



## **Serenity In The Here and Now: *Bodhicitta* From A Modern Buddhist Sage**

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*Bodhicitta* is both sublime and practical. Sages have confessed to its rigor in terms of contemplation and study, but it never stopped them from pursuing it nonetheless. The philosopher-sage Thich Nhat Hanh was one who had a deep grasp of *Bodhicitta* which, due to his many experiences, have given it a twist of ancient and modern – yet all sacrosanct. The explanations therein may not even satisfy a Western philosopher, yet it need not be, because Thay’s (Hanh) discourse appeals from a flow of long-lasting Oriental training which is unique in itself.

The exposition provided for us highlights *Bodhicitta* as the be-all and end-all of life, coupled with rigorous meditation and contemplation. He came to a point when all life becomes meaningless if he alone pursues a path to peace. To satisfy this, he had to deliberately suspend his Nirvana so as to teach the whole world of a life lived with *Bodhicitta*.

The article is therefore both an exposition and a response. Thich Nhat Hanh did all for the love of humanity, to shed light on the dullness of purposelessness and despair. Now that the good news has been enunciated, how will the readers go forth? He issues a few practical tips, all in the effort of making *Bodhicitta* come “in the flesh.” Again, it will all depend on those who wish to take up the challenge to enjoy a life worth living.

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## Buddhist Wisdom

The sage of the *Shakya* Clan – Gautama Buddha had for his goal the Enlightenment and liberation of all sentient beings. His approach was not simplistic though. Throughout his life he remained attuned to the sufferings of the world and sought to do something about it. His initial advance to this was love and compassion. The author Herman Hesse described Buddha as being “filled with tremendous love for all, (and) for everything he saw.”<sup>1</sup> Villaba said that the Buddha is the “epitome of love”<sup>2</sup> in his tradition. Indeed, “Buddha’s love embraces all people as a father.”<sup>3</sup> Yet it wasn’t enough to love, for it cannot remain stagnant. A practical application of his abstract teachings must be executed.

*Bodhicitta* as a concept has been highlighted several times by the Buddha. Although scattered in many writings and in the interpretations of many authors, he goes back to the essential and philosophical approaches by which this can be realized. Again, more than an impersonal, unattached stance, the Buddha goes to the heart of reality in all sentient beings. He begins with suffering. It was mentioned that “life is nothing but suffering and pain (*Dukkha*).”<sup>4</sup>

Pema Chodron points out that the Buddha sees suffering as something that has a great deal to teach us.<sup>5</sup> The Vietnamese nun Sister Thoai Nghiem mentions that suffering is highly “transformative and beneficial to the realization of *Bodhicitta*.”<sup>6</sup> Many individuals have come to appreciate a spiritual path because of unhappiness, sorrow and feelings of loneliness. These are sufferings in themselves. Physically, a person experiences the joy of being healed only when that individual experienced being wounded; or that a child learns a lesson or two upon a quick scolding. Buddhism embraces this reality. That very moment of suffering, no matter how low, is the self-same path towards genuine spirituality. This is the key to realize *Bodhicitta*.

As long as we are caught up always in looking for certainty and happiness, rather than honoring the taste and smell and quality of exactly what is happening, as long as we are always running away from discomfort, we are going to be caught in a cycle of unhappiness and disappointment, and

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<sup>1</sup> Hesse, Herman. *Siddharta*. (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1951), p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> See Villaba, Magdalena A. *Philosophy of the East*. (Manila: UST Publishing House, 1996), p. 89.

<sup>3</sup> Klostermaier, Klaus K. *Buddhism: A Short Introduction*. (Boston: Oneworld Publications, 1999), p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> Rahula, Walpola. *What the Buddha Taught*. (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1959.), p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Chodron, Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Combelie, Janelle. “Nurturing Bodhicitta in Vietnam”; *True Lotus Meditation*, p. 2.

we will feel weaker and weaker. *This way of seeing helps us develop inner strength.*<sup>7</sup>

There are two facets to this assertion, and Buddhism highlights it well. First, one has to know the inevitability of the situation - no individual can escape it. Thus there is a need to focus on the 'present moment.' Buddha himself said: "Do not pursue the past. Do not lose yourself in the future. The past is no longer. The future has not yet come. Looking deeply at life as it is, *in the very here and now*, the practitioner dwells in stability and freedom."<sup>8</sup> The ancient writer Shantideva in his *Bodhicitta* calls for an inner reflection of what we have at present and then attempt to do something practical about it. This fuels *Bodhicitta* – it is the 'Mind of Enlightenment' itself, or the "Heart of the Enlightened Mind"<sup>9</sup> that "One must first develop an aspiration to the rank of (such) highest Enlightenment."<sup>10</sup>

Another important understanding from the quotation is the availability of "inner strength" once this has been realized. *Bodhicitta* is this inner strength.<sup>11</sup> The virtues of love and compassion, present in the philosophy of Thich Nhat Hanh, are the springboard towards the dawning of awakening of this virtue. It is the realization of a "relationship with the world that is nonconceptual."<sup>12</sup> The modern Buddhist scholar Thich Nhat Hanh candidly calls this "the Mind of Awakening."<sup>13</sup> By this it assumes now, once achieved, a more spiritual outcome, yet still something rooted in the rudiments of reason and philosophy. Such is the proximity between these two aspects.

Now Buddhism, understood as a way of life, is much more than just acquiring the virtues necessary. There is always a practical aspect to it which calls for a renewed outlook in life. To fully comprehend this there shall be a need to heed the concepts of Altruism and Wisdom.

A query seems necessary at this point. Can Buddhism speak of morality while at the same time be devoid of the notion of God or a divine being? Dr. Quito, among others, stated that morality presupposes a belief in God; otherwise moral

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<sup>7</sup> Chodron, *Ibid.*, p. 2. (my italics)

<sup>8</sup> Hanh, *Our Appointment with Life: Living Happily in the Present Moment*. *Ibid.*, p. 18. (my italics)

<sup>9</sup> Novick, Rebecca McClen. *Fundamentals of Tibetan Buddhism*. (Mumbai: Alchemy Press, 2005), p. 84.

<sup>10</sup> XIVth Dalai Lama. *The Buddhism of Tibet and the Key to the Middle Way*. (Surrey: The Gresham Press, 1975), p. 47.

<sup>11</sup> cf. XIVth Dalai Lama. *The Power of Buddhism*. (Dublin: Newleaf, 1996), p. 56.

<sup>12</sup> Chodron, *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. "Plum Village – Introduction"; accessed 24<sup>th</sup> October, 2010. Also at <http://BUDDHISM.Bodhicitta.20M.com/10-1.htm>.

actions will have no purpose or goal.<sup>14</sup> This may be the reason why Buddhism has been branded as “atheistic” from a Western perspective.<sup>15</sup> Yet here lies the novelty of this religion, that even devoid of a notion of God, one can speak of morality and the pursuit of its goal, and the possibility of actually putting it into practice.

Furthermore, the goal of any Buddhist is Enlightenment; understood as *Nirvana* in some aspects. Yet it is highlighted by Thich Nhat Hanh that the society where a practitioner lives and moves is also a noble and worthy endeavor in itself. In other words, Enlightenment has its benefits, although for this author, it is not the exclusive goal, at least not yet. He has endeavored to work and invite any good natured being to set a path towards moral transformation.

### **Thich Nhat Hanh’s Definition of *Bodhicitta***

Shantideva’s provided for us a wonderful exposition of *Bodhicitta* in many of his commentaries. Because of this he has been considered Master in almost all Buddhist traditions, sometimes next to the Buddha himself. Shantideva though will not agree with this assertion out of humility. Nonetheless, those who have been inspired by his life and works can testify to the depth and wisdom of his mind – toughened by the rigorous mental and body trainings, yet softened by silence and unassuming stature of his meditations. Thich Nhat Hanh himself enunciates that “without Shantideva, the whole journey of the *Bodhisattva* will be chaotic and thus futile.”<sup>16</sup> His contribution had so great an impact that “he has influenced the good karma of thousands of practitioners since his time; as he has influenced mine...”<sup>17</sup> These two men will continue the journey of the *Bodhisattva* as they introduce to us the notion of *Bodhicitta*.

#### *Thich Nhat Hanh*

Born as Nguyen Xuan Bao in 1926 in the province of Quang Tri in Central Vietnam, he saw his country under the French colonizers. “*Thich*” is a common name or title given to all monks and nuns of the Vietnamese meditation school. It is also a transliteration of the clan name *Sakya*, from Sakyamuni Buddha. This means that all of them came from the lineage of the Buddha himself. He was fondly called “*Thay*” though, which simply means teacher.

<sup>14</sup> cf. Quito, Emerita. *Fundamentals of Ethics*. (Manila: De La Salle Univ. Press, 1989), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> See John Paul II and Vittorio Messori. *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1994), p. 240.

<sup>16</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *Essential Writings*. (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> XIVth Dalai Lama. Ed. Rajiv Mehrotra. *The Essential Dalai Lama*. Kent: Mackays of Chatham Ltd., 2005), p. 32.

From a very young age he desired to attain Enlightenment, as any good Buddhist, but he preferred a more solitary approach. It was at twelve years old when “he was inspired by the ideal of the hermit who retires from the world in order to devote himself to a life of spiritual practice.”<sup>18</sup> This individualistic approach will be the genesis of his *Theravadic* stance in his philosophical undertakings, and later on in his definition of *Bodhicitta*. He enunciated that “to live alone does not mean to reject the world and society. The Buddha said that living alone means *living in the present moment deeply observing what is happening*. If we do that, we will not be dragged into the past or swept away into thoughts about the future.”<sup>19</sup>

Historically, he also saw his beloved Vietnam divided at the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel in 1954. It was a sorrowful memory of the past. Prior to this, he belonged to the first generation of monks and nuns who were educated in Western philosophy, method and history. This inspired him and his brothers and sisters to take a more socially-oriented path to help others, especially the young. Many of them eschewed being confined to the monasteries, and this proved very helpful because during the war, they were able to aid the injured both physically and spiritually. He said that during those times, it was the *Bodhicitta* in him which moved his soul to compassion. We see here thus a monk from the *Theravada* tradition, ingrained in its rituals and philosophies; but his outlook has always been for the other’s benefit. He said, “it is the same *Bodhicitta* which moved me to go outward and work for the Enlightenment of all.”<sup>20</sup>

### *What is Bodhicitta for Thich Nhat Hanh?*

As a Buddhist, he always had recourse to the wisdom of Sakyamuni Buddha. He was the first teacher and master of those who were lost and sick. Yet health cannot come if the heart is hardened with defilements of emotion and spirit. “Buddha was not a god. He was a human being like you and me, and he suffered just as we do. If we go to the Buddha with our hearts open, he will look at us, his eyes filled with compassion, and say, ‘because there is suffering in your heart, it is possible for you to enter my heart.’”<sup>21</sup> Two very important assertions are found here. First, as a constant theme, there is the reality of suffering. Buddhism, in its Four Noble Truths, craves for the elimination of such. Yet Thich Nhat Hanh sees a different approach – he caters to accepting and embracing the reality of suffering and transforming it into something meritorious. “The reality of suffering is not a thorn in the side; it can be the rose

<sup>18</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *Essential Writings*, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *Our Appointment With Life: Living Happily in the Present Moment*. (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1990), p. 25. (my italics)

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *Essential Writings*, p. 120.

which can bring healing and spiritual courage.”<sup>22</sup> Pema Chodron adds to this by highlighting the same suffering as almost equal to virtue itself.<sup>23</sup> It is the virtue which helps the practitioner “realize” and then “accept,” until finally “embrace” suffering. “*Bodhicitta* is not just a desire for Enlightenment, it is the root which moves us to accept everything that comes with Enlightenment, including the pain of suffering.”<sup>24</sup> Here lies the first definition of *Bodhicitta*. It is the aspiration to allow the individual to achieve Enlightenment, yet at the same time embracing and transforming the difficulties that go along with it.

The second assertion from the quotation given involves the practitioner “entering into the heart of the Buddha.” The appellation “Buddha” came from the root of the verb “*Budh*” which means to “wake up” or to “arise.” Every practitioner is invited to have this “awakening” in due time, and this is entirely possible because there is a “Buddha-nature” in all of us – the seeds of Buddha. “It is the seed of mindfulness, the awareness of what is happening in the present moment.”<sup>25</sup> This is entering the heart of the Buddha and it is living the disposition which the Buddha himself lived. He was very much involved with his monks and day to day affairs, yet he was also a mystic who had great capacities for meditation and solitude. That is the path which every good-willed practitioner ought to take. The Tibetan author Geshe Yeshe Tobden continues: “Every endeavor of a good practitioner should bring him closer and closer to the face of the Buddha.”<sup>26</sup> The path therefore is to be like the Buddha himself. “There is no one who does not have the capacity to be a Buddha.”<sup>27</sup> This declaration springs from the confidence of *Bodhicitta*. Thich Nhat Hanh, ever optimistic, believes in the capacity of each individual to attain this. “Don’t look outside yourself for happiness. Let go of the idea that you don’t have it. *Bodhicitta* lies within. It is available within you.”<sup>28</sup>

Let us examine this more closely because it is an essential tool for our understanding. The Buddha’s heart is one of compassion and empathy. He could not bear to see people in ignorance – the greatest suffering. Tibetan Buddhism in fact is very much particular to this vice; one’s goal should always be the elimination of such.<sup>29</sup> *Bodhicitta* in him stirred compassion in his soul and fired his thirst to aid sentient beings. Yet the dilemma is, he can never eliminate suffering; except limit or

<sup>22</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Path of Emancipation*. (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2000), p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> cf. Chodron, Pema. *No Time To Lose*. (Boston: Shanmbhala Publications, Inc., 2005), p. 309.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>25</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *Essential Writings*, p. 122.

<sup>26</sup> Geshe Yeshe Tobden. *The Way of Awakening: A Commentary on the Bodhicaryavatara*. (Maine: Wisdom Publications, Inc. 2005), p. 275.

<sup>27</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Path of Emancipation*, p. 34.

<sup>28</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> cf. Novick, Rebecca McClen. *Fundamentals of Tibetan Buddhism*. (Mumbai: Alchemy Publications, 2005), p. 97.

diminish it. For forty five years, the Buddha asserted: “I teach only suffering and the transformation of suffering.”<sup>30</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh carries from this statement and was never alien to it. Yet the emancipating value is there:

When we recognize and acknowledge our own suffering, the Buddha – which means the Buddha in us – will look at it. Discover what it has brought about, and prescribe a course of action that can transform it into peace, joy and liberation. Suffering is the means the Buddha used to liberate himself, and it is also the means by which we can become free.<sup>31</sup>

*Bodhicitta* fuels this drive for liberation. One simply has to embrace it like the Buddha, and enter the paradise of his heart. “Embrace it and cherish it. Go to the Buddha, sit with him, and show him your pain. He will look at you with loving kindness, compassion and mindfulness, and show you ways to embrace your suffering and look deeply into it. There lies the heart of *Bodhicitta*.”<sup>32</sup> Chodron on suffering adds: “It is such a worthy endeavor as liberation from *samsara*, we could take pride in the suffering we go through. Instead of complaining, let’s regard these wounds as trophies.”<sup>33</sup> A person’s victory over suffering despite its glaring presence is merit in itself. Chodron is all too aware that desiring to overcome it is already half the battle won. More than seeing it as a battle though, it has been described as a “noble path”<sup>34</sup> because it is also the road towards liberation.

Now, to deny this assertion or to take it lightly goes against nature and reality. Thich Nhat Hanh even calls this violence. “When we hold back our feelings and ignore the pain, we are committing violence against ourselves. The practice of nonviolence is to be here, to be present, and to recognize our own pain or despair. We do not make war on our feelings or reject them, but just recognize, embrace and transform them.”<sup>35</sup> Williams, in his commentary on the *Bodhicaryavatara* enunciates that “the violence we commit to ourselves doubles when a practitioner abandons hope for Enlightenment, first of all, and when he or she pursues a path which will harm the same in the process.”<sup>36</sup>

We can rightfully say from here thus, that for Thich Nhat Hanh, *Bodhicitta* is both the genesis and the inspiring motive for a practitioner to accept suffering as it is and transform it into something beneficial. Yet how does *Bodhicitta* do it?

<sup>30</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh quoting Sakyamuni Buddha. *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*. (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> Chodron, *No Time To Lose.*, p. 97.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>35</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *Creating True Peace*. (New York: Free Press, 2003), p. 16.

<sup>36</sup> Williams, Paul. *Altruism and Reality: Studies in the Philosophy of the Bodhicaryavatara*. (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998), p. 145.

In Tibetan Buddhism, suffering takes on a more difficult realization. Novick elaborates<sup>37</sup>: The first has to deal with Manifest Suffering which encompasses all forms of sicknesses, losses and emotional dysfunctions; then The Suffering of Change or “faux happiness,” showing the sometimes immediate and quick change from happiness to sorrow and vice-versa. Next is the Suffering of Conditioning – all are products of past experiences and defiled emotions which, one way or another, have contributed to the present state of life. These are immensely significant for Tibetan Buddhists because it is that which “foresees” the future life of a practitioner.

Thich Nhat Hanh now traces its roots to a single vice: attachment. This “gives false hope to a Buddha-being innocently journeying to Enlightenment.”<sup>38</sup> It is attachment to permanence, to stability of life and name, and false unity. *Bodhicitta* then is the virtue which will make us aware of these vices, and with awareness comes caution. With caution there arises the desire to be well-equipped faced with these lures. “If we touch the truth of suffering with our mindfulness, we will be able to recognize and identify our specific suffering, its causes, and with *Bodhicitta*, transform them into spiritual treasures.”<sup>39</sup>

### **The ever open spirit**

Another description for *Bodhicitta* culled from his writings is “openness.” A practitioner is like any individual, yet is drawn to Enlightenment for oneself and others, depending on the Buddhist tradition. In such a case, openness is a viable instrument for *Dharma* teachings to flow in the mind and heart with ease. Thich Nhat Hanh invites the sentient being to be first of all docile to the promptings of *Bodhicitta*. It is and will always be there; it just needs to be tapped and maximized. “Be like the earth. When the rain comes, the earth only has to open herself up to the rain. Allow the rain of *Dharma* to come in and penetrate the seeds that are buried deep in your consciousness.”<sup>40</sup> *Bodhicitta* is symbolically like the sun which will shine on all these elements for it to grow and take root. “A closed mind,” says Geshe Yeshe Tobden, “especially to the promptings of the *Dharma* path will lead to more harm. Let the spirit be free and open to look into oneself and then learn the beauty of life within.”<sup>41</sup>

This openness is especially crucial when hearing and reflecting on transmission of the Buddha’s teachings, for it is here where *Bodhicitta* can be complemented. As

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<sup>37</sup> Novick. *Fundamentals of Tibetan Buddhism*, pp. 36-37.

<sup>38</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Path of Emancipation*, p. 45.

<sup>39</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>40</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> Geshe Yeshe Tobden. *The Way of Awakening*, p. 183.

a philosophical endeavor, entirely respectful of mind and will, Hanh's Buddhism invites the sentient being to examine, compare and contrast the teachings and tenets, and then make a worthy judgment. There is no room here for coercion. "Buddhism is like that, it allows one to examine, analyze and even unlock its secrets. Let the practitioner be intent then, for within such endeavor is a realization of the Buddha-nature within."<sup>42</sup> Openness allows the individual to accept and study *Bodhicitta* as an innate desire, later on to discover that it is itself "the guiding force as to why one studied it in the first place."<sup>43</sup> This docility will make the practitioner desire for more knowledge, which will prompt him or her to pursue it at all costs later on. *Bodhicitta*, as we shall see, is still that tugging entity towards its completion or fulfillment. "What a joy it will be once *Bodhicitta* is realized. It is after all the pinnacle of our mission. But pursue it with extreme diligence."<sup>44</sup>

### Having the Right View

*Bodhicitta* is exemplified in another description. Thich Nhat Hanh understands it as having the "right view" of things. Oftentimes a person, even if s/he desires what is best, ends up doing the opposite. He even quotes the Christian apostle Paul, who though desiring to please Christ his Master, ends up harming himself and others in the process.<sup>45</sup> St. Paul, like all of humanity, falls short of their noble goals because of a lack of exercise in right view, of which *Bodhicitta* is the source. Thich Nhat Hanh, ever candid, shares four practices related to right view:<sup>46</sup>

- a. "Are you sure?" – this has to do with asking ourselves again and again the need to have a right perception of things. The more erroneous the perception, the more incorrect thinking will ensue, and thus unnecessary suffering.
- b. "What am I doing?" – helps the practitioner to get back to the present moment, instead of wasting time in dealing with the past or the future. Mindfulness needs to intervene here.
- c. "Hello, Habit Energy" – erroneous habits tend to be a favorite action, thereby causing stress and suffering. There is a need to find moments of contemplation to counter the harmful ones with the good.

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<sup>42</sup> Senauke, Hozan Alan. "The Bodhisattva's Embrace" in *Religion East and West*, Issue 6, October, 2006, p. 90.

<sup>43</sup> cf. Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Path of Emanipation*, p. 63.

<sup>44</sup> Chodron, *No Time To Lose*, p. 75.

<sup>45</sup> cf. Thich Nhat Hanh. *Going Home: Buddha and Christ as Brothers*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 1999), pp. 134-135.

<sup>46</sup> cf. Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, pp. 60-63.

- d. “*Bodhicitta*” – involves going back as to why an individual pursues Enlightenment. It embodies the first three practices and gives them meaning and purpose. It is the ‘mind of love,’ “the deep wish to cultivate understanding in ourselves in order to bring happiness to many beings. It is the motivating force for the practice of right view and mindful living.”<sup>47</sup> Constant practice and openness here will lead to ‘Right Diligence’ as a consequence, that is, the constant eagerness to attain Enlightenment.

To have the ‘right view’ says Williams in his book involves or should involve having the right disposition. By this we mean, following from the preceding explanations, that one’s openness will eventually lead to a dawning of such understanding. The ‘right view’ therefore is a product of immense concentration, study and prayer – all encompassed within the wealth of Buddhism. It is thus “seeing things as they really are; how they have their beginnings and how they will end; that which is above, below and within it.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, it arrives at the inevitability of realizing “emptiness.” Kemmerer in her retreat in Plum Village had a similar experience, so she relates. “It is true that meditation is one of the keys to arrive at seeing things as they really are. One has to sit, listen, pause and study so that the dawning of awakening will be made manifest.”<sup>49</sup>

Having the ‘right view’ as *Bodhicitta* insists that the birth of such a notion begins with proper study and meditation, panning up to a worthy realization. This may be ideal in a sense but it was proven true and effective by practitioners. The right view of things implies optimism to pursue and eventually achieve the goals. It is viewing reality with an atmosphere of temporariness, that everything is but a fleeting glimmer of reality. Impermanence flows in each and every being that is encountered and will be encountered. “What is there but nothing – empty and barren – yet it is from this nothing where everything has its birth. The irony of life.”<sup>50</sup>

## Inclusivity in Outlook

Another highly significant interpretation of Thich Nhat Hanh for *Bodhicitta* is “inclusiveness.” The term seems misleading at first glance. In Buddhism however, this is in fact considered as one of the techniques for happiness, or *Paramitas*. Thich Nhat Hanh in many instances lifted from the term and considered it a description for *Bodhicitta*. This is “the practice of helping your heart to grow larger and larger

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>48</sup> Williams, *Altruism and Reality*, p. 141.

<sup>49</sup> Kemmerer, Lisa. “In Retreat: Thich Nhat Hanh in Colorado” in *Contemporary Buddhism*, Volume 8, No. 1, May, 2007, p. 53.

<sup>50</sup> Chodron, *No Time To Lose*, p. 111.

all the time.”<sup>51</sup> Recall that as a personal endeavor or “mission,” a practitioner has to be reminded again and again of such a desire for the Enlightenment of all. In such a journey, there has to be a constant outpouring of love and compassion to eventually encompass more and more sentient beings. This is “Bodhicitta-in-progress.” When one’s desire is puny, a little setback can destroy the ideal, but if one’s desire is huge and all-encompassing, a little detour will not deter an individual to move on. “Suppose you have a bowl of water and someone put a handful of salt in it; it would be too salty for you to drink. But suppose someone threw a handful of salt into a clean mountain river. The river is deep and wide enough that you can still drink the water without tasting the salt.”<sup>52</sup>

A large heart is spurred by love and compassion *at all times*. It refuses to remain idle, yet it starts from an individualistic fervor. *Bodhicitta* is that self-same drive to keep the heart growing and growing larger. A practitioner will do (and ought to do) everything within the capacity to maintain such a disposition. Many instances will prompt a person to give up, especially when the situation is dismal. Hanh issues a warning: “If you nourish your anger and hatred, you burn yourself. Understanding and compassion is the only way out. Let *Bodhicitta* feed the spirit so that the fire will not die out.”<sup>53</sup> Inclusiveness as *Bodhicitta* allows for making a huge “leap” of desire so that when pursued it goes on full strength. The analogy one can make of this is like a coiled metal spring; in order for it to bounce high, it has to fold into itself (inclusivity) and then released with tremendous force. *Bodhicitta* is the force which “coils” the spring of ‘Buddhahood’ in a practitioner. The technique of inclusiveness involves meditation and mind-training. Chodron asserts this further by qualifying inclusiveness as “reaching further and further outward while delving deeper and deeper into oneself. There is a process here, not just a technique. Mind-training is the genesis for the eventual encompassing of the heart for all.”<sup>54</sup>

### **The call of Ever-Presence**

Now, one of the more unique interpretations for *Bodhicitta* is that it dwells in the here and now. “*Bodhicitta* does not necessarily emphasize in the past or the future. It is here, ever-present.”<sup>55</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh quotes the Buddha as the basis for this assertion. This was culled from the *Bhaddekaratta Sutta* or The Sutra on Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone.

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<sup>51</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *Buddha Mind, Buddha Body*. (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2007), p. 94.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, p. 198.

<sup>54</sup> Chodron, *No Time To Lose*, p. 234.

<sup>55</sup> op. cit., p. 209.

Do not pursue the past.  
Do not lose yourself in the future.  
The past is no longer.  
The future has not yet come.  
Looking deeply at life as it is  
In the very here and now,  
the practitioner dwells  
in stability and freedom.  
We must be diligent today.  
To wait until tomorrow is too late.  
Death comes unexpectedly.  
How can we bargain with it?  
The sage calls a person who knows  
how to dwell in mindfulness  
night and day  
“one who knows  
the better way to live alone.”<sup>56</sup>

In this passage lies a crucial interpretation by Thich Nhat Hanh. First of all, true again to his tradition, the best and first way to Enlightenment is a personalistic, even solitary approach because this was an example from the Buddha's teaching. Yet it invites others to “call” or make them realize first their capacity for Buddhahood, and the necessity to train in mindfulness. Now, in order for the mind to be disposed to achieve, or even begin this, one has to focus on the present moment – in the here and now. Williams says that “there is no other way to begin, at least in *Theravada*, but a practitioner must be staunch in this. Let him or her wallow in the perfection of the being, then go outward and tell others the same.”<sup>57</sup>

When the Buddha gave this teaching, he did not mean to forget the past but that one ought not to be overwhelmed by it nonetheless. The past still has merit because it is an avenue of learning from happy memories or sad mistakes. “There is no choice, the past is past. It has occurred but not lost. What have we garnered from it?”<sup>58</sup> The result of this is a new understanding of things, or a fresh outlook in facing the world. He continues though that “the past also lies in the present. To observe them (the past) deeply, recognize their nature, and transform them, is to transform the past.”<sup>59</sup> Later on we shall see that the present “touches” the past and even transforms it, thereby achieving more merit for a practitioner.

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<sup>56</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh quoting the Buddha. *Our Appointment with Life*, p. 5.

<sup>57</sup> Williams, Paul, *Altruism and Reality*, p. 155.

<sup>58</sup> Chodron. “Bodhicitta: The Excellence of Awakened Heart” in *Shambhala Sun*, 2001, p. 1

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

The present also becomes stressful because there is an inordinate focusing on the future because it brings a lot of fear and anxiety in the process. He said: “Although not yet here, the future is already producing ghosts which haunt us.”<sup>60</sup> Notice the term ‘inordinate.’ Hope is necessary for life, but it can also be an obstacle. Focusing too much on the future will make the individual wary and too tired to transform the present. Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that to be free of all desires for the future is necessary in order for us to come back with all our heart and mind into the present. Chodron highlights yet again Mindfulness of the ‘now.’ “Do not be lost in the extreme time zones. Go back ... go back ... Focus on the here and now so that you can maximize and earn merit from both times instead. There is no future or past. Everything is now.”<sup>61</sup>

Both past and future are in the present moment. If we hold on to this, we can transform both time zones for our benefit. *Bodhicitta* stirs in the practitioner to learn from the past instead of sulking and regretting a former event; to turn it to something constructive instead of destructive. On the other hand, taking care of the present assures a brighter future. If one worries too much, or is filled with anxieties, the future will indeed be dismal. Thich Nhat Hanh calls for proper awareness; meaning, if one becomes mindful or aware of something which may distort the future, then that same individual must do something about it. For instance, being concerned with the depletion of natural resources and destruction of the environment ought to move the individual to awareness that littering or harming nature will cause damage in the future. Thus, one has to start by taking care of the environment right here and now. This assures us of life and continued existence. “Life can only be found in the present moment. Our appointment with life is in the present moment. The place of our appointment is right here, in this very place.”<sup>62</sup> That is why for Williams, such disposition “will not only merit good *karma* but also a progressive praxis for the good of all. In the end all are benefitted from a practitioner who believes and puts that belief into action.”<sup>63</sup>

*Thay* is not advocating something grandiose; mindfulness of the present is not a practice for seasoned Buddhists; it is not even exclusively for Buddhists. This activity merely involves being aware of one’s actions all the time – breathing, walking, singing, etc. “When you make breakfast, when you eat, drink or clean the table, you can practice being truly present, for yourself and your loved ones. Do not feel you have to rush all the time. If you hurry, you waste precious time, the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>61</sup> Chodron. *No Time To Lose*, p. 139.

<sup>62</sup> op. cit., p. 41.

<sup>63</sup> Williams, Paul. *Altruism and Reality*, p. 100.

time for being alive.”<sup>64</sup> After all, it is not in “doing things fast, but doing it effectively, meritoriously, simply. Know what you are doing.”<sup>65</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh shares this poem of awareness:

EACH STEP

Through the deserted gate  
full of ripened leaves,  
I follow the small path.  
Earth is as red as a child’s lips.  
Suddenly  
I am aware  
of each step  
I make.

Being aware itself which is unassuming and simple in Hanh’s eyes is the miracle of life and the genesis of moral transformation. “To appreciate the peace and beauty that are available now is the path to peace and moral regeneration. Peace is all around us – in the world and in nature – and within us – in our bodies and our spirits. Once we learn to touch this peace, we will be healed and transformed. It is not a matter of faith; it is a matter of practice.”<sup>66</sup>

What practice should one pursue to attain this then? Thich Nhat Hanh, expert in the art of mindfulness, offers a lot of examples. One such practice is what he calls “*Tiep Hien Order*” or the “Order of Interbeing.” It is a *Theravadic* endeavor meant for “equalizing oneself and others.” The birth of such an application has to begin with the present moment. For now, however, it is sufficient to begin with simple practices of mindfulness. There is a whole book by Thich Nhat Hanh which is supposed to aid the practitioner in this.<sup>67</sup> It consists of verses, almost poetic, to bring an individual to a mindfulness of what s/he is doing at the present moment. There are meditations for “Starting the Day” or for “Daily Activities” and others.

All these are rooted in the Buddha himself. Hanh relates a significant story:

The Buddha was asked, “What do you and your disciples practice?” And he replied, “We sit, we walk, we eat.” The questioner continued, “But, sir, everyone sits, walks and eats.” The Buddha told him, “When we sit, we know we are sitting. When we walk, we know we are walking. When we eat, we know we are eating.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *Creating True Peace*. (New York: Free Press, 2003), p. 143.

<sup>65</sup> Senauke. “The Bodhisattva’s Embrace,” p. 97.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>67</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment*. (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2006)

<sup>68</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *Essential Writings*. ,p. 147.

## Peace becomes Ripe

Now that we have elaborated on *Bodhicitta* as being “present,” it will have the capacity to offer something entirely beneficial for the exclusive enjoyment of a *Theravada* practitioner, as well as for society in general. Thich Nhat Hanh defines *Bodhicitta* as “peace.” He explains that the human person has the capacity to be both violent and compassionate – the “seeds of understanding, forgiveness, mindfulness, and also the seeds of ignorance, fear and hatred.”<sup>69</sup> The effort lies in the individual choice of the practitioner to pursue only that which is virtuous. Yet again, the source of such strength and the zeal to accomplish it is *Bodhicitta*. Recall how it was mentioned previously that in order to cultivate the virtue, one has to apply it everyday – to make it stronger and more solid. Like fertile soil which needs care, watering, the warmth of the sun and human effort, so true with the individual. The seed in the soil is *Bodhicitta* and it needs to be cultivated with love for it to become a sturdy plant. True peace is always possible and once accrued it will also nourish one’s neighbors. “Peace is seemingly a distant virtue – but this not so. It lies within the person because there are the seeds of the Buddha. Yes, the sentient being may be capable of violence, but he is made for peace and peace alone.”<sup>70</sup>

*Thay’s* reflection on war proves that it is merely an unfortunate circumstance brought about by events gone wrong. He recalls how in 1946, as a novice monk, a French soldier came to his *Tu Hieu* Temple and demanded rice, of which only one sack was available to feed his fellow monks. He had to give it up lest he be hurt by the armed soldier. There and then he felt unhappy and angry, desiring even to kill the Frenchman. Then he realized how both of them were angry, hungry, and both victims of war. “The two of us were not, by nature, enemies. Under different circumstances we could have become close friends, even loving each other as brothers. It was only the war that separated us and brought violence between us.”<sup>71</sup> Here we see that the nature of war according to *Thay* is to turn people into enemies, the result of which is nothing but hatred and more destruction.

Yet the worst circumstance of war sometimes does not involve others – it is to make an enemy of oneself. An enemy to oneself implies a lack of patience and understanding and compassion to the same individual or person. This is why the thrust of Thich Nhat Hanh always has to start with a very personal project – the *Theravada* practice. Looking at other Oriental cultures, the Muslims too have such a concept – *Jihad*. This is rightly understood not only as an external conflict but internal as well.

<sup>69</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *Creating True Peace*, p. 1.

<sup>70</sup> Geshe Yeshe Tobden. *The Way of Awakening*, p. 113.

<sup>71</sup> op. cit., p. 4.

The solution here is *Bodhicitta* – the root of peace and is peace itself. “Peace is not simply the absence of violence; it is the cultivation of understanding and insight, combined with action.”<sup>72</sup> Mindfulness is the process one has to undergo. One has to be aware of one’s thoughts and then of actions, pursuing goodness for everyone’s benefit. “Yes, it is the good which should be manifested at all times. There is no other way to accrue merit. Be mindful then of the good – good action and it will *transform* you.”<sup>73</sup> Once these have been put into practice, violence and vice are diminished each day. The practice of mindfulness simply means bringing awareness into each moment of our lives, as we have learned. *Thay’s* assurance is so great that he sees, after rigorous endeavor, that the practitioner’s emotions are calmed, and the realization of “interbeing” comes into play – equalizing self and others. “The only way out of violence and conflict is for us to embrace the practice of peace, to think and act with love and understanding.”<sup>74</sup>

To be more practical, *Thay* offers in his book an example of how to cultivate such a noble virtue. According to him, a practitioner can make a “personal peace treaty” for himself and the world. As a kind of *mantra*, an individual can say everyday: “*Dear self, I promise to practice and live my daily life in a way that will not touch or water the seed of violence within me.*” Or in a shared effort, one can say to a loved one: “*My dear, my beloved one, if you really love me, please do not water the seed of violence in me. Please water the seed of peace in me. I promise to do the same for you.*”<sup>75</sup> These efforts are not nil; they transform because there is, in a sense, a subtle psychological disposition to work for the good. It is honing, as it were, an individual’s drive for perfection. Thus, it will not fall unto us empty. Training one’s mind and body is the instrument for the pursuit of goodness.

### **The Fullness of Emptiness**

A definition of *Bodhicitta* intertwined with the rudiments of general Buddhism brings us to the term “emptiness” or *Shunyata*. This author sees in *Thay’s* writings an inclination to define *Bodhicitta* as such because one of the realizations of Enlightenment is precisely emptiness. Emptiness does not mean total isolation of person, thoughts or feelings. It does not also mean being empty of something, or nonexistence. “We are empty of a separate, independent self. We cannot be by ourselves alone. We can only inter-be (interbeing) with everything

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>73</sup> Lama Thubten Yeshe. “Bodhicitta: The Perfection of Dharma” in *Shambhala Sun*, December 2007, p. 4. (my italics)

<sup>74</sup> op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>75</sup> Both quotations taken from Ibid., p. 7. (emphasis in original)

else in the cosmos.<sup>76</sup> *Thay* says that we touch the nature of the cosmos every day and at all times. When an individual observes and appreciates everything around, one realizes that these are all empty of a separate self. “There is nothing there in reality and mindfulness. There is no self. Look deeper and examine any thing or matter. Remove all that which make it thus and you will see that there is nothing underneath and within.”<sup>77</sup> Emptiness is the middle ground between existence and nonexistence. For instance, admiring the beauty of the flower does not mean it is empty when it fades or dies. It is indeed empty in its essence. Yet in the reality of interbeing, there are ‘non-flower’ entities in it: the sun which nourished it, the water which quench its thirst, the soil which gave it food, etc. There is interbeing with everything else – light, clouds, space, even consciousness. It is empty of a separate, independent self. *Thay*, in one public conference, held a piece of ordinary blank paper. He asked the audience what they saw. For *Thay*, he saw a cloud. Cloud brought rain, which in turn nourished the soil, which nourished the plant, which became a tree, which was cut and processed and made into ordinary paper.<sup>78</sup> Everything contains ‘some other things’ except “self.” “One thing has to rely on all the other things in order to manifest.”<sup>79</sup> This is a consequence of *Bodhicitta*. “*Bodhicitta’s* mindfulness allows us to see the nothingness of self. Isn’t this true wisdom? Carry on the mindfulness then and teach others to do the same.”<sup>80</sup> It is no wonder how this term and its practice is crucial for Enlightenment, yet for Hanh the practitioner has to start with the personal approach as expected. This realization is the stepping stone for moral transformation – a ‘conversion’ to a new way of looking at the cosmos. Such a personalistic stance will then prompt the same practitioner to concern for others – the environment and non-human species.

A human being is not independent of other species; so to protect humans, we have to protect others. If we pollute the air and water, the vegetables and minerals, we destroy ourselves. We have to learn to see ourselves in things that we thought were outside ourselves in order to dissolve false boundaries.<sup>81</sup>

Emptiness is therefore fullness at the same time. The happiness or sadness of one will be the happiness or sadness of all. When we maintain this “awareness,” a term so important to *Thay*, then one has embraced reality. Reality is emptiness. This ‘way of life’ or philosophy is *Bodhicitta*. *Thay* calls this insight “wondrous being.”

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<sup>76</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, p. 146.

<sup>77</sup> Chodron, *No Time To Lose*, p. 66.

<sup>78</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *Living Buddha, Living Christ*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), p. 134.

<sup>79</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *Buddha Mind, Buddha Body*, p. 90.

<sup>80</sup> Geshe Yeshe Tobden. *The Way of Awakening*, p. 204.

<sup>81</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *The Path of Emancipation*, p. 245.

## Love which is Incarnate

Now that Thich Nhat Hanh has prepared his readers to embrace, almost within reach, this noble aspiration, there lies the further task of making the last step toward its completion. He is all too aware that even though a practitioner has reached closer to this, there is and will always be the tendency to revert back to the ocean of senses and the lure of illusions. This cycle can become endless, diminishing good karma every time, and eventually causing suffering. *Thay* then provides for us a final way of understanding *Bodhicitta* – defined as the “Mind of Love.” He clearly states: “*Bodhicitta* is our great aspiration to wake up, to transform our suffering into compassion and serve all beings as a *Bodhisattva*.”<sup>82</sup> The path he pursues is service, often without getting anything in return. It involves pursuing a life “*for*” others, inspired no less by them. “Our paths are made for sentient beings. This is not a call just for monks and nuns. It is for all to help each other and to learn from each other.”<sup>83</sup>

The seduction of falsehood may be so great that a practitioner easily succumbs to it. *Thay* issues a challenge to make the *Bodhisattva* vow everyday; it has to be renewed constantly so that the mind becomes aware of the horrific possibilities of error and suffering. This activity involves training the mind to have a deep and sacrosanct desire to work for the benefit of all sentient beings. It provides the key to escape from the vicious circle. All are rooted in the desire itself which makes us a *Bodhisattva*, but not without proper effort. Williams provide a possible remedy: “Hold on to the vows you made and keep it. Do not allow idleness to get the better of you, nor allow it to sway you back to ignorance. Be mindful and docile. Work hard for it, and then you become one step closer to perfection.”<sup>84</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh says it is the animal nature within us which distorts our noble aspirations. There is no need to panic though; *Thay* says to let the Buddha nature embrace the animality. “Just smile to the animal nature and remember that is always in you.”<sup>85</sup> This will lead to a ‘miracle’ in *Thay’s* eyes – the peaceful coexistence of animal and Buddha within the same practitioner.

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<sup>82</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh. *Creating True Peace*, p. 39.

<sup>83</sup> Chodron, *No Time To Lose*, p. 239.

<sup>84</sup> Williams, Paul. *Altruism and Reality*, p. 81.

<sup>85</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *op. cit.*, 40.

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