



Book By

Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh

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Living Buddha, Living Christ

Ven. PJ Paññādīpa [Kah Poh Tan]

Shan State Buddhist University,

Phaya Phyu Qrt., Taunggyi, Myanmar;

Corresponding Author Email: pannadipa5587@gmail.com

For over half a century, the remarkable contribution of Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh (Thây) in promoting social peace through mindfulness meditation practice and inter-religious dialogues cannot be overestimated. Sectarian strife which manifests into widespread tension and warfare in the history of humankind is all rooted in clinging on “self”, particularly self “views”. Religious exclusivism, thinking our own religious tradition is monopolizing the only Truth, is a tumor and culprit to the above strife. To remedy this, the religious leaders must be consciously lobbying commonalities and shared values among various religious teachings, respecting pluralism, and avoiding magnifying doctrinal conflicts. Thây’s long-term effort in promulgating religious understanding and tolerance has been widely noted, leading him to be nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize at his earlier career.

In “Living Buddha, Living Christ”, Thây seeks to bridge the seemingly sectarian differences between the two great religions – Buddhism and Christianity - to which Thây professed to equally affiliate (Pp. 2-4 & 99). In keeping pace with popular spirituality genre, the language in this book is simple yet beautiful, with mesmerizing

and impactful prose all over that guarantees an inspiring read. Thây's adoption of the above two spiritual ancestors may seem to be either disloyal or even infidel to both traditions. Despite this, this is the essence of the teachings, not the superficial outlook, dogma and rituals, that Thây proclaimed this conviction. In his words, "*As people mature in their own traditions, they are able to recognize the universal truths within other traditions.*" (P. 106). To him, the Buddha and Jesus Christ are two spiritual ancestors teaching the same Truths: love, compassion, understanding (wisdom), peace, patience, non-violence, freedom, etc. The distinctive doctrinal points and elaborations preached by them are only metaphorically varied which is superficial. In other words, The Buddha and Jesus Christ were indeed using skillful means and concepts to convey similar messages with different emphasizes that, ultimately, head for the same destination.

Therefore, it is Thây's belief that all true spiritual paths are pointing to a conjoined spiritual goal. Based on this understanding, Thây stresses that only through open, meaningful dialogues and sincere practice according to each religious tradition can the existing wounds religious disputes have since brought to the world be mended. Thây does not call for people to indiscriminately embrace both Buddhism and Christianity, but to respect them as two great spiritual roots thrived in different historical, cultural and geographical dimensions. He also sees the necessity for the increasingly disillusion towards these great religious traditions that occurs in today's youths to be "re-rooted" (Pp. 87-90). One without own spiritual roots will suffer from losing his/her safety refuge and innermost heritage. Hence, any force religion conversion and oppression is, at core, against the fundamental religious teaching.

The idea of seeing most spiritual paths as identical is not uncommon among contemporary new-age spiritual movements, but when it comes out from a renowned Buddhist master like Thây this may create criticisms, especially from the traditional, orthodox quarter. To assert this egalitarian view, Thây asks us to open our hearts, set aside our prejudices, listen deeply, and represent truthfully what we know and understand (Pp. 11-12). To listen deeply and experience the deepest abyss of our spiritual experience we, need *Mindfulness* practice.

Thây is, by no doubt, an avid, erudite and skillful teacher for mindfulness meditation. It is no exaggeration to suggest that Thây could be one of the earliest and most influential leaders in popularizing mindfulness meditation in the West. To him, mindfulness is the seed of the Holy Spirit (Pp. 13&24) and the Buddha (P. 36). It brings us to the ever aliveness of the present moment, i.e., to look deeply and touch the body of reality (P. 31), the Buddha's Dharma body (P. 40), the body of Christ (P. 57), and true refuge of our shared ancestors (Pp. 47&118). With mindfulness established in our daily life, the Buddhist realizes suchness and emptiness of a permanent self as the true nature of reality (P. 41) to return to the

original mind (P. 171), while the Christian becomes the light of the Holy Spirit (P. 21) and salt of the world (Pp. 69-70). It is the gateway to the Buddhist Nirvana (P. 138) and the Christian Kingdom of God (P. 38), for which analogies representing the ultimate dimension of reality (Pp. 151-157). In Thây's words, mindfulness is the basis for arriving at genuine love, compassion, understanding and peace (P. 65); it is the panacea for our world woes.

Further, it is through mindfulness incorporated into various forms of such spiritual practices as meditation, prayers, self-surrender, sacred hymn and songs, and contemplation that advances one's devotional or faith practices into transformational experiences (Pp. 129-130). In this deep experiential practice, all notions, concepts, intellects, dogmatic beliefs and views that differentiate spiritual traditions, human races and conventions would be transcended (Pp. 139-157). Such understanding joined with the transformative power brings highest forms of prayers, compassion and liberation (Pp. 76-86). Buddhists are to experience and live as a living Buddha, while Christians are to experience and live as a living Christ. There is no differentiation at the culminating stage of spiritual transformation. And now to practice truly the five Buddhist Wonderful Precepts are essentially no different from the Christian Ten Commandments (Pp. 111-112). The mindfulness practice that gives inner peace to each and every one will then blossom into social peace and harmony in the whole society and the world. In Thây's worldview, every positive change of the world must start from every individual and, hence, collective conscious acts. The whole is made of sums, and the sums shape the whole. This attitude reflects perfectly in Thây's roles as a meditation Dharma teacher and, at the same time, also a social peace and human right activist.

Nevertheless, the liberalist approach of Thây towards religious doctrines in this book may have been too much to some, particularly the staunch Christian theologians. In a fervent tone of an academic, Groothuis points out unorthodox, or rather heretical, ideas of Thây on his casual, unexamined citing of biblical passages and Christian scholarly work². His critique of Thây's understanding of Christian doctrines is that of Gnosticism, an extinct early Christian sect whose doctrines were deemed heretical by orthodox Christians. Among the Gnostic ideas are the esoteric concepts of divine manifestation and oneness of God in His creatures: men and cosmos/reality, and denying original sins of humans. More importantly, the significance of Christ resurrection for redeeming our sins which forms the very foundation of most, if not all, Christian faith has been shattered in this book. Thây has also been guilty of redefining Christian doctrines in Buddhist epistemology and soteriology that makes his syncretistic ideas biased towards Buddhism. Despite this, Thây's non-dogmatic approaches may have appeased the majority of liberal Christians like Quakers, new-age spiritualists and his many mindfulness meditation practitioners.

From the Buddhist perspective, the attribution of the Buddha and his awakening path to simply the mindfulness practice may have been overly generalized. As a path factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, right mindfulness is required but not sufficient to lead one to the end of suffering. Moreover, the deliberate conflation of Buddhist specific terminologies in a casual manner, e.g., to equate Nirvana and ultimate dimension of reality with the substance or ground of “being”, and to suggest mindful living as an example of living in Nirvana here and now may have watered down the actual lofty concept of Nirvana in favor of a non-sectarian, new-age bandwagon. Here, it proves the syncretism of religious doctrines in the name of tolerance and peace may not always go well in all aspects without having a scrupulous and analytical approach set alongside.

There have indeed been some notable spiritual writers of the past that skillfully amalgamated the spirits of religious traditions of different philosophical backgrounds without compromising their core teachings. And their works leave a legacy that influences more than one generation in posterity. A famous example is the early 20th century famous Christian-Sufi artist-writer, Khalil Gibran. His classic, highly-praised spiritual masterpiece, “the Prophet”, has made tremendous amounts of inspiring phrases that bring resonating harmonies of Christian mystic ideas to that of Eastern religions including Buddhism.³ Here are a few example phrases among numerous I have selected from “the Prophet” that remind me of my Buddhist root:

“Love possesses not nor would it be possessed; for love is sufficient unto love.”

“It is when you give (up) of yourself (your self) that you truly give.”

These poem-like sentences would equally appeal to both Christians and Buddhists alike as they teach messages of shared universal spirits of all forms of spirituality.

Another example is the famous Catholic Trappist philosopher-writer monk, Thomas Merton. His outspoken adoration of Buddhist philosophy does not quiver his unwavering love for his own traditions love.⁴ His openness to devising Buddhist esoteric methods to reaffirm his inner search for God - as the universal Truth or transcendental consciousness - represents a sincere Truth seeker’s journey in which many Buddhists may find their solemn refuge. Here is an example of his “all-embracing” closing prayer in a 1968’s spiritual summit conference at Calcutta, India:

*“I will ask you to stand and all join hands in a little while.
 But first, we realize that we are going to have to create a new
 language of prayer. And this language of prayer has to come out
 of something which transcends all Our traditions, and comes out of
 the immediacy of love. We have to part now, aware of the love
 that unites us, the love that unites us in spite of real differences[...].”*

The above authors retained the dignity and authenticity of their own religious root(s) without synthesizing new hybrid ideas to accommodate the course of good and world peace. In my humble opinions, Thây’s “Living Buddha Living Christ” would have accomplished another masterpiece of work on the “middle-path” if he had consulted the above approaches.

Meanwhile, comparative religion scholarships have found considerable consensus in parables and key messages from both Biblical sources and Buddhist scriptures. As such, the Buddhist influence in Christianity has long been postulated.^{5, 6} Most amusing of all are the stories that Jesus might have spent many years in his mysterious youth days (his early-life accounts are absent in the Bible) in India under the tutelage of Buddhist masters.⁷ Although such account remains largely unverified, similarities of the Buddha’s teachings and that of Christ may have been closer than we thought. “Living Buddha Living Christ” may have intuitively concealed a two-millennium gap that separates these two great religious traditions that are, in actuality, teaching the same Truth. The working of the natural laws of dependent origination (conditionality) suggests that all phenomena including various spiritual traditions are constantly influencing one another in the river of history. Mindful of such inevitable interactions, the intention of Thây to make harmony and avoid segregation among religions in this book will contribute to healthy inter-religious communications. As to work for religious peace, Thây will unmistakably advise us to always come back to restore our inner peace and “interbeing-ness” by mindfulness of our breathing (P. 16).

*“Breathing in, I calm my body.
 Breathing out, I smile.
 Dwelling in the present moment,
 I know this is a wonderful moment.”*

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