



The Environment is You

A Talk by Thich Nhat Hanh— Denver, Colorado, August 29, 2007

Thich Nhat Hanh

Plum Village, France

pvlistening@plumvill.net

Abstract: When we produce a thought that is full of anger, fear, or despair, that thought has an immediate effect on our health and on the health of the world. We may like to arrange our life in such a way that we will not produce thoughts of that kind very often. Producing a thought is already karma or action, and that is our continuation into the future. Our speech may be an expression of right speech as recommended by the Buddha. Something we say may manifest our loving-kindness, our nondiscrimination, and our willingness to bring relief. After having uttered such a word we feel better in our body and mind. We receive healing and everyone in the world benefits from our speech of loving-kindness, forgiveness, and compassion. Cognitive science and neuroscience ask about the relationship between the “in here” and the “out there.” We perceive reality subjectively and we ask the question whether the external reality is exactly the same as the subjective reality. If you pursue meditation deeply you will be able to transcend the duality of in here and out there. There are two kinds of environment: the social environment and the natural environment. In Buddhist practice you should take care of your five skandhas but you should also take care of your environment because the environment is you. You help create that environment, whether that is social environment or the natural environment. When you see things like that you are no longer sure that you are only inside of your skin, and you can transcend very easily the duality of self and non-self.

At the Buell Theater in Denver, Colorado on August 29, 2007, Thich Nhat Hanh delivered a provocative talk on the effects of humanity’s lack of mindfulness toward the planet we call home. They later elaborated on this theme—and proposed an elegant course of action—in a letter to the sangha. The talk is reprinted below, and the letter is reprinted in the following section in this journal, courtesy of Mindfulness Bell: A Journal of the Art of Mindful Living.

When we produce a thought that is full of anger, fear, or despair, that thought has an immediate effect on our health and on the health of the world. We may like to arrange our life in such a way that we will not produce thoughts of that kind very often. Producing a thought is already karma or action, and that is our continuation into the future.

Our speech may be an expression of right speech as recommended by the Bud-

Originally published as “Our Environment: Touching the Gift of Life” in the *Mindfulness Bell: A Journal of the Art of Mindful Living*, Winter/Spring 2008 (www.mindfulnessbell.org). In appreciation to Sister Jewel, of the Plum Village in France, for suggesting this talk delivered by Thich Nhat Hanh in 2007.

dha. Something we say may manifest our loving-kindness, our nondiscrimination, and our willingness to bring relief. After having uttered such a word we feel better in our body and mind. We receive healing and everyone in the world benefits from our speech of loving-kindness, forgiveness, and compassion. It is possible for us to say such things several times a day, bringing healing and transformation to ourselves and the world.

And when we perform a physical act that has the power to protect, save, support, or bring relief, that also brings an element of healing to us and to the world. When you are full of compassion, even if you don't take action, action will take you. We may repeat such actions several times a day because that kind of love and compassion calls for action.

When we look at an orange tree we see it is producing beautiful leaves, blossoms, and oranges. These are the best things that an orange tree can produce and offer to the world. If we are human beings we also make offerings to the world every moment of our daily life—our thoughts, our speech, and our actions. We want to offer the best kind of thoughts, the best kind of speech, and the best kind of action; these are our continuation whether we want it or not. *Karmahetu*, action as cause, will bring about *karmaphala*, action as fruit. We are continued into the future through our own actions.

A BEAUTIFUL CONTINUATION

When this body disintegrates we cannot bring along anything like diplomas or fame or wealth. We have to give up everything. The only thing that follows us is our actions, the fruit of our thinking, of our speech, and of our acts during our lifetime.

Of course we can assure a beautiful continuation. If we have manifested one time it means that we have manifested several times already. This can be described as past lives. And if we have manifested in the past

and in the present moment we shall be manifested in the future in one way or another.

To think that after the disintegration of this body there will be nothing left is a naïve way of thinking. With deep observation we know that nothing is really born and nothing can die. Our true nature is the nature of no birth and no death. Those of us who have tried Buddhist meditation have seen that. Before the cloud manifested as a cloud she was something else—the water in the ocean, the heat produced by the sun, water vapor. The cloud has not come from nothing. The cloud has come from something, from many things. The moment of the so-called birth of the cloud is only a moment of continuation.

Many of us have learned from the Buddha about the Middle Way, a path that transcends pairs of opposites like birth and death, being and nonbeing. Reality is free from these notions.

When we say that God is the ground of being, you may ask, who is the ground of nonbeing? Theologians like Paul Tillich say that God is the ground of being. But looking deeply we see that the notions of being and nonbeing cannot be applied to reality. The truth is that reality transcends both the notions of being and nonbeing. To be or not to be, that is not the question [laughter].

God cannot be described in terms of being and nonbeing. In Buddhism we have the expression nirvana or suchness, which means reality-in-itself. That kind of reality-in-itself cannot be described in terms of birth and death, being and nonbeing.

If your beloved has abandoned the form in which you used to see him or her, follow the advice of the Buddha and look deeply. Your beloved is still there, maybe much closer than you had thought.

DOUBLE RETRIBUTION

Our karma, our actions, continue us. And they will manifest in two aspects. That manifestation has already started.

In Buddhism the term “retribution” re-

fers to the fruit of your actions in the future. Retribution has two meanings: the first is our five skandhas—form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness; the other side of retribution is the environment. Retribution should be seen in its double nature. You are your environment; your environment is what you have created personally and collectively. That is why there is another step for us to take—to transcend the duality between our five skandhas and our environment.

When you look at the stars, the moon, you know that you are the stars, the moon. And when you look at the mountain, the forest, you know that you are the mountain, the forest. There is always interaction between the two forms of retribution. In fact elements like air, water, earth, fire are always going in and going out. When we breathe out, something goes out to the environment. When we breathe in, something goes into our body. So you are not only here but there.

Cognitive science and neuroscience ask about the relationship between the “in here” and the “out there.” We perceive reality subjectively and we ask the question whether the external reality is exactly the same as the subjective reality. If you pursue meditation deeply you will be able to transcend the duality of in here and out there.

You may believe that this flower is out there, but I am not sure of that at all. Whether the flower that you see there is something in your consciousness or outside of your consciousness, that is not an easy question to answer. In quantum physics or neuroscience or cognitive science it is a very hard question. But the Buddha has given us all kinds of hints so that we can touch reality as it is.

THE ENVIRONMENT IS YOU

There are two kinds of environment: the social environment and the natural environment. In Buddhist practice you should take care of your five skandhas but you should

also take care of your environment because the environment is you. You help create that environment, whether that is social environment or the natural environment.

A long time ago I wrote a small book on meditation with the title *The Sun My Heart*. In one sitting meditation, when I focused my attention on my heart—breathing I am aware of my heart, breathing out I smile to my heart—suddenly I realized that this is not the only heart that I have. I have many other hearts. Suppose that I look at the sun in the sky. I know that it is also another heart of mine. If this heart failed I would die right away. But if the other heart, the sun, explodes or stops functioning as the sun, I would also die right away. So there is a heart inside my body and a heart outside my body; the sun is one of my hearts.

When you see things like that you are no longer sure that you are only inside of your skin, and you can transcend very easily the duality of self and non-self.

In Buddhist psychology we learn that there are many seeds, called *bijas*, in the depth of our consciousness. We have the seed of fear, anger, and despair deep down in our consciousness. As these seeds are watered they manifest in the upper realm of our consciousness in the form of energy. We call them mental formations. If the seed of fear sleeps quietly down there we are somehow peaceful, but if the seed of fear is touched it manifests as the mental formation of fear and we suffer. The practice is to keep the seeds down there and not give them the chance to manifest.

Neuroscientists and biologists tell us that the genes in our cells cannot turn on by themselves; they need the environment. That is why it is very important to assure that you are in a good environment, that you do something to improve the quality of your environment, to ensure that only the good genes, the good seeds are turned on each day. That is the practice of protecting ourselves, our children, our family, and our society so as not to allow the negative seeds to be watered so much.

In Buddhist psychology we speak of contact between the sense organs and the objects of perception. Suppose Sister Pine invites the bell to sound, and the sound stimulates our ear. The mental formation called touch or contact will bring about another mental formation called feeling, whether that feeling is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. If that feeling is not something unusual, if it is of no importance, then store consciousness ignores it. We have many kinds of these feelings throughout the day. If the feeling is strong enough there is a mental formation called attention. If the feeling is deep enough in us it crosses a certain threshold and then there is attention— *manaskara* in Sanskrit.

THE PRACTICE OF APPROPRIATE ATTENTION

The environment touches a seed in us, drawing our attention to that particular point, and turns on a mental formation. That seed may be the seed of mindfulness or the seed of craving, anger, or confusion. If you live in a practice center the sound of the bell has a special meaning because you train yourself to understand it in a particular way. The sound of the bell means “please go home to yourself, enjoy your breathing and be fully present in the here and the now.” Our store consciousness has learned it well. Every time we hear the sound of the bell, without making any effort, any decision, we go back to our breath and we breathe at least three times, in out, in out, in out. This brings us peace and joy, and the insight that we are alive—what a miracle!

The sound of the bell brings about appropriate attention, the kind of attention that turns on good things like mindfulness and joy. But there are other sounds and sights that bring our attention to negative things like craving, fear, anger, distress. We have to organize our environment to have elements that are conducive to appropriate attention, otherwise it will bring about inap-

propriate attention. For instance, television programs might contain elements that can turn on the worst things in our children. When a child finishes elementary school she has seen 100,000 acts of violence and 8,000 murders on television. That is too much! In the name of freedom we continue to produce films that are full of violence, anger, fear, and craving.

Looking deeply if you see that your social environment is not conducive to peace, joy, compassion, and non-violence, you have to do something to change it or seek ways to move toward another environment that is safer to us and our children. Even if we have to take another job that will bring us a meager salary, live in a smaller house, or use a smaller car, we have to accept that in order for us and our children to be better protected.

If you are depressed you may have consumed sights, sounds, touch, and so on, that have stimulated the negative seeds in you and made them manifest in your daily life. That is why the practice includes taking care of the five skandhas but also the social environment.

According to the teachings of Buddhism everything is impermanent. Therefore it is possible for us to change our environment for the better. As a sangha we may want to sit down and have a Dharma discussion to find ways to improve the quality of our social environment. We can practice as a family, as a neighborhood, as a city, or as a nation. The social environment is crucial in determining our future.

MINDFUL CONSUMPTION IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The fifth of the five Mindfulness Trainings in Buddhism is about mindful consumption. We have to consume in such a way so as not to bring toxins like fear and anger into ourselves.

The difficult situation in which we find ourselves has been created by unmindful

production and unmindful consumption. We have created an environment that is conducive to violence, hate, discrimination, and despair. Violence is now everywhere; in the family there is domestic violence. Our young people have become too violent and their teachers don't know how to help them deal with their anger and fear.

We are doing violence to our environment and to nature. We are now facing global warming and weather changes. Even the Kingdom of God is impermanent. Even the Pure Land of the Buddha is impermanent.

When we look deeply into ourselves we can identify elements of the Kingdom of God that are available in the here and the now. That pine tree standing on the mountain is so beautiful, solid, and green. To me the pine tree belongs to the Kingdom of God, the Pure Land of the Buddha. To me the Kingdom of God or the Pure Land of the Buddha is not a vague idea, it is a reality. And your beautiful child with her fresh smile, she belongs to the Kingdom of God and you also, you belong to the Kingdom of God. But because you don't know how to handle the Kingdom of God you are doing harm. The Kingdom of God is such a gift. If you are filled with mindfulness and concentration you can touch the Pure Land of the Buddha right in the here and the now.

In the Gospel there is the story of a farmer who discovers a treasure in a small piece of land [Matthew 13:44-46]. After the discovery he distributed all the other lands that he owned and kept just the land with the treasure. When you have such a treasure you do not need other belongings. With the practice of mindfulness, concentration, and insight, we may realize that happiness.

When you are inhabited by the energy of mindfulness and concentration, every step you make takes you into the Kingdom of God or the Pure Land of the Buddha. The practice taught by our teacher should lead us to the treasure; we don't have to run after fame, wealth, power, or sex.

If we are capable of recognizing that beautiful river as something that belongs to

the Kingdom of God, we will do our best to preserve it and not allow it to be polluted. If we recognize that this planet belongs to the Kingdom of God, we will cherish and protect it so that we can enjoy it for a long time. And our children and their children will have a chance to enjoy it.

Mindfulness helps us to be aware of what is going on. Our way of eating and producing food can be very violent. We are eating our mother, our father, our children. We are eating the earth. Scientists tell us that if we can reduce the eating of meat by fifty percent it will be enough to change the situation of our planet.

THE BUDDHA ON GLOBAL WARMING

I have sat with the Buddha for long periods and consulted him about the situation of global warming. The Teaching of the Buddha on this is very clear. It is a very strong teaching. The Buddha said that when someone realizes that he or she has to die, that person will first of all revolt against the diagnosis. The fear of dying is always there deep down in our store consciousness. And the Buddha advises us not to run away from that fear. Instead, we should bring it up in order to recognize it.

*Breathing in, I know I am of the nature to grow old.
Breathing out, I know I cannot escape old age.*

*Breathing in, I know that I am of the nature to get sick, terminally ill.
Breathing out, I know that I cannot escape sickness.*

*Breathing in, I know that I am of the nature to die.
Breathing out, I know that I cannot escape dying.*

*Breathing in, I know that one day I will have to let go of everything and everyone I cherish.
Breathing out, there is no way to bring them along.*

This practice helps you to accept old age, sickness, and death as realities, facts that you cannot escape. After you have ac-

cepted this you feel much better. Those of us who have been diagnosed as having AIDS or cancer react the same way. We cannot accept it, we struggle with ourselves for a long time. Finally we accept it and in that moment we find peace. And when we find peace, we are more relaxed, and we have a chance to overcome the sickness.

I have known people with cancer able to survive ten, twenty, even thirty years, because of their capacity to accept and to live peacefully. The Buddha told me that the same thing is true with our civilization. If we continue like this our civilization will come to an end. Before this civilization the earth has known other civilizations. Many civilizations have died because mankind was not wise enough. And the same thing will be true for ours. If we continue to consume like this, if we don't care about protecting this wonderful planet, we will allow it to be burned with global warming. Maybe seventy percent of mankind will die. The ecosystem will be destroyed to a very large extent and we will need millions of years to start a new civilization. Everything is impermanent.

Many of us do not accept this. Oh no! God has created this world and God will not allow things like that to happen. But the fact is that we are not only our five skandhas but we are our environment, which is in a process of self-destruction. Many of us who see this course of destruction become victims of despair and fear. Before global warming brings death and destruction we will already have died of fear and despair. We will have died of mental illness before we die from the results of climate changes.

THE END OF OUR CIVILIZATION

Breathing in, I know that this civilization is going to die.

Breathing out, this civilization cannot escape dying.

We have to learn to accept the end of our civilization. Just as we accept our own

death, we accept the death of our civilization. We know that another civilization will be born later on, maybe one or two million years later. We touch the truth of impermanence and then we have peace. When we have peace there will be hope again. With this kind of peace we can make use of the technology that is available to us to save this planet of ours. With fear and despair we are not going to be able to save our planet, even if we have the technology to do it.

Scientists tell us that we have enough technology to save our planet, but psychologically, we are not capable. We are not peaceful, enlightened, or awake enough to do it. That is why, while scientists are trying to discover ways to improve our technology, we as members of the human race have to practice so that we can transcend our fear, despair, forgetfulness, and irresponsibility. A collective change of consciousness will bring about a new way of life, a mindful way of living. The technology that is available to us will be enough to help us save this planet.

If you can get in touch with the treasure that is described in the gospel according to Matthew, you don't have to run after anything else. You have the Kingdom as your wealth; you have a beautiful planet as a great gift. Just enjoy it. Breathing in, you get in touch with the stars, the moon, the clouds, the mountain, the river. Taking a step you make a step in the Kingdom of God. This is possible with mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful dwelling in the present moment. And then you don't need to consume, to run after these objects of craving in order to be happy.

The teaching of the Buddha is very clear, very strong, and not difficult to understand. We have the power to decide the destiny of our planet. Buddhism is the strongest form of humanism we have ever had. It is our actions and our way of life that will save us. If we awaken to our true situation there will be collective change in our consciousness. Then hope will be possible.