

A Question of Responding to the Need for Activism

Transcript of a talk by **Brother Phap Hu**

I recently received this question from a friend:

I was drawn to the Plum Village tradition by Thich Nhat Hanh's personal example of peace activism during the American War in Vietnam, rescuing the boat people

Can you reflect on Thay's hopes for our engaged community responding to the need for activism around our current challenges?

This is a very important question, a multilevel question too. I certainly am not the one to speak for Thay but as a practitioner and someone who is concerned about the suffering in the world, in our society, our communities, our own person, I do have some thoughts about your question.

Engaged Buddhism

First, let's delve into what is meant by Engaged Buddhism. My impression is that there is some confusion or misunderstanding surrounding that term. What does Thay mean when he uses the phrase Engaged Buddhism? Sometimes I wonder if the term has been hijacked from its original context.

In a talk Thay gave in 2009 he gives a specific definition for both the terms. To Thay, Engaged Buddhism means:

That you practice all day without interruption, in the midst of your family, your community, your city, and your society. The way you walk, the way you look, the way you sit inspires people to live in a way that peace, happiness, joy, and brotherhood are possible in every moment.

In essence, and I have heard this many times over the year, Engaged Buddhism is applying the practice to one's life, a very general statement, a very general approach.

It really takes me to the notion of the traditional Zen practice of chop wood and carry water – practice is daily life wherever it takes you, however you may respond to life with its suffering, its wonderment and everything in between. Life equals practice and practice equals life. Through the practice, we learn to see, to understand, to grow, and to respond.

What is not in Thay's description of Engaged Buddhism, and what is not in it is just as important as what is, is the specific notion of activism. Nowhere is the idea that the community is a venue for social, political, environmental activism, or any other type of activism.

This is an important point. Being in the community for some time now, I have often gotten the impression now and then that some believe that Engaged Buddhism equals a mandate for activism, that the community has a mandate for activism.

Moreover, if you are a community member that is what you are supposed to be doing. I have never thought that this was the case. Engaged Buddhism, as I interpret Thay's teaching, refers to the basic notion of just practice, just engage the practice in your daily life, whatever you do. That is all we are supposed to do. That is what the communities are supposed to do. Just practice.

It's not about activism, not specifically. If that is what you do in your life, wonderful, it's certainly needed, just bring your practice into it. However, there is no mandate for community activism.

This is an important thing to understand because to project onto the community or community members that they are supposed to be engaged in politics or social activism, and so forth, can and I'm sure does, create suffering and disharmony which is counterproductive in the practice, one's own and others, they are interconnected.

Applied Buddhism

This idea of activism of engagement into the various realms of human endeavors, of taking the practice into the larger sphere, falls under Applied Buddhism, rather than Engaged Buddhism. Going back to the printed talk of Thay's:

Applied Buddhism is a continuation of Engaged Buddhism. Applied Buddhism means that Buddhism can be applied in every circumstance in order to bring understanding and solutions to problems in our world.

Applied Buddhism offers concrete ways to relieve suffering and bring peace and happiness in every situation.

Whereas Engaged Buddhism in one respect is a response to one's surroundings, how one interprets and practice with what life throws at you. Applied Buddhism, to Thay, is more about rolling up the sleeves and taking the practice to the world. Taking the benefits, the fruit, or merit, of one's practice and applying it to the various issues of our times.

How can the teachings of Thay, the teachings of Buddhism help the world, help societies and communities, and help the individuals involved?

This is the question of our times. It is also a question of the Bodhisattva. Helping others to overcome suffering and difficulties is the path of the Bodhisattva.

The Bodhisattva is active in this, a sort of spiritual activism. There is no formula for this. There is no manual for this. The expression of the Bodhisattva path has countless manifestations, ones that can be seen, ones that cannot be seen, all driven by the empathic understanding of suffering and difficulties of others and wanting to help.

It does not matter if the "others" is a single individual, a community, a society, a nation, a species, or all beings. Context and relationships are paramount but so too is the heart and mind that is inspired.

In the community of practitioners, and I am not sure if it this community specifically or if this is the case in Buddhism here in the US specifically, there is an aversion for labels, definitions, specificity, probably related to the idea of inclusiveness and the idea of freedom.

Bodhisattva Path

What I have seen over the years is that, yes, like everything else, inclusivity can be taken too far, to the point of community and individual suffering. This is an American thing applied to the teachings rather than the other way around.

I bring this up because the Bodhisattva path is a specific thing, a specific understanding, a specific wisdom that is acted on. It's not a feel good thing, although it does feel like it sometimes.

In Buddhism, there are actually levels of Bodhisattva attainments all leading to Buddhahood. It all begins and is all premised on helping others. That other's suffering

and difficulties are seen as important as one's own, and often deemed more important than one's own. This is the realm of selflessness.

In my understanding, interbeing has within it the path of the Bodhisattva in that as we become more and more aware of the inter connectivity of all things it begins to dawn on us that the benefit and detriment of others is a benefit and detriment to oneself and that the benefit and detriment of oneself is the benefit and detriment of others. It is all interconnected and we are part of this great interconnectedness.

As one looks towards the higher attainments of the Bodhisattva one sees that there is no distinction whatsoever about oneself and others. There is nothing to talk about. They just do it. No regard to the idea of oneself or other. It's not in the vocabulary.

Regardless where one is on the path, Bodhisattva or not, one thing is for certain these are difficult and turbulent times we live in. It is not the first time in human history but we are here nonetheless. We are all different beings, come from different conditions, view things in different ways, and so forth.

Some may look at the world today and gasp, sinking into despair. Some may see the same things but have more resiliency and cope well. Others may see the same thing and think everything is just fine. It is like the blind men and the elephant.

Clear Insight

So where is the truth of it all? This can be found only in one's heart and mind. For, as the teachings tell us, the heart and mind are the rudders of our intentions and our actions.

We can only truly know these things through our clear mind and heart not the mind and heart of confusion, self-centredness, bitterness, retribution, grasping, and so forth.

It is a matter of clear insight versus delusion and ignorance. For me, it is only through the practice that I find the clarity and insight that I make my best decisions and pure actions – or pure non-actions.

When we come home to ourselves through the clear mind and heart, we have the ability to listen and understand our own heart and mind and what they tell us. Then we know. When we begin to touch our true nature, we can hear our path. Then we know.

As I look at our society, our nation and witness the difficulties and suffering, the causes of difficulties and suffering, knowing that there is a way out, I cannot help but want to help in some way or another. I think many people share the same sentiments, the same

inner experience. It is a difficult challenge just in the question of how to grapple with it all. All harmful actions, be it by an individual or by a distinguishable group are based on ignorance, greed, and aversion of one kind or another. These are the three roots, or origin, of suffering.

We see the tree trunk, the branches, and the leaves, but rarely do we see the roots, hence ignorance. But these are teachings pointing to the moon, also pointing to suffering, which you need to deal with before actually seeing the moon.

What is more concrete is recognizing what in society is the origin of suffering directly. For example, the lack of access to health care, poverty, injustice, racism, authoritarianism, bad governance, political ideology over human dignity. Interrelated is the wholesale degradation of the planet.

Many Manifestations

These are all very tangible things and very spiritual things as well. The Bodhisattva perfection of generosity isn't just about saying kind things or speaking to the "spiritual" things. It does include very tangible things, such as money for example.

No inside, no outside. No sacred and no profane. And, just as there is a monastic calling, this too is a calling. But, as I have said, not everyone has the same calling. The expression of the practice has many manifestations and we cannot get caught in anything but rather respond to one's own mind and heart.

Going back to the question regarding Thay's hope: Again, I cannot speak for Thay, but I tend to believe that it would be something to the effect of whoever you are, whatever you do or don't do, wherever you find yourself, in good times and bad, take your practice with you because both you and the world need more wisdom and compassion no matter how it all plays out.