distinguishing himself particularly with his Pālī language skills, he disliked both urban life and ecclesial monasticism, finding the former too crowded and hectic and the latter too narrowly focused on the monastic institution. Longing for a return to the peaceful environs of his childhood, as well as the opportunity to study more broadly, he deliberately failed his final exam and made his way home.¹⁸⁰

While hundreds of miles to the north, political turmoil rankled Bangkok with coups and overthrows,¹⁸¹ Ngeuam walked into "an overgrown, abandoned monastery near his hometown," and began to study.¹⁸² Joined by his brother and a growing number of others who had become disillusioned with their experience of Thai Buddhism, Ngeuam took the name Buddhādāsa and began sharing his insights into the *Dhamma*, which soon gained a reputation for their forthrightness, clarity, and applicability to daily living.¹⁸³ Aided by the popularity of a quarterly journal overseen by he and his small group of compatriots, his notoriety began to grow. Buddhādāsa's "Garden of the Power of Liberation," which came to be known by the shortened *Suan Mokkh*, began to attract a variety of people, including high-ranking monks and civil servants who conferred a legitimacy on the monk's unorthodox methods which served to increase his reputation further. Invited back to Bangkok to teach in the central Wats,

¹⁷⁹ Santikaro Bhikkhu, "Buddhadasa Bhikkhu," 150.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 150-151.

¹⁸¹ Hans-Bernd Zöllner, "Radical Conservative Socialism: Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's Vision of a Perfect World Society and its Implication for Thailand's Political Culture," *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, Vol. 15, No 2 (2014): 245.

¹⁸² Donald K. Swearer, "Exemplars of Nonviolence in Theravada Buddhism," 69.

¹⁸³ Santikaro Bhikkhu, "Buddhadasa Bhikkhu," 152-153.

Buddhadāsa surprised, rankled, and thrilled his audiences with his “plain language,” evincing his belief “that anyone of average intelligence could study, understand, practice, and realize its [the Dhamma’s] truth for themselves,” even going so far as to encourage the present laity to take up meditation practices.¹⁸⁴ Soon, the original location of Suan Mokkh became too small for the regularly assembling crowds; an abandoned Wat nearby was soon refurbished. From here, Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu continued to teach and formulate what would become “the largest and most innovative body of work of any bhikkhu in recent Thai history.”¹⁸⁵

The Dhamma of the Self

For Buddhadāsa, the awakening the Buddha experienced under the Bo tree consisted in a realization of the nature of the world. In articulating the teachings of causality and no-self, the Buddha was giving voice to a governing principle which was characterized by all of existence. Realizing that “there is no Creator God nor is there anything one may call the self,”¹⁸⁶ and that “[t]he world is a perpetual flux of natural forces incessantly interacting and changing,”¹⁸⁷ the Buddha articulated the reality of dependent arising. In this, the Buddha was not formulating a doctrine or creating a pragmatic tool as a means to some other end, but was simply recognizing an evident truth woven into the fabric of existence. This, the Buddha called Dhamma, which, for Buddhadāsa is synonymous with Nature. This reality can be observed by observing the interactions of animals, plants, and all else in the natural world. When human beings act in ignorance of this insight, conflict results; when human beings act in accordance with this

¹⁸⁴ Santikaro Bhikkhu, “Buddhadasa Bhikkhu,” 153-154.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 147.

¹⁸⁶ Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, “Buddhism in Brief,” *Me and Mine: Selected Essays of Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa*, ed. Donald K. Swearer (Albany: State University of New York, 1989), 15.

¹⁸⁷ Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, “Handbook for Humankind,” *Me and Mine*, 23.

Dhamma, harmony and peace prevail. Describing this reality, Buddhādāsa then sought to articulate how this truth could be lived out in the structuring of societies with the modern world.

In Buddhādāsa's thinking, the Buddha's teachings of no-self and of causality are a part of a broader insight into the nature of the universe. Dependent arising is not limited to a causal chain explaining the arising and cessation of suffering but is more like a skeleton key which unlocks insight into a foundational principle of existence; wherever one looks, one sees dependent arising operative. The Buddha's teachings, then, were an example of a clear insight into "the way things are."¹⁸⁸ For this reason, writes his student Santikaro Bhikkhu, Buddhādāsa uses the term Dhamma in such a way that points beyond the recorded teachings of the historical Buddha to include terms like "the Truth, Reality, Law, or that to which the teachings point." Or, as Buddhādāsa summarized succinctly, "Dhamma is Nature."¹⁸⁹ What is seen in nature, then, the truth of reality according to Buddhādāsa, is "conditionality or interdependency."¹⁹⁰ Sallie King summarizes his view:

"The natural law, again, is conditionality, the law that all things come into being in dependence upon other things. All things and all beings, thus, are utterly dependent upon other things. They cannot exist by themselves. They have no existence without other things."¹⁹¹

It is from this principle that Buddhādāsa draws the rest of his insight.

If, in articulating this understanding of dependent arising, Buddhādāsa sounds more like a teacher of Mahāyāna Buddhism than of Theravāda Buddhism (and, indeed, he was criticized for utilizing Mahāyāna concepts^{192, 193}), then his use of the term emptiness (S: *śūnyatā*; P: *suññatā*)

¹⁸⁸ Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, "Conditioned Genesis," *Me and Mine*, 115.

¹⁸⁹ Santikaro Bhikkhu, "Buddhadasa Bhikkhu," 159.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁹¹ Sallie B. King, "From Is to Ought: Natural Law in Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Phra Prayudh Payutto," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (2002): 280.

¹⁹² Donald K. Swearer, "Introduction," *Me and Mine*, 10.

¹⁹³ Sallie B. King, "From Is to Ought," 277.

to describe this teaching will not surprise. He equated this term with dependent arising, calling *suññatā* “the true essence of Buddhism,” and “that it alone was the heart of the teachings of all the Buddhas; and that all other teachings came from less enlightened people.”¹⁹⁴ No-self, dependent arising, *suññatā*, then, for Buddhādāsa all become ways of expressing the truth of reality, the Dhamma or Nature, such that they become in his teachings “variations on a single theme.”¹⁹⁵

Buddhādāsa believed that this insight was central to Buddhist understanding and formed the primary focus of the Buddha’s historical teaching. He came to see his primary responsibility as decluttering the Buddhist doctrine of all that obscured this central description of the universe, seeking “to restore the Buddha’s teaching to its pristine state.”¹⁹⁶ In doing so, he hoped to reach even beyond Buddhism to what he came to call “the natural religion of non-selfishness,”¹⁹⁷ a base-reality obscured by a false notion of self, which inspired a selfishness in all things, even the development of the world’s religions.

For Buddhādāsa, the labeling of another as enemy is born of a misunderstanding of the nature of reality. Since he is instantiating a broad articulation of the nature of reality, he spends less time on the specifics of such labeling, but the implications of the picture he illustrates are clear. If dependent arising is the true nature of the universe, a false conception of self, what Buddhādāsa termed “me-and-mine,” is the heart of misunderstanding Nature and restraining people’s selflessness. It is, for Buddhādāsa, through ignorance that this false conception arises. Utilizing the specific articulation of dependent arising, the Twelve *Nidānas*, Buddhādāsa understood this ignorance to be born of contact with the world which gives rise to me-and-mine,

¹⁹⁴ Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, “Me-and-Mine,” in *Me and Mine*, 84.

¹⁹⁵ Donald K. Swearer, “Introduction,” 9.

¹⁹⁶ Santikaro Bhikkhu, “Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu,” 147.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 147-148.

a “feeling or state of mind conjured up by the mind’s surroundings.”¹⁹⁸ This false idea of self gives rise to attachments, which, when acted upon from the perspective of “me-and-mine lead to conflict and competition.”¹⁹⁹ So central was this understanding that Buddhādāsa reformulated the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths in terms of “me-and-mine,” calling it “the cause of all suffering”:

[S]uffering results from the feeling of me-and-mine; the cause of suffering is me-and-mine; the cessation of suffering, nibbana, is the cessation of me-and-mine; the Noble Eightfold Path is the method or means for eliminating me-and-mine.²⁰⁰

The cause of suffering, for a person and for our world, is, for Buddhādāsa attachments born of a false belief in me-and-mine, which lead people to gather and hoard resources they have and to fight for resources they want. In his writings, this is the only thing that should receive the name enemy, and the fight against was universal, involving “all human beings.”²⁰¹

Perhaps most tempting, in Buddhādāsa’s understanding, is to attach to one’s religious conceptions or spiritual achievements, an observation which, when he first shared it, challenged the contemporary religious understanding of many. In June 1948, he elaborated on themes presented in a recently published essay, shocking the crowd by saying “that the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha of most Buddhists were obstacles obstructing their way to liberation.”²⁰² Recalling his days among the clerical establishment and what he saw as a preoccupation with intellectual achievement and professional advancement, he criticized these as “egoistic attachments” for too many monks. “The idea that all aspects of Buddhism must be cleansed of attachment to ‘I’ and ‘mine’ was hard for many to swallow.”²⁰³ Buddhādāsa leveled a similar

¹⁹⁸ Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, “Me-and-Mine,” 89.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 90.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 89.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 91.

²⁰² Santikaro Bhikkhu, “Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu,” 154.

²⁰³ Ibid.

criticism at the lay practice of merit-making, at least as he observed it, seeing any effort “to gain material benefits as a refutation of the central Buddhist teaching of non-attachment,” that reduced the Buddha to “a wish-fulfilling deity, instead of the teacher who’s *dhamma* provides a ‘raft’ to gain the ‘further shore’ (*nibbana*).”²⁰⁴ The further shore, Buddhādāsa argued, could only be reached when actions arose from an understanding that there was no self to benefit:

We should take our attachments to religion, to God, to the Buddha, dhamma and sangha, and put them aside in order to turn our attention to learning how to deal effectively with me-and-mine. When we have succeeded, God, religion, the Buddha, dhamma, and sangha will exist fully in our actions, because purification from the feelings of me-and-mine is the true essence of God, the Buddha, dhamma and sangha.²⁰⁵

Writing of this teaching, Santikaro Bhikkhu writes that what lies at the heart of this teaching was an understanding of Nature, that “nonattachment is a natural consequence of the way things are.”²⁰⁶

For Sallie King, the centrality of this aspect of thought to Buddhādāsa’s ethic leads her to recognize a natural law ethic as “foundational” in his work. In Buddhādāsa’s thought, he understands

ethics to be moving from ‘is’ to ‘ought’—that is, from a description of what is, the nature of reality, to a description of what we ought to do, correct behavior. In other words, [his] account of ethical behavior is based upon [his] account of the nature of reality.”²⁰⁷

Within Buddhādāsa’s thinking, “his account of the nature of reality,” as we have seen, is dependent arising: “All things and all beings, thus, are utterly dependent upon other things. [...] To try to live as if one were or ever could be independent of other beings, things, and

²⁰⁴ Donald K. Swearer, “Introduction,” 4.

²⁰⁵ Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, “Me-and-Mine,” 90.

²⁰⁶ Santikaro Bhikkhu, “Buddhadasa Bhikkhu,” 158.

²⁰⁷ Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press: 2005), 43.

processes... is out of balance and—in this sense—wrong.”²⁰⁸ Existence functions according to a universal principle—dependent arising—which is naturally harmonious; any deviation from it, then, is the single source of strife and contention. Once one understands this Nature, one can begin to understand how to accord one’s behavior with to it.²⁰⁹

For Buddhadāsa, the key to living in accordance with “the way things are,” with the interdependence seen in dependent arising, is through “overcoming attachment to self, to ‘me’ and ‘mine,’” Donald K. Swearer writes. In this way, through this process of self-transformation, can one alter one’s perspective such that “self-interest” becomes “selflessness and concern for others.”²¹⁰ Or, as Buddhadāsa puts it, if we were to act in accordance with the reality of the world, “then our problems would disappear. There would be no illusion of ‘me’ leading to mutual conflict, and the entire world would be peaceful.”²¹¹ The false of me-and-mine leads one to live in such a way as to conflict with the governing principle of the world, dependent arising, while overcoming this notion and operating in the world as a no-self alleviates the world’s suffering.

Seeing this truth isn’t simply a matter of learning a doctrine, Buddhadāsa wrote, but rather through one’s own experience of Nature. The first way that humans experience this reality is accidental or coincidental” as when “we act spontaneously in an emergency or when we are so awed by the power and beauty of Nature that the mind becomes momentarily silent.”²¹² In these moments, we are recognizing “the original state of nature—a condition of mutual interdependence, balance, and selflessness.”²¹³ To help facilitate such a realization, Buddhadāsa

²⁰⁸ Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence*, 47.

²⁰⁹ Sallie B. King, “From Is to Ought,” 279.

²¹⁰ Donald K. Swearer, “Exemplars of Nonviolence in Theravada Buddhism,” 70.

²¹¹ Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, “Democratic Socialism,” *Me and Mine*, 169.

²¹² Santikaro Bhikkhu, “Buddhadasa Bhikkhu,” 158.

²¹³ Donald K. Swearer, “Exemplars of Nonviolence in Theravada Buddhism,” 70.

counseled his readers and students “to live in intimate contact with Nature (in the more limited sense of trees, insects, rocks, and weather), especially the natures not yet altered by human greed, anger, and delusion.”²¹⁴ It was, he believed, our alienation from the operations of the natural world that aided the flourishing of selfishness and materiality in our modern world.

From his understanding of the natural world, a world which functioned in accordance with Nature, with dependent arising, Buddhādāsa begins to formulate his ethic of how one should live in a society so as to shape it for the benefit all. Attachment and greed, the false reality of me-and-mine, are not present in the natural world, he observes:

Notice that among all the many non-human forms of life in the natural world, no one kind takes more than its share. They have no granaries or storehouses in which to hoard or stockpile supplies; so they cannot accumulate any more than they need. A bird eats only what its stomach will hold. It is incapable of taking more than it must have to live.²¹⁵

Nature, including human beings, Buddhādāsa observed is “inherently socialistic. We should observe that from birth through our entire lives we are dependent on parent, relatives, friends, the government, and even enemies.”²¹⁶ This “interdependence” precludes the creation of false dichotomies— between person and natural world, between person and person, and between person and society. Misunderstanding this gives rise to a selfishness which manifests in a society’s various shortcomings; this unhealthy understanding of Nature leads to the formation of unhealthy people and unhealthy communities. From observations such as this, Buddhādāsa sees a method for addressing social ills: by shaping our own understanding and our own actions to the truth of Nature, we can begin to shape societal structures that conform as well, and so lead to greater peace and harmony for all.

²¹⁴ Santikaro Bhikkhu, “Buddhadasa Bhikkhu,” 160.

²¹⁵ Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, “Democratic Socialism,” 173-174.

²¹⁶ Santikaro Bhikkhu, “Buddhadasa Bhikkhu,” 168.

One leads to the other—that is, personal transformation leads to societal transformation—because the person is inseparable from the society. Any ultimate distinction between person and society, spiritual and social, body and mind, is to impose a duality where interdependence exists, and any action based on such a duality will be discontinuous with Nature. As Santikaro writes of Buddhādāsa’s thinking, “The spiritual does not reject the body, society, economics, politics, or any other area of life but understands all the dimensions of life in a fundamental way, that is, in the context of Dhamma,”²¹⁷ of interdependence. The interdependence of all phenomena, then, includes person and society, such that what happens in one shapes the other, and vice versa, the realization of which, for Buddhādāsa, was a part of the Buddha’s enlightenment experience.²¹⁸ Donald K. Swearer, then, compiles the vocabulary utilized by Buddhādāsa and nicely summarizes:

To be a not-self (*anatta*) therefore, is to be void (*suññatā*) of self, and, hence to be part of the normal (*pakati*), interdependent co-arising matrix (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) of all things, and to live according to the natural (*dhammajāti*) moral law (*sīladhamma*) in a fellowship voluntarily restrained (*dhammika-sangama-niyama*) by other-regarding concerns.²¹⁹

To the extent that human beings are able to act in accordance with Nature, with the reality expressed by the Buddha in the teaching of dependent arising, the more their lives will be peaceful and harmonious, as well as their surrounding societies.

These ideas are key to shaping Buddhādāsa’s articulation of what such a society, one composed of persons living according to dependent arising, would look like. This vision, which he called “Dhammic Socialism,” arises “when nonselfishness informs all aspects and levels of

²¹⁷ Santikaro Bhikkhu, “Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu,” 155.

²¹⁸ Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, “Buddhism in Brief,” 16.

²¹⁹ Donald K. Swearer, “Introduction,” 6.

society.”²²⁰ The qualifier “dhammic” carries much weight, as Buddhādāsa is keen to make a distinction between his vision—and his hopes for Thailand’s failed revolution of 1932—and the instances of democracy and socialism he has witnessed in twentieth century politics.

Contemporaneous to Buddhādāsa’s retreat into solitude and the first weeks of Suan Mokh, “a coup d’état took place in Bangkok, bringing an end to the absolute monarchy and installing a democratic system” broadly inspired by socialism. However, according to Buddhādāsa, the coup leaders’ focus of socialism as an economic philosophy angered too many in power and led to the downfall of the new government.²²¹ Power should be shared, he came to believe, a belief which necessitated the spiritual development of the populace, lest the people lack the tools to make informed decisions in the interests of all. That is, if a population is made up of people who put materialistic and individual concerns forward as a top priority, democracy will only result selfishness-promoting governments.²²²

Socialism via authoritarianism, likewise, brought with it much turmoil. Buddhādāsa was disillusioned by the Marxist-inspired revolutions he witnessed during his lifetime which utilized violence to achieve materialistic ends; such a movement, he wrote, “creates serious problems and disrupts the natural order of things.”²²³ This contrasts sharply with Dhammic Socialism, which was first apparent in the Buddha’s “behavior toward all living beings” and takes organized form in the early community of disciples. It is incumbent upon Buddhists, he exhorts, “to become familiar with the socialism inherent in the Buddhist community, using it as a weapon against violent forms of socialism which promote one’s own evil interests and forces them on others.”²²⁴

²²⁰ Santikaro Bhikkhu, “Buddhadasa Bhikkhu,” 167.

²²¹ Hans-Bernd Zöllner, “Radical Conservative Socialism,” 245.

²²² Santikaro Bhikkhu, “Buddhadasa Bhikkhu,” 176.

²²³ Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, “A Socialism Capable of Benefiting the World,” *Me and Mine*, 194.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 194-195.

The matter, writes Santikaro, is not finally a debate between democracy and authoritarianism, per se, but rather, “whether the political system of a particular society is in line with Dhamma or not.”²²⁵ Dhammic Socialism, then, stands in opposition to any form of government based in “materialism.” Instead, it is a means of structuring a society “composed of, based in, governed by, and in line with Nature and the Law of Nature.”²²⁶ A society which grows out of such an understanding, analyzes Swearer, can “be discussed in terms of three basic principles: the good of the whole, restraint, and respect for life,” all three of which express interdependence in differing ways.²²⁷ The first, the good of the whole, is best understood when one considers the nondualistic relationship between persons and societies, as discussed above. That is, the good of the whole is tended to when persons recognize the truth of the Dhamma and so live in ways that are selfless rather than selfish. “From an awareness of interdependence follows the second principle, restraint (and its corollary, generosity).”²²⁸ From this, one recognizes that “[b]y living with only what we really need, we are living according to the way of nature.”²²⁹ Just as the bird which consumes only what it needs to survive, humans too should limit their consumption to what is necessary in order to increase the amount of resources that are shared, working, if possible, to create surpluses for the benefit of the whole community.²³⁰ This, Swearer notes, is not a restriction on human freedom, but rather a means for maximizing it. By consuming only what is necessary, the selfish and egoistic impulses of me-and-mine are held in

²²⁵ Santikaro Bhikkhu, “Buddhadasa Bhikkhu,” 178.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 167.

²²⁷ Donald K. Swearer, “Exemplars of Nonviolence in Theravada Buddhism,” 72.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, “Democratic Socialism,” 173.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 175.

check and the amount of conflict that exists by those who were previously competitors is decreased.²³¹

It is with Swearer's third principle, respect for life, where Buddhādāsa's articulation of the "peacemaker" comes into view. In addition to learning and living deeply the truth of no-self in accordance with Nature, those who are aware of the reality of dependent arising can act in ways that further shape their societies to the Dhamma. "[I]f we hold fast to Buddhism," Buddhādāsa writes, "we shall have a socialist disposition in our very being. We shall see our fellow human beings as friends in suffering—in birth, old age, sickness and death—and, hence, we cannot abandon them."²³² This view emerges directly from Buddhādāsa's understanding of the Buddhist path as inherently connected to the well-being of one's fellow beings.²³³ Consequently, peacemakers will act with the well-being of others in mind, living with restraint in all things—that is consuming enough but not too much and sharing all that is extra—"in order to establish a peaceful and loving society."²³⁴

The law of nature, of Dhamma, is one of interdependence. Seeing this, persons are able to shape their lives accordingly in order to live in ways that promote selflessness rather than selfishness for the benefit of themselves and others. In so doing, persons can begin to create and shape societies based on the principle of dependent arising and so "help one another to be free from the mentality of me-and-mine."²³⁵ Through this, persons are able to overcome attachment and live lives based in mutually beneficial understandings.

²³¹ Donald K. Swearer, "Exemplars of Nonviolence in Theravada Buddhism," 72-73.

²³² Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, "A Socialism Capable of Benefiting the World," 195.

²³³ Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, "Democratic Socialism," 175.

²³⁴ Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, "Till the World Is with Peace," in *Me and Mine*, 205.

²³⁵ Ibid.

Practice of Community

As noted above, the first and primary way human beings overcome the attachment to me-and-mine is by recognizing Dhamma in the operations of the natural world, including in those moments when human beings spontaneously act out of selflessness. By being in touch with nature, by observing the operations of the plants and animals nearby, one is able to witness interactions based on interdependence on a daily basis. Buddhādāsa counseled his readers and students to take advantage of this lesson into the nature of reality.

While these experiences could provide first-hand knowledge of Dhamma, Buddhādāsa also saw the practices of meditation as key to a sustained effort to overcome attachment to me-and-mine. Because Buddhādāsa saw less need to address the spiritual practices of his Buddhist communities than he did the understanding of his peers' attachments to me-and-mine and so consequently wrote less explicitly about them. What is clear, though, is that Buddhādāsa understood the practice of meditation and the study of the Buddhist tradition's textual canon too inseparable with one another; it was this relationship he witnessed most fruitfully during his years of retreat upon leaving Bangkok.²³⁶ It is through such a sustained practice that one is able to recognize the opportunities to act out of a sense selflessness in one's daily life and so contribute to shaping one's society according to the Dhamma.²³⁷

It was to the end of realizing a practice which combined intellectual study with meditative discipline, in an environment which kept one in touch with the realities of the natural world, that Buddhādāsa retreated from the busyness of Bangkok to the rural south and began his efforts at what would become Suan Mokkh.²³⁸ Here, Buddhādāsa was able to institute a kind of

²³⁶ Santikaro Bhikkhu, "Buddhadasa Bhikkhu," 158-159.

²³⁷ Ibid., 158-159.

²³⁸ Ibid., 153.

“model community” where “[m]onks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, the young and the elderly, as well as many kinds of animals and plants live together... in a spirit of harmony.”²³⁹

Taking their cue from the structure of Suan Mokkh, it is hoped that the thousands of guests and pilgrims who come to meditate, hear lectures, and repose in the natural surroundings, will return able to institute something of this model community in their own lives and communities. Suan Mokkh, then, stands as an enduring example of the possibilities envisioned by Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu of the power of the Dhamma to transform lives and societies.

Conclusion

Living a life amid tumultuous social change in his native Thailand, Southeast Asia, and, indeed, a modernizing, globalizing world, Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu saw an urgency to articulate the truth of the Buddha’s teaching, the Dhamma, to the world for the sake of the world. By focusing on how the nature of reality as dependent arising challenges assumed notions of the self and shapes a new understanding based in no-self, Buddhādāsa was able to articulate a vision for how the Buddha’s teachings could shape modern societies to be based more on a mutual beneficence and so more peaceful. By recognizing the truth of the nature of reality, the Dhamma, human beings are able to see that what they took for a self does not exist, and that the universe operates according to a principle of dependent arising in which all of reality is interdependent; with regards to persons, this means that persons are not independent actors but that they too are interdependent: person with person, person with world, and person with society. By witnessing this natural law in the workings of nature, by experiencing this reality in meditation, and by applying insight into this reality through wisdom, persons overcome selfish attitudes and

²³⁹ Donald K. Swearer, “Exemplars of Nonviolence in Theravada Buddhism,” 70.

engender selfless ones, benefiting themselves and their societies, and building communities based on the ideal of dhammic socialism.

V. THICH NHAT HANH

Like Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh has sought to articulate what he sees as Buddhism's harmony with modern ways of viewing the world. Like the Thai thinker, Nhat Hanh relies more on buoying his case, not by appeal to the religious authority of the tradition itself or to the reality of other-worldly consequences for one's actions, but rather by appealing to the reader's own experiences of the world, experiences Nhat Hanh believes will conform to his description of reality. All that exists, Nhat Hanh will argue, exists in ineluctable relationship, such that distinctions between entities—between self and other, self and nature, self and world—cannot be discerned. Reality can be characterized, not only as interdependent, but as interbeing, as existing always nondualistically with all else.

Nhat Hanh's interbeing may at first seem to function like Buddhādāsa's understanding of Nature/Dhamma. However, within Nhat Hanh's larger corpus of work, one finds the traditional reticence to name any ontology as existing beyond conventional designations. Nhat Hanh's interbeing, then, may function as a mean tool between Śāntideva's "abolitive ontology," which instantiates an instrumental ethic, and Buddhādāsa's Dhamma-as-natural-law ethic. That is, Nhat Hanh's continuity with the tradition may preclude his conceiving of interbeing as a descriptor of "reality as it is," but may yet serve as apt descriptor in the service of addressing suffering. In this way, interbeing may be seen as a "pragmatic ontology," a claim on nature of reality as it is, not because it should be adopted as an absolute principle, but because seeing reality in this way represents the best way to address suffering from Nhat Hahn's point of view.

Background

Born Nguyen Xuan Bao in 1926 in central Vietnam, just south of the line which would divide the country in two, Thich Nhat Hanh entered into a tumultuous world.²⁴⁰ The colonial order was fracturing violently and would come to be replaced by a proxy war between global superpowers, a struggle which would come to define the history of the nation in the twentieth century. Amid the crucible of war, Nhat Hanh formulated his conception of “interbeing,” a description of reality as interrelated, based in the Buddhist teachings of no-self, dependent arising, and emptiness. Nhat Hanh witnessed intimately the destructive consequences of actions undertaken with a disregard for the well-being of others, and, along with his compatriots in the Struggle Movement, worked tirelessly attempting to bring peace to his war-torn country. Rooted in his perception of reality, Nhat Hanh was convinced that the term “enemy” could not be applied to anyone involved in the conflict, and encouraged a peaceful end to the war through the means of nonviolence, a nonadversarial stance, and nonjudgmentalism. Along the way, Nhat Hanh coined the term “Engaged Buddhism,” and helped train and teach others who were determined to apply their understanding of Buddhist concepts to the conflict for the sake of peace.²⁴¹ Exiled to Southern France during the fighting, Nhat Hanh spent the post-war years continuing the struggle for peace, primarily through the continued teaching of interbeing and the meditative practices that help one perceive it.

He took the name Nhat Hanh (“One Action”) upon entering the monastery at the age of seventeen, where he excelled at his studies but longed for a broader education in philosophy and

²⁴⁰ Sallie B. King, “Thich Nhat Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam: Nondualism in Action,” in *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 322.

²⁴¹ Though universally credited with the term’s origination, Nhat Hanh has written that he inherited the term from others; see *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, 40-41; regardless of the term’s coining, it is clear that Nhat Hanh has done more than anybody to develop and create awareness of the concept.

literature.²⁴² Studying in Saigon, Nhat Hanh began to see the tenuous order his society break down. In 1955, the Diêm regime took power in the newly created Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam), and the stridently Roman Catholic government began persecuting the Buddhist majority, restricting Buddhist displays and soon resorting to imprisonment and execution of Buddhist leaders.²⁴³ Vietnamese Buddhists, long divided by the practice of Theravāda in the south and Mahāyāna in the north, formed the Unified Buddhist Church in Vietnam, with the goal of protecting the practice of Buddhism within the country.

In 1964, Nhat Hanh founded the School of Youth for Social Service, where others who were seeking a peaceful solution to the conflict could learn nonviolent tactics and how to be of service to the rural villages most affected by the war by creating schools and health clinics; by the war's end "there were more than 10,000 monks, nuns, and young social workers involved in the work."²⁴⁴ In 1965, Nhat Hanh founded a new monastic order, the *Tiep Hien* Order (Order of Interbeing) with six initiates, a mix of laypeople and monastics, "to help bring Buddhism directly into the arena of social concerns during a time when the war was escalating and the teachings of the Buddha were most sorely needed."²⁴⁵

Because the Struggle Movement refused to endorse either the North or the South, focusing solely on an end to the hostilities, they made enemies among those for whom winning the war, rather than merely ending it, was paramount. As their movement gained success in convincing more and more Vietnamese people the war was more costly than it was worth, including a growing contingent of South Vietnamese troops, opposition from the governmental

²⁴² Sallie B. King, "Thich Nhat Hanh," 322.

²⁴³ Thich Chân Không (Cao Ngoc Phuong), *Learning True Love* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993), 14.

²⁴⁴ Arnold Kotler, "Editor's Introduction," *Peace Is Every Step* (1991), in *The Thich Nhat Hanh Collection*, ed. Arnold Kotler (New York: One Spirit, 2004), unpaginated.

²⁴⁵ Thich Chân Không (Cao Ngoc Phuong), *Learning True Love*, 78-79.

powers increased. Eventually, the forces of the South Vietnamese government chose to deal with the nonviolent resistance militarily, and the Struggle Movement was defeated. “On the heels of these events,” writes Sallie King, “Thich Nhat Hanh narrowly escaped an assassination attempt and left Vietnam on May 22.”²⁴⁶ The war continued.

Having fled Vietnam, Nhat Hanh continued to advocate for an immediate end to hostilities, embarking on an international speaking tour with the hope of raising awareness of the war’s devastating consequences of the nation. Having become the public face of the war’s opposition, he was unable to return to Vietnam upon the war’s conclusion, settling in Southern France, where he continued seeking ways to help the people of his native country, while founding the retreat center, Plum Village, which would become the headquarters of the Order of Interbeing. During these years, Nhat Hanh has continued his efforts to address the suffering born of the war in Vietnam, hosting retreats especially designed for veterans of that war to come to terms with its consequences—for them and for others. He has written extensively, articulating clearly his concept of interdependence—interbeing. It has been during these years that

Thich Nhat Hanh has made probably the single greatest contribution to global thinking about peacemaking with his idea of ‘being peace.’ To make peace, he argues, it is necessary to ‘be peace.’ [...] The means determine the ends; in order to make peace, one must do so in a peaceful way, building it step by step through peaceful actions emanating from a peaceful heart and mind.²⁴⁷

In this seemingly simple enunciation of “being peace,” “is contained a world of Engaged Buddhist philosophy.” Here, Nhat Hanh brings his understanding of the nature of reality as

²⁴⁶ Sallie B. King, “Thich Nhat Hanh,” 334.

²⁴⁷ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009), 81.

fundamentally interdependent to bear on the suffering that exists in our world through the technique of nonviolence and from a stance of nonadversariality and nonjudgmentalism.²⁴⁸

Interbeing

The world as we encounter it, writes Nhat Hanh, is one that appears to exist filled with discrete entities. Just as we feel ourselves to exist as independent selves, bounded by our bodies, so too do we see independent phenomenon, nameable and describable. Wherever we look, “[w]e see a line between one and many, between one and not one.”²⁴⁹ But this assumption is one that does not hold up upon further inspection. Considering something as simple as a piece of paper, cheap commodity rarely considered at all. “If you are a poet,” writes Nhat Hanh:

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*.²⁵⁰

What had seemed to be something that was simple and ordinary reveals a lesson about the nature of reality upon further inspection. The paper is a result of the causes and conditions which enable its existence, without which, there would be no paper. A relationship of interbeing is seen between the cloud and the paper. Nhat Hanh isn’t done with the paper, though. Without sunshine, for instance, there can be no tree from which the paper was made. Without the laborers who harvested the tree and turned sapwood and heartwood into pulp, there could be no paper. Without the food which sustains the work of the laborers, without the persons who gave rise to and taught the laborers their skills, without, in fact, the entirety of the rest of the universe,

²⁴⁸ Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 175.

²⁴⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart: Reflections on Mindfulness, Concentration, and Insight*, tr. Anh Huong Nguyen, Elin Sand, and Annabel Laity (Berkeley: Parallax, 1988), 63.

²⁵⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*, ed. Arnold Kotler, in *The Thich Nhat Hanh Collection*, 95.

there could be no paper: “This sheet of paper is, because everything else is.”²⁵¹ This, Nhat Hanh explains, is interbeing, for “[a]s thin as this piece of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.”²⁵²

This understanding, for Nhat Hanh, grows directly from his understanding of Buddhism’s foundational teachings, especially dependent arising, on which “[a]ll teachings of Buddhism are based.”²⁵³ Explaining the teaching of causality through the Twelve *Nidānas*, Nhat Hanh concludes that, since “[e]very link conditions every other link and is conditioned by them [...] we can abandon the idea of a sequential chain of causation and enter deeply the practice of the Twelve Links of Interdependent Co-Arising,” providing an English translation which emphasizes the general relationality he sees in the teaching.²⁵⁴ Implicit in dependent arising, for Nhat Hanh, is the truth of impermanence, which is most clearly seen through the Buddha’s teaching of no-self, a key “to unlock the door of reality,” that “the one is in the all and the all is in the one.”²⁵⁵ This is case, Nhat Hanh writes, because what, at first, appear to be discrete and independent entities, existing of their own accord, are in fact empty “of a separate, independent self. We cannot be by ourselves alone. We can only inter-be with everything else in the cosmos.”²⁵⁶ The Buddha’s teachings of “impermanence, nonself, interbeing, and emptiness were offered, not as instrumental tools designed to point one’s understanding toward the interdependent nature of all that exists.”²⁵⁷

²⁵¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 96.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁵³ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation: The Four Noble Truths, The Noble Eightfold Path, and Other Basic Buddhist Teachings* (New York: Broadway, 1999), 226.

²⁵⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, 236.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 136.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

Interbeing, then, for Nhat Hanh is a description of reality as it is and as it can be apprehended. It is, in his thought, “an understanding of the web of interdependence as the fabric of our existence.”²⁵⁸ However, in Nhat Hanh’s understanding, this does more than relate one thing to another or define a relativity between objects; for Nhat Hanh it reveals their fundamental *identity* with one another:

[T]he great body of reality is indivisible. It cannot be cut into pieces with separate existence of their own. The object of our mind can be mountain, a rose, the full moon, or the person standing in front of us. We believe these things exist outside of us as separate entities, but objects of our perceptions *are* us.²⁵⁹

Because of the truth of dependent arising, the entirety of existence can be said to co-exist such that, to speak of separate entities, much less independent entities, can only be meaningful as a conventional truth qualified by a deep understanding of the world’s interbeing, an understanding which obviates the distinction between self and other and brings the world’s objects into such deep intimacy that they cannot be understood as separate. In this way, then, Nhat Hanh’s interbeing leaves any two phenomenon—person and person, person and object, object and object—“nondual.”

When we want to understand something, we cannot just stand outside and observe it. We have to enter deeply into it and be one with it in order to really understand. [...] The word ‘comprehend’ is made up of the Latin roots *cum*, which means ‘with,’ and *prehendere*, which means ‘to grasp it or pick it up.’ To comprehend something means to pick it up and be one with it. There is no other way to understand something. In Buddhism, we call this kind of understanding ‘non-duality.’ Not two.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁸ Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence*, 175.

²⁵⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, 80.

²⁶⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 100.

Yes, the world is a world of causality wherein all phenomena are conditioned and conditioning. But, in Nhat Hanh's articulation, it is not enough to speak of an interrelatedness between persons, objects, world, but of an inseparability, an in-distinction.

Since this is a characteristic of existence, like Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, Thich Nhat Hanh sees this reality throughout the natural world. Consider the body's organs, for instance, they "rely on each other for existence. Lungs are necessary for blood, so lungs belong to blood. Blood is necessary to lungs, so blood belongs to lungs."²⁶¹ The same could be said for all of the organs, as well as every other part of the body. A single cell can be said to contain every other cell because "one cell implies the presence of all the others, since they cannot exist independently, separate of the others."²⁶² For this reason, Nhat Hanh draws a poetic equivalence between his own heart, without whose beating "the flow of our life will stop," and the sun at the center of our universe: "If it stops shining, the flow of our life will also stop, and so the sun is our second heart, our heart outside of our body."²⁶³ Likewise, considering the interdependent nature of the leaves of a forest and the sun on whose light the leaves and trees depend, Nhat Hanh penned this poetry: "The sunshine is the leaves. / The leaves are the sunshine. / The sunshine is no different from the leaves. / The leaves are no different from the sunshine. / All other forms and sounds / are of the same nature."²⁶⁴ It is not enough for Nhat Hanh to say that one entity influences and shapes the other or that one entity should be grateful for the contributions of other, but that any dichotomy between entities misunderstands their fundamental nature and can only be qualified, lingual designation; in the most meaningful of senses, here, one *is* the other.

²⁶¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 60.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 60.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

Nhat Hanh's conviction that this reality is readily observable in the natural world is not limited to forms of life, to those entities like trees and people and cells that must take in resources from elsewhere, process them, and deposit the remains into the environment. Nhat Hanh's interbeing is true of the whole cosmos, even at the smallest of imaginable levels:

[A]t the level of subatomic particles, scientists have discovered that each particle is affected by all other particles, and even by the mind of the observing scientists. [...] We are used to believing that particles form 'things,' but in fact all particles are dependent upon all other particles and none has a separate individuality.²⁶⁵

There is nothing in existence that can be conceived of as separate from all else; from the very, very small to the very, very large, all that exists inter-exists.

As with the other thinkers examined herein, what applies to existence applies just as forcefully to the person. Just as a person's body parts can be said to inter-be with one another, and just as plants, animals, trees, and molecules of the world can, so too must it be said that people inter-are with their world:

Is the world outside your body? Is it outside you mind? Our body—blood, flesh, bones—belongs to this 'outside world.' In fact, our brain and nervous system do not escape it either. Perhaps the several hundred square centimeters that comprise our brain can be considered 'inside.' But no the brain occupies space, and space is part of the 'outside world,' isn't it? Is our mind in the 'inner' world? Where is mind to be found? Can you identify it in space? [...] Continue to examine and you will find that everything seems to belong to the 'outside world.' But outside of what? How can there be an 'outer' without an 'inner'?²⁶⁶

Nhat Hanh deconstructs a person's sense of having an existence separate from the world. The instinctual feeling we have of possessing an interior wrapped in a material exterior is simply the result of faulty conditioning.

²⁶⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 30.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 41-42.

There is nothing that can ultimately be found to be inside of anything else. The matter which makes up our bodies, for instance, comes, of course, through the taking-in of resources; Nhat Hanh once mused that the cow from whom came the milk contained in his morning yogurt would be giving the day's Dharma talk, not the learned monk.²⁶⁷ But even the non-physical elements we take to be interior—thoughts, experiences, emotions—are the result of our interactions with the interdependent world. Returning to the piece of paper which contains the entire universe, Nhat Hanh points out that “we can see ourselves in this sheet of paper too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, it is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also.”²⁶⁸ Our emotions, thoughts, experiences, Nhat Hanh writes, likewise do not exist as separate from the world we encounter; rather, they are the products. The world which we take to be external isn't; it inter-is with us in physical and non-physical ways.

That this is the nature of reality, for Nhat Hanh, changes the way we think about and interact with our world. Whereas previously we understood ourselves to be independent entities with a fixed boundary, an understanding of interbeing removes any such justification. Whereas previously, we had a sense of one/many, a conception as necessary to daily interactions as tracks to a train, recognizing the reality of interbeing,

we are like a train breaking free of its rails to fly freely in space. Just as when we realize that we are standing on a spherical planet which is rotating around its own axis and around the sun, our concept of above and below disintegrate, so when we realize the interdependent nature of all things, we are freed from the idea of ‘one/many.’²⁶⁹

For this reason, Nhat Hanh writes, our sphere of concern increases dramatically. No longer concerned only with ourselves, or what is in our immediate vicinity, now “[t]here is no

²⁶⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, 126.

²⁶⁸ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 95.

²⁶⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 63-64.

phenomenon in the universe that does not intimately concern us, from a pebble resting at the bottom of the ocean, to the movement of a galaxy millions of light years away.”²⁷⁰ Indeed, there is no phenomenon in the universe which does not inter-exist with us.

Nhat Hanh sees three common distinctions that cause unnecessary harm in the lives of individuals and societies. First, we unnecessarily distinguish between “self” and “other,” a distinction that causes us to misplace our priorities and mistake what we take for our self as having pride of place. Rather, we must see that “the self does not exist” and that “[l]ife is one.”²⁷¹ The second harmful distinction we habitually make is a form a speciesism, the distinction between human and non-human life, an error which gives mistaken ethical priority to humans. However, “since we humans are made of non-human elements, to protect ourselves we have to protect all of the non-human elements. [...] When we see that humans have no self, we see that to take care of the environment (the non-human elements) is to take care of humanity.”²⁷² Lastly, and relatedly, “[t]he third notion we have to break through is the notion of a living being.” Since we are made of inanimate objects as well as animate ones, “[t]o protect living beings, we must protect the stones, the soil, and the oceans.”²⁷³ These false dichotomies lead us to misunderstand what it means to exist in this world and so bases even well-intentioned actions in a false conception which leads to division, strife, and contention.

For Nhat Hanh, the reason it is necessary to realign our thinking from one that assumes a “one/many” dichotomy to one that recognizes the true nature of reality as interbeing is because failing to do so causes tremendous suffering in our world. Thinking of ourselves as independent, bounded entities creates a misunderstanding of peace and security. Any peace we seek as “our

²⁷⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 62.

²⁷¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley: Parallax, 1993), 133.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 133-134.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 134.

personal possession,” will not be a viable peace. Understanding the nature of reality, though, leads us to seek “an inner peace which makes it possible for us to become one with those who suffer, and to do something to help our brothers and sisters, which is to say, ourselves.”²⁷⁴

Not only will a misunderstanding of the world as interbeing lead us to fail to act in ways that will lead to peace and well-being, it will also lead us to act in ways that cause harm. Having seen the horrors of two wars in his native land, Nhat Hanh knows well the consequences of anger. All anger, he writes, “is rooted in our lack of understanding of ourselves and of the causes, deep-seated as well as immediate, that brought about this unpleasant state of affairs. Anger is also rooted in desire, pride, agitation, and suspicion. The primary roots of our anger are in ourselves.”²⁷⁵ Just as Śāntideva likened the harm caused by human aggression to the harm caused by disease-causing agents—and so claimed that, since the latter are unworthy recipients of our anger so too should be the former—Nhat Hanh draws a similar comparison between harm-causing persons and natural disasters: “We know that earthquakes and floods have causes, and we should see that the person who has precipitated our anger also has reasons, deep-seated and immediate, for what he has done.” People’s actions, Nhat Hanh reminds us, are born of causes and conditions, and so anger at those who have harmed is unwarranted. Besides, he writes, if we want to prevent such actions from reoccurring and harming us or others again, we will have more success if we understand the causes of such actions, all the better to address them.²⁷⁶

This applies even to the extremes of harm-causing action, extremes lived by Nhat Hanh himself: war. Like a person’s anger, war does not arise on its own, but rather is produced of surrounding causes and conditions, for which we all bear responsibility: “The roots of war are in

²⁷⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 119; see also *Peace is Every Step*, 99.

²⁷⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 63-64.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

the way we live our daily lives—the way we develop our industries, build up our society, and consume goods.”²⁷⁷ The over-consumption of resources by the few, which leaves the many wanting, creates a situation of global poverty from which violent conflict can arise, he warns. And this over-consumption is based on the faulty premise that there is a peace, a security, a well-being, which can be our own private possession. However, “[w]hen we look deeply,” Nhat Hanh writes, “we can see that all wars have their roots in the lack of understanding,”²⁷⁸ especially, we might add, a lack of understanding concerning the nature of reality. However, just as we are all co-responsible for the conditions that lead to conflict, on an interpersonal and international scale, it is also within our power to re-orient our understanding of the world so that our actions might be a cause of peace, rather than of conflict. By “looking deeply into our craving,” by examining our desire for resources and our tendency to seek security in the accumulation of wealth and possessions, “we see that we already have what we crave, because everything is already a part of everything else. This insight can take us from the realm of craving into the realm of freedom.”²⁷⁹ Just as the roots of war are contained within our perspective concerning the nature of the reality, a perspective which leads us to structure our societies in ways that encourage over-consumption and a growing gap between the well-resourced and dispossessed, so too are the roots of peace contained within to align our understanding of the world with its true nature, a nature of interbeing.

Likewise, then, just as Śāntideva, Thich Nhat Hanh finds no grounds for naming another person enemy. To name another “enemy,” for Nhat Hanh, is to attribute a realness, a stability, an independence to that person that is clearly belied by the interdependent nature of reality. It

²⁷⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 115.

²⁷⁸ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 93.

²⁷⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, 79.

would require a denial of what Nhat Hanh knows to be true of the universe. He provides an analogy from his time in his native Vietnam: in villages where cock-fighting is common, Nhat Hanh points out that chicks from the same hen will not fight each other unless they are disguised; their faces must be painted so that they are unable to recognize their kinship and fight. The naming of enemies, then, is a means to obscure our true reality, our inseparable kinship:

Putting colors on our own face is to make ourselves a stranger to our own brothers and sisters. We can only shoot others when they are strangers. [...] When will the chicks of the same mother hen remove the colors from their faces and recognize each other as brothers and sisters? The only way to end the danger is for each of us to do so, and to say to others, 'I am your brother.' 'I am your sister.' 'We are all humankind, and our life is one.'²⁸⁰

Human beings, it seems, are especially susceptible to this kind of trickery, Nhat Hanh has observed first-hand, when it comes enveloped in nationalism. The naming of an enemy is crucial to create a sense of unity which is now being threatened by some other.²⁸¹ “Such definitions,” like “enemy,” Daniel Berigan writes, a long-time Roman Catholic peace activist and sometimes-collaborator with Nhat Hanh, “have a mysterious power of creating what they signify.”²⁸² That is, by naming another as an enemy, we come to believe that they are a deep threat to our well-being, to our very existence, a belief which will motivate and color our harm-causing actions. With a clear view of interbeing, our “real enemies” come into view:

Turn around to face your real enemies— / ambition, violence, hatred, greed. /
Men are not our enemies—even men called Vietcong. / If we kill men, what
brothers will we have left? / With whom then shall we live?²⁸³

²⁸⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 118.

²⁸¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 109.

²⁸² Daniel Berrigan, “Foreword,” *Love in Action*, 4.

²⁸³ Thich Nhat Hanh, “Condemnation,” *Love in Action*, 62.

Such designations, whether they are made by ourselves or made by governments in an effort to instill a sense of threat that must be address, are just another example our painted-faces blinding us to our true nature as interbeing.

Nhat Hanh's reticence to resort to anger or to name another "enemy," though, is not only a result of his understanding of the causes and conditions which shape people and their actions; while this is true of Nhat Hanh's thinking, he goes further than this: it's not just that the other person lacks sufficient agency to warrant anger or the label enemy, it's that, ultimately, there is no other person. Since, "the great body of reality is indivisible," whatever it is we are perceiving is, in every meaningful way, inseparable from us: "We believe these things exist outside of us as separate entities, but objects of our perceptions *are* us. When we hate someone, we also hate ourself. The object of our mindfulness is actually the whole cosmos."²⁸⁴ On the one hand, it makes no sense to resort to anger directed at another, or to label another as an enemy, because the nature of all phenomenon is interdependent, conditioning and conditioned by all else; but, for Nhat Hanh, there is another way of describing this reality, which gets closer to the truth: it's not simply a lack of agency in the other; it is a lack of other altogether.

These views for Nhat Hanh, come together in his well-known poem, "Call Me by My True Names," shared first publicly at the Rochester Zen Center in 1983.²⁸⁵ After the Vietnam War ended, many Vietnamese tried to escape the communist government by fleeing in small fishing boats. Defenseless, they often made easy targets for pirates. Nhat Hanh heard of one such boat taken by pirates, one of whom raped the twelve-year girl he found aboard, who then

²⁸⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, 80-81.

²⁸⁵ With slightly varying commentaries, the poem was first published in *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Fred Eppsteiner (Berkeley: Parallax, 1985), 31-39, with the title "Please Call Me by My True Names," and later republished with the shortened title in Nhat Hanh's *Peace is Every Step* (1991) and *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley: Parallax, 1993), 107-112; for sourcing, see the latter work, 154.

threw herself overboard where she drowned. The poem implores the reader to “look deeply” at the nature of reality, before the poem’s voice begins a series of “I am” stanzas:

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.

“Please call me by my true names,” Nhat Hanh concludes the poem, “so I can wake up, / and so the door of my heart can be left open, / the door of compassion.” The poem shocks because it places actions so often so easily condemned—the rape of a child and the selling of weapons contributing to a crisis—on par with the actions of a snake and a bird catching and eating their food, “thus suggesting that we should no more blame the human killers than the animal killers,” writes Sallie King.²⁸⁶

Indeed, writes Nhat Hanh, that is the case. While anger is an understandable reaction to such enormity, at whom should it be directed?

I was very angry, of course. But I could not take sides against the sea pirate. If I could have, it would have been easier, but I couldn’t. I realized that if I had been born in his village and had lived a similar life—economic, educational, and so on—it is likely that I would now be that sea pirate.

In fact, writes Sallie King, it’s not quite accurate to say that, given the same situation, any one of us would *likely* be that sea pirate: “[G]iven *anatman*, in their situation, with their background we would *be* them.”²⁸⁷ While it might seem shocking, offensive even, that Nhat Hanh draws such an equivalency, King writes that it “is largely based upon the Buddhist views of causation,

²⁸⁶ Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence*, 101.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

interdependence, and *anatman*.” It is true that such *actions* can be labeled as wrong, and one should take action to prevent them, “but we cannot take this one action as defining the being or innermost essence of the pirate—both because there is no such innermost essence and because there is more to the pirate than this one action.”²⁸⁸ The pirate’s actions are the result of causes and conditions, then, learned behavior and economic desperation, say, and so, while one can say without hesitation that the actions are wrong, the identity of the pirate is not reducible to this act. Further, King notes that, in Nhat Hanh’s view, the pirate did not create these conditions—we did:

[W]e have all together constructed this world, in which the Western world is far richer than the developing world, in which people can be born into crushing poverty and hopelessness. We could make a difference in this state of affairs if we cared enough, made it a priority, and dedicated ourselves.

We co-create the world and so we are responsible for the causes and conditions that result in harm-causing actions. But Nhat Hanh goes further than this. While his commentary acknowledges that reality of causality and the mitigating effect a realization of this reality should have on one’s anger and blame-casting, Nhat Hanh’s poem speaks a different truth: “I *am*...” Nhat Hanh couldn’t find the perspective, the distance, from the sea pirate necessary to condemn him. In a real way, he couldn’t find the pirate. “Looking deeply,” he could only find interbeing, the identification of the self with the other: the poem “is called ‘Please Call Me by My True Names,’ because I have many names”—mayfly-eating bird, frog-eating snake, arms dealer, and rapist—“and when you call me by any of them, I have to say, ‘Yes.’”²⁸⁹

A compatriot in Nhat Hanh’s activism, and among the first initiates into the Order of Interbeing, Thich Chân Không shares a similar story, but one that is more personal. In June of

²⁸⁸ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 29.

²⁸⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh, “Please Call Me by My True Names,” *The Path of Compassion: Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Fred Eppsteiner (Berkeley: Parallax, 1985), 31.

1966, “a group of unknown men threw grenades into the campus temple” of the School of Youth for Social Service.

Altogether, eighteen people were killed or seriously wounded. It was difficult to remain calm with so much hatred and anger directed towards us. We wondered how people could be so cruel. [...] Thầy Thanh Van asked me to write a speech for him to read at the funeral. After one Day of Mindfulness by myself, I wrote this eulogy, which was delivered by Thầy Thanh Van: ‘We cannot hate you, you who have thrown grenades and killed our friends, because we know that men are not our enemies. Our only enemies are the misunderstanding, hatred, jealousy, and ignorance that lead to such acts of violence.’²⁹⁰

Acts of violence and harm do not originate in a person isolated, or only minimally affected by their social surroundings; they originate from people who are inseparable from their surroundings, from the world; they originate from “misunderstanding, hatred, jealousy, and ignorance.” This, too, has been Nhat Hanh’s goal, to communicate that our enemies are not one another, but rather “are hatred, inhumanity, anger, and ideology.”²⁹¹ When we see this, both the presence of causes and conditions and their shaping effects, as well as our shared identity with others, “the idea of ‘enemy’ vanishes and is replaced by the notion of someone suffering a great deal who needs our compassion.”²⁹²

Nhat Hanh’s one-act play, “The Path of Return Continues the Journey,” concerns the story of five School of Youth for Social Service workers who were abducted in the middle of the night, taken to a river, and shot. Four died. The play begins immediately following their deaths, as the four are invited aboard a small boat that has just arrived, piloted by Mai, a fictional version of Nhat Chi Mai, who had immolated herself prior to murders of the four. One of the young men, Tuan, realizes that his murderer did not kill *him* exactly, since he knew nothing of him:

²⁹⁰ Thich Chân Không (Cao Ngoc Phuong), *Learning True Love*, 92-93.

²⁹¹ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 81.

²⁹² Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 77.

They shot only at the object of their fear and hatred, but because they had pasted the label of this object on us, they ended up shooting us, and we died by mistake. They killed us because they truly did not know who we were.²⁹³

Hy, who was also among those murdered, concurs: “Hatred and fear blind us. We no longer see each other. We see only the faces of monsters, and that gives us the courage to destroy each other.”²⁹⁴ Their boat pilot, Mai, draws the parallel to the war raging around them: “Those who are shooting at this very moment do not know who they are fighting. All are victims.”²⁹⁵ “Who is really killing us?” Mai asks later, answering, “It is fear, hatred, and prejudice.”²⁹⁶ All have been convinced that the painted faces of the others are their real faces, that those from whom they are inseparable, are monsters worthy of fear and anger. In this way can Mai see that, of those participating in the fighting, none are enemies and all are victims.

Applying what he sees as the reality of interbeing to social ills, Nhat Hanh sees a tremendous opportunity to shape the world positively. Just as persons are not separable from their world—from one another or from their environments—neither are they separable from their societies: “[T]he individual contains society within himself and society is constructed of individuals. We are children and mothers of society and society is our mother and our child. We produce each other.”²⁹⁷ While this may seem an obvious implication of Nhat Hanh’s thought, it has tremendous implications for we conduct ourselves: just as a person is conditioned and shaped by the world around them, so too is society shaped by the person. By developing the idea of ‘being peace,’ Nhat Hanh ties his understanding of interbeing to an ethic centered in one’s disposition toward the world, in one’s understanding of the reality of interbeing, one in which

²⁹³ Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Path of Return Continues the Journey,” in *Love in Action*, 30.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

²⁹⁷ Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence*, 93.

“he shows us the connection between personal, inner peace and peace on Earth.”²⁹⁸ Constructing one another, constructing our world, we are able to situate ourselves in such a way as to shape reality for others for the better.

By understanding the nature of reality as interbeing, one “comes to see that the lives of all beings are one, and he or she is overcome with compassion for all.”²⁹⁹ Unable to understand one’s own being separately from the entirety of the world, the entire world, “from a pebble resting at the bottom of the ocean, to the movement of a galaxy millions of light-years away,” becomes one’s central location of concern.³⁰⁰ In this way, a view of the world as interbeing becomes much more than just a way of seeing; it becomes a way of acting. Returning to “The Path of Return Continues the Journey,” the murder victims whom Mai collects with her boat begin to realize a truth about the world of the dead: it responds to the thoughts and actions of its inhabitants. Mai explains: “The universe of the dead changes according to one’s wishes. And, as I see it, the universe of the living does, too.”³⁰¹ Here, Nhat Hanh voices through Mai a truth of nonduality, of interbeing: the world is as we make it. “The world of the living is shrouded in fog,” a third victim, Lanh, observes. However, from his new vantage point, he can see clearly: “All I feel now is compassion for the destiny of mankind. It is like walking in a moonless, starless night.”³⁰² Understanding the nature of reality shapes the way in which one lives and interacts with their surroundings. For Nhat Hanh, as with the other Engaged Buddhists examined herein, that means an ethic which is nonadversarial, nonjudgmental, and nonviolent.

²⁹⁸ His Holiness the Dalai Lama, “Foreword,” *Peace is Every Step*, unpaginated.

²⁹⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 67-68.

³⁰⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 104.

³⁰¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, “The Path of Return Continues the Journey,” 15.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 32.

Developed within the crucible of war, the center of Nhat Hanh's approach is nonadversariality. Nhat Hanh witnessed the damage that can arise from false notions of the enemy, not only as such ideas arose from national identities but from religious ones as well. During the period of French colonization of Vietnam, the largely Roman Catholic French allied themselves with the Vietnamese Catholics, beginning a societal division that would be one tributary of the war.³⁰³ To help bring about the war's end, then, Nhat Hanh saw it as absolutely necessary to approach all sides with an attitude of nonadversariality; any alliance with one faction would only lead he and the Struggle Movement to become a participant in the conflict, rather than peace-seekers.³⁰⁴ Of course, opposition to the "other" was so entrenched among some that the Struggle Movement's failure to align themselves with one side or the other, was taken to be an implicit endorsement of the opposition.³⁰⁵³⁰⁶

The importance of this position within Nhat Hanh's thinking cannot be overstated and the failure to operate from a stance of neutrality is, according to him, why so many well-intentioned movements fail. As people naturally compassionate, it is easy and understandable that, when encountering conflict, we would take the side of whomever we perceive to be the victim. But this approach is unlikely to result in a peaceful resolution, since one side will still be working to defeat the other:

We get angry, we shout, but rarely do we rise above all this to look at a conflict the way a mother would who is watching her two children fighting. She seeks only their reconciliation. Real efforts for reconciliation must arise from this heart of compassion which arises meditating on the nature of interbeing and interpenetration of all beings.³⁰⁷

³⁰³ Thích Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 24.

³⁰⁴ Thích Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 39-40.

³⁰⁵ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 77.

³⁰⁶ Thích Chân Không (Cao Ngọc Phương), *Learning True Love*, 73.

³⁰⁷ Thích Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 69-70.

Peace does not arise from choosing one side over the other and, when we make this error, only more conflict ensues. We become a participant in the conflict, blinded to the viewpoints of the others. Instead, one who wants to address a conflict and work for a peaceful solution should see “himself or herself in every being. With the ability to view reality from many viewpoints, we can overcome all viewpoints and act compassionately in each situation.”³⁰⁸ From this perspective, understanding that the well-being of one cannot be separated from the well-being of the other, we will understand that “we belong to each other” and that “[e]very side is ‘our side.’”³⁰⁹ Only through a perspective of nonadversariality can one address a conflict with a compassion that holds the reality of interbeing at its center.

In order to approach a conflict with nonadversariality, one must be free of the kind of moral judgments that so often lead us to choose one side against the other. By understanding, on the one hand, that actions are born, not of a person’s evil or bad character, but through the causes and conditions in whose creation we have all participated, and, on the other, that we cannot separate ourselves from those of whom we might be tempted to sit in judgment, can we enter into a conflict nonjudgmentally. The first was instrumental in the post-war work Nhat Hanh undertook with veterans of the Vietnam War; the second was the reason that work was necessary.

The war, for Nhat Hanh, caused much understandable suffering. He writes, “I lost many friends Grenades were thrown into my room.... Social service workers under my direction were killed and maimed.”³¹⁰ It was only through his meditative practice that he was able to turn his suffering into compassion. This compassion moved him to help American veterans of the

³⁰⁸ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 121.

³⁰⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 103.

³¹⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 87.

war, many of whom were overcome with anger concerning their participation and their government's role in mandating it. To help veterans of the war process their feelings of guilt over their actions, Nhat Hanh tries to stress the complicated causes and conditions of the war, reminding veterans that they only had so much control over their actions in such a climate. In speeches at retreats organized for veterans of the war, he said, "When you went to war, you went for the whole nation. The whole nation was responsible for what happened there, not you alone. Your hand was the hand of the whole nation."³¹¹ The goal, here, is not to remove a person's responsibility and place it on head of another, but to help others understand that the actions they took did not happen in isolation from the surrounding, conditioning reality. The government, too, Nhat Hanh goes on to say, is itself the result of causes and conditions, and so isn't a suitable place for our anger. Rather, when we understand the nature of interbeing, we realize that the seeds of war are within our own misapprehension of the nature of reality. The weapons we manufacture are only the results of "our own prejudices, fears, and ignorances. [...] To work for peace is to uproot war from ourselves and from the hearts of men and women."³¹² Wars, Nhat Hanh said to those bearing their weight years later, are not the results of any individual's nature or poor character; rather, they arise from the ignorance we all must be working against.

This, of course, applies to less dramatic examples of conflict as well. When others cause harm to us, writes Nhat Hanh, we would do well to remember that the actions of others do not originate in their nature or character, but in their surrounding environments.³¹³ It is also important to remember that our actions, with or without ill-intent, arise from the causes and

³¹¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 88.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 75.

³¹³ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 83.

conditions around us. Keeping this reality in mind will keep us from employing an unhelpful judgmentalism.³¹⁴

It was the suffering of veterans of the war that compelled Nhat Hanh to work to address it. The nonjudgmentalism that helped to turn his anger into compassion is a necessary ingredient to addressing social suffering. This is true even amid violent conflict. While it may be tempting to consider those who are engaging in violence—or, in the case of veterans, those who had so engaged—as worthy of blame and condemnation, Nhat Hanh writes that this is an impediment to peaceful resolutions. When one gives into this temptation, “[w]e will always blame and condemn those we feel are responsible for wars and social injustice, without recognizing the degree of violence in ourselves.”³¹⁵ Any attempt to cast judgment on others, to place others in the position of the sole or primary cause of social conflict, misunderstands our own participation in the creation of the causes and conditions that resulted in that conflict; “we are,” Nhat Hanh writes, “all co-responsible. We are all the policemen *and* the victim.”³¹⁶ This judgmentalism, then, leads us to misattribute the causes of the conflicts we hope to resolve. There is no suffering, no hurt, no harm, from which we are ultimately separate. There are no causes or conditions in which we do not participate. And there is no other with whom we do not co-exist. Seeing this, Nhat Hanh was able to address those he might have otherwise blamed, and at whom he might have otherwise directed anger, for years.

Growing from his understanding of the nature of reality as interbeing is the understanding that, just as it makes no sense to choose sides in a conflict and doing only perpetuates the conflict, and just as it makes no sense to look upon one side as morally deficient and doing so

³¹⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 77.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

only perpetuates the conflict, so too does it make no sense to attempt to solve a conflict through violent means. No conflict can ever be solved in this way and only the seeds for future are sown. Even if one believes that their goals are worthy, peace can never be an end at which arrives by violence. In fact, for Nhat Hanh, peace is never an end at all—means and ends, of course, inter-are with one another and so are not distinguishable from one another—but the only viable orientation that grows out of an understanding of interbeing.³¹⁷ To address a conflict nonviolently, Nhat Hanh is clear that such work begins within one's own self: "To practice ahimsa, we must first of all learn ways to deal peacefully with ourselves. If we create true harmony within ourselves, we will know how to deal with family, friends, and associates."³¹⁸ Realizing that there is no dichotomy between inner and outer, nor self and other, Nhat Hanh writes that one's own orientation, the peace with which one deals with one's own self, is inseparable from the peace of one's interactions with the world. To shape the latter to become more peaceful, to root them in nonviolence, one must cultivate a position of nonviolence in own's understanding of one's self; to make peace, in other words, one must be peace.³¹⁹

This concept, "being peace," Sallie King writes, may represent Nhat Hanh's "single greatest contribution to global thinking about peacemaking."³²⁰ It is an understanding, well in accord with Nhat Hanh's conception of reality as interbeing, that ends are not separable from means, that one's own orientation is not separable from one's actions, and that's one's actions are not separable from the reality of the world. The peace of one's own self, the peace of one's communities, and, indeed, the peace of the world with which we inter-exist are one in the same. Misunderstanding this can lead us to cause harm in our world; correcting our insight, learning

³¹⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 66.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 69-70.

³¹⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, 115.

³²⁰ Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 81.

more and more deeply the truth of interbeing can lead us to shape the whole of existence positively:

Without a correct understanding of a situation or a person, our thoughts can be misleading and create confusion, despair, anger, or hatred. Our most important task is to develop correct insight. If we see deeply into the nature of interbeing, that all things ‘inter-are,’ we will stop blaming, arguing, and killing, and we will become friends with everyone.³²¹

The seeds of the conflict which exist around us sprout from the soil within us; but so too do the seeds of peace. Learning how to cultivate these can, Nhat Hanh believes, can have world-transforming consequences.

Interbeing Practice

Because of inseparability between self and world, in order to contribute peacefully to our co-existence, one must cultivate a peaceful life.³²² For Nhat Hanh, this arises only through a deeper and fuller understanding of the nature of reality as interbeing. Without such a deepening understanding, the social ills that we see in the world will continue to plague us. The understanding of interbeing, he writes,

is not a philosophical game removed from spiritual and practical life. In bringing to light the interdependence of all phenomena, the meditator comes to see that the lives of all beings are one, and he or she is overcome with compassion for all. [...] Seeing and loving always go together. Seeing and loving are one.³²³

The practice of meditation, then, is not merely for the benefits of the practitioner; there are no benefits that belong to the practitioner alone. Instead, the practice of meditation “prepares one for ‘reentry into society’ and helps one ‘stay in society.’”³²⁴ It is not for the sake of one’s self

³²¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 68.

³²² Meditation, of course, makes up a significant portion of Nhat Hanh’s writings and may, in fact, constitute their majority. It is enough, here, to highlight his understanding of the importance of practice to social activism.

³²³ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 67-68.

³²⁴ Kenneth Kraft, “Prospects of a Socially Engaged Buddhism,” in *Inner Peace, World Peace: Essays on Buddhism and Nonviolence*, ed. Kenneth Kraft (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 19.

that one practices, nor is it for the sake of others. One cultivates a sense of the interbeing nature of reality for the sake of the entirety of existence. This is key to any social activism inspired by Nhat Hanh's understanding: "To create fundamental change," he writes, "we, the members of society, have to transform ourselves."³²⁵

In one sense, the entirety of the preceding has included a discussion of practice in Nhat Hanh's thought. This is because, for Nhat Hanh, the practice of meditation is the practice of seeing reality, of seeing interbeing. While Nhat Hanh considers the reality of interbeing to observable within our relationships and within the natural world, it is through the practice of meditation one gains the clearest insight. This is because, for Nhat Hanh, meditation allows for the clearest observation of the world as it is:

When the sun shines continuously on a lotus flower, it opens widely, reveling its seed-heart. In the same way, through the activity of looking, reality gently reveals itself. In meditation, the subject and object of pure observation are inseparable.³²⁶

Meditation does not unlock the secrets of reality; meditation allows one to see most clearly what exists plainly. For instance, if one were to contemplate an object one normally considers to be outside of one's own existence—trees, say—meditation reveals this inner/outer dichotomy to be a false conception: "My mind fixes on the trees, but they are not a distinct object. My mind and the trees are one."³²⁷ This arises, for Nhat Hanh, because the contemplation of any object reveals its interdependent nature. The very act of contemplation obscures the line between inner and outer and a consideration of any object reveals its inseparability from the whole of reality: "Whatever the object, it is not fragmented from ultimate reality. In fact, it contains the vast totality of reality."³²⁸ What is revealed in the practice of meditation, then, for Nhat Hanh, is the

³²⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, 67.

³²⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 30.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

realization of the true nature of reality as co-existing, as interbeing. When this happens, “discrimination vanishes and reality is no longer sliced by the sword of conceptualization. The boundaries between good and evil are obliterated, and means and ends are recognized as the same.”³²⁹ Overcoming these false dichotomies is a purposeful act. Without the distinctions we so easily assume, without the boundaries we must regularly remind ourselves do not exist, “we can see a child’s body of skin and bones in Uganda or Ethiopia as our own,” and that “the hunger and pain in the bodies of all living species are our own.”³³⁰ It is then that we will be able act—that we will not be able not to act—for the benefit of our world.

Nhat Hanh counsels one to undertake four mindfulness practices, articulated in the Sūtra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. First, in considering the reality of one’s body, one observes that “mindfulness is not an outside observer;” there is no centrality from which one looks out into the world—there is the body.³³¹ The second observation, the Second Establishment of Mindfulness, is similar: one’s feelings do not exist separately from any other aspect of one’s being.³³² In the same way, one considers the nature of one’s own mind and the nature of one’s perceptions.³³³ These practices, Nhat Hanh writes, help one simply to observe what is happening and to accept it. In this way

we reach a degree of peace and understanding. Peace and joy arise when we drop the discrimination between right and wrong; between the mind that observes and the body that is being observed...; between the mind that observes and the feelings that are being observed....

³²⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 121-122.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

³³¹ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Transformation and Healing: Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness* (Berkeley: Parallax, 2006), 9.

³³² *Ibid.*

³³³ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

Through mindfulness practices like these, then, the subject-object duality that we so easily assume begins to blur and the practitioner moves closer to seeing the interbeing nature of existence. In this way, just as the line between the mind and the object of observation becomes more difficult to discern and, eventually, vanishes altogether, so too do we see the ultimate nonexistence of the line between self and other. Practicing in this way, for Nhat Hanh, can allow mindfulness to become a regular part of one's interactions in the world. Nhat Hanh regularly calls his readers and students to a consistent and relentless reminder that there is no inner and outer and that is, at that moment, interbeing with all that is. Supported by intentional mindfulness practices such as those above, one is better able to exist with an orientation to the world rooted in interbeing. As we have seen, for Nhat Hanh, this is the key to fruitful social action.

Thich Nhat Hanh's Pragmatic Ontology

Because Thich Nhat Hanh understands “interbeing” to be an apt description of the nature of reality, it seems that applying a natural law understanding to his thinking, as in the case of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, would be obvious. Indeed, Nhat Hanh seems relentlessly concerned with convincing his reader that his understanding of existence is an understanding of the world as it is. It is discernible through observation and analysis, reveals itself in meditation, and is seen clearly in the workings of the natural world. It's even clearly seen in Einstein's theory of relativity and in the developments of quantum theory.³³⁴ It appears to be an open-and-shut case of a natural law ethic. However, upon closer examination, Thich Nhat Hanh seems to leave a few clues that the matter is more complicated.

³³⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 43.

For instance, in a discussion of the Noble Eightfold Path, Nhat Hanh leaves no doubt that, ultimately, no understanding of reality can be conclusive: “Relatively speaking, there are right views and there are wrong views. But if we look more deeply, we see that *all views are wrong views*.” To understand Buddhism, he goes on to write, as “a collection of views” badly misses the mark. “It is a practice to help us eliminate wrong views. [...] Right View is the absence of all views.”³³⁵ He writes similarly about the foundational teaching of no-self. The Buddha’s teaching of no-self was instrumental; its purpose was “to overthrow ‘self,’ not to replace it with a new concept of reality. The notion of ‘no self’ is a method, not a goal. If it becomes a concept, it must be destroyed along with all other concepts.”³³⁶ Buddhism, then, is not a lens for seeing reality, but a method for seeing our false views of reality. Likewise, then, it follows that the purpose of seeing that our views are false and need to be overthrown is not to replace them with a correct view, like that of interbeing. To do so would be to create another “concept” which “must be destroyed.” In fact, he says this explicitly about Buddhist thinking, that it must be understood “only as a method, as a guide, to the practitioner in his experience of this reality” and never as “the description of reality.”³³⁷

What, then, could Nhat Hanh’s purpose be in arguing so forcefully and so consistently that the nature of reality should be viewed as an existence which is interbeing? A possible answer might lie in an oft-quoted statement of the Buddha: “I teach only *duḥkka* and the utter quenching of *duḥkka*.” Regarding this statement, Nhat Hanh writes, “If this teaching is taken at face value then the entire purpose of Buddhism is pragmatic: to end suffering.”³³⁸ As often as interbeing is put forward as a description of reality, it is just as frequently put forward as way to

³³⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, 56.

³³⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 47.

³³⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Zen Keys* (New York: Harmony, 1974), 47.

³³⁸ Sallie B. King, *Being Benevolence*, 80.

address suffering—albeit, through a correct apprehension of reality. However, given the above, it may be that Nhat Hanh understands the concept of interbeing as a tool, as a method itself, for best addressing the suffering in world. In this way, it would differ from Buddhādāsa's approach and begin to look a bit more like Śāntideva's consequentialism, an approach which renders his entire project as instrumental, a means to the end of alleviating suffering. However, because Nhat Hanh's work is so forcefully concerned with the nature of reality, a reality which is best described, clearly, as interbeing, Nhat Hanh's efforts can't be reduced to an instrumentalism so easily. Nhat Hanh's ethic may be best categorized by thinking of it as a pragmatic ontology; that is, Nhat Hanh's description of reality as interbeing is so central to his ethic, and his ethic so singularly focused on the alleviation of suffering, it may be that he proposes the adoption of a particular ontological view of reality—interbeing—as the best means toward his sought-for end. That is, it may be that he presents interbeing as a characterization of the universe, not because he believes the universe can be characterized but because he believes that doing so thusly is instrumental as a means to best address suffering. While in Nhat Hanh's broader body of work, he is clear that reality cannot be characterized accurately, that any conception is false and Buddhism's goal is not to overthrow one wrong view with another right view, when he is writing of interbeing and its relation to social activism, to the engagement and amelioration of suffering, he does not hesitate to present interbeing as a description of reality as it is. In this way, then, interbeing as an apt descriptor of reality becomes a pragmatic choice made by someone who believes that viewing the world in this way is the best hope for reducing suffering in a globalizing world, a goal given priority over any views, ultimately accurate or not.

Conclusion

As the world continues its tumultuous process of globalization, as technologies continue to reshape our lives in dramatic ways, and as boundaries between nations, communities, traditions, and cultures begin to break down, as much as anybody else, Thich Nhat Hanh has spoken as an advocate for peace for the sake of the entire global community. After having watched his country torn apart by the division sown by superpowers seeking power, Nhat Hanh dedicated himself to working to prevent another such disaster by helping others to grow in peace themselves. Through his understanding of the nature of reality as interbeing, Nhat Hanh has taught the dichotomies we so easily assume in our world—between inner and outer, self and other, object and existence—are, in every meaningful way, illusions. Instead, we must come to see that we exist, not with one another in ineluctable relation, but as one another in inseparability. Living deeply into this truth, the suffering of others then ceases to be a pain which exists “out there,” but becomes our very own, the entire universe ceases to be that which exists “out there,” but becomes our very own being. Addressing the hurt that exists, and transforming our own selves, become, then, not something one does in addition to one’s primary vocation, but indeed the only action that retains any meaning.

VI. CONCLUSION

In Paul Knitter's experience with the International Peace Council, he witnessed an instance which both challenged his theological understanding and resonated with his experience of the world. After having spoken forcefully in condemnation of those who were using their social position and resources to gain advantages of those who were already dispossessed and marginalized, he was taken aback by the resistance of his Buddhist compatriots to join him in condemnation. Why couldn't these people, whose actions were based in greed for material gain and lust for increased power over others not be condemned, he asked; and if they couldn't, could anybody?

John Makransky, a professor of Buddhist studies and himself a practitioner of the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, also recognizes an opportunity for Christian social activists, especially those influenced by the traditions of liberation of theology emerging from the Latin American experience, to reconsider their conception of the "enemy," offering the insights of the Buddhist tradition as a starting point. Specifically, Makransky offers the lesson that all people are suffering under a misunderstanding of the nature of reality, including that of persons, as transient and ever-changing.³³⁹ This fact makes it impossible to speak of anything as a wholly independent entity and instead casts the phenomena of existence as interrelated. In an effort to push against this reality of transience, human beings instinctively conceive of themselves (and others) as independent beings, existing of and unto themselves and their wants and needs, and often drafting metaphysical claims to support this misapprehension. This misunderstanding, Makransky says, causes people to grasp onto impermanent things—material

³³⁹ John Makransky, "A Buddhist Critique of, and Learning from, Christian Liberation Theology," *Theological Studies*, Vol. 75, No. 3 (2014): 636-639; see also: John Makransky, "What Christian Liberation Theology and Buddhism Need to Learn from Each Other," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, No. 34 (2017):118-120.

possessions and power over others, for instance—in an effort to define a permanent self, which leads to suffering as impermanent things continue to change. The actions of those Knitter assumed were condemnable, then, can be seen as misguided efforts to alleviate this suffering, an insight which led Knitter’s Buddhist compatriots, to view them, not as contemptible enemies, but as fellow beings suffering under a common condition of misunderstanding and so worthy of compassion instead of condemnation. Allowing this understanding of the nature of persons to shed light on Christian assumptions, Makransky claims, will not only allow Christian social activists to better fulfill the claim of Jesus to love every person, but will also enhance their efforts at peace and reconciliation by allowing for a better understanding the nature of the conflicts Christian social activists hope to address.³⁴⁰

To investigate this claim, this study has examined the thought of three Buddhist thinkers—the eighth-century Indian Śāntideva, twentieth-century Thai Theravāda monk Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, and contemporary Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh—as well as a variety of contemporary Buddhist movements of religiously-inspired social activism united under the rubric “Engaged Buddhism,” in order to articulate these conceptions of personhood and how they inform a social ethic which compels this engagement. In so doing, the Buddhist conceptions of no-self, dependent arising, and emptiness, and how such conceptions lead an understanding of an interdependence between self and society and, in many instances, of an interdependence of all phenomena, have been articulated. Within the work of these specific thinkers herein examined, attempts to name another “enemy” are problematized, requiring instead a social ethic which keeps at the forefront that one’s existence—including one’s positive

³⁴⁰ John Makransky, “What Christian Liberation Theology and Buddhism Need to Learn from Each Other,” 121.

and negative characteristics—is wholly the result of causes and conditions, rather than anything inherent.

In each, the role of ontology differs. For Śāntideva, questions of ontology are extraneous to the larger mission of addressing suffering. No-self, dependent arising, and emptiness are instrumental means to this end. Any ontological view misunderstands the nature of Buddhist teaching, even the teaching of emptiness, as “abolitive” and seeking to eradicate absolutisms in the service of employing best practices to address suffering. Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, seeking to uncover the Buddha’s original teaching which, since it accords with an apt description of reality as it is, sees in the Buddhist Dhamma a natural law, an articulation of the nature of being, an understanding of which will unlock the door to the actions that will best shape individual and collective lives. Nhat Hanh, working from many of the same impulses as Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu, employs his conception of interbeing as a descriptor of reality, an understanding of which he hopes will be a tool to best facilitate the amelioration of suffering, but always allows for the qualification that Buddhism precludes seeing any absolute view as ultimately effective. In this way, interbeing functions as a pragmatic ontology, an ontology employed and articulated, not because of its ultimate correctness, but because such an ontological view may prove most useful in addressing suffering in a globalizing world.

For these thinkers, the Buddhist teachings of no-self, dependent arising, and interdependence inform a conception of the self which precludes the naming of another as “enemy.” As one’s actions, even harm-causing actions, are the results of surrounding causes and conditions, the agency required to justify such a label cannot be found. Further, in each of these thinkers, it is a misapprehension of the nature of reality, and specifically of the nature of one’s own self as an entity independent of one’s surroundings, that directly leads to harm-causing

actions; it is not, then, the result of inherent characteristics within a person that would then justify defining the person primarily by their harm-causing actions. Lastly, in each of these thinkers, that a person cannot be described as a bounded entity whose needs and wants are addressable independent of their surroundings, informs a social ethic which elevates the priority of other persons, in some cases the natural environment, such that one's own well-being cannot be scythed from the well-being of one's society. In this way, a social ethic emerges that informs efforts to address conflict, personal and social.

Such a selfhood stands in contrast to conceptions traditionally operative in Christian thinking, that of a bounded entity defined by an essence. This notion, Makransky has argued, has facilitated a reductive tendency in Christian social activists to define persons by their harm-causing actions—that is, to name one “enemy.” Such a move imparts a greater culpability than can be warranted, and so hinders efforts toward reconciliation, and misunderstands the motivations of harm-causing actors, and so hinders efforts to address their motivations. Recently, emerging within Christian thought have been various understandings of the person as interdependent with their environment. These nascent offerings could benefit from the more thoroughly developed teachings of no-self, dependent arising, and interdependence, and how such teachings give rise to and shape social ethics.

From such a comparative study, the work of Christian social activists might be undertaken with differing assumptions. Rather than ascribing the kind of agency necessary to define a person by their harm-causing actions and so warrant the label “enemy,” Christian social activists might see a person's actions as the result of conditioning factors which preclude such an agency. Likewise, rather than seeing a person's harm-causing actions as the arising from inherent and immutable characteristics, Christian social activists might gain a greater awareness

of the suffering born of a misapprehension of the nature of one's own self and the ways in which such a misapprehension is itself a conditioning factor of harm-causing actions; in this way, Christian social activists might view harm-causing agents with greater compassion and better address the source of harm-causing actions. Finally, within those currents of Christian thought where such an interdependence is emerging (to be taken up below), such a comparative study might inform the development of a social ethic not based on bounded individuals defined by an essence but rather one in which is based on the nondualistic relationships between self and other, self and environment, and self and society. It is hoped that the preceding can be seen as an offering to that end.

Through this investigation, several areas for further research have come to light: first, should a comparative study of selfhood in Christianity and Buddhism with respect to social activism be undertaken, the question of ontology will loom large; should Christianity maintain its theological dualism and if not, what kind of ontology might be best employed? Would Christianity do well to adopt an instrumental, if not abilitative ontology, asking which tools might be best employed in the service of activism; if so, what are the goals of that activism, if they are not the amelioration of suffering? Would Christianity do well to employ a natural law ethic based in a reimagination of the relationship between God and the world, such that theological dualism is no longer the dominant paradigm? Or, would Christianity do well to adopt a pragmatic ontology, to ask which ontological vision best suits some yet-articulated goals? These questions relate to how a two-truths doctrine might be developed within Christianity; that is, these questions relate to what Christianity might come to say is ultimately true and how that shapes what we believe to be conventionally true.

Second, there arises a question of how practice might be employed within this reimagination. In each of these three locations, practice has been key to countering the reifying tendencies of persons. Do such practices exist in Christianity and, if not, how might they be developed? This question might also benefit from a comparative study between Christianity and Buddhism which, as we have seen, has considered similar questions throughout its history.

Interdependence in Christian Thought

Turning to the question of how the Buddhist conceptions examined here might influence Christian thinking and, in particular, its approach to social activism, this section will first address the prevalence of similar themes in Christian theology, examining them historically (and briefly) through the work of Catherine Keller and contemporarily through the work of Sallie McFague and Ivone Gebara, before outlining several of the areas where further development is needed.

While it has by no means been a dominant thread within the history of Christian theology, an ontological nondualism between God and the world is not unknown, appearing in the writings of some of the earliest Christian thinkers and continuing through the Middle Ages and into the modern period. While theistic dualism, the premise that God and the world are necessarily separate from one another, has been the dominant paradigm in Christian thought, panentheism, the idea that God and the world are distinct from one another but ultimately inseparable, has been a recurring theme. Detailing a history of panentheism, Catherine Keller traces this development, uncovering a consistent, if not unbroken, thread in Christian thought.

Beginning with Irenaeus, a second-century CE theologian, Keller notes how the Incarnation of a divinely-conceived Jesus problematizes theistic dualism even from Christianity's beginnings. In writing of the Incarnation of the one "who in an invisible manner contains all things created, and is inherent in the entire creation," Irenaeus articulates what Keller

calls “classical panentheism.” “Irenaeus situates,” Keller continues, “not only all-in-God but also God-in-all.” Keller goes on to describe how such writing is quite in keeping with a tradition of describing God that predates Christianity and is present dating even back to a “prerabbinic Jewish” understanding of the nature of God and the world.³⁴⁷ Such conceptions began to become heretical with the concretization of Christian theology in the coming centuries, but they remained present among those thinkers always given a certain leeway, the mystics. A panentheistic conception of God and the world was central to a still-influential Syrian monk writing around 500 CE, who has come to be known as Pseudo-Dionysius, on whom the fifteenth century theologian and philosopher Nicholas of Cusa relied in formulating his “*coincidentia oppositorum*,” an articulation of paradox in Christian thinking that allowed him to formulate a kind of interdependence of all phenomena, one which “pivots on the enfoldment of the creatures on each other.”³⁴⁸ Such ideas continued to percolate through the emergence of modernity, remaining always beneath the surface of mainstream Christian thought.

Thus, for those who might be interested in developing a conception of selfhood not based on the person as ultimately a bounded entity unto oneself, it is worth noting that a strand of nondualistic ontology can be found within the Christian tradition. That is, the Christian tradition is not monolithic with regard to the theistic dualism which developed in concurrence with notion of the person as defined by essence. If such a dualism is not itself essential to Christian tradition, if alternatives can be uncovered within the tradition itself, then perhaps its concurrent self-conception is likewise non-essential and is negotiable. For those who wish to consider an

³⁴⁷ Catherine Keller, “The Body of Panentheism,” in *Panentheism across the World’s Traditions*, eds. Loriliai Biernacki and Philip Clayton (New York: Oxford, 2014), 67-68.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 70-71.

alternative notion of self, one possibility for its basis is an ontological nondualism within the tradition.

It is in the areas of feminist theology broadly, and ecofeminist theology specifically, that such an alternative conception has emerged and began to develop. In summarizing this emergence, Rebecca Chopp writes that it is characterized by two foundational themes, “embodiment” and “connectedness.” Noting Christianity’s history of disregard for the body (influenced by the theological dualism that takes hold), and of the female body in particular (influenced by a patriarchy inseparable from the development of Christian thought), Chopp writes:

Embodiment... becomes a way to retrieve a part of assigned women’s nature and use it as normative for all persons. Since women’s physical nature has been attributed as inherently sinful, it has been important for feminist theologians to affirm physical nature, including women’s bodies, as part of the ‘good’ creation.”³⁴⁹

It is from this affirmation of embodiment that a recognition of “connectedness or mutuality” emerges:

The term ‘connectedness’ signifies the interconnected matrix or web or reality in which we always already exist. The term ‘mutuality’ suggests that to be connected, to seek connections, to build communities, is a transformation of suffering into flourishing, of evil into good.”³⁵⁰

Articulating such a connectedness becomes key for two thinkers in particular, whose work represents an emerging discourse taking place in feminist and ecofeminist theology, Sallie McFague and Ivone Gebara.

³⁴⁹ Rebecca S. Chopp, “Feminist and Womanist Theologies,” in *The Modern Theologians, 2nd Edition*, ed. David F. Ford (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 395.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 395.

Perhaps no Christian thinker has done more to articulate the beginnings of a systematic theology based in a nondualism between God and the world than Sallie McFague. Recognizing that twentieth century theology had done much work in deconstructing the traditional images of God—images that are largely “triumphalist, monarchical, patriarchal”—McFague sets about the task of constructing a new way of thinking of God and God’s relationship to the world.³⁵¹ Doing so is paramount at the current time because, while the prior deconstructing did much to articulate the damage previous models of God had likely caused, the remaining social and environmental ills are in need of a platform from which they can be addressed, at least for those who seek to address them from an explicitly Christian perspective. What is needed, then, “is an imaginative vision of the relationship between God and the world that underscores their interdependence and mutuality, empowering a sensibility of care and responsibility toward all life.”³⁵²

To that end, McFague suggests conceiving of the world as the body of God, of existence as contained within God, and of articulating an inseparability between the two. Such a conception, she argues persuasively, creates for Christians an impetus to love the world with a vivacity heretofore unknown, as, in this model people are seen to be interdependent with the materiality of the planet.³⁵³ This conception also forces a reevaluation of non-human life and a “need to move beyond democracy to biocracy, seeing ourselves as one species among millions of other species on a planet that is our common home.”³⁵⁴ However, McFague sees implications beyond a more-fervent environmentalism in this model, namely a rethinking of the conception of the person: “At the very least this means problematizing the boundaries between self and other,

³⁵¹ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), xi.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 60-61.

³⁵³ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 102-103.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

subject and object, extending autonomy, agency and creativity beyond our own species.”³⁵⁵

While McFague recognizes the potential for her panentheistic model to provide a new vision for interpersonal relationships, this idea remains largely unexplored in her work, seeing here a quizzical affirmation of others, both persons and non-persons alike, their “concrete individuality, otherness, and difference.”³⁵⁶

Building on McFague’s work, and relying heavily on her own experience of a lifetime spent among the marginalized people of Rio De Janeiro, Brazilian nun, activist, and theologian Ivone Gebara advances an understanding of interdependence within Christian thinking, articulating her ideas most completely in her 1999 book *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*. Like McFague, Gebara recognizes that previous models of God as ontologically separate from the world have been instrumental in anthropocentric and patriarchal modes of thinking that have contributed to the unfolding climate crisis and have participated in systems of oppression that have harmed many, women in particular. Though, rather than beginning with ontology, as McFague does, Gebara begins her evaluation in personal experience—that of her own and of others, particularly women.³⁵⁷ Doing so, she recognizes

the interdependence among all the elements that are related to the human world. [...] Interdependence means accepting the basic fact that any life situation, behavior, or even belief is always the fruit of all the interactions that make up our lives, our histories, and our wider earthly cosmic realities.”³⁵⁸

³⁵⁵ Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 110.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁵⁷ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 48-49.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

Her experience also reveals that this interdependence is not limited to the realm of human activity but encompasses “our wider cosmic identity,” instantiating a kinship with all of life that forms an impetus for a biocentric worldview.³⁵⁹

This, Gebara contrasts with previous epistemologies which relied on essentialisms which defined persons as “‘this’ and not ‘that,’” and assumed their existence as “specific beings.”³⁶⁰ In this contrasting consideration, then, the lines between self and other become more difficult to discern, as an interdependent outlook leads us

to relate subjectivity to objectivity; individuality to collectivity, transcendence to immanence, tenderness to compassion and solidarity, plants to humanity, and animals to humanity, based on a perspective that is all-encompassing and intimately interwoven.³⁶¹

The interdependence born of her experience of the world, then, is one in which all phenomena are somehow “intimately interwoven,” a truth evident through the experience of the world.

While this truth is arrived at by Gebara through her experience, she sees deep resonances with the Christian conception of the Trinity. In the relationality articulated by a conception of God who is both unitary and multiple, Gebara sees a reflection of humanity. “The Trinity,” she writes

is an expression of our history—of human history, which is both tragic and challenging—but it is a unified Trinity. [...] The experience of the Trinity brings multiplicity and the desire for unity into a single and unique movement, as if they were phases of the same breath. “Trinity” is the name we give ourselves, a name that is the synthesis of our perception of our own expanded existence. ‘Trinity’ is a language we build in an attempt to express our awareness of being a multitude and at the same time a unity.³⁶²

³⁵⁹ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 50-51.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 148-149.

It remains unclear which conception shapes which—that is, if the understanding of humanity as interdependent is a lens through which to view the Trinity or vice versa—but the imagery creates powerful resonances for a conception of God and humanity through a nondualistic lens.

Her conception of the Trinity, however, raises an important question as to the role of Jesus in this conception. Because she resists the traditional formulation of the Trinity as a tripartite conception of the Godhead, preferring instead a more generalized notion of multiplicity and community, the identity of Jesus of Nazareth, whom Christian tradition came to consider incarnation of the deity, is muddled. The stories about Jesus in the gospel accounts are certainly crucial to her understanding of the nature of God, and so in this way Jesus is not divorced from revelation of the divine reality. Taking the stories of Jesus in the gospels as central and listening to the stories of the marginalized persons encountered by Jesus in the gospels,

it seems that the centrality of Jesus opens us to the centrality of persons, especially the outcast, and to the need to invest in what we could call our ‘salvation’ in the here and now. Thus we move away from an excessive emphasis on the figure of the savior, the hero, the martyr, the king, the saint—as well as the victorious warrior, the only Son of God. We come to speak of the salvation we offer one another when our hearts open up in tenderness and mercy.³⁶³

While Gebara makes clear that in her writings on Jesus, she has “neither the desire nor the ambition to build a new Christology to be discussed by professional theologians,”³⁶⁴ it is clear, in the light of the nondualisms shone forth by these perspectives, that such a project is needed. Jesus as the one who points toward this reconfigured social relationship based on interdependence would be a different articulation of the divine embodiment, but not one necessarily at odds with Christian tradition. And given Gebara’s forceful and poetic articulation

³⁶³ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 180.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 174.

of the role of the Trinity in her thinking, it would seem that such a conception is in her view. However, it remains unarticulated and the question of the identity of this central figure remains.

While Gebara attends more fully to the question of interpersonal relationships in a conception of the world in which God and existence are something other than ontologically separate, she, like McFague, leaves the specifics of a related ethic unarticulated. She does acknowledge that such a re-conception of persons requires new modes of ethical thought, especially regarding globalized commerce and national boundaries. This remains a place where further development is needed. Specifically, there exists the question of the purpose of Christian ethics in such a view. Is an ethic based on a developing Christian interdependence a kind of natural law ethic, where actions that grow out of this understanding will be more harmonious and peaceful than those that do not, as in the thought of Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu? Or is an ethic based on a developing Christian interdependence a kind of consequentialism that seeks to overcome the suffering of others, or language more often utilized in Christian thought, that seeks to more fully love others, as in the thought of Śāntideva? Such an answer is going to shape the ethic that develops here.

Further, both McFague and Gebara articulate an interdependence of persons but stop short of grounding this interdependence within the Christian tradition. McFague, for instance, articulates a nondual ontology between God and the world and is convinced that this ontology should lead to a reconsideration of human relationships, but less clear on why. All persons are contained within God, yes, but how does this metaphysical location define relationality between them? In some sense, McFague's understanding of the person is in contrast with traditional dualistic understandings of persons by moving the metaphysical from within (as in some idea of

a soul) to without (as in a God who contains all); if interpersonal relations in the former system are wanting, why are they improved in the latter?

Gebara, it seems, attempts to do this in her discussion of the Trinity, offering it as a clear reflection of relatedness. However, it is unclear in her articulation if human relations are a reflection of the Trinity, which could form an ontological argument for the interdependency of persons, or if her understanding of the Trinity is a reflection of her experience of human interdependency, which would render it a pragmatic view and its implications would be unclear. Of course, this reflects a question of Gebara's work that pervades it:

A major question, then, faces those of us who are seeking new directions. Is Christianity conceivable apart from the traditional philosophical framework? Are we able to think about it from within other frames of reference that might demand changes in its traditional formulations? Can we reflect on these apart from the dogmatic formulas that have set their stamp on so many centuries? These questions haunt us, and we have not yet found really satisfactory answers.³⁶⁵

For Gebara, removing these concepts from epistemologies that cannot be separated from androcentrism and patriarchy allows her to reformulate an understanding of these issues based on her experience. Is it possible to allow her experiences to reshape some of the theological frameworks from which they arose removed? Would doing so render her experience less meaningful than the traditional frameworks in need of reimagining, and, if so, would the traditional frameworks then once again be participating in patriarchal oppression? Can something be salvaged of the former epistemologies such that they are not patriarchal but still bear continuity with the tradition? These are questions in need of examination.

³⁶⁵ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 47.

Remaining Issues

Hovering over all of the articulations of Buddhist thinking in the previous pages is the Buddhist teaching of the Two Truths, first articulated by the Mahāyāna philosopher Nāgārjuna, but present also in the work of Theravāda thinkers Walpola Rahula and Buddhādāsa. Articulated briefly in this work's second section, this teaching states that there exists an ultimate truth (P: *paramattha-sacca*, S: *paramārtha-satya*), “that all things are empty of own-being, or dependently arisen,” and a conventional truth (P: *sammuti-sacca*, S: *saṃvṛti-satya*), which refers “to the world as experienced by ordinary perception” and the formulation of concepts. “This ‘ultimate truth’ about existence does not deny conventional truths; it simply reveals the true nature of what one knows at the conventional level of truth.”³⁶⁶

With regard to persons, then, the Two Truths are seen in the acknowledgment that persons do not possess *svabhāva* and do not exist as independent entities, much less as eternal and unchanging essences, but that persons do exist in a conventional sense, as beings with (conditioned and conditioning) experiences that have value. It is this understanding that is at the heart of the relationship between emptiness and no-self and Buddhist ethics, writes Luis O. Gómez: “For what is false here is not the phenomena of interpersonal relations but the notion of permanent, graspable entities; and only the first is a necessary condition for ethical values.”³⁶⁷ John Makransky points to this teaching, as well, in his critique of the tendency for Christian-inspired social activists to label a person as “enemy.” Doing so, he writes, makes a conventional truth about a person (that they are engaging in behavior that is causing serious harm) into an ultimate truth. “At that point the whole person has become an ‘enemy’ to me. In that moment, I have lost touch with the fuller reality of self and other (the others fuller humanity and my

³⁶⁶ Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience, 2nd Edition* (New York: Oxford, 2008), 40.

³⁶⁷ Luis O. Gómez, “Emptiness and Moral Perfection,” *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 23 (1973): 372.

capacity to know that in him), the fuller reality in which authentic love as social challenge to the ‘enemy can function.’³⁶⁸ This misunderstanding is born of human ignorance but is exacerbated by Christian conceptions of persons as ultimate essences with ultimate characteristics and we have seen how Buddhist teachings no-self, dependent arising, emptiness, and interdependence recast the nature of persons.

The importance of such a development can be seen in some of the objections to Makransky’s critique that he addresses. In objecting to Gustavo Gutiérrez’s labeling of those who contribute to social harm and oppression as “enemies,” Makransky claims that he is reducing the identity of these people to their harmful actions, precluding the ability to address the suffering that motivates their harmful actions and neglecting to carry out the Christian command to love all people.³⁶⁹ In the endnotes to his paper, “What Christian Liberation Theology and Buddhism Need to Learn from Each Other,” Makransky shares one of his interlocutors’ objections to his critique: “Gutiérrez is arguing for us to side with the poor only with regard to their economic and social situation,” his unnamed colleague objects. “He is not saying to side with them as whole persons over other whole persons.”³⁷⁰ The argument is one of pragmatism: the label “enemy” says nothing of the person’s ultimate nature but serves only to point to the actions that Christian social activists are called to oppose. Such a claim would place Gutiérrez in line with a Hebrew tradition of “prophetic voice,” the utilization of dramatic and often harsh language to point out the shortcomings in Israelite society. However, Makransky rightly objects, there is no such qualification in Gutiérrez’s text and, if Makransky’s colleague is correct, given

³⁶⁸ John Makransky, “A Buddhist Critique of, and Learning from, Christian Liberation Theology,” 643; see also his “What Christian Liberation Theology and Buddhism Need to Learn from Each Other,” 123.

³⁶⁹ John Makransky, “What Christian Liberation Theology and Buddhism Need to Learn from Each Other,” 122-123.

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 131n8.

human beings' tendency to consider persons as labels and not in their whole, nuanced being, Gutiérrez is relying on the reader to infer a critical point. "To counter the tendency to reify persons that is evoked by such wordings of careful qualification, like that by my colleague, would need to be made much more thoroughly and frequently."³⁷¹ To do so would require some kind of framework which could employed to this end, some kind of absolute reality which would be consistently and frequently invoked to contextualize any conventional labeling.

To develop a social ethic based on a Christian interdependence, then, will require the development of a kind of Christian two truths. What, in such a formulation, would an ultimate truth be? In a Buddhist conception, the answer is, of course, the emptiness of all phenomena of *svabhāva*, and within more specific understandings of this truth (as in Mādhyamika), it becomes important to stress that this emptiness is itself empty, a conceptual tool meant to describe the nature of existence.³⁷² Clearly, there is no room in such a conception for a divine being as has been traditionally understood by Christianity. If a panentheistic conception of God is adopted, like the ones examined above, could the ultimate truth be said to be the presence of God throughout (but not equivalent with) the Creation? If so, how would this qualify any conventional understanding of what it means to be a person, such that labeling one "enemy" would no longer be a viable option? The development of such a conception within Christian theology seems, to me, to be inseparable from adopting any conception of personhood that shares with the Buddhist thinking examined here a prohibition against reductive labeling.

Finally, each of the thinkers examined above note that the false conception of sense of self independent from one's surroundings arises through ignorance of the nature of reality but is

³⁷¹ John Makransky, "What Christian Liberation Theology and Buddhism Need to Learn from Each Other," 131n8.

³⁷² See Jay L. Garfield, "Introduction to the Commentary," *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (New York: Oxford, 1995), 90-91.

reinforced staunchly by our habituations and social interactions. It is, in a sense, our default position. Yes, knowledge of the true nature of reality can be gained through experience, either through analysis or through contact with the world that alters one's perception, but there will remain always an inclination to return to this default. For this reason, as was seen, each of these thinkers counseled a robust spiritual practice aimed at countering this tendency, without which it will be difficult, if possible at all, to retain a true picture of the nature of reality and of persons. Such a practice, agrees Makransky, "must be part of the purpose of any contemplative system that would support work against injustice that avoids the fractured misperception of other persons that contribute to the dynamics of injustice itself."³⁷³ Thus, to develop a conception of persons that can better serve as a basis for Christian-inspired social activism, such a contemplative system must be developed. Are there contemplative tools within the Christian tradition that can be marshalled toward these efforts? As Keller noted above, a certain Christian ontological nondualism thrived in the mystical tradition's mystical expressions; are there practices from these spheres which can be dusted off and adopted? How might these practices be incorporated in existing Christian liturgical practices, if at all? And lastly, what might come of a comparative study between these practices and the Buddhist meditative practices counseled above by the thinkers here examined? Such questions must be at the heart of future attempts to create a conception of Christian personhood that inspire, motivate, and shape productive social activism.

³⁷³ John Makransky, "What Christian Liberation Theology and Buddhism Need to Learn from Each Other," 125.

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