



Peace in Oneself, Peace in the World **The Real Heart of Engaged Buddhism**

A Response to Lisa Kemmerer

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Abstract: This is a response by Bhikshuni Chan Tung Nghiem (Barbara Newell), also known as Sister Pine, to a commentary by Lisa Kemmerer published in the Summer 2008 issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, regarding Kemmerer's experience of attending one of Thich Nhat Hanh's mindfulness retreats in Estes Park in September 2005. Sister Pine notes that "The nuns whom Ms. Kemmerer encountered most likely felt Ms. Kemmerer was focusing too much on theoretical, political rights and wrongs, and missing the purpose of the retreat, which is to practice getting to know and understand ourselves and the world around us in a direct and deep way." "True freedom, as well as real change in the behavior of human beings," Sister Pine adds, "is realized not through mere intellectual criticism and debate, but by a change of heart that comes from touching the profound interconnectedness of *all* things. We sincerely wish Ms. Kemmerer peace and happiness in this very moment, and all the fruits of realizing true, deep understanding and compassion for herself and *all* the beings she encounters on her path. This is the real heart of engaged Buddhism."

Ms. Kemmerer says she came to the retreat at Estes Park "to enhance [her] ability to teach about Thay, about contemporary Zen Buddhist practice, and Engaged Buddhism." We trust that Ms. Kemmerer, as a

student of Zen Buddhism, will not be surprised if in responding to her key question, "*Was this retreat really only about me?*", we have to answer, "Yes!" and, "no." One of the central themes of Thay's teaching, espe-

Bhikshuni Chan Tung Nghiem (Barbara Newell) earned a BA with High Distinction Honors in International Relations followed by a JD at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Before moving to Plum Village and ordaining as a nun, she practiced as an attorney at LeBoeuf, Lamb, Greene & MacRae in Washington, DC from 1991-1996, and at the Animal Legal Defense Fund in Rockville, Maryland from 1996-2002. She is the author of "Animal Custody Disputes: A Growing Crack in the "Legal Thinghood" of Nonhuman Animals" and co-author of "Recovery of Non-Economic Damages for Wrongful Killing or Injury of Companion Animals: A Judicial and Legislative Trend," both published in the *Animal Law Journal*. Sister Pine, as she is also called, moderated two of the three panels on "Buddhist Contributions to Social Justice" at the Fifth International Buddhist Conference on the United Nations Day of Vesak, held in Hanoi last May, and served on the editorial board for the conference's companion volumes published by Culture and Information Press of Hanoi. Her gratitude to her teacher Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh and the worldwide Plum Village sangha is immeasurable.

cially in the context of engaged Buddhism, is “Peace in oneself, peace in the world.” In the ultimate dimension of reality, there is no separation between oneself and the world; in daily practice, peace always has to begin with our way of relating with ourselves and those around us.

We could only smile with recognition and solidarity, as fellow students in the Zen tradition, at the recurring anguish and irritation ultimately summed up in Ms. Kemmerer’s demand: “Time was running short; *when would my questions be answered?*” Countless others have hit the same wall of frustration in their encounters with Zen teachers across the centuries. (It’s a lucky thing—or perhaps an unlucky one?—that Ms. Kemmerer wasn’t asking her questions of our great patriarch, Master Linji. He almost certainly would have responded with a shout or a blow to try to help her break out of the prison of her thinking, judging mind.) Enjoy your koan!

In our experience, focusing and dwelling upon others’ imperfection rarely helps us to realize inner transformation, understanding and compassion—the only true foundation for being peace, and bringing more peace into the world. As it says in the Bible: “First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly enough to remove the speck from your brother’s.” Specifically with regard to vegetarianism and veganism, Sister Chan Khong addressed this in the “Commonly Asked Questions” section of Thay’s book, *For a Future to Be Possible: Buddhist Ethics for Everyday Life* (1993/2007). In response to the question, “If I take the First Mindfulness Training [on not killing], does it mean I have to become a vegetarian?” Sister Chan Khong explained:

Thay Nhat Hanh asks us to practice mindfulness deeply every time we eat or drink. If we do so, we may find that our appetite for meat and fish begins to diminish. The

important thing is to be aware of what we consume. I have met people who cannot be vegetarian because of medical reasons, but who respect life more than many vegetarians. Some vegetarians are too extreme, and are unkind to those who cannot give up meat-eating. I am more comfortable with a meat-eater than an extremist vegetarian who is filled with self-righteousness. (107)

At our retreats in Plum Village and on tour, we do our best to balance our own way of living out the teachings of the Buddha with making those teachings accessible at the same time to a broad spectrum of people who are not yet ready to, for example, go totally vegan or even be full-time vegetarians. We certainly are not going around our retreats forcing 800 mature adults into absolute, total compliance with the teachings offered. We’re very happy that people from many walks of life feel welcome to come and receive teachings that can help them move a little bit farther along their path.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in this journal issue may be found Thay’s letter of November 2007 gently asking his students to refrain from eating milk and eggs as well as flesh; a “love letter” Thay recently wrote to KFC asking for more humane treatment of chickens; and also the latest version of our contemplations recited before meals. We believe these pieces respond to the bulk of Ms. Kemmerer’s criticisms, and may even lead her to re-examine her assertion that her questions during the retreat were not mindfully considered and “the learning ... all one-way.”

Most of Ms. Kemmerer’s other observations had to do with situations that were more or less random, or personal to the individual she observed, and not representative of any systematic, deliberate policies. There is, for example, no rule that says nuns

must sit in meditation facing Thay while monks sit in another manner. (When we are at home in the monastery and not in a makeshift, gymnasium-turned-meditation-hall such as was used in Estes Park, everyone faces the wall.) Similarly, we do not have any prescribed set of rules for how a nun or a monk may or may not respond to a practitioner in consultation or in group discussion. It is up to that monastic to do his or her best to help the practitioner break out of the conditioning that causes suffering. The nuns whom Ms. Kemmerer encountered most likely felt Ms. Kemmerer was focusing too much on theoretical, political rights and wrongs, and missing the purpose of the retreat, which is to practice getting to know and understand ourselves and the world around us in a direct and deep way.

Thay's attendants are just as often male as female and are regularly rotated, as this is a rare and precious opportunity to be close to, and learn in an intimate setting from, a beloved Zen master. Thay, by the way, has devoted his life to studying and practicing the Dharma as a monk since 1943, some thirty or forty years longer than even the eldest members of our community, including Sr. Chan Khong.

We're very glad that Ms. Kemmerer came to our retreat. We warmly encourage her to continue to practice touching and befriending reality as it is, and looking more deeply into the themes of the retreat she attended, "Finding True Freedom: Opening the Door of Understanding and Compassion." In this journal issue may be found Thay's poem, "Please Call Me By My True Names." This poem shows very clearly that engaged Buddhism is not, as Ms. Kemmerer and others may have thought, just about being sociopolitically aware and active—although that is certainly part of it. Engaged Buddhism is something much deeper and more fundamental. True freedom, as well as real change in the behavior of human beings, is realized not through

mere intellectual criticism and debate, but by a change of heart that comes from touching the profound interconnectedness of *all* things.

We sincerely wish Ms. Kemmerer peace and happiness in this very moment, and all the fruits of realizing true, deep understanding and compassion for herself and *all* the beings she encounters on her path. This is the real heart of engaged Buddhism.

REFERENCES

Nhat Hanh, Thich. 2007 [1993]. *For a Future to Be Possible: Buddhist Ethics for Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press.