

Two Modern Buddhist Prophets

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November 23, 2008

Reading 1: from “Nobel Lecture” (12/11/89) by the 14th Dalai Lama

Thinking over what I might say today, I decided to share with you some of my thoughts concerning the common problems all of us face as members of the human family. Because we all share this small planet earth, we have to learn to live in harmony and peace with each other and with nature. That is not just a dream, but a necessity. We are dependent on each other in so many ways, that we can no longer live in isolated communities and ignore what is happening outside those communities, and we must share the good fortune that we enjoy. I speak to you as just another human being; as a simple monk. If you find what I say useful, then I hope you will try to practise it. . .

The realisation that we are all basically the same human beings, who seek happiness and try to avoid suffering, is very helpful in developing a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood; a warm feeling of love and compassion for others. This, in turn, is essential if we are to survive in this ever shrinking world we live in. For if we each selfishly pursue only what we believe to be in our own interest, without caring about the needs of others, we not only may end up harming others but also ourselves. This fact has become very clear during the course of this century. We know that to wage a nuclear war today, for example, would be a form of suicide; or that by polluting the air or the oceans, in order to achieve some short-term benefit, we are destroying the very basis for our survival. As interdependents, therefore, we have no other choice than to develop what I call a sense of universal responsibility.

Today, we are truly a global family. What happens in one part of the world may affect us all.

Reading 2: from *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change*
by Thich Nhat Hanh

Our society is sick. When we put a young person in this society without trying to protect him or her, he or she will receive violence, hatred, and fear every day and get sick. Our conversations, our TV programs, our advertisements, our newspapers, our magazines all water the seeds of suffering in young people and not-so-young people.

How can we transform our individual consciousness and the collective consciousness of our society? How can we refrain from consuming more toxic cultural products? We need guidelines – a diet – and we need to practice watering the seeds of peace, joy, and happiness in ourselves. The most important practice for preventing war is to stay in touch with what is refreshing, healing, and joyful inside us and all around us. If we practice walking mindfully, being in touch with the earth, the air, the trees, and ourselves, we can heal ourselves, and our entire society will also be healed. If the whole nation would practice watering seeds of joy and peace and not just seeds of anger and violence, the elements of war in all of us will be transformed. . .

The essence of nonviolence is love. Out of love and the willingness to act selflessly, strategies, tactics, and techniques for a nonviolent struggle arise naturally. Nonviolence is not a dogma; it is a process. Other struggles may be fueled by greed, hatred, fear, or ignorance, but a nonviolent one cannot use such blind sources of energy, for they will destroy those involved and also the struggle itself. Nonviolent action, born of the awareness of suffering and nurtured by love, is the most effective way to confront adversity.

Sermon

Today, we continue with our series on modern-day representatives of the prophetic tradition. Two weeks ago we looked at two prophetic voices that were not explicitly religious – Al Gore and Van Jones. This week we shift more into the religious realm with a look at two voices deeply grounded in the Buddhist tradition. We will consider the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama, and the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh.

While each of these men falls squarely within their particular religious traditions, they have had the wisdom, the courage, and the spiritual insight to speak not only to those within their own tradition, but to the world at large. One of their important qualities has been that they have used their religion not as a box to contain and define them, but rather as a platform from which to build messages and approaches to living that cut across religious and cultural boundaries. As such they warrant our attention and our consideration.

Tenzin Gyatso was born on July 6, 1935 to a Tibetan farming family. When he was a very young child, a search party was sent out to find the new incarnation of the Dalai Lama. The thirteenth incarnation had died in 1933. Legend has it that a number of signs pointed at Tenzin Gyatso. For instance, when he was presented with various relics and toys, some of which had belonged to his predecessor, he correctly identified all those owned by the previous Dalai Lama, exclaiming “That’s mine! That’s mine!”

The new Dalai Lama began his monastic education at the age of six, and by the age of 23, attained the rough equivalent of a doctorate in Buddhist philosophy. The office of Dalai Lama signifies spiritual leadership within Tibetan Buddhism, but also temporal leadership of the nation of Tibet, a position he assumed in 1950 at the age of fifteen. But the early years of his leadership were marked by increasing conflict with the People’s Republic of China, which considered Tibet a part of China, rather than an autonomous state.

The Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959, creating a government-in-exile along with about 80,000 Tibetan refugees. From there, he has devoted his life to regaining autonomy for Tibet, through appeals to China itself, the United Nations and the world at large. He has put forth numerous plans and proposals, including a democratic constitution based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and repeated calls for respect for fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms.

Although political unrest within Tibet has occasionally led to violent protests, the Dalai Lama has held fast to a firm policy of nonviolence, seeking change through dialogue, negotiation, and moral persuasion. Earlier this year he stated that he would step down as leader of Tibet’s government-in-exile if violence in the region worsened. While he hasn’t taken that step, the Dalai Lama did issue a shockingly blunt statement at the end of last month that he had given up negotiating for increased autonomy, and that from now on Tibetans themselves would have to decide how to continue a dialogue with the Chinese government.

One of the qualities we've observed in prophets of the past and present has been their persistence in putting forth their vision and message, and in speaking truth to power. I think fifty years of principled effort qualifies as persistence. Whether or not that effort has truly come to an end remains to be seen. I, for one, plan on staying tuned for further developments, and actually expect to be surprised. We'll see.

While much of his life work has been devoted to his role as leader of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhists, the Dalai Lama's impact and influence has reached beyond that circumscribed world. For one thing, he has been an important role model for millions as the voice for nonviolent activism in the tradition of Thoreau, Gandhi, and King. Upon his receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, the chair of the Nobel committee said that the award was "in part a tribute to the memory of Mahatma Gandhi." The committee recognized his efforts in "the struggle of the liberation of Tibet and the efforts for a peaceful resolution instead of using violence." One of the things that has impressed me the most through the years has been the Dalai Lama's refusal to hate the Chinese, despite what they have done to him, his people, and his homeland. That takes real spiritual maturity and discipline.

The Dalai Lama has also engaged the world through his teaching activities. Even now, in his mid-seventies, he continues to teach. Earlier this year he gave lectures on engaging wisdom and compassion, and sustainability at a number of American universities.

He has also engaged in various philanthropic efforts, such as support for SOS Children's Villages, a charity that works across religious and cultural boundaries to serve orphaned and abandoned children in the spirit of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

For me, one of the Dalai Lama's most notable and admirable qualities is his ability and willingness to reach beyond the bounds of his own Tibetan Buddhist tradition. He has helped promote peace and ethics world-wide. He has also stated his belief that modern scientific findings take precedence over ancient religions.

The Dalai Lama takes strong positions on many social issues, but not in a rigid and dogmatic way. While generally opposed to abortion, for instance, he takes a nuanced position, acknowledging that circumstances sometimes warrant exceptions. A fierce advocate of nonviolence himself, he supports the concept of self-defense. "If someone has a gun and is trying to kill you," he said, "it would be reasonable to shoot back with your own gun. Not at the head, where a fatal wound might result. But at some other body part, such as a leg."

As with other prophets we've looked at, the Dalai Lama doesn't get caught up in the petty details of doctrine and dogma. He keeps his eye on the bigger picture of core values. I leave you with a few quotes: "All major religious traditions carry basically the same message, that is love, compassion and forgiveness . . . the important thing is they should be part of our daily lives." "If you have a particular faith or religion, that is good. But you can survive without it." "Open your arms to change, but don't let go of your values." "There is no need for temples, no need for complicated philosophies. My brain and my heart are my temples; my philosophy is kindness." "The ultimate authority must always rest with the individual's own reason and critical analysis."

And finally, one of my favorite Dalai Lama quotes, in response to the frustration of discouraged social activists: "If you think you are too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito."

Thich Nhat Hanh was born October 11, 1926 in central Vietnam. He entered a Zen monastery at the age of sixteen and was fully ordained as a monk in 1949. Through his life, he has been known as a teacher, author, poet, and peace activist.

During the Vietnam War, Thich Nhat Hanh founded a grassroots relief organization that rebuilt bombed villages, set up schools and medical centers, and resettled homeless families. He traveled to the United States to study, but also to urge U. S. withdrawal from Vietnam. He urged Martin Luther King to oppose the war publicly, which King did in his famous Riverside Church speech in 1967. Based on my selection of prophets to talk about over the past weeks – Gandhi, King, Al Gore, the Dalai Lama – it may almost seem like a Nobel Peace Prize is a prerequisite. Well, rest assured, Thich Nhat Hanh did not receive the prize. But he was nominated for it in 1967, by none other than Martin Luther King, Jr.

Nhat Hanh also led the Buddhist delegation to the Paris Peace Talks in 1969. When the peace accords were signed in 1973, the Vietnamese government denied permission for him to return home, and he went into exile in France, where he has made his home ever since. Happily, he has been able to return to Vietnam twice in the past five years to teach and to visit his home temple in Hue.

One of the best known Buddhist teachers in the West, Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings and practices appeal to people from various religious, spiritual, and political backgrounds. He has offered practices of mindfulness adapted to Western sensibilities. He travels widely internationally giving retreats and talks. He is another boundary-crosser, like many of the prophets we've recognized.

Thich Nhat Hanh is also a prolific writer, having published over one hundred books, some forty of them in English. I have about a dozen of them in my own library, from which I draw fairly frequently in my ministry. He covers a wide range of topics. From pastoral issues like death, fear, and comforting wisdom, to spiritual matters of prayer and practice. From psychological and philosophical topics such as the nature of consciousness, to prophetic issues of peace, nonviolent social change, and love in action.

It is on this last area that I'd like to focus the remainder of our time this morning: that is, love in action. Thich Nhat Hanh's brand of Buddhism does not stop with the quest for individual enlightenment. It seeks, rather, to engage the world in the quest for compassion-based social change. This takes shape within the framework of Engaged Buddhism.

Thich Nhat Hanh has been a leader in the Engaged Buddhism movement and is credited with bringing the idea to the West. In an interview with John Malkin in the *Shambhala Sun*, Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Engaged Buddhism is just Buddhism. When bombs begin to fall on people, you cannot stay in the meditation hall all of the time. Meditation is about the awareness of what is going on – not only in your body and your feelings, but all around you."

In order to give more of a flavor of what Engaged Buddhism is all about, I'd like to finish this morning by sharing Thich Nhat Hanh's own words in laying out some of its precepts. "The Fourteen Precepts of Engaged Buddhism," along with further commentary, appear in his book *Interbeing*, first published in 1987. Here are some of them:

Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist systems of thought are guiding means; they are not absolute truth.

Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. . . Truth is found in life and not merely in conceptual knowledge. Be ready to learn throughout your entire life and to observe reality in yourself and in the world at all times.

Do not force others . . . to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda, or even education. However, through compassionate dialogue, help others renounce fanaticism and narrow-mindedness.

Do not avoid suffering or close your eyes before suffering. Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world. Find ways to be with those who are suffering, including personal contact, visits, images and sounds. By such means, awaken yourself and others to the reality of suffering in the world.

Do not accumulate wealth while millions are hungry. . . Live simply and share time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need.

Do not maintain anger or hatred. . .

Do not utter words that can create discord and cause the community to break. Make every effort to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people. . . Always speak truthfully and constructively. Have the courage to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may threaten your own safety.

Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. Do not invest in companies that deprive others of their chance to live. Select a vocation that helps realize your ideal of compassion.

Do not kill. Do not let others kill. Find whatever means possible to protect life and prevent war.

Possess nothing that should belong to others. Respect the property of others, but prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.

I hope you agree with me that Thich Nhat Hanh, like the Dalai Lama and the other prophetic voices we've encountered, articulates an attitude and a vision worthy of embracing and striving to realize. A vision that transcends boundaries of religion and culture. May we have the wisdom and courage to embrace Truth from wherever it comes.

So may it be.