

This is the Buddha's Love



The great Buddhist teacher THICH NHAT HANH talks with Melvin McLeod, editor of the Shambhala Sun, about non-self, interdependence, and the love that expands until it has no limit.

One of the best parts of my job as editor of the Shambhala Sun is the chance to discuss dharma seriously, even intimately, with great teachers. I'm a Buddhist student before I'm a journalist, and the questions I ask are often ones that have deep meaning to incise a person and a practitioner. The result is less an interview, in the standard sense, than the record of a teaching that I received. This is a great honor and privilege for me, and I hope it is of benefit to you.

I met Thich Nhat Hanh at Deer Park Monastery near San Diego, a mix of East and West, funky and elegant, mindful and playful. It sits in a little mountain valley in splendid isolation from the suburbs just a mile away. Many of its low, one-story buildings have the temporary feel of an army camp (it has been: a nudist camp and a police training center), but its elegant new meditation hall is of majestic scale. Outside, young Vietnamese-American monks play basketball while elderly nuns in traditional conical hats sweep leaves off the dry ground, and earliest Western lay

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practitioners debate the dharma. The breakfast buffet is traditional Vietnamese fare alongside Corn Flakes and peanut butter, and everything stops when the clock chimes so people can practice a few moments of mindfulness.

I spoke with Thich Nhat Hanh for about an hour and a quarter, and then he showed me the calligraphies, the ones in this issue, which he had done beforehand as a gift to the Shambhala Sun. Although he is best-known for his political and community-building work, I found he was so much more. I met a multidimensional teacher who was deep and realized, committed to both practice and community, steeped in traditional dharma and the ways of the world. He spoke directly to my heart, and if you get a chance to hear him teach, do. Words in print do not do him justice.

—Melvin McLeod

Around us at this monastery are many signs and slogans reminding people to be mindful, to return to their body and breath, and to recollect their nature as human beings. At mealtimes, everyone stops eating when the clock chimes to practice a few moments of mindfulness. Why is it so important for us to return to this basic ground of breath and body and being?

Thich Nhat Hanh: To meditate means to go home to yourself. Then you know how to take care of the things that are happening inside you, and you know how to take care of the things that happen around you. All meditation exercises are aimed at bringing you back to your true home, to yourself. Without restoring your peace and calm and helping the world to restore peace and calm, you cannot go very far in the practice.

What is the difference between this true self, the self you come home to, and how we normally think of ourselves?

True self is non-self, the awareness that the self is made only of non-self elements. There's no separation between self and other, and everything is interconnected. Once you are aware of that you are no longer caught in the idea that you are a separate entity.

What happens to you when you realize that the true nature of the self is non-self?

It brings you insight. You know that your happiness and suffering depend on the happiness and suffering of others. That insight helps you not to do wrong things that will bring suffering to yourself and to other people. If you try to help your father to suffer less, you have a chance to suffer less. If you are able to help your son suffer less, then you, as a father, will suffer less. Thanks to the realization that there is no separate self, you realize that happiness and suffering are not individual matters. You see the nature of interconnectedness.

and you know that to protect yourself you have to protect the human beings around you.

That is the goal of the practice—to realize non-self and interconnectedness. This is not just an idea or something you understand intellectually. You have to apply it to your daily life. Therefore you need concentration to maintain this insight of non-self so it can guide you in every moment. Nowadays, scientists are able to see the nature of non-self in the brain, in the body, in everything. But what they have found doesn't help them, because they cannot apply that insight to their daily lives. So they continue to suffer. That is why in Buddhism we speak of concentration. If you have the insight of non-self, if you have the insight of impermanence, you should make that insight into a concentration that you keep alive throughout the day. Then what you say, what you think, and what you do will then be in the light of that wisdom and you will avoid making mistakes and creating suffering.

So the practice of mindfulness is to try to maintain the insight of non-self and interconnectedness at all times.

Yes, exactly.

We human beings say that above all else we want love. We want to give love; we want to be loved. We know that love is the medicine that cures all ills. But how do we find love in our heart, because often we can't?

Love is the capacity to take care, to protect, and to nourish. If you are not capable of generating that kind of energy toward yourself—if you are not capable of taking care of yourself, of nourishing yourself, of protecting yourself—it is very difficult to take care of another person. In the Buddhist teaching, it's clear that to love oneself is the foundation of the love of other people. Love is a practice. Love is truly a practice.

Why don't we love ourselves?

We may have a habit within ourselves of looking for happiness elsewhere than in the here and the now. We may lack the capacity to realize that happiness is possible in the here and now, that we already have enough conditions to be happy right now. The habit energy is to believe that happiness is not possible now, and that we have to run to the future in order to get some more conditions for happiness. That prevents us from being established in the present moment, from getting in touch with the wonders of life that are available in the here and now. That is why happiness is not possible.

To go home to the present moment, to take care of oneself, to get in touch with the wonders of life that are really available—that is already love. Love is to be kind to yourself, to be compassionate to yourself, to generate images of joy, and to look at everyone with eyes of equanimity and nondiscrimination.

That is something to be cultivated. Non-self can be achieved. It can be touched slowly. The truth can be cultivated. When you discover something, in the beginning you discover only part of it. If you continue, you have a chance

to discover more. And finally you discover the whole thing. When you love, if your love is true, you begin to see that the other person is a part of you and you are a part of her or him. In that realization there is already non-self. If you think that your happiness is different from their happiness, you have not seen anything of non-self, and happiness cannot be obtained.

So as you progress on the path of insight into non-self, the happiness brought to you by love will increase. When people love each other, the distinction, the limits, the frontier between them begins to dissolve, and they become one with the person they love. There's no longer any jealousy or anger, because if they are angry at the other person, they are angry at themselves. That is why non-self is not a theory, a doctrine, or an ideology, but a realization that can bring about a lot of happiness.

And peace.

Sure. Peace is the absence of separation, of discrimination.

You are renowned for teachings on community, which in Buddhism is called saugha. Through practices such as the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing, you define mindfulness in ways that are social, even political. You teach about communication techniques and the power of deep listening and loving speech. Why do you emphasize the community, the interpersonal aspect?

You have experiences in the practice—peace, joy, transformation, and healing—and on that foundation, you help other people. You don't practice just as an individual, because you realize very soon on the path of practice that you should practice with community if you want the transformation and healing to take place more quickly. This is taking refuge in the sangha.

In sharing the practice with others, the energy of mindfulness, concentration, and joy is much more powerful. That is what the Buddha liked to do. Everywhere he went, many monastics accompanied him, and that way the monastics could learn from his way of walking and sitting and interacting with people. Soon the community began to behave like an organism, with everyone engaged in the same energy of peace, joy, calm, and brotherhood.

At the same time, everyone in the sangha speaks for the Buddha, speaking for him not just by their words but by the way they act and the way they treat people. That is why King Prasanjit told the Buddha, "Dear teacher, every time I see your community of monks and nuns, I have great faith in you." He meant that the sangha is capable of representing the Buddha. The Buddha with the sangha can achieve a lot of things. I don't think a teacher can do much without a community. It's like a musician, who cannot perform without a musical instrument. The sangha is very important—the insight and the practice of the teacher can be seen in the sangha. It has a much stronger effect when you share in the practice and the teaching as a sangha.

So for the dharma to really be powerful we must transform not just ourselves but, in effect, society.

Yes, that is Mahayana. That is going together in a larger vehicle. That is why Buddhism should always be engaged. It's not by cutting yourself off from society that you can realize that. That is why Mahayana, the great vehicle, is already seen in what they call the Hinayana, the lesser vehicle.

Do you think that one reason you emphasize community and society as a practice is the terrible conflict that you saw in your home country of Vietnam? Did seeing a society destroyed by war, seeing the terrible stakes involved, heighten your concern for our community life?

I think that's true. It is the insight you get when you are in touch with the real situation. But it is also emphasized in the tradition. We say, "I take refuge in sangha," but sangha is made of individual practitioners. So you have to take care of yourself. Otherwise you don't have much to contribute to the community because you do not have enough calm, peace, solidity, and freedom in your heart. That is why in order to build a community, you have to build yourself at the same time. The community is in you and you are in the community. You interpenetrate each other. That is why I emphasize sangha—building. That doesn't mean that you neglect your own practice. It is by taking good care of your breath, of your body, of your feelings, that you can build a good community, you see.

You've been in the West now for a long time. What do you think are the best ways to present Buddhist,, to meet the needs of Western students?

I think Buddhism should open the door of psychology and healing to penetrate more easily into the Western world. As far as religion is concerned, the West already has plenty of belief in a supernatural being. It's not by the law of faith that you should enter the spiritual territory of the West, because the West has plenty of this.

So the door of psychology is good. The abhidharma literature of Buddhism represents a very rich understanding of the mind, which has been developed by many generations of Buddhists. If you approach the Western mind through the door of psychology, you may have better success helping people to understand their mind, helping people to practice in such a way that they can heal the mind and the body.

The mind and body are very much linked to each other, and we can say that the practice of Buddhist meditation has the power to heal the body and the mind. You see this very clearly when you study the basic texts of Buddhist meditation, like the Anapannasati Sutra, on the practice of mindful breathing, and the Sutra of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. The practice of meditation helps us to release the tension—within the body, within the mind, within the emotions—so that healing can take place. Even if you take a lot of medicine, it won't work very well if the tension is still strong in your body and your mind. So the Buddha offers very practical methods, such as, "Breathing in I'm aware of body; breathing out I release the tension in my body. Breathing in I'm aware of the emotion in me; breathing out I release the tension in the emotion. I embrace my body and my feelings with the energy of mindfulness."

If you touch the phenomena deeper and deeper, you touch the ultimate. The ultimate is not something separated from the phenomena.

The practice of releasing tension in the body and mind is the foundation of healing. In the beginning it helps to bring you relief. Then, with more mindfulness and concentration, you practice looking more deeply into the pain and the tension, and you find its roots, the cause of the ill-being. You discover the second noble truth. You can identify the source of that tension, that depression, that ill-being. And when you identify the roots of the suffering, namely the second noble truth, then you begin to see the fourth noble truth, the way that leads to the cessation of the ill-being, the tension, and the pain. That is the most important thing to see—the path. If you follow the path, very soon ill-being will disappear and give way to well-being, which is the third noble truth. So the Buddhist principle is the principle of medicine.

Another door that we should open is the door of ecology, because in Buddhism there is a deep respect toward animals, vegetables, and even minerals. In Mahayana Buddhism we say that everyone has buddhanature—not only humans but animals, vegetables, and even minerals. ‘When you study the Diamond Sutra you can see that the Diamond Sutra is the oldest text on the protection of environment. The idea of self is removed, because self is made of non-self elements, and the idea of man is removed, because man is made of non-man elements, mainly animals, vegetables, minerals, and soon. That means that in order to protect man you have to protect the non-man elements. it’s very clear.

So the door of ecology is a very wonderful door to open. And the door of peace, because Buddhism is about peace. The true Buddhist cannot refuse working for peace. And I think the door of feminism, the nondiscrimination between genders. The Buddha opened the door for women to enter the holy order and that was a very revolutionary act on his part.

I think all these dharma doors should be opened wide so the West can receive the true teaching of the Buddha. These dharma doors all exist within the roots of Buddhism, but many generations of Buddhists have lost these values. Buddhists should practice in such a way as to restore these values to the tradition so they can offer them to other people.

Conversely, do you see things in Western thought or knowledge that can contribute to Buddhism?

I think that democracy and science can help Buddhism, but not in the way people might think. You know, the practice of democracy already exists in the Buddhist tradition. But if you compare it to democracy in the West, you see that Buddhist democracy is more grounded in the truth, because if you are a teacher and you have much more experience and insight, your vote has more value than the vote of a novice who has not got much insight and experience. So in Buddhism, voting should combine the way of democracy with the way of seniority. That is possible. We have done that with a lot of success in our community, because the younger and less experienced people always have faith and respect toward the elder ones. But, you know, many Buddhist

communities don't follow that approach; the teacher decides everything and they have lost the democracy. Now we have to restore the democracy, but not as it is practiced in the West. We have to combine it with the spirit of seniority.

Personally, learning about science has helped me to understand Buddhism more deeply. I agree with Einstein that if there is a religion that can go along with science, it is Buddhism. That is because Buddhism has the spirit of nonattachment to rules. You may have a view that you consider to be the truth, but if you cling to it, then that is the end of your free inquiring. You have to be aware that with the practice of looking deeply you may see things more clearly. That is why you should not be so dogmatic about what you have found; you have to be ready to release your view in order to get a higher insight. That is very exciting.

In the sutra given to the young people of the Kalama tribe, the Kalama Sutra, the Buddha said, "Don't just believe in something because it has been repeated by many people. Don't just believe in something because it has been uttered by a famous teacher. Don't just believe in something even if it is found in holy scripture." You have to look at it, you have to try it and put it into the practice, and if it works, if it can help you transform your suffering and bring you peace and liberty, you can believe it in a very scientific way.

So I think Buddhists should not be afraid of science. Science can help Buddhism to discover more deeply the teaching of the Buddha. For example, the Avatamsaka Sutra says that the one is made of the many, and the many can be found in the one. This is something that can be proven by science. Out of a cell they can duplicate a whole body. In one cell, the whole genetic heritage can be found and you can make a replica of the whole body. In the one you see the many. These kinds of things help us to understand the teaching of Buddha more deeply.

So there is no reason why Buddhists have to be afraid of science, especially when Buddhists have the capacity to release their view in order to get a higher view. And in Buddhism, the highest view is no view at all. No view at all! You say that permanence is the wrong view. So you use the view of impermanence to correct the view of permanence. But you are not stuck to the view of impermanence. When you have realized the truth, you abandon not only the view of permanence, but you also abandon the view of impermanence. It's like when you strike a match: the fire that is produced by the match will consume the match. When you practice looking deeply and you find the insight of impermanence, then the insight of permanence will burn away that notion of impermanence.

That is what is very wonderful about the teaching of nonattachment to view. Non-self can be a view, impermanence might be a view, and if you are caught in a view, you are not really free. The ultimate has no view. That is why nirvana is the extinction of all views, because views can bring unhappiness—even the views of nirvana, impermanence, and no-self—if we fight each other over these views.

I very much like the way you describe what other Buddhist traditions call relative and absolute truth. You describe these as the historical and ultimate dimensions. Much of your teaching focuses on the relative or historical dimension, or on the principle of interdependence, which you call interbeing. Is that a complete or final description of reality, or is there a truth beyond the insight that nothing exists independently and all things are interrelated?

There are two approaches in Buddhism: the phenomenal approach and the true nature approach. In the school of Madhyamaka, in the school of Zen, they help you to strike directly into your true nature. In the school of Abhidharma, Mind-Only, they help you to see the phenomena, and if you touch the phenomena deeper and deeper, you touch the ultimate. The ultimate is not something separated from the phenomena. If you touch the ultimate, you touch also the phenomena. And if you touch deeply the phenomena, you touch also the ultimate.

It is like a wave. You can see the beginning and the end of a wave. Coming up, it goes down. The wave can be smaller or bigger, or higher or lower. But a wave is at the same time the water. A wave can live her life as a wave, of course, but it is possible for a wave to live the life of a wave and the life of water at the same time. If she can bend down and touch the water in her, she loses all her fear. Beginning, ending, coming up, going down—these don't make her afraid anymore, because she realizes she's water. So there are two dimensions in the wave. The historical dimension is coming up and going down. But in the ultimate dimension of water, there is no up, no down, no being, and no nonbeing.

The two dimensions are together and when you touch one dimension deeply enough, you touch the other dimension. There's no separation at all between the two dimensions. Everything is skillful means in order to help you touch the ultimate.

Sonic people I have spoken to seem to interpret the concept of inter-being as a statement that all things are one. That sounds like one of those views we're not supposed to hold on to.

Yes. One is a notion, and many are also a notion. It's like being and nonbeing. You say that God is the foundation of being, and then people ask, "Who is the foundation of nonbeing?" [laughs] That is why that notion of being and nonbeing cannot be applied to reality. They're only notions. The notions of two different things, or just one, are also notions. Sameness and otherness are notions. Nirvana is the removal of all notions, including the notions of sameness and otherness. So interbeing does not mean that everything is one or that every-thing is different. It will help you to remove both, so you are not holding a view.

You said that the Buddha was a human being. But the Mahayana says that there are countless buddhas and bodhisattvas at many levels of existence who are sending their compassion to us. How are we rationalist Westerners to understand these beings? How can we open ourselves to them when we can't perceive them with our five senses?

In Buddhism, the Buddha is considered as a teacher, a human being, and not a god. It is very important to tell people that. I don't need the Buddha to be a god. He is a teacher, and that is good enough for me! I think we have to tell people in the West about that. And because the Buddha was a human being, that is why countless buddhas become possible.

Did the Buddha die?

Sure. As a human being, you should be born and you should die. That is the historical dimension. Then you have to touch the Buddha deeply in order to touch his or her ultimate dimension. You can also look deeply at an ordinary human being—not a buddha, just a non-buddha like myself or yourself. If you look deeply at yourself, you see that you have this historical dimension—you have birth and death. But if you look at yourself more deeply, you see that your true nature is the nature of no birth and no death. You are also like a buddha: you have never been born; you'll never die. So in you I see a buddha; in everyone I see buddha in the ultimate dimension. That's why we can talk about countless buddhas. It is exactly because the Buddha is a human being that countless buddhas are possible.

Don't think that the buddhas are very far away up in the sky. The buddhaland is here. It's wonderful that it's possible in the here and the now.

We have to remember that inside of the historical dimension there is the ultimate dimension. We are not really subjected to birth and death, it is like a cloud. A cloud can never die; a cloud only becomes rain or snow or ice, but a cloud can never be nothing. That is the true nature of the cloud. No birth and no death. A buddha shares the same nature of no birth and no death, and you share the same nature of no birth and no death.

We know that on Earth there are human beings who possess great wisdom and great compassion. They are buddhas, Don't think that the buddhas are very far away up in the sky. You touch the buddha in yourself; you touch the buddha in people around you. It's wonderful that it's possible in the here and the now.

The buddhaland is here. If you know how to practice mindful walking, then you enjoy walking in the pure land of Buddha in the here and the now. This is not something to talk about; it's something to taste. In our tradition, you should walk in such a way that each step helps you to touch the buddhaland. The buddhaland is available to you in the here and now. The question is whether you are available to the pure land. Are you caught by your jealousy, your fear, your anger? Then the pure land is not available. With mindfulness and concentration you have the capacity to touch the celestial realm of the buddhas and the bodhisattvas in the here and the now. That is not

theory at all. That is what we live each day. What we practice each day. It's possible.

Many of us are capable of this. When I talk to Christians I say that the Kingdom of God is now or never. You are free, and then the kingdom is there for you. If you are not free, well, the kingdom does not exist, even in the future. So the same teaching and practice can be shared between many traditions.

You've lived a long life during a century that was as terrible as any, in a country that suffered as in itch as any. I think there are many people who 110W look at this new century and see, again, the seeds of tragedy, both at the human level and the natural level. Where do you feel the world is headed now?

Loving one person is an opportunity for you to love many more people. Finally your love will have no. That is the Buddha's love.

I think the twentieth century was characterized by individualism, and more than one hundred million people perished because of wars. Too much violence, too much destruction of life and environment. If we want the twenty-first century to be different, if we want healing and transformation, the realization is crucial that we are all one organism, that the wellbeing of others, the safety of others, is our own safety, our own security. That kind of realization is very crucial. Modern biology has realized that the human being is really a community of billions of cells. No cell is a leader; every cell is collaborating with every other cell in order to produce the kind of energy that helps the organism to be protected and to grow. Only that kind of awakening, that kind of insight—that our danger, our security, our well-being, and our suffering are not something individual but something common to us all—can prevent the destruction that has arisen from individualism in the twentieth century.

This insight of no-self, this insight of togetherness, is very crucial for our survival and for the survival of our planet. It should not be just a notion that we can read in books; this insight should be something that animates our daily life. In school, in business, in the Congress, in the town hall, in the family, we should practice in order to nurture the insight that we are to-

I have spent much of my time building communities and I have learned a lot from it. In Plum Village we try to live like an organism. No one has a private car, no one has a private bank account, no one has a private telephone—everything belongs to the community. And yet, happiness is possible. Our basic practice is seeing each one as a cell in the body, and that is why fraternity, brotherhood, sisterhood become possible. When you are nourished by brotherhood, happiness is possible, and that is why we are able to do a lot of things to help other people to suffer less.

This can be seen, it can be felt. It's not something you just talk about. It is a practice, it is a training, and every breath and every step that you take aims at realizing that togetherness. It's wonderful to live in a community like that, because the well-being of the other person is also our well-being. By bringing joy and happiness to one person, we bring joy and happiness to every one of us. That is why I think that community-building, sangha-building, is the most important, most noble work that we can do.

And to extend that to the greater society.

Yes. It's like in a classroom at school. If the teacher knows how to organize the kids in her class into a family, they will suffer much less and they will have a lot of joy. It's the same in the town hall or in a business. Business leaders can organize their enterprise as a family where everyone can look at each other as a cell of the organism.

We know that in our own body there are many kinds of cells: liver cells, lung cells, neurons. And every cell is doing her best. There's no envy about the position of the other cells, because there's no discrimination at all. It's by being the best kind of liver cell that you can nourish other cells. Every cell is doing her best in order to bring about the well-being of the whole body. There is no discrimination, no fight among the cells, and that is what we can learn from modern biology. We can organize ourselves in this way as a family, as a school, as a town hall, as a Congress. It is possible, because if our cells are able to do that, we humans can do that also.

I hope you don't mind my asking this question, and you don't have to answer. But I have always been very touched by what you've written about a love that you had, someone you clearly loved very deeply, whom you left. How do you feel about that now? Is that, at this point in your life, a regret?

That love has never been lost. It has continued to grow. The object of my love grows every day, every day, every day, until can embrace everyone. To love someone is a very wonderful opportunity for you to love everyone. If it is true love. In the insight of non-self, you see that the object of your love is always there and the love continues to grow. Nothing is lost and you don't regret anything, because if you have true love in you, then you and your true love are going in the same direction, and each day you are able to embrace, more and more. So to love one person is a great opportunity for you to love many more.

Yet monasticism—and you are very encouraging toward those who would like to become monks or nuns—renounces this love. Why is it a good thing to forego this opportunity to love?

In the life of a monastic, you make the vow to develop your love and your understanding. You develop the capacity to embrace everyone into your love. So loving one person, as I said, is an opportunity for you to love many more people. Especially when that person shares the same aspiration as you, there is no suffering at all. As a monastic you lead a life of monastic celibacy and

community, and if the one you love realizes that, she will not suffer and you will not suffer, because love is much more than having sexual relationship. Because of great love you can sacrifice that aspect of love, and your love becomes much greater. That nourishes you, that nourishes the other person, and finally your love will have no limit. That is the Buddha's love.

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