

A New Model of the Bodhisattva Ideal in Thich Nhat Hanh's Socially Engaged Buddhism

Venerable Nguyen Van Nam

Phra Rajapariyatkavi, Prof. Dr.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sudarat Bantaokul

Dr. Soontaraporn Techapalokul

International Buddhist Studies College

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University

Corresponding Author Email: tk.tamchanh@gmail.com

Abstract

This research article attempts to find out a new model of bodhisattva ideal in Thich Nhat Hanh's Socially Engaged Buddhism (SEB). The methodology of this paper is qualitative consisting of documentary and in-depth interview methods of four key informants who are the closest disciples of Thich Nhat Hanh. The data analysis involves both content and interview analyses. The findings show that the bodhisattva ideal in Mahāyāna scriptures is aimed to dissect the bodhisattva concept and the practices of two typical bodhisattvas – Mañjuśrī and Avalokiteśvara. Thich Nhat Hanh has revived the notion of typical bodhisattva through the spirit of Socially Engaged Buddhism which is manifesting in four fields: education, social services, peacemaking, and the building of Plum Villages. The new model of bodhisattva ideal in his SEB is called the SMS model – that is *Śīla* – the mindfulness training, *Maitri* – loving-kindness and *Smṛti* (or *Sati*) – mindfulness meditation. This SMS model helps the Buddha's teachings and the Buddhist practices lead all human beings to happiness of this world and future lives.

Key words: Bodhisattva ideal, Thich Nhat Hanh, Socially Engaged Buddhism.

1. Introduction

All religions always contain a sustainable improvement to adapt to new circumstances. About three hundred years after the Buddha's *Mahāparinirvāna*, the bodhisattva concept has strongly developed in order to deal with complicated social problems. With this new ideal, monks and nuns have attended to their social duties as well as the practices of laypeople have increased in value. The bodhisattva ideal was therefore considered to be a fresh wind, a bright horizon, or a revolution in Buddhism at that time. Some scholars have called it the Fourth Buddhist *yāna* (Powers & Charles 2009, 274) – or Socially Engaged Buddhism (SEB). Thich Nhat Hanh – a Zen master who was born and brought up during the Vietnamese Civil War has witnessed the devastation of the war and after the match on lives of the Vietnamese. Since then, he has revived the spirit of SEB to help his country and to spread Buddhism to the West. Thus, this research article aims to analyze the bodhisattva ideal in the context of Thich Nhat Hanh's SEB.

2. The Concept of Bodhisattva

Bodhisattva is a Sanskrit word (Pāli: bodhisatta). It is made up of two words *bodhi* and *sattva*. The term *bodhi* is derived from the verbal root *budh*, meaning to awaken, to understand, to recognize, to wish to observe, to desire, and to become acquainted (Williams 1960, 733). Also, it can be interpreted as knowledge, enlightenment, and the knowledge possessed by a Buddha. The term *sattva* is defined in many different fields, for instance as being, existence, entity, and reality; as spiritual essence, spirit, and mind; as a living or sentient being, creature, and animal; as embryo, fetus, and rudiment of life; and as a ghost, demon, goblin, and monster (*ibid.*, 734). The term bodhisattva then has several definitions. Williams translates it as “one who has *bodhi* or perfect wisdom as his essence” (*ibid.*, 734), while Edgerton (1993, 403) interprets it as “a person destined for enlightenment, a Buddha-to-be”. Besterman (2005, 24) defines it as “one whose essence is knowledge, the name given to one destined to become a Buddha; the director of the spiritual development of each root-race.”

In Mahāyāna doctrines, the term bodhisattva is expressed clearly in the Mahāprajñāpāramitā sūtra (220, 1071) as a sentient being who finds *sarvajña*¹, knows all dharmas, has the ability to help living beings to get enlightened, and owns the Buddha’s wisdom for all dharmas. In Avataṃsaka sūtra (279, 277), it is defined as ‘a being who listens to the Tathāgata’s inconceivable meanings (*acintya*) and opens the door of wisdom without impediment, and who after that believes in him/herself, comprehends him/herself, stays in the Tathāgata’s house, and follows all the Tathāgata’s real. All in all, a bodhisattva is referred to sentient beings who desire to look for the highest enlightenment or the fruit of Buddhahood for themselves and guide others to follow the Bodhisattva path. The two well-known typical bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna scriptures are Mañjuśrī and Avalokiteśvara.

Mañjuśrī is considered the wisest of the bodhisattvas just as Śāriputra, the smartest of Buddha’s disciples. According to Saddharmapuṇḍarīka sūtra (262, 4), incalculable *kalpas* ago, he was Varaprabha bodhisattva – the greatest disciple of Candrasūryapradīpa Buddha. He directly listened to the Lotus sūtra for sixty intermediate *kalpas* and taught the sūtra to the Assembly and eight Princes of Candrasūryapradīpa Buddha who had attained the Buddhahood. In the twelfth chapter, when he is asked how many sentient beings he has led and inspired at the palace of the Nāga king, he replied ‘the number is immeasurable and incalculable’. The climax of his beneficial activities for sentient beings had been reached when an eight-year-old daughter of the Nāga king Sāgara, who was trained under Mañjuśrī, attains Buddhahood in an instant (*ibid.*, 35). In the Fourteenth Chapter, he asks the Lord Buddha about ‘the four kinds of practices’ that help mahābodhisattva teach the Lotus sūtra in the troubled world. The four kinds of practices are valuable keys to widely open the door of the bodhisattva path. The four are as follows. First, the bodhisattvas have to establish ‘the sphere of their practice and the sphere of their relationships. When the bodhisattvas have completed the methods of perseverance that combine with the characteristics of

¹ *Sarvajña* means the wisdom that covers all the general attributes of phenomena without any interruption.

gentility, tranquility, nonviolence, fearlessness, and nondiscrimination, they abide by the sphere of their practice. Second, they should observe the emptiness of all dharmas to recognize the unerring, unmoving, non-returning, and irreversible characteristics and overcome all barriers of language. Third, they should not take pleasure in talking about the faults of the sūtra and goodness or badness and strength or weakness of others, and have to use the Mahāyāna teachings to answer all questions that maybe raised, and have to respect all Buddhas and bodhisattvas in the ten worlds. Fourth, they have to abide by the great compassion and mercy for all sentient beings. Actually, Mañjuśrī does not only appear in the most important texts of Mahāyāna Buddhism, but also becomes prominent in his transcendent wisdom and activities for the sake of all sentient beings.

Avalokiteśvara, a bodhisattva famous for the characteristic of great compassion and the virtue of ‘deep listening’ (Iron 2008, 222-3), is known by different names such as Avalokita, Avalokiteśvara and Avalokiteśvara (Lokesh 1998, 19) meaning ‘The Lord who sees, or looks down’, ‘The Lord of view’, ‘The Lord who perceives the World’s Sounds’, and ‘The Lord who looks on the ‘region’ of sufferers who have voices of many tones, all acknowledging misery and asking for salvation’ (Dayal 1970, 47). In the Compassionate Flower scripture, Ratnagarbha Buddha bestows a beautiful name, Avalokiteśvara, upon him since the bodhisattva observes all gods, human beings and sentient beings in three realms to develop great compassion to break off sentient beings’ suffering, cut off their beings’ defilements and allow them to take part in joyfulness (Karunāpūṇḍarīka sūtra 157, 186). In the Chapter ‘Entry into the Realm of Reality’ of the Avataṃsaka sūtra, Avalokiteśvara achieves the great light of compassion and guides Sudhana to it (Lok To 1998, 716). He can appear in inconceivable forms in all Buddha worlds in the ten directions to preach the Buddha’s teachings to sentient beings and to help them attain Buddhahood. Also, he uses such methods of practices as the perfection of giving, kind speech, beneficial actions, working together (*samānārthatā*), skillful means (*upāya*), and mindfulness at present time on his bodhisattva path. Besides in the chapter ‘Universal Door’, the Buddha explains that he is called Avalokiteśvara because he deeply listens to the sound of the world in order to take care of sentient beings. With his ‘deep listening, he can transform into 33 different shapes to satisfy the wishes of various beings and can appear in all Buddha lands in the ten directions to alleviate the pain of all sentient beings and to

guide them through the Buddha's teachings without any limitation and tiredness. (Saddharmapuṇḍarīka sūtra 262, 57). Thus, he is the most widely respected and worshiped by all bodhisattvas and becomes not only a powerful protector or a gentle mother in different cultural traditions but also a strong leader in the realm of hungry ghosts.

3. Most Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh

Thich Nhat Hanh is a monastic name, Nguyen Xuan Bao is his family name. Born on October 11, 1926, in a petty government official family in Thua Thien Hue Province (Queen & King 2009, 221), at the age of nine, he came across a magazine where its cover had an image of the Buddha leisurely sitting cross-leg on the grass. This led to the development of his great interest in the Buddha and a wish of attaining full enlightenment. In 1942, he was ordained as a novice by his Zen Master Thanh Quý Chân Thật at the Từ Hiếu monastery in Hue Province (Thich Nhat Hanh 1996, 8-9). In 1949, he received the Zen and Mahāyāna training at Báo Quốc Buddhist Institute in Huế city and was ordained with full precepts. In 1950, he applied for foreign languages and literature of the undergraduate course at Saigon University. In the 1960s, he went to study in America and gave lectures on comparative religions at Columbia University and Princeton University (Thich Nhat Hanh 1991, ix-x).

While studying at Saigon University, he began to compose fiction, poems, Buddhist works, and historical studies. Thich Nhat Hanh was the Editor-in-Chief of two Buddhist Magazines: *The Lotus* in Đà Lạt city in 1951-1954 (Nguyễn Lang 2012, 800), and *Vietnam in Saigon* in 1956-1959. He established *Lá Bối* [Palm Leaves] Publishing House in 1964 to assist in the publication of Buddhist books (Chan Khong, 2014, 72-3). An exhibition 'Thich Nhat Hanh Celebrating Life in Bangkok' ran from January 23 to February 17, 2019. Some 800 of his books in Vietnamese, English, French, Japanese, Thai and German were launched. They are a priceless asset for Buddhists and mankind.

4. His Activities in Socially Engaged Buddhism (SEB)

The term "Engaged Buddhism" first appeared in early 1964 in a book named 'Đạo Phật Đi Vào Cuộc Đời' – Engaged Buddhism in Vietnam: Entering into Life (Nhat Hanh 2012, 5). It became more relevant with the word 'socially' added in the 1980s.

Thich Nhat Hanh also defined SEB as the manifestation of Buddhist principles in daily life, and in a concrete context to change life in positive ways (*ibid*, 9). Furthermore, he stressed: “Buddhism itself is already engaged Buddhism. Should it not be, it is not Buddhism” (Queen 2000, 36). Also, the basic characteristic of SEB has been already found in traditional Buddhism, but he wanted to focus more on how to apply the Buddha’s teachings to contemporary society. His spirit of SEB is evident in his Buddhist training systems, the performance of social services, peace for Vietnam and the world, and the building of Plum Village Community.

While studying at Báo Quốc Buddhist Institute in Huế city in 1949, he shaped the idea of Buddhist education reforms by requesting the teaching staff to add some subjects such as Western philosophy, literature, and foreign languages to the curriculum. As his suggestions were rejected, he and his close friends left the Institute and enrolled in Saigon University (Nhat Hanh 1996, 32). In 1956, his innovative Buddhist education program was accepted by the Most Venerables Thiện Hòa and Thiện Hoa at the Southern Viet Buddhist Institute in Saigon where students needed to acquire both high school and basic Buddhism (Nguyễn Lang 2012, 776).

While preaching Buddhism to university students at the Ân Quang temple in Saigon in February 1961, he invited his students to establish an organization for social services. The organization and his seventy colleagues held new classes for poor children, supported their families with 15 kilograms of rice a month, guided poor people to do business, took turns looking after their children, and visited the hospitals in the six slums: Mã Lạng, Quốc Thanh, Bàn Cờ, Cầu Bông, Ông Tạ market, and Cầu Bông market on the outskirts of Saigon (Chân Không 2014, 27). Three years after that, all these slums witnessed remarkable changes and the residents’ economic and social lives have transformed to great improvement. They are then called exemplary slums.

In 1964, Thich Nhat Hanh requested the Unified Buddhist Church (UBC) to build a center for social services. Although the UBC did not accept this proposal, he and his colleagues continued to build *Làng Tình Thương* (Love Villages) or *Làng Hoa Tiêu* (Pioneer Villages) in *Cầu Kinh*, and *Thảo Điền* in Saigon. They established *Son Ca* Elementary School in *Cầu Kinh* slum for 77 children aged 5-12. Largely due to the achievements of these villages, the School of Young Social Service (SYSS) was opened

in September 1965 in the Department of Social Science at Vạn Hạnh University. Its first classroom and office were located at Từ Nghiêm Temple, and 300 students were chosen from one thousand applicants. A further 500 and 800 others were admitted in the next two intakes.

Moreover, Thích Nhất Hạnh founded the Saigon Buddhist Studies College at Pháp Hội temple in 1964. The Most Venerables Thích Trí Thủ and Thích Minh Châu were appointed as the director and the vice director. Over three years, students studied six subjects – General Buddhist Studies, Buddhist literature, General Only-mind, Prajñā Literature, Abhidharma Literature, Chinese, and Pāli. Later, this college became Vạn Hạnh University, the first private university in Vietnam with a training program based on the spirit of “attaining wisdom as a sole goal”. On February 5, 1966, the Order of Interbeing was established at Chùa Lá Pháp Vân (Phap Van Leave Temple), at Phú Thọ Hòa Saigon with initially six members – Cao Ngọc Phương, Phạm Thúy Uyên, Nhất Chi Mai, Nguyễn Văn Phúc, Đỗ Văn Khôn, and Bùi Văn Thanh. In July 1967, the office of SYSS moved to the temple where 11,000 refugees were taken care and supplied with food, water, and medicine during the General Offensive and Uprising of Tet Mậu Thân in 1968 (Chân Không 2014, 115).

By January 1975, more than 300 projects had been deployed in all 42 provinces in Southern Vietnam, and 10,000 volunteers carried out these projects with SYSS. Later in April, the poor Vietnamese children had received support from 14,000 families in Holland; 1,000 in Switzerland; 2,000 in France; 1,000 in the United States; and hundreds of others (*ibid.*, 155). Thích Nhất Hạnh always yearns for sustainable peace. While the Buddhist monks, nuns and laypeople were fighting nonviolently to protect Buddhism in his hometown in 1963, he tried to translate all the materials about this Buddhist movement and presented them to the United Nations (UN) in New York. As a result, the UN decided to send a delegate to Vietnam to look into the matter. After returning to Vietnam on December 16, 1963, in the first point of his Three-Points Proposal, he urged UBC that “the Church should publicly call for the cessation of hostilities in Vietnam” (*ibid.*, 41).

Notably, in January 1966, he composed a book, Vietnam: Lotus in A Sea of Fire, which offered an in-depth analysis of the historical Vietnamese context, the role

of parties and current religions, and aired his peaceful proposals concerning the Vietnam War (Thich Nhat Hanh 1967, viii). In 1968, he paid a visit to U Thant, the third Secretary-General of the UN, to convey the legitimate aspirations of the Buddhists and Vietnamese people. In June 8, 1969, to soon put an end to the Vietnam War, he set up the Buddhist Peace Delegation in Paris and traveled to Holland, England, Germany, Norway, Denmark, France, Italy, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, and Japan to give a speech on peace for Vietnam (Thich Nhat Hanh 2001, 11). In the 1970s, he and his followers started another campaign named “Stop the Killing Now” and gathered 10,000 signatures of Government leaders, clergy members, parliament members, congressmen, senators, politicians, and scientists (Chan Khong 2014, 160), as a contribution to the Paris Peace Accords in 1973.

Following the unification of Vietnam, and as his social services had been limited within Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh took the initiative to create his new Order and opened mindfulness retreats. In October 1982, he established the Plum Village in France, in the Deer Park Monastery (California) in July 2000, in the Magnolia Grove Monastery (Mississippi) in May 2005, in the Blue Cliff Monastery (New York) in May 2007, in the Stream Entering Meditation Center (Victoria) in February 2010, and in Thailand (Nakorn Ratchasima) in 2012. Besides, he founded the European Institute of Applied Buddhism in Cologne, Germany, in 2008, and the Asian Institute of Applied Buddhism in Hong Kong in 2011. In addition, he started to create the monastic Order where the number of monastic disciples increased rapidly. According to the Plum Village letters, 924 lay people were ordained as novices with ten precepts throughout the 30 years of training (1988-2018).

5. A New Model of Bodhisattva Ideal in Thich Nhat Hanh’s SEB

Thich Nhat Hanh’s model of the bodhisattva ideal is called “the SMS model” where S refers to *Śīla* (meaning mindfulness training), *Maitri* (loving-kindness), and *Smṛti* (mindfulness meditation). According to the interviews with the four senior members of Plum Village, Sister Chân Đức, Brother Pháp Khâm, Brother Pháp Trạch and Brother Từ Thông, the SEB understood as bringing the Buddha’s teachings and practices to enter the world and to help all beings.

Śīla in the new model means “mindfulness training” which is the quintessence of the five precepts, ten good actions, fifty-eight bodhisattva precepts, and true aspirations to fulfill the trainees’ good virtue and to help all beings release their sufferings. They are researched in two parts: 1) the fourteen trainings and 2) the five mindfulness trainings. The fourteen trainings are of the Order of Interbeing written in 1966 and revised in 2012. After that these fourteen trainings continue to be inherited quintessence of fifty-eight bodhisattva precepts and ten good actions. They are based on the four fundamental principles – non-attachment to any teachings or views, positivism by experiencing real life, conformity with everyone, and social context in recent epoch for new situations and modern contexts. In addition, they are divided into three groups – the trainings of mind (the first seven trainings), of speech (the next two trainings), and of body (the last five trainings) (Nhat Hanh 2000, 12). The five mindfulness trainings help practitioners overcome their sinful feeling for they have made mistakes in practicing these precepts. They are the core of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Paths. When practitioners are practicing these five mindfulness trainings, it means that they are going on their Bodhisattva path (Thich Nhat Hanh 2013, 103).

Maitri (loving-kindness) is defined as “the offer of happiness,” going together with *karuṇā* as “the transformation of sufferings,” *muditā* as “the offer of joyfulness” and *upekṣā* as “non-attachment or nondiscrimination.” These four virtues are his characters of inter-being of the ‘four immeasurable minds’. If the trainees want to gain the perfection of one in the four virtues such as *maitri*, they must complete the other three minds (virtues) and *vice versa*. The trainees must return to full lives with their bodies, their speeches and their minds to produce true happiness for themselves and practice mindfulness. While the suffering of bad speech, bad actions or bad thinking are manifesting, the trainees should stop all of them, breathe and listen to their bodies, their feelings, and their minds. When the listening virtue is enlarged to all sentient beings, all plants, and minerals, it helps to protect all of them and build a wonderful world. In short, loving-kindness and listening virtue are two sides of a hand that exist together to complete all good virtue and to remove all bad things. Both are important methods to heal the practitioners’ wounds and to remove a distance among individuals, groups and communities.

Smṛti (mindfulness meditation) involves Satipaṭṭhanasutta, Anāpānasattisutta and the opening spirit of Mahāyāna Buddhism to use with the contemporary demands. The three new meditative methods are invented to help his meditators live fully in the present moment and solve such modern problems as insomnia, stress, mental illness, and conflicts in their families, in companies, and in schools. First, walking meditation makes the practitioners enjoy walking with no particular aim or destination. They can practice walking meditation by counting their steps following the rhythm of nice poems so that their mind, their breath and their step are easily connected together.

Second, tea meditation is a harmonious combination of a formal Buddhist ritual, music, art of listening and mindful activities. Thich Nhat Hanh also composes meditative songs to spread the Buddha's teachings and to inspire mindfulness meditation. His monastic disciples are trained to play musical instruments such as the guitar, violin, flute, and organ. In addition, participants can be invited to share their stories or experiences which help them open their minds with others and relieve their sufferings with a noble mindful power of all participants. The ceremony of tea meditation can be considered as success when all participants enjoy their mindfulness and relaxation, and be present together in the whole ceremony. It not only contains the four key characteristics – harmony, respect, purity and tranquility of Japanese tea ceremony (Shozo Sato and Shodo 2003, 88), but also places an emphasis on mindfulness in all activities at the ceremony, and connects everyone together.

Third, hugging meditation. Thich Nhat Hanh combines mindfulness meditation with western tradition as the basis to establish this kind of meditation which helps in healing mental sufferings and conciliating conflicts among members in the family or colleagues in the company or school. Firstly, the meditators bow and recognize the presence of the other. They should close their eyes and deeply breathe in some times. Next, they should observe themselves and raise their perception of their beloved ones in the past. Then they can enjoy three deep conscious breaths to bring themselves here and now.

6. Conclusion

The Buddha and the Order ceaselessly try to teach Buddhism and the ways of practice to all sentient beings and help them recognize the truth of life and remove their

suffering, so that the spirit of ‘entering the world’ is considered. This is as the origin of SEB. The new model of bodhisattva ideal, the SMS model, in Thich Nhat Hanh’s SEB is explored in three fields – mindfulness meditation, mindfulness trainings and two practicing methods of loving kindness and listening virtue. Thich Nhat Hanh’s meditative methods not only help the practitioners gain peace and joyfulness, but also guide them to heal sufferings in their daily lives. His mindfulness trainings are not only revised from the five precepts, the ten good actions and the fifty-eight bodhisattva precepts in the traditional Buddhism, but also added new aspirations such as creating good conditions to develop a peaceful and sustainable world, cultivating freedom of speech, avoiding consuming harmful produces, and building a pure harmonious community.

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