Review of International American Studies
RIAS—Vol. 18, Fall-Winter, № 2/2025
ISSN 1991-2773
DOI: https://doi.org/10.31261/rias.18020

THE PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE OF INTERBEING IN THICH NHAT HANH'S WRITING

When people talk about war
I vow with all beings
to raise my voice in the chorus
and speak of original peace
[Robert Aitken 58]

INTRODUCTION

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8111-4998

The Vietnam War, or the American War, as it is usually referred to in Vietnam, was over 50 years ago, but its impact on both Vietnamese and American societies continues. This essay looks at the teaching of interbeing by the late Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist Zen master, poet, author, scholar, and activist for social change, also known as "a monk who taught the world mindfulness." Nhat Hanh worked for peace and social change ever since the war started. In the mid-1960s, he co-founded the School of Youth for Social Services (a grassroots relief organization of 10,000 volunteers based on the Buddhist principles of non-violence and compassionate action) and created the Order of Interbeing (a new order based on the traditional Buddhist Bodhisattva precepts) ("The Life Story of Thich Nhat Hanh"). In 1964, he came to the US to seek help for his countrymen, to promote the idea of communication, of reconciliation, of putting an end to the bloodshed. He came back to the US in 1966. At that time his teaching on mindfulness, meditation, and interbeing started taking root on the American ground. As a peace-promoter and equality-supporter, he found a loyal companion in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967. In his nomination, King said, "I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize than this gentle monk from Vietnam.

His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity" (King, "Nomination of Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize"). Ironically enough, because of his peaceful mission, opposition to the war, and his refusal to take sides, both North and South Vietnam denied him the right to return to Vietnam. His long exile lasted 39 years. Not being able to come back to his home country, he decided to move to Paris. Nhat Hanh established dozens of Plum Village meditation centres around the world, and he himself lived in the Plum Village monastery near Bordeaux (established in 1982), and served as a Dharma teacher in Europe, America, and Asia. Nhat Hanh is considered to be the father of Engaged Buddhism; he coined that term in his 1967 book entitled *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*. In his view, Buddhist precepts must be practiced in the form of working for society, particularly in the context of promoting peace, and saving the environment (Kocot, "A Celebration of the Wild" 250–253). This article will look at Nhat Hanh's essays and books as well as poems (written during and after the Vietnam war) which discuss the philosophical and social aspects of interbeing, as practised by the Plum Village community till this day.

PEACEFUL REVOLUTION AND BUILDING A COMMUNITY

In his seminal book on the practice of fearlessness, Nhat Hanh writes:

> When I met Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1966, during the Vietnam War, one of the things we discussed was the importance of building community—or, as we call it in Buddhism, sangha. Dr. King knew that community building was vital. He was aware that without a community little could be accomplished. A solid sense of brotherhood and sisterhood gives us strength when we feel fear or despair and helps sustain our power of love and compassion. Brotherhood and sisterhood can heal and transform our lives. Dr. King spent much of his time building a community that he called "the beloved community." (*Fear* 115)

Nhat Hanh's emphasis on the need for communal practice is reflected in each of his books, as for him one of the most significant aspects of Buddhist spirituality is looking deeply into the nature of one's identity and noticing the interconnectedness of all creation. Once the idea of separation is removed, one becomes free to explore the process of transforming existing problems within a society. One should always begin with one's own transformation (Kocot, "Geopoetics and the Poetry of Consciousness" 200). The way out is in.[1] If one

1 For more on how "the way out is in" practice in the context of solving environmental problems and Engaged Buddhism, see Kocot, "The Only Way Out Is In" (2022).

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

is fortunate enough to be surrounded with people who also actively transform their attitudes and behaviours, change within a society is only a matter of time.

In his famous "I Have a Dream" speech delivered in 1963, King speaks openly about a continuous effort to work together for the benefit of the society seen as a whole, and applying peaceful means to change the existing conditions:

> We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone. (King, "I Have a Dream")

The term "soul force" is reminiscent of Gandhi's *satyagraha*, firm insistence upon the truth, and acting out of compassion and a sense of interconnectedness of all (Gandhi 358–359). The message of oneness, clearly inspired by King's talks with Thich Nhat Hanh, becomes much more pronounced in King's speech "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence" delivered at Riverside Church, New York City, on April 4, 1967. The speech might have been inspired by Nhat Hanh's antiwar poetry, particularly by his poem written in 1964 in Vietnam entitled "Peace:"

> They woke me this morning
> to tell me my brother had been killed in battle.
> Yet in the garden
> a new rose, with moist petals uncurling,
> blooms on the bush.
> And I am alive,
> still breathing the fragrance of roses and dung,
> eating, praying, and sleeping.
> When can I break my long silence?
> When can I speak the unuttered words that are choking me?
> (*Call Me by My True Names* 27)

As Nhat Hanh emphasizes, at that time, to "pronounce the word 'peace' meant you were 'communist,' helping the communists, or just defeatist" (*Call Me* 27). In his speech, King speaks of a complex power struggle in Vietnam, and a revolution of values that is needed to end the war:

> A true revolution of values will lay hands on the world order and say of war, "This way of settling differences is not just." This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.

He continues, by referring to a "Hindu-Muslim-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality," a universal law of love, which, when practiced, has the power of reversing the dynamic activated by the death drive:

> We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. We must move past indecision to action. We must find new ways to speak for peace in Vietnam and justice throughout the developing world, a world that borders on our doors. If we do not act, we shall surely be dragged down the long, dark, and shameful corridors of time reserved for those who possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight.

Sadly, King's dream of living in a society unified by peaceful aspirations remained unfulfilled. He was assassinated one year later, on April 4, 1968. Nhat Hanh's work continued until his peaceful death on January 22, 2022, in his root temple in Hue, Vietnam. As I have already mentioned, he could not come back to his home country in the 1960s due to his involvement in peace talks; (he was the leader of the Buddhist delegation at the Paris Peace Talks in 1969) ("The Life Story of Thich Nhat Hanh"), so he continued to travel widely (in Europe and America), spreading the message of peace and brotherhood, lobbying Western leaders to end the Vietnam War. Nhat Hanh also continued to teach, lecture and write on the art of mindfulness and "living peace;" in the early 1970s, he was a lecturer and researcher in Buddhism at the University of Sorbonne, Paris. In 1975, he established the Sweet Potato community near Paris, and 1982 marks the beginning of The Plum Village community in the South West of France ("The Life Story of Thich Nhat Hanh").

On the website of the community, one can read that under Thich Nhat Hanh's spiritual leadership "Plum Village has grown from a small rural farmstead to what is now the West's largest and most active Buddhist monastery, with over 200 resident monastics and over 10,000 visitors every year who learn 'the art of mindful living'" ("The Life Story of Thich Nhat Hanh"). One can also learn that Nhat Hanh founded Wake Up, a worldwide movement of thousands of young people training in the practices

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

of mindful living, and he launched an international Wake Up Schools programme training teachers to teach mindfulness in schools in Europe, America and Asia. In the 21th century, Nhat Hanh opened new monasteries in Vietnam, Hong Kong, Thailand, Australia, in the US (in California, New York, and Mississippi), and in Europe (Paris). He also founded Europe's first Institute of Applied Buddhism in Germany ("The Life Story of Thich Nhat Hanh"). The importance of establishing communities and practising mindfulness and peaceful living is deeply rooted in Buddhist philosophy in general, and in Hua-yen Buddhism in particular.

THE WEB OF RELATIONSHIPS: THE NET OF INDRA

As a Mahayana Buddhist practitioner, Nhat Hanh sees the web of relationships between all phenomena as depicted in the metaphor of the Net of Indra, "a multidimensional net of all beings (including inanimate things), with each point, each knot, a jewel that perfectly reflects, and indeed contains, all other points" (Aitken xvii; see Cleary, *Entry into the Inconceivable* 37). This metaphor for the interconnectedness of all things (interdependent origination) appears prominently in *The Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, translated into Chinese as the *Hua Yen Sūtra*, one of the most influential Mahayana sūtras of East Asian Buddhism, rendered in English as *Flower Garland Sūtra*, *Flower Adornment Sūtra*, or *The Flower Ornament Scripture* (as translated by Thomas Cleary).

The multidimensional depth of the metaphor of Indra's Net has attracted many Western scholars. In his insightful article entitled "Relational Holism," David Barnhill dwells on the complexity of mirroring with regard to nondualistic vision of identity:

> In one sense each jewel is a single entity. But when we look at a jewel, we see the reflections of other jewels, each of which contains the reflections of other jewels, and so on in an endless system of mirroring. Thus in each jewel is the image of the entire net as whole. The jewels interpenetrate each other and, in Huayan's sense of the term, they share the same identity. Yet each one contains the others in its own unique way in its distinctive position, and so they are different. This type of identity does not imply being identical or involve merging into an undifferentiated One. (Barnhill 86–87)

Thomas Cleary, a scholar of Hua-yen philosophy, focuses on a slightly different aspect of the net:

> All things, being interdependent, [...] imply in their individual being the simultaneous being of all other things. Thus it is said that the existence of each element of the universe includes the existence of the whole universe and hence is as extensive as the universe itself. (*Entry into the Inconceivable* 7)

In his seminal *Entry into the Inconceivable*, Cleary discusses in detail the various aspects of the non interference of noumenon and phenomena in terms of the interdependence of things. He notes that "relative or conditional existence of things is not opposed to their absolute emptiness (or emptiness of their absoluteness)" (*Entry* 25). He adds that "relative existence and absolute emptiness are, to use a popular Ch'an metaphor, 'two faces of the same die'" (*Entry* 25). I mention the scriptural and philosophical link between interdependence and emptiness, because it plays a major role in Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching. He calls it interbeing, and I will explore how he perceives this dynamic, together with its psychological and social implications, in the next part of my article.

Cleary observes that Hua-yen Buddhism is "famed for its intriguing philosophy, but it is perhaps most useful to consider Hua-yen metaphysics primarily in terms of instrumental value" (*Entry* 1). In other words, the philosophy may be considered not only as a system of thought as such, but rather as "a set of practical exercises in perspective—new ways of looking at things from different points of view, of discovering harmony and complementarity underlying apparent disparity and contradiction" (*Entry* 1–2). In his opinion, the value behind such an approach is that we develop "a round, holistic perspective which, while discovering unity, does not ignore diversity but overcomes mental barriers that create fragmentation and bias" (*Entry* 1–2).

Similarly, Francis Cook notes that without the practice and realization of Zen, Hua Yen philosophy "remains mere intellectual fun, never a vibrant reality" (26). One of the ways of making it a vibrant reality is to acknowledge and affirm the interdependence of all the elements of the net, to see the other as a reflection of oneself (Kocot, "Geopoetics" 184; "'The Only Way Out Is In'" 263–265). Let me quote Cook again: "When in a rare moment I manage painfully to rise above a petty individualism by knowing my true nature, I perceive that I dwell in the wondrous net of Indra, in this incredible network of interdependence" (122). He also adds that it is not just that "we are all in it" together. "We all *are* it, rising or falling as one living body" (Cook 122). As I have argued elsewhere, "the message of Indra's net for us as individuals is that through our own self-realization and transformation, we affect everyone and everything on this planet, precisely because we inter-are" ("'The Only Way Out Is In'" 265).

Given the philosophical depth of the *Hua Yen Sūtra*, it might seem difficult to imagine how a Buddhist can make it personal. Interestingly, Nhat Hanh uses the so-called *gathas*, four-line verses which are found in the earliest Buddhist writings, and he applies them as tools

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

of establishing oneself in the present moment as well as of working with challenging situations and afflictive emotions. The *Hua Yen Sūtra* includes a chapter entitled "Purifying Practice," consisting of 139 *gatha*-vows. Each gatha is event-driven, contains a line of a vow of oneness with all beings, and two lines of the specific practice which connects the event with one's activity. Here is a *gatha* excerpted from the "Purifying Practice" chapter:

If they see a big river,
They should wish that all beings
Gain entry into the stream of truth
And enter the ocean of Buddha-knowledge.
(Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture* 321)

In his *Zen Vows for Daily Life*, inspired by the poetic teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh, Robert Aitken notes that events presented in the *gathas* of the chapter followed the routine of T'ang period monks and nuns; each act such as sitting down for meditation, or putting on clothes received "its Dharma poem" (Aitken xxiii). But as we can see in the *gatha* above, oneness with nature played a crucial role in the purifying practice, and offered gateways into "the stream of truth." Aitken is very fond of the classical *gathas* on nature, but he openly admits that he misses *gathas* that would offer loving-kindness attitude in an emotionally challenging situation: "I find myself wanting *gathas* that show the way to practice and realize interbeing when I am angry with someone" (xxv). In the introduction to Aitken's book, Thich Nhat Hanh writes about his practice of working with *gathas* from the time he entered the monastery as a novice monk at the age of 16, the practice which continued till the end of his life. This is what he has to say about the importance of *gathas*-poems:

Practicing mindfulness with *gathas* helps us develop concentration. In Buddhism, meditation means looking deeply into the heart of reality, and concentration is the basic condition for this practice. In itself, concentration contains the seeds of the kind of insight that frees us from afflictions and reveals to us the nature of reality. (Nhat Hanh, "Foreword" xiii)

In Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhism, poetry is often used as a tool in meditation (Nhat Hanh, "Foreword" xi), and Nhat Hanh's *gathas* often become part of his poems, or the other way round, passages from his poems are turned into *gathas* for practicing mindfulness and peaceful living.

INTERBEING

Nhat Hanh has written extensively on the philosophy of interbeing. In his article "The Order of Interbeing," he introduces the core of his teaching which can be seen as a practical application of the *Heart Sūtra* and *Hua-Yen Sūtra*.

> To be in touch with the reality of the world means to be in touch with everything that is around us in the animal, vegetal, and mineral realms. If we want to be in touch, we have to get out of our shell and look clearly and deeply at the wonders of life—the snowflakes, the moonlight, the songs of the birds, the beautiful flowers—and also the suffering—hunger, disease, torture, and oppression. Overflowing with understanding and compassion, we can appreciate the wonders of life, and, at the same time, act with firm resolve to alleviate the suffering. Too many people distinguish between the inner world of our mind and the world outside, but these worlds are not separate. They belong to the same reality. (Nhat Hanh, "The Order of Interbeing" 205–206)

Tiep refers to "receiving," "being in touch with" and "continuing," while *hien* signifies "realizing" and "making it here and now" (Nhat Hanh, "The Order of Interbeing" 205). In order to "inter-be," to use one of Nhat Hanh's favourite verbs, we need to "bring and express our insights into real life" (206). And because only "the present moment is real and available to us" (206), understanding and compassion must be seen and touched in this very moment (Kocot, "A Celebration of the Wild" 109; "'The Only Way Out Is In'" 251).

As Robert Aitken aptly points out, Nhat Hanh's understanding of interbeing is activated when the other person, animal, plant, or thing is experienced as oneself (xvii). In the chapter on interbeing in *Fear, Essential Wisdom for Getting Through the Storm*, Nhat Hanh writes that as a monk, he does not just give lectures, but practices looking deeply every day: "I see me in my ancestors. I see my continuation everywhere in this moment [...] I see everyone in me, and me in everyone. That is the practice of looking deeply, the practice of concentration on emptiness, the practice of interbeing" (*Fear* 62–63).

Nhat Hanh stresses that "when we practice, we do not expect the practice to pay large rewards in the future, we do not expect to attain nirvana, the Pure Land, enlightenment, of Buddhahood. The secret of Buddhism is to be awake here and now" (*Interbeing* 7). He adds that [t]here is no way to peace; peace is the way. There is no way to enlightenment; enlightenment is the way. There is no way to liberation; liberation is the way" ("The Order of Interbeing" 207; Kocot, "Geopoetics" 109–111; Kocot, "'The Only Way Out Is In'" 251–253). It is essential to fully appreciate the (healing) potential of each moment of the practice.

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

This teaching is reflected in the *gatha* "Peace is this Moment" which highlights the importance of the present moment. It reminds us that peace can be found in the here and in the now, regardless of external circumstances. By being fully present and mindful, we can experience peace in each moment. An integral part of the process of awakening is dropping the ego-driven notion of a separate self: "If you are locked into the idea of a separate self, you have great fear. But if you look deeply and are capable of seeing 'you' everywhere, you lose that fear" (*Fear* 68). The insight and practice of embracing the other as "an extension" of oneself gains a much deeper meaning when we think of the time this philosophy was practised, the time of war, ongoing bloodshed, immense physical and mental suffering. When surrounded by brutal violence and while experiencing emotions of fear and hatred, entering the mode of fight, flight, or freeze seems "natural." To acknowledge the other in oneself becomes a challenging task.

One of the most often used *gathas* (both in teaching and in community practice) Nhat Hanh has created is an invitation to being present "in the here and now, our true home" (*Fear* 46):

I have arrived, I am home
In the here, and in the now
I am solid, I am free
In the ultimate I dwell
(*Fear* 46)

In the Plum Village community, it is usually recited (or spoken silently to oneself) while breathing in and out during a walking meditation, where each verse is linked with each step, or sometimes two steps, if one wants to make it a very slow walking meditation. When each verse is spoken and embodied by the sheer fact that one's feet touch the ground, when one comes back to the here and now, one's inner peace and stability become present, and one "can recognize the many conditions of happiness that already exist" (*Fear* 46).[2]

INTERBEING IN HISTORICAL AND ULTIMATE DIMENSION

The quote which opens *The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* volume, entitled *Call Me By My True Names*, says:

If you touch deeply the historical dimension,
you find yourself in the ultimate dimension.
If you touch the ultimate dimension,
you have not left the historical dimension—
(*The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* 2)

2 This *gatha* can be practiced even by people who suffer from CPTSD.

Even though it appears to be simple, it might actually be seen as a *koan*, a Zen riddle, which takes the reader far beyond dualistic thinking (with its ultimate dependence on reason) and into intuition right from the beginning of the book. Nhat Hanh arranges his poems in two sections, beginning with the historical dimension—poems written mostly during the Vietnam War—and proceeds to the ultimate dimension where the poems explore the fruits of the philosophy and practice of interbeing in times of peace.

As Nhat Hanh points out in his book *Fear, Essential Wisdom for Getting Through the Storm*, when one can establish him/herself in the present moment, one can see the two dimensions of reality, the historical and the ultimate. In order to elucidate the difference in meaning between the two dimensions, Nhat Hanh uses the image of a wave and water.[3] When one touches the historical dimension, one can notice various notions, or qualities of the wave: "birth and death, being and nonbeing, high and low, coming and going" (*Fear* 47), but when one touches the wave more deeply, one touches water. Obviously, the wave is made of water, hence water is wave's ultimate dimension, beyond birth and death, beyond being and nonbeing, beyond coming and going. "In the ultimate dimension, all these notions are removed," Nhat Hanh writes (*Fear* 48). But this is not the end of his teaching. "All of us are like that wave," he continues (*Fear* 48). We all get caught in the notions which come from our own conceptual minds, which is why "we have fear, we have jealousy, we have craving, we have all these conflicts and afflictions within us" (Nhat Hanh, *Fear* 49). Is there any way out? The answer is simple: "if we are capable of arriving, being more solid and free, it will be possible for us to touch our true nature, the ultimate dimension of ourselves" (Nhat Hanh, *Fear* 49). When the ultimate dimension is activated, we are "like a wave being in touch with its true nature of water" (*Fear* 49).

In Nhat Hanh's writing, the issue of historical and ultimate dimensions is often connected with one more image, namely that of a cloud. Being a cloud-lover himself, he often referred to the image of a cloud in order to teach about the impermanent nature of phenomena as well as interbeing: "You look up in the sky and don't see your beloved cloud anymore, and you cry, 'O my beloved cloud, you are no longer there. How can I survive without you?' and you weep" (*Fear* 53). Nhat Hanh argues that if one thinks that the cloud has passed from being into nonbeing, from existence into nonexistence, one is wrong.

3 The symbolism of the wave and water has been used by The Plum Village Band in the recently released album *A Cloud Never Dies*, particularly in the song "Thầy Ơi."

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

He says that it is "impossible for a cloud to die" (*Fear* 53); the truth is that because the cloud depends on conditions such as evaporation, condensation, accumulation, precipitation, changes in temperature, it simply becomes a new manifestation. By acknowledging the cloud's new form, we affirm the no-coming, no-going nature of everything. "You have to understand the true nature of dying to understand the true nature of living. If you don't understand death, you don't understand life," Nhat Hanh writes (*Fear* 68). By embracing the philosophy of no-coming and no-going, we become less fearful of death, and it is easier for us to accept the impermanent nature of things. Nhat Hanh writes:

> The teaching of the Buddha relieves us of suffering. The basis of suffering is ignorance about the true nature of self and of the world around you. When you don't understand, you are afraid, and your fear brings you much suffering. That is why the offering of non-fear is the best kind of gift you can give, to yourself and to anyone else. (*Fear* 68)

One of the shortest and most moving poems in the historical dimension section of *Call Me By My True Names* is entitled "The Witness Remains." Its minimalistic imagery and withheld emotionality speaks volumes on what it means to be living in fear:

> Flare bombs bloom on the dark sky.
> A child claps his hands and laughs.
> I hear the sound of guns,
> and the laughter dies.
> But the witness remains. (*The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* 26)

In the note below the poem, Nhat Hanh writes: "Flare bombs are to detect the presence of enemies. When you are dominated by fear, anyone can be seen as an enemy, even a little child. The witness is you. And me" (*Call Me* 26). It could be argued that due to its subtle phrasing, Nhat Hanh's comment could stand as a poem of its own.

In the poem entitled "For Warmth,"[4] Nhat Hanh touches upon the issue of one's response in the face of violence. This time he does not focus on being a witness, but on one's practice of looking deeply and mindful work with strong afflictive emotions; such work becomes one more way of practicing interbeing:

> I hold my face in my two hands.
> No, I am not crying.
> I hold my face in my two hands

4 Betsy Rose set this poem to music in a song called "In My Two Hands."

to keep the loneliness warm—
two hands protecting,
two hands nourishing,
two hands preventing
my soul from leaving me
in anger.
(*Call Me* 15)

This poem was written after Nhat Hanh heard about the bombing of the South Vietnamese city of Ben Tre; on February 7, 1968, American bombs and rockets destroyed much of the city, killing between 500 and 1,000 civilians (Deis). The poem was triggered by the comment made by an American military man, "We had to destroy the town in order to save it" (Nhat Hanh, *Call Me* 15). The core of the Buddhist teaching on working with anger is looking deeply in order to transform it (Nhat Hanh, *Anger* 1–11), and this poem demonstrates how to do that using very simple imagery. The simplicity of the practice does not mean, however, that it is easy to do. It takes years of training.

It should be noted here that working with anger features prominently in Nhat Hanh's book entitled *Interbeing. The 14 Mindfulness Trainings of Engaged Buddhism*. The book was written for the Order of Interbeing, a community of monastics and lay people who have committed to living their lives in accord with the 14 Mindfulness Trainings, a distillation of the Bodhisattva teachings of Mahayana Buddhism ("What Is the Order of Interbeing"). The order was established by Nhat Hanh in Saigon in 1966 ("What Is the Order of Interbeing"); it initially consisted of six people. By 2006 the order included approximately 1000 lay practitioners and 250 monastic practitioners outside of Vietnam ("What Is the Order of Interbeing"), and its history continues even after Nhat Hanh's passing in 2022.

It is important to remember that the socially engaged aspect of interbeing in Nhat Hanh's writing is as important as philosophical inquiry and personal practice with one's mental states. In *Interbeing*, Nhat Hanh dwells on the sixth training "Taking Care of Anger" (47–53), but when one reads the commentaries on all trainings, it becomes clear that other trainings, such as "Openness," "Awareness of Suffering," "True Community and Communication" are interlinking with "Taking Care of Anger." Anger is also the main topic of the 2001 *Anger. Buddhist Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*, where Nhat Hanh elaborates on the seeds of anger, on embracing anger with mindfulness, on transforming anger which makes communication possible; the book ends with guided meditations on looking deeply and releasing anger.

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

Working with anger and hatred as ways of practicing interbeing is one of the main themes in Nhat Hanh's antiwar poetry. The poem entitled "Resolution" speaks of the mechanism of hatred pointed towards monks and nuns who refuse to be taking part in the war, and actively support peace actions:

You fight us
because we fight hatred,
while you feed on hatred and violence
for strength. […]
You condemn us
because you can't use our blood
in paying off your debts of greed;
because you can't budge us
from man's side,
where we stand to protect all life.
(*Call Me* 21)

In the poem "Condemnation," Nhat Hanh addresses the issue of real enemies as opposed to those mentioned by the war propaganda. The poem was written in 1964 and printed in the Buddhist weekly *Hai Triêu Am* (*The Sound of the Rising Tide*); as a result, Nhat Hanh earned the title "antiwar poet" and was denounced as a pro-communist propagandist (Nhat Hanh, *Call Me* 39). The poem opens with a brief narrative: "Listen to this: / yesterday six Vietcong came through my village, / and because of this, the village was bombed. / Every soul was killed" (Nhat Hanh, *Call Me* 39). "In the presence of the undisturbed stars" and "in the invisible presence of all people still alive on Earth," Hanh Hanh denounces the dreadful war and asks his listeners to look deeply at the mechanism of war hidden within themselves:

Whoever is listening, be my witness:
I cannot accept this war.
I never could. I never will.
I must say this a thousand times before I am killed.

I am like the bird who dies for the sake of its mate,
dripping blood from its broken beak and crying out,
"Beware! Turn around and face your real enemies—
ambition, violence, hatred, and greed."
(*Call Me* 39)

The seeds of anger and hatred are present within each individual, which is why the best way to fight with external enemies is to face one's own "real" enemies first. When one is capable of acknowledg-

ing one's dark / negative side, one becomes less prone to acting out of anger towards oneself and others, even if one is triggered by external circumstances. A similar message can be found in the poem "Recommendation," written for the young people in the School of Youth for Social Service[5] who were often attacked, tortured and killed during the war.

Promise me […]
Even as they strike you down
with a mountain of hatred and violence;
even as they step on you and crush you
like a worm,
even as they dismember you and disembowel you,
remember, brother,
remember:
man is not our enemy.

The only thing worthy of you is compassion—
invincible, limitless, unconditional.
(*Call Me* 18)

The poem speaks of compassion, the fruit of the practice of interbeing. Nhat Hanh adds a comment below the poem saying "If you die with compassion in mind, you are a torch lighting our path" (*Call Me* 19).

It could be argued that the poem which best encapsulates Nhat Hanh's teaching on interbeing and working with afflictive emotions is entitled "Those That Have Not Exploded." This long poem was written in 1966 after an attack on The School Of Youth for Social Service by a group of unknown men with grenades and guns (*Call Me* 22); in the poem Nhat Hanh expresses a whole gamut of feelings:

I don't know,
I just don't know
why
they hurl grenades
at these young people.

Why wish to kill
those boys with still innocent brows,
those girls with ink-stained hands?

5 The poem is recited by Sister Chan Khong—the first fully-ordained monastic disciple of Thich Nhat Hanh, and the director of his humanitarian projects since the 1960's—on *The Cloud Never Dies* album: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5vQjV-L6eU

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

What was their crime?—
to hear the voice of compassion?
to come and live in a hamlet,
to help the villagers,
teach the children,
work in the rice paddies?
(*Call Me* 22)

And this is where his teaching really begins:

Those grenades have burst
and ripped apart the sky.
Those boys and girls are gone,
leaving a trail of blood.

But there are more grenades
than those that burst last night.
[…]
They remain
still
in the heart of man—
unknown, the time of their detonation;
unknown, when they will desecrate the land;
unknown, the time they will annihilate our people.
(*Call Me* 22–23)

The end of the poem is an invitation to work in unison, as one body, and transform the seeds of hatred in our hearts. Nhat Hanh's phrasing is clearly reminiscent of Dr. King's speeches I have already mentioned.

Come, hear me,
for time grows short
and danger is everywhere.
Let us take those grenades
out of our hearts,
our motherland,
humankind.
Let us stand.
Let us stand
side by side.
(*Call Me* 23)

In *Fear*, Nhat Hanh addresses the issue of "grenades in the heart" by using different imagery, namely that of a sharp knife hidden in the heart. Hidden, because one is often unaware/ignorant of the suffering one carries within, anger or hatred being just manifestations of the inner struggle. "When you take out the knife of anger and distrust

that is pointed to your heart, your heart becomes a bridge" (*Fear* 97). The practice of "making one's heart become a bridge" is to make people aware of the importance of the inner work without which embodied interbeing will never manifest. In the following quote, Nhat Hanh discusses the issue of removing the knife of hatred and fear, and clearly shows that since the war in Vietnam there have been other violent conflicts whose source have not been addressed:

> Since the so-called war on terror began, we have spent billions of dollars but have only created more violence, hate, and fear. We have not succeeded in removing fear, hatred, and resentment, either in their outward expressions such as terrorism or, most importantly, in the minds of the people. It's time to contemplate and find a better way to bring peace to ourselves and the world. Only with the practice of deep listening and gentle communication can we help remove wrong perceptions that are at the foundation of fear, hatred, and violence. You cannot remove wrong perceptions with a gun. (*Fear* 107)

CONCLUSION (A CLOUD NEVER DIES)

On October 11, 2024, in order to celebrate Thich Nhat Hanh's birthday, or his continuation day (nothing dies, nothing is born), The Plum Village Band released a musical album entitled *A Cloud Never Dies*. The title uses one of Nhat Hanh's most popular one-line *gathas*, the one he often referred to when discussing the notion of interbeing or the true nature of things, their no-birth no-death nature, or no-coming no-going nature:[6]

> So birth and death are paired notions, like coming and going, permanence and annihilation, self and other. The cloud appearing in the sky is a new manifestation. Before assuming the form of a cloud, the cloud was water vapor, produced from water in the ocean and the heat of sunlight. You can call it her previous life. So being a cloud is only a continuation. A cloud has not come from nothing. A cloud always comes from something. So there is no birth; there is only a continuation. That is the nature of everything: no-birth, no-death. (*Fear* 50–51)

In the song "Thầy Ơi" ("Dear Thay"), Plum Village Band uses the already explored symbolism of the wave and water, to emphasize the message of Nhat Hanh's continuation in other forms. The word *Thay* means Teacher, and the Plum Village sangha members have always used that title when referring to their Zen master. Thich Nhat Hanh has often taught on the no-birth and no-death aspect of inter-

6 This *gatha* was also used as a main message in Nhat Hanh's funeral processions in Vietnam, transmitted online worldwide in January 2022.

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

being, and in the following quote he refers to Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi—whose importance was emphasized at the beginning of this article—whose work, just like Nhat Hanh's work, still continues:

> There's a tendency for people to think that they can eliminate what they don't want: they can burn down a village, they can kill a person. But destroying someone doesn't reduce that person to nothing. They killed Mahatma Gandhi. They shot Martin Luther King Jr. But these people are still among us today. They continue to exist in many forms. Their spirit goes on. Therefore, when we look deeply into our self—into our body, our feelings, and our perceptions—when we look into the mountains, the rivers, or another person, we have to be able to see and touch the nature of no-birth and no-death in them. This is one of the most important practices in the Buddhist tradition. (*Fear* 52)

The "Ultimate Dimension" section of *Call Me by My Names* contains two poems which affirm the liberating aspect of acknowledging and practicing interbeing in times of relative peace. Interestingly, the first one, entitled "Interrelationship," was written in 1989, during a retreat for psychotherapists held in Colorado in response to Fritz Perls' statement, "You are you, and I am me, and if by chance we meet, that's wonderful. If not, it couldn't be helped" (*Call Me* 154). One could argue that the poem deconstructs the premise of Perls' argument by transcending the implied duality of one's relationship with others, which still informs Western psychology:

> You are me, and I am you.
> Isn't it obvious that we "inter-are"?
> You cultivate the flower in yourself,
> so that I will be beautiful.
> I transform the garbage in myself,
> so that you will not have to suffer.
>
> I support you;
> you support me.
> I am in this world to offer you peace;
> you are in this world to bring me joy.
> (*Call Me* 154)

The second poem, entitled "Interbeing," speaks of Indra's Net, the philosophy of no-coming and no-going. The sun, the cloud, the river—the three natural phenomena used by Nhat Hanh in his books on interbeing of all creation—are presented here as natural and metaphorical elements entering/penetrating the speaker, but at the same time always present within the speaker.

The sun has entered me.
The sun has entered me together with the cloud and the river.
I myself have entered the river,
and I have entered the sun
with the cloud and the river.
There has not been a moment when we do not interpenetrate.
But before the sun entered me,
the sun was in me—
also the cloud and the river.
Before I entered the river,
I was already in it.
There has not been a moment
when we have not *inter-been*.

Therefore you know
that as long as you continue to breathe,
I continue to be in you.
(*Call Me* 150)

It could be argued that the poem praises one great sangha (community) with all of its elements each in itself an interpenetrating jewel of Indra. It affirms the message of Nhat Hanh's love for his community and the importance of his *gatha* which still nourishes his sangha: a cloud never dies.

Abstract: The article looks at the philosophy and practice of interbeing in the writing of the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. Each section discusses a selected aspect of interbeing as taught by Nhat Hanh and practiced by the Plum Village community. "Peaceful Revolution and Building a Community" section introduces a historical look at a collaboration between Nhat Hanh and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960s. "The Web of Relationships: The Net of Indra" explores the philosophical depth of the concept of interbeing and its roots in *The Avataṃsaka Sūtra*. "Interbeing" looks at how the term is applied in Engaged Buddhism. "Interbeing in Historical and Ultimate Dimension" develops some of the insights from previous sections and discusses the practical dimension of interbeing, with numerous references to Nhat Hanh's books as well as his poems written during and after the Vietnam War.

Keywords: Thich Nhat Hanh, interbeing, Engaged Buddhism, Vietnam War, Zen, Plum Village

Bio: Monika Kocot, PhD, is Assistant Professor in the Department of British Literature and Culture at the University of Lodz, Poland. She is the author of *Playing Games of Sense in Edwin Morgan's Writing* (2016) and co-editor of *Języki (pop)kultury w literaturze, mediach i filmie* (2015), *Nie tylko Ishiguro. Szkice o literaturze anglojęzycznej w Polsce* (2019), and *Moving Between Modes. Papers in Intersemiotic Translation. In Memoriam Professor Alina Kwiatkowska* (2020). She has published articles on contemporary Scottish poetry and prose, as well as Native American writing. Her latest research is on philosophy and spirituality in literature, with a particular emphasis on geopoetics

and comparative literature. She is a member of the Association for Cultural Studies, the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, Scottish Centre for Geopoetics, and Polish Cognitive Linguistics Association. She is the Vice President of The K. K. Baczyński Literary Society.

Monika Kocot
Department
of British Literature and Culture
University of Łódź, Poland

WORKS CITED

Aitken, Robert. *Zen Vows for Daily Life*. Foreword by Thich Nhat Hanh. Wisdom Publications, 2018.

Barnhill, David Landis. "Relational Holism." *Deep Ecology and World Religions. New Essays on Sacred Ground*, edited by David Landis Barnhill and Roger S. Gottlieb, State U of New York P, 2001, pp. 77–106.

Cleary, Thomas. *Entry into the Inconceivable: An Introduction to Hua-yen Buddhism*. University of Hawaii Press, 1983.

Cook, Francis H. *Hua-yen Buddhism. The Jewel Net of Indra*. Sri Satguru Publications, 1977.

Deis, Robert. "It became necessary to destroy the town to save it." *This Day in Quotes*, 7 Feb. 2015, https://www.thisdayinquotes.com/2015/02/it-became-necessary-to-destroy-the-town-to-save-it/?__cf_chl_tk=rZU6lEMxkTuuzIeRuBxttb2IpFcYyWPsrl4sFO.au5I-1733865083-1.0.1.1-W2IldnYYYP6V0iMHN9wHfeVyH3SXBY6zf0lxlUsGWO8. Accessed 10 Dec. 2024.

Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand. *An Autobiography Or The Story of My Experiments With Truth*. Navajivan Publishing House, 1968. https://www.mkgandhi.org/ebks/An-Autobiography.pdf. Accessed 11 Dec. 2024.

King, Martin Luther Jr. "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence." 4 Apr. 1967, Riverside Church, New York City. Speech. *American Rhetoric*, 1 Oct. 2024, https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm. Accessed 11 Oct. 2024.

———. "I Have a Dream." 28 Aug. 1963, The Lincoln Memorial, Washington D.C. Speech. *American Rhetoric*, 1 Oct. 2024, https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm. Accessed 11 Oct. 2024.

———. "Nomination of Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize." 25 Jan. 1967. Letter. *Hartford Web Publishing*, http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/025.html. Accessed 11 Oct. 2024.

Kocot, Monika. "A Celebration of the Wild. On Earth Democracy and the Ethics of Civil Disobedience in Gary Snyder's Writing." *Review of International American Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2020, pp. 99–122.

———. "Geopoetics and the Poetry of Consciousness: A Transmodern Perspective." *Transmodern Perspectives on Contemporary Literatures in English*, edited by Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen and José María Yebra-Pertusa, Routledge, 2019, pp. 178–203.

———. "The Only Way Out Is In": Transcending Modernity and Embracing Interconnectedness in Gary Snyder and Kenneth White." *Text Matters:*

A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture, No. 12, 2022, pp. 249–268. https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.12.15.

Nhat Hanh, Thich. *Anger. Buddhist Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*. Rider, 2001.

–––. *Call Me by My True Names. The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh*. Parallax Press, 1999.

–––. *Fear. Essential Wisdom for Getting Through a Storm*. Harper One, 2012.

–––. "Foreword." *Zen Vows for Daily Life*, by Robert Aitken. Wisdom Publications, 2018, pp. xi–xiii.

–––. *Interbeing. The 14 Mindfulness Trainings of Engaged Buddhism*. Parallax Press, 2020.

–––. "The Order of Interbeing." *Comparative Political Culture in the Age of Globalization: An Introductory Anthology*, edited by Hwa Yol Jung, Lexington Books, 2002, pp. 205–212.

Plum Village Band. "Thầy Ơi." *A Cloud Never Dies*, Pirate's Blend Records, 11 Oct. 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sxR_In9L1M. Accessed 13 Oct. 2024.

"The Life Story of Thich Nhat Hanh." *Plum Village*. https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/biography. Accessed 13 Oct. 2024.

"What Is the Order of Interbeing." *Order of Interbeing*, https://orderofinterbeing.org/about/our-history/. Accessed 11 Dec. 2024.