

**Political Emptiness:
A Chinese Buddhist Ground for the Formation of a Sustainable Civil Society**

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In recent years there has been considerable discussion about whether the concept of individual human rights is specific to Western cultural contexts, or if it can be applied in Asian Cultures. Among the value systems indigenous to Asia, Buddhism provides the most solid philosophical foundation for an argument for individual human rights. Buddhist teachings assert that each individual is capable of attaining enlightenment in this lifetime. As the primary objective of Buddhist teachings is to help all beings attain a speedy enlightenment, a beneficial society should support all its members in their progress along the path toward enlightenment. Such a society would need to grant all of its individual members the right to freely determine their own livelihood and lifestyle.

The Distinctly Chinese Genesis Hua-yen and Ch'an Buddhist Thought

There have already been several treatments of this issue by writers working from the Mahayana Scriptures of Indian Buddhism¹. Although many Chinese perceive Indian Buddhism as a foreign philosophy, the schools of Hua-yen and Ch'an represent uniquely Chinese interpretations of the essential Buddhist teachings. While the teachings of the Hua-yen school eventually spread throughout East Asia, their genesis and development took place in the distinct context of the Chinese worldview. The Ch'an and Hua-yen traditions embody the transformation of Buddhist thought that took place in the philosophical and religious context of Chinese Taoism. Francis H. Cook provides an insightful analysis of the nature of this transformation.

The syncretistic efforts of Hua-yen were so comprehensive that they managed to include not only most of what was significant in Buddhist thought, but much of what might be considered the characteristic features of indigenous Chinese thought as well. These native Chinese ideas are those usually associated with the

¹For an excellent example of this sort of writing, see Robert A.F. Thurman's "Human Rights and Human Responsibilities: Buddhist Views on Individualism and Altruism" in Religious Diversity and Human Rights, Columbia University Press, 1996.

philosophical Taoist traditions . . . It is doubtful that the architects of Hua-yen . . . deliberately incorporated these Taoist elements into their system; rather they were Chinese who had what might be called "pictures" in their minds of how reality was constructed, and these pictures tended to influence subsequent modes of thinking. They were presuppositions of the most vital form, fundamental symbol systems by means of which experience was ordered. (Cook 26)

In the fourth century C.E., many Buddhist scholars utilized the Taoist ideas of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu to explain Buddhist concepts (Lahiri 1974, 63-64). This method was called "*Ko-i*," (lit. "matching the meanings")² and was designed to make use of the Taoist ideas already understood by the educated elite of China in conveying the unfamiliar principles of Buddhist thought. Although this translation technique was eventually abandoned because it led students to misunderstand the original meaning of the Indian Buddhist terms, it reflects the compulsion to assimilate foreign ideas into indigenous patterns of understanding.

This transformation by the Chinese was necessary in order for true assimilation of Buddhist teachings to take place. ". . . Chinese minds, ever since the coming of Bodhidharma³, worked on the problem of how best to present the doctrine of Enlightenment in their native garment cut to suit their modes of feeling and thinking . . ." (Suzuki 105) The cultural symbolism and philosophical ground in which the Indian teachings of Buddhism are framed were not immediately comprehensible to the majority of Chinese. Prior to the development of indigenous Buddhist teachings such as Hua-yen and Ch'an, Chinese students of Buddhism struggled to make sense of exotic metaphors and seemingly abstruse philosophical arguments. Because of these difficulties students were largely unable to glean the essence of the Buddha's

²See entry in Charles Muller's Online Dictionary of East Asian Buddhist Terms at <http://www.human.toyogakuen-u.ac.jp/~acmuller/dicts/deabt/data/b68.htm#b683c-7fa9>

³Bodhidharma, the legendary founder of the Ch'an (Zen) lineage, was a South Indian Buddhist meditation master who traveled to China around the year 475 C.E.

teachings, which describe a practical path for all sentient beings to attain liberation from suffering.

It was up to the founders of the Chinese schools of Ch'an and Hua-yen to develop a way of expressing the truth of the Buddha's teaching using modes of discourse that were widely accessible to the Chinese population. The Hua-yen tradition generated a strong philosophical framework, presenting the essence of sophisticated Indian Buddhist principles in language that the Chinese mind could comprehend. Ch'an teachers established a method of practice and realization based on direct expression of the enlightened mind that made the profound experience of Buddhist awakening accessible to a variety of people. The Ch'an lineage continues to thrive throughout East Asia; furthermore, its teachings have been embraced by Buddhist practitioners the world over.

The Hua-yen Understanding of Emptiness Applied to Sociopolitical Issues

The understanding of the doctrine of emptiness (*sunyata*) comprises one of the most important aspects of the development of indigenous Chinese Buddhist teaching. According to Buddhist teachings, all things are empty of an intrinsic self-nature. The *Prajñāparamita Heart Sutra*, one of the most fundamental texts of Mahayana Buddhism, offers a concise treatment of the doctrine of emptiness. In describing how ". . . all dharmas [or phenomena] are marked with emptiness . . ." (Nhat Hanh 1988, 1), the Sutra systematically itemizes the emptiness of all sense perceptions and aspects of human consciousness. Traditional Indian Buddhist teachings interpret the principal of emptiness with particular emphasis on the negative understanding of this teaching--all identities are illusory and void. Many people have perceived this negative understanding of emptiness as giving rise to an attitude that denies the world and implies a need

to transcend daily life. Although this view largely stems from an oversimplification of sophisticated Indian Buddhist philosophy, it is characteristic of the response that many followers of Chinese Buddhism have when encountering Indian teachings. The Indian and Chinese interpretations of emptiness are not irreconcilable; but the vast differences between the two cultures justify their unique interpretive styles. (Thurman 1977, 343),

The Hua-yen perspective emphasizes a positive view of emptiness by describing all things as existing in a state of interdependence. Applied to the discussion of social and political structures, the idea of interdependence proves to be a rich source of insight into the relationship between the individual and the society as a whole. Fa-Tsang, the Third Patriarch of the Hua-yen tradition, frequently receives credit for the great syncretizing work of his lineage (Cook 1977, 32). Francis H. Cook describes the way in which Fa-Tsang approaches the doctrine emptiness:

With Fa-Tsang's method, there is a very strong emphasis on the positive manner in which *any dharma* [thing or phenomenon] acts as a necessary support for the others, the upshot of which is that *any* phenomenon must be viewed as having absolute value in the nexus of interdependence. The view of uniformity or sameness of all things (*samata*), which was attained in Indian Buddhism primarily by reducing all things to the common level of insignificance, is attained in Hua-yen by raising all things to the common level of supreme value. (Cook 1977, 49)

This uniquely Chinese way of understanding the doctrine of emptiness provides the philosophical groundwork for an egalitarian sociopolitical system that respects the unique contribution of each individual. As opposed to a government which considers the individual citizen's concerns to be insignificant in comparison with the good of the state as a whole, an approach to government based on the principles of Hua-yen approach would respect the interests of the individual as a means to promote the best interests of the state as a whole.

Let us begin by examining the nature of the individual entity, or *dharma*, as set forth in the Hua-yen teachings. "The *dharma* is an individual in the strict sense; it is unique, possessing

a form not exactly like any other form, and it also has a function which is different from the functions of other dissimilar individuals." (Cook 67) In the act of acknowledging each individual's unique form and function, Hua-yen teachings assert the importance of respecting the individual's integrity. In order for each person to properly manifest her unique form and function, the individual must not only live in such a way as to not impede others, but also must not be restrained from carrying out her own function. A political system that accords with these principles would need to give a high priority to protecting the right of the citizen to determine her own way of life, unimpeded by other members of society, or the functioning of the government itself.

The idea that individuals who are functioning according to their actual nature do not interfere with one another is developed thoroughly in the teachings of the Hua-yen tradition. Tu Shun, the First Patriarch of the Hua-yen school, illuminates the nature of noninterference in his seminal treatise *Fa-chieh kuan*, "Contemplation of the Realm of Reality":

. . . one phenomenon is relative to all; there is inclusion, there is entry, with four steps in all: one includes all, one enters all; all include one, all enter one; one includes one phenomenon, one enters one phenomenon; all include all, all enter all. They commune simultaneously without interference. (Cleary 118)

This fundamental Hua-yen teaching shows that although all realities interpenetrate, they do so without inference. This means that in the natural state of things, the individual lives in a constant state of communion and harmony with other individuals, but is not restricted in his or her correct function by one other individual or all other individuals. So a beneficial governmental system should enable each individual to actualize his or her correct function without hindrance. The individual functions in cooperation and communion with the society as a whole. In fact, the individual fully embodies his or her communitarian function by living a unique and self-determined life.

This view places equal emphasis on the well-being of the individual and the well-being of the society as a whole. In this way, the society can maintain the necessary balance between preserving the rights of each citizen and ensuring the welfare of the society as a whole. Concern for the well-being of each individual is identical with concern for society as a whole. Hua-yen thinkers have deeply examined the relationship between the part and the whole. In his "Cultivation of Contemplation of the Inner Meaning of the Hua-yen," Fa-Tsang elaborates on the nature of this relationship, saying,

The one truth, or reality, spoken of here is the so-called one mind; this mind includes all mundane and transmundane elements and is identical to the essence of the teaching of the aspect of totality of the cosmos of reality. It is only because of delusive thoughts that there are distinctions; if you transcend illusory ideas there is just one true thusness. (Cleary, 153)

Taking into account the Hua-yen position that distinctions between self and other, part and whole, arise from deluded misperceptions of reality, it becomes clear that one would be in error to assert the primacy of the individual with respect to the whole, or vice versa. If government seeks to insure the welfare of state as whole without consideration for the interests of individual citizens, the fallacy of its motivation will prevent it from establishing a sustainable political structure. Emphasizing the welfare of society as a whole to a degree that inhibits the free functioning of individuals weakens the social fabric because constituent parts fail to function as effectively integrated elements in a harmonious whole.

For example, if a state tries to strengthen its educational system by measuring the aptitudes of its students and placing them on certain career tracks regardless of the students own academic interests, genuine passion learning and creativity will be severely hampered. One can force students who lack sincere interest in their studies to regurgitate information, but doing so stunts their ability to think creatively and contribute the further development of the discipline.

This practice of attempting to enhance an educational system without considering the interests of the individual actually does great harm to the educational process. On the other hand, if one encourages students to pursue their own areas of interest, they will be naturally motivated to deepen their understanding and education will thrive.

For many years, thinkers in the areas of science and politics have formulated theories by focusing on one aspect of a system to the exclusion of other aspects of the totality. This practice has enabled scientists and political thinkers to develop theories that explain certain phenomena or justify certain practices; but such theories frequently do not accord with the total reality. A theory that grows out of an incomplete perception of reality will only have legitimacy as long as part of the totality is repressed or obscured. Garma C.C. Chang points out the error of developing a viewpoint based on an incomplete notion of reality:

... what science tries to do is artificially separate the inseparable, organic whole, by its own selection for a particular and restricted purpose. As far as philosophy is concerned, this approach is not only dangerous but at times misleading, for *it reveals one aspect at the cost of concealing the other*. The organic totality is therefore short-changed." (Chang 123) (my italics)

Government must maintain a total and balanced view, considering both the welfare of the society as a whole, and respect for the integrity of the individuals who make up the society. In the process of decision making this means taking into consideration how each individual or community will be affected by a certain policy. Because of the immensity of variables that determine the character of a society, the best action for the government is to empower individuals and communities to respond quickly and effectively to conflicts and emergencies.

It is necessary for each individual entity to possess integrity within the whole. By fulfilling its unique function, each thing actualizes its potential to contribute to the collective

well-being. Fa-Tsang makes use of the metaphor of the totality of a house and the beams that make it up in his discussion of the integrity of parts within the whole:

... it is just because wholeness is diversity itself that wholeness can be established [and not otherwise]. For instance, inasmuch as beams [and other parts] are the house itself, it is called the wholeness; [and inasmuch as the house] is beams themselves, it is called diversity. If beams are not the house itself, then they cannot be considered to be the [totalistically true] house. (Chang, 169)

The degree to which the individual is of equal value with the totality determines the integrity of the totality. If the individual is denied significance equal to that of the totality, then the whole suffers as a consequence. The extent to which the people who are governed participate in the government determines the wholeness of a political system. When there is no dualism between those who control the state and those who are governed by the state, it becomes possible for the body politic to manifest its identity with the social totality.

When an individual is integrated into the totality, it loses neither its unique characteristics nor function. What occurs is a harmonizing of its function with the functions of other entities. In order for the individual to function effectively as an aspect of the unified totality, it must possess genuine freedom from interference in its function. Fa-Tsang comments,

... if all the *dharmas* which constitute interdependent origination are not formed [as an integrated totality of interdependence], then they cease. If they are all formed [together], then they are all identical with each other, interfused, [and] *completely free in their interrelationships* ... (Cook 1977, 82) (my italics)

Although each *dharma*, or phenomenon, exists in a constant state of interdependence and identity with all other phenomena, this relationship does not confine the individual in any way. This view provides a solid basis for a harmonious society in which each person actualizes her interconnections with the other members of society. Such a social system would enable people to cooperate and nurture one another, while at the same time allowing each member of society to actualize her fullest potential as an individual. The fulfillment of each individual would in turn

enhance the society as a whole. A society composed of harmonious, self-actualized individuals cannot help but prosper.

On the other hand, if the government denies the members of society the right to integration and self-actualization, it creates a problematic system that subsumes individuals without fully integrating them. Using an extension of Fa-Tsang's analogy of the relationship between a house and its building materials, we could describe a member of society who is not allowed the freedom to actualize her full potential as a board randomly nailed onto the side of a wall. Such an entity is included within the system but serves no real purpose. Furthermore, a nonintegrated individual makes demands on the strength and vitality of the system without having the ability to make a positive contribution. In order to establish a sustainable a social, economic, and political environment, the individual must have the opportunity to make an effective contribution to the totality of the community.

Hua-yen teachings maintain that the integration of the individual requires each individual phenomenon to possess the power to create the totality. If the individual's contribution is not essential to the existence of the collective being, then the totality will lack integrity. When the presence of a single part completes the whole, there is genuine integrity in the system. Cook describes Fa-Tsang's assertion that the individual needs total power of the formation within the whole:

Fa-Tsang is concerned with arguing that the particular individual possess total power to create the whole. . . . If the rafter does not have this total power, then if the rafter is removed, the whole building should remain . . . Obviously this is not the case, and so Fa-Tsang says that in order for the whole to be a whole, the part must exert total power in the formation of the whole. To possess total power means, as was said above, the causative power of the whole building. (Cook 81)

In order to create an integrated social totality, each individual must have the power to determine the character of the society. When a society achieves true integrity, the character of its members

will be reflected in the character of the community as a whole. Each individual's unique contribution to the society must be valued as the essential to the existence of the entire society. So if a society denies one group or class of individuals the right to fully participate in the shaping of that society, the society will lack integrity and fail to realize its full potential.

Moreover, if a government places excessive emphasis on the rights of the individual, the people who make up the society will lose sight of their role in forming a unified social totality. This will give rise to a fragmented and weakened society. Fa-Tsang offers useful insight on this point in his analogy of the house: ". . . if the rafter were to exert only the causative power of itself--i.e., to exert the power of its rafterness--then it could never become truly integrated into the total building and become the building. In this case no building would be possible." (Cook 1977, 81) In contrast to a situation where the individual has no power to participate in the totality, here we have the description of a situation where the individual functions purely for its own sake, without any consideration of the totality. Fa-Tsang clearly asserts that such a self-oriented perspective makes it impossible to form a cohesive whole. Therefore, if the members of a society are concerned with their own profit and well-being, without maintaining awareness of the interdependent nature of their existence, then they will fail to achieve harmony with each other. It is not difficult to imagine the suffering that arises out of a community composed of people who concern themselves solely with the advancement of their own interests and have little or no concern for the way in which their actions affect the lives of those around them. According to the principles of Hua-yen, one cannot even consider such a social system to be a unified community. It is merely a confused and dysfunctional amalgamation of parts.

In this teaching, we can see how the perspective of Hua-yen Buddhism provides a sound philosophical base for a balanced political system. Hua-yen thought enables one to avoid both

the error of excessive concern for individual interests and the error of excessive concern for the welfare of the state through a unified view that takes into account both aspects of the social reality. Fa-Tsang and the other Hua-yen teachers set forth principles which support the development of effective political systems that balance respect for each member's right to participate in society in a free and self-actualized way, with the importance of maintaining awareness of the interdependent nature of the social totality.

Tu Shun, Fa-Tsang, and the other patriarchs of the Hua-yen tradition did not simply contrive this complex philosophical framework as an exercise in intellectual athletics. These teachings were formulated in an attempt to express the perspective of the enlightened mind using conventional modes of discourse. "The function of Hua-yen thought, as was remarked earlier, is to be a lure which attracts the aspirant to the practice which will presumably culminate in an existential, or experiential, validation of what was before only theory." (Cook 109) The Hua-yen school develops its view of reality out of clear insight into the nature of reality. In contrast to conventional abstract ways of thinking about government, Hua-yen theory offers a perspective that stems from experiential wisdom, and provides a harmonious, balanced way of cultivating the correct relationship between the individual and society.

The Continuation of Hua-yen Teachings Through the Spread of Ch'an

Although the living Hua-yen tradition never recovered from the Great Persecution of Buddhism during the years 841-845 C.E., much of the wisdom and insight of the Hua-yen tradition was carried on in the teachings of the Ch'an lineage (Cleary, 16). The Ch'an school focuses on methods for putting these teachings into practice and actualizing enlightened wisdom in one's own life (Dumoulin, 34). "Hua-yen came to serve as the philosophical basis for the other

schools of Buddhism more concerned with practice and realization." (Cook 1977, 26) Because the Ch'an school strongly discourages reliance on words and letters as a means to understand Buddhist teachings, Ch'an practitioners rarely dedicated time and energy to the formulation of philosophical treatises. Hua-yen and Ch'an teachings are two different approaches to conveying the same enlightenment experience within a Chinese mental framework; so they readily complement each other. Students of Hua-yen have looked to Ch'an for insight into practice and realization, and students of Ch'an have looked to Hua-yen for a theoretical ground for their realization.

The teachings of Chinese Ch'an Buddhism eventually spread throughout East Asia to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Since the end of World War II, and the U.S. occupation of Japan, the teachings of Ch'an (Japanese: Zen) have been embraced by many people in Europe and North America. Many of the most dedicated Buddhist leaders in Asia, inspired by the enthusiasm of Western students, have traveled to the West to teach. Several Westerners have journeyed to Asia to study Buddhism in a well-established practice environment. Robert Aitken Roshi is one of the foremost American Buddhist teachers. He began his study of Buddhism as a prisoner of war during The Second World War, and spent much of his life studying with Japanese Zen Masters in Japan and the U.S. Aitken's teachings provide a compelling example of the ways in which traditional Buddhist teachings can be applied to social and political concerns.

In his Zen teachings, Aitken uses the traditional Hua-yen Buddhist metaphor of the Net of Indra⁴ to describe the importance of individual self-actualization in developing a stable and harmonious society: "Unfulfilled in metamorphosis, the human being is alien, exploiting

⁴The Net of Indra is a metaphor that frequently appears in Hua-yen writings with the purpose of illustrating the nature of interdependence. It consists of a giant net of jewels that have been

others by sex, race, class, nation, and species. Fulfilled, we realize and actualize the Net of Indra--with each being nourished by and nourishing all other beings." (Aitken 1984, 138) In order to foster a sustainable society, one must give each individual the opportunity to achieve self-actualization. Self-actualized individuals support each other and make positive contributions to the society as a whole. A society that does not permit and promote self-actualization will be riddled with conflict and chaos. Individuals who have a low degree of self-actualization will be excessively concerned with their own well-being. Because they will be largely oblivious to the interconnected nature of their existence, they will seek to advance their own interests at the expense of other people, the environment, and the entire society. Promoting the self-actualization of individuals within a society gives rise to a harmonious and prosperous society. As individuals develop awareness of the crucial role that interconnections play in their survival, they will seek to nurture these connections to make them stronger and healthier. As the individual members of society learn to support and rely on each other, the society as a whole becomes more stable and vibrant. Each individual makes a positive contribution by freely fulfilling her unique role in society.

The following comment by Aitken shows how the society that respects the value of each individual, fosters an environment of equality based on mutual respect. "The recognition of one's own absolute and total uniqueness is also the compassionate acknowledgement of the absolute and total uniqueness of each other being, and of one's equality with them." (Aitken 1978, 88) When one is able to recognize and cherish the value of the individual in one's own uniqueness, then one is capable of revering the uniqueness of all individuals. So by fostering dignity and self-respect in the individual members of a society, the government can establish a

polished and arrayed in such a way that the surface of one jewel reflects the surfaces of all other jewels, resulting in an infinite reflecting process. (Cook 1977,

peaceful social climate. When individuals respect and nurture each other, they will endeavor to support and sustain each other. Conflict will naturally decrease because individuals and groups will cease to vie with one another for power and resources. Because individuals are acutely aware of their interdependence on one another, they will feel a vested interest in support for those and need and relief for the oppressed.

This application of Chinese Buddhist thought to the context of modern society not only provides insight for rulers, it provides insight for all members of society. Applied to a discussion of social systems, the Net of Indra model shows that each individual makes an equal contribution in determining the character of a society. Aitken asserts that the individual makes a distinct contribution by taking responsibility for the situation as a whole: "How do we actualize the oneness of all beings? Through responsibility, the ability to respond--like that of the clover. When the clover is cut, its roots die and release their nitrogen, and the soil is enriched." (Aitken 1984, 136-137) We help shape our society by taking responsibility for ourselves, our environment, and those around us. Enhancement of a society occurs when individual people act responsibly in a way that nurtures the community as a whole. The community, in turn, nurtures its members creating a continuous cycle of growth and benefit. In order for citizens feel a sense of responsibility to the society, they need to have freedom to determine their own way of life. If they are inhibited, their ability to respond to the needs of others and the needs of their situation will be impaired.

Aitken refers to a practice of "Indra Networking" (Aitken 1984, 145), which he describes as the practice of actualizing the Net of Indra within one's community by active participation in the development of a harmonious society. Active participation by each member is fundamental to the maintenance of a healthy society. Active participation does not mean only

to contribute one's labors to the economic development of the society. True participation requires the contribution of one's unique insights and personal perspective to the character of the society as a whole. In order for the individuals of a society to make a genuine contribution to society they must have access to the mechanisms that determine public policy and the nature of the government.

Joanna Macy is a contemporary political and social writer who offers a holistic perspective on social justice that grows out of a Buddhist perspective. Some of Macy's most compelling writings deal with issues of power in the social context. She bases her sociopolitical theories on the ideal of an integrated society:

Far different than the hierarchies of control familiar to societies where rule is from above, in nested hierarchies (sometimes called holonarchies) order tends to arise from the bottom up; the system self-generates from spontaneously adaptive cooperation between the parts, in mutual benefit." (Macy 1998, 42)

This vision of society as an organically functioning totality provides a model for spontaneous adaptation to the demands of changing circumstances. If a problem or conflict should arise, the affected parties will cooperate to develop a solution that is appropriate to their specific situation. The people who are most familiar with the circumstances that produced the difficulty, and who will have to initiate and carry out the actual transformation of the structure will determine the nature of any change in the social system. When social change is initiated and carried out locally, it will be implemented with increased alacrity because the individuals who are working to bring about the change acutely feel the need for rectification of the problem. The implementation of the solution will be particularly effective because the individual carrying it out will know which initiatives are most pertinent to the specific situation.

In order for an organic, holistic social system to exist, individuals must have the freedom and the power to initiate and carry out real social change. The community as a whole

must value and respect each individual member of the community's unique perspective and contribution. If an individual recognizes a genuine potential for positive change, the other members of the community will naturally acknowledge her insight, and support her in carrying out the necessary reforms in the system. In this way, the community maximizes the value of its constituent members. Diversity of perspectives becomes the community's greatest asset: "... Genuine, systemic self-organizing requires diversity of parts in spontaneous, unconstricted play. A monolith of uniformity has no internal intelligence." (Macy 1998, 43-44) A society that denies its individual members the ability to initiate change, devalues its most precious resources. The ability of a community to adapt to changing circumstances and overcome adversity is contingent upon the power of its members to respond to a problem when it arises. Because there are a variety of problems that arise within a society, having a diversity of perspectives and lifestyles enhances a community's ability to respond promptly and effectively to problems. Likewise, if a community discourages nonconforming perspectives, it will retard its ability to respond to adversity.

In order for organic mechanisms of social change to flourish, each individual must have the opportunity to express her perspective in a respectful and supportive environment. Because different members of the society are in tune with different aspects of the social system, the society optimizes its integrity by allowing information to flow freely throughout the system. By sharing knowledge and views with each other, diverse members of a community can work together to meet the challenges of the ever-shifting social and political environment. The free flow of information must also extend to areas that may seem threatening one's self-interest:

As open systems dependent on larger, evolving systems, we must stay open to the wide flows of information, even when certain information seems inimical to our self-interest. What is required of us, for our survival, is an expanded sense of self-

interest, where the needs of the whole, and other beings within that whole are seen as commensurate with our own. (Macy 1983, 32)

When individuals in a society are nurtured by their interconnections with one another, their personal well-being becomes directly contingent upon the well-being of the other members of the society. If others prosper, the individual benefits; if others suffer, the individual feels the consequences. Thus, one's locus of self-interest expands from a constricted view of the self to include the well-being of other individuals in society. Once a person discovers this enlarged perspective, she will freely share information that she may once have sought to conceal out of concern for her private interests.

People who have an expanded sense of self-interest also feel a responsibility to intervene when they recognize a dangerous trend in the social system as a whole. When they become keenly aware of their reliance on the integrity of the entire system, their self-preservation instincts will become sensitive to circumstances that threaten the stability and welfare of the society. Macy discusses the nature of social action that arises out a concern for the well-being of the total community:

. . . we are called to step in when the health or survival of the larger system is at stake. That can involve lobbying for laws, or intervening in a more surgical fashion to remove power from those who misuse it. This is not to 'seize' power so much as to release it for decentralized use in efficient self-governance. (Macy 1983, 33-34)

The release of power that Macy advocates is not motivated by the idea that a group of individuals who are more capable of utilizing power will take over for a less able group. Anytime that a single group monopolizes power within a social system, the spontaneity and efficiency of the system will be impaired. The change that Macy describes operates to remove a detrimental isolation of power. Once each individual has equal power to determine the form and function of the society, efficient, harmonious activity will increase. Instead of a situation where a few

powerful individuals determine the character of society based on their limited perspective, all individuals are able to contribute their understanding to determination of the social system. By utilizing all perspectives in the formation of the society, the manifold variables that influence the success or failure of the system will be taken into account. This increase in information will enable the society to develop structures that are appropriate to its needs and capable of adapting to changing circumstances.

When an oligarchy sets out to impose generalized social change without regard for the diversity of the people or groups to be affected, it runs the risk of crippling the effective function of the community, or even worse, provoking conflict. According to Macy, a system in which a select group of individuals impose their rule over the majority is inherently unstable: "To the social system, power-over is dysfunctional because it inhibits diversity and feedback; by obstructing self-organizing processes, it fosters entropy--or systemic disintegration."(Macy 1998, 53) If a government restricts the free functioning of the members of society, they will cease to feel that their active participation is vital to the sustenance of the society. If they do not perceive themselves as an integral part of the society, people's sensitivity to their environment and the lives of those around them will quickly become deadened. They will cease concerning themselves with their contribution to maintaining the health and vitality of the community. As their sense of connection with the whole vanishes, they will act increasingly in their own self-interest. Once this shift in value occurs, the organic, self-sustaining social totality will degenerate into disassociation and chaos. The government may be able to use coercive force to hold the society together for a period of time, but the unsustainable system will inevitably collapse at some point.

On the other hand, if individuals are given the freedom to function and associate with each other according to their natural tendencies, the society as a whole will prosper. When individuals learn to utilize the power of interdependent cooperation, they will be able to combine their diverse talents to realize a potential far beyond anything possible for a single individual.

Each individual contributes freely to the creation of an enhanced totality:

As parts self-organize into a larger whole, capacities emerge which could never have been predicted, and which the individual parts did not possess. The weaving of new connections brings new responses and new possibilities into play. In the process, one can feel sustained--and *is* sustained--by currents of power larger than one's own. (Macy 1998, 55)

This process of integration affirms the value of each individual. Without each individual's unique contribution, the whole will not be able to realize its full potential. By freely cooperating with others, the individual can experience achievements beyond what would be possible if she was working in isolation. By merging her specific talents with the specific talents of others, one experiences the satisfaction of performing at level far beyond what she previously experienced on her own. This vision of the social system provides a structure that gives each person the opportunity to realize her maximum potential while contributing to the enhancement of the society as a whole.

The Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh⁵ is one of the most active figures in the continuation of Asian Buddhist practices and the transmission of Buddhist teachings into the West. Exiled from his native country since the Vietnam War, Thich Nhat Hanh works extensively with refugees, war veterans, and Buddhist practitioners. During his work for peace in the 1960's Thich Nhat Hanh developed a model for Buddhist practice within

⁵For more thorough biographical information about Thich Nhat Hanh see <http://seaox.com/thich.html>

the context of modern society. Based on this practice, he founded The Order of Interbeing, an extension of the Lin-chi⁶ school of Ch'an Buddhism.

The theoretical basis for Thich Nhat Hanh's model of socially engaged Buddhist practice reflects fundamental principles of Hua-yen thought. Like the Hua-yen masters, Thich Nhat Hanh emphasizes realization of the interconnected nature of reality as the key to harmonious and integrated existence. Both Fa-Tsang (Cook, 1978) and Thich Nhat Hanh (Nhat Hahn, 1988) utilize the teachings on emptiness in the Heart Sutra⁷ to affirm the interdependent nature of all phenomena. Like Macy and Aitken, Thich Nhat Hanh's view of interdependence gives rise to a profound concern for the welfare of others and sense of social responsibility.

Thich Nhat Hanh developed fourteen precepts that provide the foundation for practice in the Order for Interbeing. These 14 precepts guide students in their efforts to establish a stable Buddhist practice that helps to live mindfully and compassionately within the context of their daily existence. A deep regard for each individual's right to freedom and self-actualization is inherent in the precepts. By calling on his students to respect and protect the well-being of all other people, Thich Nhat Hanh implies universal rights to life, self-determination, and a livelihood that is both economically and spiritually fulfilling. The following precepts, selected from the total 14, are particularly pertinent to the discussion of individual civil rights.

The Third Precept, an instruction for the practitioner to abstain from forcing his views on any other people, implies a respect for diversity of opinions:

Do not force others, including children, by any means whatsoever, to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda, or even education.

⁶The Lin-chi school is named after its founder Lin-chi I-hsuan(d. 866-7). Its teachings emphasize, sudden enlightenment and non-attachment to scriptural teachings. For more information see the entry in Charles Muller's Online Dictionary of East Asian Buddhist Terms at <http://www.human.toyogakuen-u.ac.jp/~macmuller/dicts/deabt/data/b81.htm#6.81e8>

⁷See page 3.

However, through compassionate dialogue, help others renounce fanaticism and narrowness. (Nhat Hanh 1987, 91)

During the Vietnam War, Thich Nhat Hanh watched ideological disputes tear his country apart. Many people suffered torture and death because they refused to accept a certain political view. Thich Nhat Hanh himself was forced in to exile because he refused to take sides with either of the warring parties. His experiences working for a peaceful resolution to the devastating conflict in his homeland strengthened his conviction that sustainable solutions to social and political conflict can only be reached through an open and honest exchange of views. In order for the compassionate dialogue that Thich Nhat Hanh advocates to occur, the community must respect and value the viewpoint of each constituent member. Any system that aims to achieve stability through the suppression of dissenting views carries the seeds of intense conflict. It is only a matter of time before the various displaced individuals band together to mount a resistance against the oppressive system. Furthermore, if these people have always lived in an environment of intolerance and domination, they will probably not understand any other way to run a society. If they should succeed in overthrowing their oppressors, there is a good chance that they will perpetuate the old mechanisms of intolerance to support their own narrow view. The only way to break this miserable cycle is to foster open and respectful public discourse.

The Ninth Precept complements the respect for diverse opinions stated in the Third Precept by affirming the individual's responsibility to advocate social justice: "Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety." (Nhat Hanh 1987, 95) This precept requires the individual to exercise freedom of speech, whether that right is granted by her society or not. Like Johanna Macy, Thich Nhat Hanh understands that in order for a social system to function effectively there must be a free flow of information and views throughout the system.

In addition to affirming the right to hold and express one's own point of view, Thich Nhat Hanh claims the right to religious freedom and the freedom to organize in his the Tenth Precept:

Do not use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit, or transform your community into a political party. A religious community should, however, take a clear stand against oppression and injustice, and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts. (Nhat Hanh 1987, 96)

While warning practitioners against the dangers of superimposing a specific political agenda onto their spiritual practice, Thich Nhat Hanh calls on religious communities to play an active role in shaping a more enlightened and compassionate society. The entire community benefits from microcosmic associations of individuals who work together deepen their insights and then endeavor to share these insights with the society as a whole. Rather than threatening the integrity of the sociopolitical structure, the free association of individuals enhances the totality by enabling each person to contribute her specific talents to the generation of greater benefits for society.

For a society as a whole to function with compassion, the constituent members of that society must manifest compassion in their daily lives. Only when the individuals who make up a social system mind the way that their actions affect other people will a system that respects and nurtures each individual be possible. The formation of a compassionate society requires that the individual member have the freedom to respond spontaneously to the needs of others by modifying her lifestyle. The Eleventh Precept of the Order of Interbeing affirms the right to freely choose a livelihood that enables one to actualize a compassionate lifestyle. "Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. . . . Select a vocation which helps realize your ideal of compassion." (Nhat Hanh 1987, 97) Here we can see an extension of the Hua-yen ideal of the individual functioning freely within the whole. In order for the individuals who

compose a society to respond efficiently to the needs of others, they must be free to adjust their position within the whole according to the demands of their circumstances. For example, if a person who realizes that her work is harming others in some way has no means to modify the nature of her work, she will not be able to act spontaneously to reduce the suffering caused by the system. A social system where the constituent parts are free to spontaneously respond to each other's needs will be less likely to suffer from such problems as structural oppression and poor distribution of resources. As soon as individuals recognize that their lifestyle contributes to another person's suffering, they will begin to seek ways to live more compassionately.

Along with the aforementioned fundamental rights pertaining to the individual's function within the social context, Thich Nhat Hanh's precepts reflect a strong concern for the individual's basic physical well-being. The Fifth Precept of the Order of Interbeing implies the right to have one's basic needs met: "Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. Do not take as the aim of your life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure. Live simply and share time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need." (Nhat Hahn 1987, 92) A social structure can most effectively achieve an equitable distribution of resources when its constituent members do not seek to possess more than they need to live in comfort. The members of society have the responsibility to protect the right of every individual to have access to sufficient material resources for survival. People who are aware of the way that one person's suffering detracts from the well-being of the whole community will endeavor to develop a social system that protects and nurtures every member.

The Thirteenth Precept supports the right to property: "Possess nothing that should belong to others. Respect the property of others but prevent others from enriching themselves from human suffering or the suffering of other beings." (Nhat Hanh 1987, 99) This precept calls

for the development of just economic systems. Social harmony requires economic systems to treat the individuals that are incorporated into them with respect. If each individual who functions within the economy receives equal value and respect, she will be able to realize her optimum potential, thus benefiting the system as a whole. On the other hand, if she receives inferior treatment, she will not be able to realize her full potential, and her suffering will impair the economy.

One aspect of economic justice that Thich Nhat Hahn clearly advocates is the right to reasonable work hours and healthy working conditions. The Fourteenth Precept discusses the appropriate attitude toward the body: "Do not mistreat your body. Learn to handle it with respect. Do not look on your body as only an instrument." (Nhat Hanh 1987, 99) A person has the right to work in an environment that respects the body's limitations and does not place undue stress on it or put it at risk of injury. A pervasive concern for physical health within a community will enhance the quality of life of its members by reducing disease and injury.

The Twelfth Precept affirms the right to life. "Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and to prevent war." (Nhat Hanh 1987, 98). Thich Nhat Hanh extends the injunction not to kill to an instruction to protect and nurture life. He illuminates the political relevance of this precept in his application of the protection of life to the prevention of war. Robert Aitken also affirms the political nature of the precept against killing: "Politics in our day of nuclear overkill is a matter of ignoring the [precept against killing] or acting upon it." (Aitken 1984, 20) War is the epitome of a destructive social system. In order for the members of a society to go to war, they must severely limit their awareness of the interdependent nature of existence. Anyone who experiences deep compassion for the suffering of other beings, would recoil at the human agony and wholesale environmental destruction that

war creates. A harmonious society would endeavor to resolve international conflicts in the same way that it resolves internal conflicts: through open and respectful dialogue aimed at developing a sustainable solution that meets the needs of all concerned parties.

Conclusion

According to the principles of Hua-yen Buddhist thought, the responsibility for determining the character of a society falls on its individual members. People who are aware of the interconnected nature of life in human society will not be willing to engage in activities that are destructive to any aspect of the totality, such as war, political oppression, or environmental destruction. They will also exhibit common characteristics of responsibility, active contribution, and responsiveness to the needs of other members of the society.

In such a society, government functions to foster a sociopolitical environment that encourages free and spontaneous social action on the part of the individual. The individuals who are most familiar with the problematic circumstances resolve conflicts within the social structure. Instead of the government acting from outside to resolve a conflict, it empowers the people who most severely feel the effects of the problem to resolve the difficulty through a ground-level systemic change. By acting out of awareness of their interdependence on each other, the members of a society will learn develop nurturing communities where each individual plays a meaningful role in an integrated totality.

If the governments of the world were to redirect a fraction of the resources that currently go toward military development into developing effective programs for raising awareness and creating political structures that enable individuals to cooperate in an effort to realize their potential for compassionate living, it would be possible to bring about a

comprehensive improvement in the quality of life. The formation of a peaceful and prosperous global community requires an international awareness of the interdependent connections that span continents and oceans. As people become more conscious of the global implications of their actions, they will begin to act in ways that reduce conflict and suffering throughout the world.

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