

READING MATTERS

by Sid Kemp

Being Peace, by Thich Nhat Hahn, ed. Arnold Kotler, illus. Mayumi Oda, Parallax Press. PO Box 7355, Berkeley, CA 94707. 1987. 115 pages, paperback. \$8.50.

"The writer only begins a book. The reader finishes it." (Goethe)

"You are not an observer, you are a participant. That is the way I always feel when I give a lecture. I want the audience . . . to be one with me, to practice, to breathe. The speaker and the people who listen must become one for right perception to take place." (*Being Peace*, pp. 38-39)

This quote captures the essence of this new column, **READING MATTERS**. I hope to explore the ways of reading and of becoming one with the written word with you. Writing and reading are acts of co-creation shared by the author and the reader. The end product is not a book, but a transformed understanding. The author begins with his or her life, time and inspiration and produces a book, a transmission of information, a bit of *dharmakaya* (vessel of the *dharma*, or teaching). You and I, as readers, receive it. From there, it is up to us to begin with the book, and bring it into ourselves. And then, to let our whole lives respond to it, and to be changed by it.

We tend to separate our reading minds from our active lives. But we don't learn to do anything by just reading it. Real understanding comes when we put it into practice. How can we read so as to be open to new understanding? And how can we live with a readiness to put our best knowledge into practice? Most important of all, what can we draw from our reading that will help us keep the Zen direction of attaining en-

lightenment and saving all people from suffering?

I am very close to most of the books I will be presenting in this column, and I also feel that the issues they present are important to consider. Both of these are especially true of *Being Peace*. I hope that I am not so close to the book that I distort its contents: most everything I say below is, I believe, true both to the book and to myself. *Being Peace* is important because it addresses two central questions of modern Buddhism: How can Buddhism adapt and survive while the cultures that fostered it are disappearing? And, what transformations will make Buddhism relevant to the modern world, especially in relation to global issues of war and peace?

Christmas Humphreys, the English scholar of Buddhism, said that the most important event of this past century is the meeting of Buddhism and the West. Vietnamese Zen met modernity in forty years of war in Vietnam, an intense crucible that forged a modern Buddhism. Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hahn's response to the suffering of the war began with the recognition that a monk cannot remain in his unbombed temple when women and children are being killed. He created the Tiep Hien Order, (the Order of Interbeing) whose practice style and precepts are presented in *Being Peace*.

During the Vietnam War, Thich Nhat Hahn guided the Order of Interbeing and the School for Youth for Social Service (which drew students from the city universities). They provided direct care to villagers devastated by the war. Thich Nhat Hahn developed a practice to help these monks and young lay people remain mindful and helpful in the midst of devastation. Members of the Order, which refused to take sides in the war, were murdered by both governments. Some immolated themselves in order to send a message to the world about the horror of the war. This message, Thich Nhat Hahn tells us, was misunderstood, because we heard it as a political statement, and not as a human one.

Being Peace, and the Tiep Hien precepts, are very much about being fully human in a world of war and suffering. The precepts are the first new Buddhist precepts proposed in over a thousand years, and the first to include positive moral injunctions (e.g., they direct members not only not to kill, but also to protect life; not only not to lie, but also to speak up for the truth even at the risk of your own safety). Thich Nhat Hahn teaches a practice for both celibate individuals and lay families, a practice centered in inner peace but directed towards the creation of world peace and justice, and the restoration of a harmonious relationship with nature. The concept that ties together meditation and political and social action is Interbeing, the awareness that none of us is separate from the whole of the world.

Thich Nhat Hahn was exiled from Vietnam because he expressed his peaceful views in the West, and now lives in Plum Village in the French Pyrenees. At Plum Village and around the world, he helps Vietnamese refugees like himself preserve family harmony and their Buddhist tradition. Tiep Hien Buddhism is unique in Zen in that it includes children and seeks to preserve the transmission of the teaching through families. This family practice style is also much gentler and less intensive than Korean and Japanese Zen. Also, the intellect is not cut off by paradoxical *koan* practice, rather, it is developed as a tool for the understanding that allows for love.

Being Peace was collected from talks Thich Nhat Hahn gave in the U.S. in 1985. It is addressed to Americans in the hope that we will awaken to what the United States is doing in the world, and to what we can do to be peace and bring peace. Talks to children and adults are interwoven throughout the book, and they blend to produce an accessible and deeply perceptive text.

Thich Nhat introduces a gentle sitting and walking meditation, some basic Buddhist philosophy (drawn from Mahayana texts), and a short poem, or *gatha*, that can be recited silently both during formal practice and throughout the day. The poem says: "Breathing in, I calm my body / Breathing out, I smile / dwelling in the present moment / I know this is the only moment." Using it, I have found, connects each moment of my day and my work back to the quiet of formal practice. It also

brings the mind back into touch with the body, so that I am here, clear about my purpose, and aware of my resources.

Thich Nhat Hahn compares modern life to a man riding a runaway horse. When someone asks the man where he is going, he can only reply, "I don't know, ask the horse." (p.65) Reciting the poem is one device for reining in the runaway horses of our lives. Thich Nhat Hahn offers many others as well, all aimed at breaking through the three root causes of suffering: anger, fear, and forgetfulness. To breathe and recite the poem is to remember, and so to overcome forgetfulness. To sit in meditation is to perceive clearly, and so to overcome fear. And to become one with is to understand and to stop blaming, to stop separating ourselves, and so, to overcome anger.

"Interbeing" is the awareness that the nature of each thing depends on the nature of everything else, and that nothing has a separate self-nature. No thing or activity is separate from everything else; rather, each thing shares a bit of itself with all other things. This awareness creates the link between activism and meditation. For example, political awareness can encourage mindful living. Thich Nhat Hahn tells us that if the Western nations use fifty percent less meat and liquor, then the whole world will have enough grain to eat. This is not a cause for guilt, but rather a reason to change our behavior in light of the awareness of our interbeing. If we argue with family or friends, we can stop and try to understand their situation so that we can love them. We can also perceive how we are, in part, responsible for the situation, and change our actions and attitudes to bring harmony.

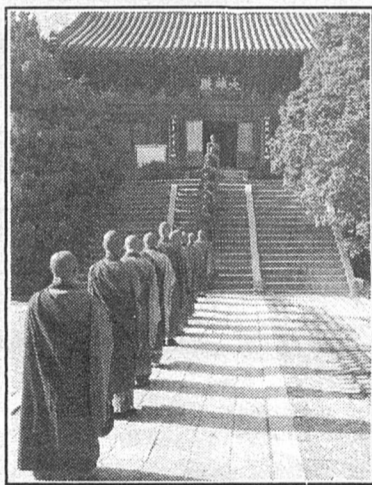
In formal sitting, we enter into a mental state of oneness with our world that deepens our interconnectedness and extends our love. Thus, understanding the suffering of the world gives both motivation and direction to our practice, while practice guides our understanding and compassion so that the wisest course of action becomes clear, and so that we can sustain loving clarity in ourselves day to day. The first Noble Truth of Buddhism, Thich Nhat Hahn reminds us, is that all life contains suffering. But by example and quiet guidance, he shows us that there is a gentle way to face that suffering and transform the world we share. □

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