

Shyam Dodge

THICH NHAT HANH'S IMAGINARY SOUL

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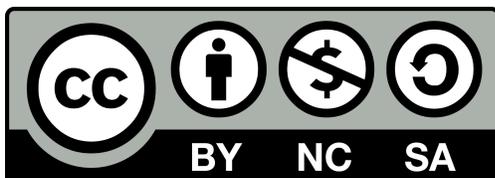
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Preface

In the present essay, author **Shyam Dodge** makes a compelling argument that **Thich Nhat Hanh** engages in intellectual dishonesty. The beloved teacher employs “tricks of language,” for instance, to imbue an absence (no-self) with an exalted presence (the idealized x-buddhist subject). He craftily conjures a liberating “non-view” out of a demonstrably ideologically-coercive (yet buddhistically anathema) “view.” He masquerades subjugating prescriptions for behavior as self-evident conditions for personal and social emancipation.

Is it possible that Thich Nhat Hanh’s contradictions are yet another instance of a compassionate master’s koanic speech—“revelatory epiphany generators,” as Dodge calls it? Dodge’s conclusion: No. “It is simply sloppy thinking. It is self-dupery and intellectual dishonesty.”

I would ask readers to consider whether Dodge’s argument does not apply equally well to x-buddhist thinking and writing in general. As I read Shyam Dodge’s essay, it occurred to me that sloppy thinking and intellectual dishonesty have become a pervasive, and hence virtually invisible, feature of contemporary western x-buddhist discourse. The next time you visit, for instance, the Secular Buddhist site, Buddhist Geeks, Ken McLeod’s Unfettered Mind site, or read some primary text explication, consider whether Dodge’s argument doesn’t help to reveal hidden features of their rhetorical practices. Certainly, you will find that the three most influential western disseminators of what David Chapman calls “Consensus Buddhism”—*Tricycle*, *Shambhala Sun*, and *Buddhadharma*—are saturated with an “intellectual self-dupery [that] disables critical thinking, the small portion of autonomy one might have,” as Dodge says of Thich Nhat Hanh. (Links at bottom.)

As always, the ridiculous irony in all of this is that such practices make a mockery of x-buddhism’s stated laudable goal of human awakening.

— Glenn Wallis

Thich Nhat Hanh's Imaginary Soul

By Shyam Dodge

1. Introduction

In this essay, I evaluate the intellectual veracity of Thich Nhat Hanh by focusing on a few key principles in his philosophy: 1. His peculiar claims regarding “realizing” non-self and how these claims construct an independent self (or soul); 2. His beliefs regarding the “unhappiness” of ideology and his own transcendent vision of Buddhism; 3. His conception of the ideal Buddhist and Buddhist community. Each of these assertions, or principles in his philosophy, proves to be self-contradictory and the product of poor reasoning. In the effort to investigate TNH’s honesty as a philosopher and teacher I also explore the implications his version of Buddhism has to questions of social and political freedom. I begin (in the following section) with an analysis of TNH’s rendering of *anatta* as independent of intellectual understanding, which leads to a discussion of his “view” of Buddhism that, he believes, not only transcends ideology but is a direct insight into the true nature of reality.

2. Will The Real Non-Self Please Stand Up?

Surveying the Buddhist landscape (on blogs, in magazines, the shelves of bookstores) we can blindly point in any direction and stumble upon casuistic gems like this one from TNH (*interviewed in Shambhala Sun*), “the goal of the practice [is] to realize non-self.” He goes further stating, “This is not just an idea or something you understand intellectually.” (McLeod 1) In response to this perplexing claim, I cannot help but ask: What else am I to do but understand non-self

intellectually? How can non-self be realized outside of my thoughts, reasoning faculties and emotions? Is there some way to realize non-self outside of my own subjectivity? Unless TNH means exactly what his words indicate—that non-self is a kind of soul or *atman* independent of the mind, the body, thoughts and emotions. In this regard, TNH’s language asserts the opposite of non-self. He, in fact, is preaching the doctrine of *atman*: a separate self (distinct from thoughts, emotion and body) that can be realized independent of all other mental and emotional faculties.

TNH, of course, thinks he is claiming otherwise. He asserts, by all appearances, an *atman* and calls it a non-self. He then articulates a particular view and calls it a non-view. To this end, in the same interview in *Shambhala Sun* he states:

Non-self can be a view, impermanence might be a view, and if you are caught in a view, you are not really free. The ultimate has no view. That is why nirvana is the extinction of all views, because views can bring unhappiness—even the views of nirvana, impermanence, and no-self... (McLeod 3)

There is a trickiness in the language here. ‘Views’ or ideologies are being critiqued. According to TNH *nirvana* is the “extinction of all views” but then in the next instance *nirvana* can be an ideology—an ideology that “can bring unhappiness.” Rather than digressing into the tired discussion of ‘both/and’ versus ‘either/or’ paradigms there is a compelling question at stake here regarding TNH’s claims to what I call a self-transcending ideology—that somehow by articulating a particular “view” he is presenting a non-view. To this end TNH says, “non-self is not a theory, a doctrine, or an ideology, but a realization that can bring about a lot of happiness.” (McLeod 1) The contradictions are more than apparent. In one instance Buddhist doctrine is an ideology that can bring about unhappiness, and in another it transcends ideology and through revelation can ‘bring about

a lot of happiness.” The contemporary x-buddhist tendency is to avoid careful examination of claims like these by relying on the standard postmodern judo-sidestep by speaking to the revelatory power of paradox to liberate the individual from the constraints of subjectivity and rational thought. But this assumes the inherent truth of TNH’s claims and their power to liberate the individual. It avoids the question of whether or not his version of Buddhism actually has the power to liberate,[1] and whether it itself is simply another ideology (possibly a useful one). It also speaks to TNH’s belief in a non-self (or really an *atman*) that is independent of the mind and can therefore be “realized” separate from the intellect thereby transcending all “views.”

In this regard, TNH claims that his version of Buddhism is not mere theory, but an insight into reality itself and is therefore capable of being “realized.” More importantly, he is implying that there are some “views” of non-self and nirvana that are ideological constructs while his “view” is a non-view—something that cannot be realized intellectually, something that transcends theory and ideology—and therefore is a direct experience of reality. TNH’s version of the dharma brings “happiness” whereas other versions (or misrepresentations) bring “unhappiness.”

In the effort to untangle his convoluted reasoning I see TNH making two perplexing and bold claims in this interview: 1. Non-self exists outside of interdependent constructs (How else could it be “realized” independent of intellectual understanding and reason?) and 2. His view of the dharma transcends all views. TNH’s version of non-self reminds me of Wittgenstein’s clever disparagement of Freud’s notion of the unconscious: “Imagine a language in which, instead of saying ‘I found nobody in the room’ one said, ‘I found Mr. Nobody in the room.’ Imagine the philosophical problems that would arise out of such a convention.” (69) The act of naming, even an absence, is capable of constructing the illusion of a substance, thereby reifying a nothing.

Just as TNH reifies a non-self by giving a name and an address at which it can be found (or “realized”) via introspective contemplation.

In fact, if I were to follow TNH’s advice, I will forever be chasing down an experience that I am not at the center of, which is another kind (or order) of regress—the search not for a cause but a non-cause. More importantly, it is naïve: As if his version of the dharma does not itself construct distinctly Buddhist selves. Here we arrive at a central question: is TNH honest? I mean intellectually honest. We see a significant number of self-deluding moves in his language. First he claims that *anatta* is something to be realized independent of our understanding and reasoning faculties. Secondly, inextricably wedded to the former assertion, he claims that his *atman*-like vision of non-self is not a theory or an ideology but an insight into reality. His version of non-self is not only independent of mind, emotion and thought but also transcends “views.” Hence my term: *self-transcending ideology*.

According to TNH “views” or ideologies bring “unhappiness;” therefore, Buddhism’s role is to help us transcend views altogether. In order to pull this off he must have an insight that is independent of a “view,” which means that he has to offer us something that transcends our interdependent and carefully mediated knowledge. This is how he constructs a soul out of the teaching of non-self. Non-self, in order to transcend the “unhappiness” of views, must then be a revelation separate from our intellectual understanding, thoughts and emotions. It must be transcendent of our condition otherwise it would simply be another “view.” In his biography of the Buddha TNH describes subjective interiority as a “prison,” (160) a structure to be escaped not reconfigured.

TNH, from all appearances, desperately wants a way out of the ideological constructions Ernest Becker describes:

the reason man was so naturally cowardly was that he felt he had no authority; and the reason he had no authority was in the very nature of the way the human animal is shaped: all our meanings are built into us from the outside, from our dealings with others. That is what gives us a ‘self’ and a superego. Our whole world of right and wrong, good and bad, our name, precisely who we are, is grafted into us. (48)

But TNH’s failure is in his inability to recognize the value of ideology—that there are ways of remaking the world that both benefit us and relieve suffering. Furthermore, he fails to see how he is remaking the world—grafting his own versions of self, good and bad, and right and wrong.

3. Buddhist Poison

What exactly is a Buddhist self? According to Thich Nhat Hanh a Buddhist possesses “equanimity and nondiscrimination” and is full of “peace and calm.” Likewise a Buddhist is “free from anger... craving, jealousy, and despair.” (Hanh 1) In so many words TNH is describing the qualities of what he thinks makes a good Buddhist. In a Foucauldian analysis we might say that such ‘dharma imperatives’ serve as a kind of technology of the self that dictates healthy and unhealthy forms of development. If “nondiscrimination” and an overriding sense of “peace and calm” are condoned affective and emotional states then there are also inadmissible emotions. TNH goes further in dictating these unacceptable or ‘non-Buddhist’ emotions:

According to the Buddha’s teachings, the most basic condition for happiness is freedom. Here we do not mean political freedom, but freedom from the mental formations of anger, despair, jealousy and delusion. These mental

formations are described by the Buddha as poisons. As long as these poisons are still in our heart, happiness cannot be possible. (Hanh 1)

For all intents and purposes, TNH's version of the dharma makes one into a "good citizen." His vision of "the Buddha's teaching" produces socially non-reactive, non-discriminating subjects. A Buddhist, in this respect, does not seek political freedom but spiritual emancipation from "non-Buddhist" emotions such as anger and despair. The Buddha, in the mind of TNH, dreamed, as Foucault would say, of "the utopia of the perfectly governed city." (198) A city populated by citizens who spend their time moderating their emotions and behavior (self-regulating). Social freedom is an afterthought. Of course this is not necessarily a bad thing. But it is also definitely an ideology that produces a particular type of Buddhist person with a particular set of Buddhist desires, habits, and behaviors (free of anger and jealousy while filled with peace and calm). All of which speaks to the fundamental dishonesty underpinning TNH's claims to providing a version of Buddhism independent of a "view."

4. The Way of Seniority

How does TNH get away with these obvious contradictions? One answer might be the structure of his Buddhist community. TNH speaks to this in the *Shambhala* interview:

Buddhist democracy is more grounded in the truth [in comparison to Western democracy], because if you are a teacher and you have much more experience and insight, your vote has more value than the vote of a novice who has not got much insight and experience. So in Buddhism, voting should combine the way of democracy with the way of seniority. That is possible. We have done that with a lot

of success in our community, because the younger and less experienced people always have faith and respect toward the elder ones. (McLeod 3)

A few things are happening here: 1. Seniority trumps dissenting voices, since “experience” is given higher value than equality and one cannot help but think possibly rationality as well (if there are revelations such as his version of non-self available to us beyond our understanding and intellect); 2. The novice is not encouraged to seek social freedom since “anger, despair [and] jealousy” are inadmissible emotions; 3. TNH is a senior member of his community and therefore can help his novices “realize non-self” not just intellectually but, one can only assume, metaphysically, and thereby free them from “delusion.” In other words TNH can draw the “poison” from their “hearts.” With this in mind a structure begins to form within one’s imagination of TNH’s version of the Buddhist self and the ideal Buddhist community.

This structure, not unlike Foucault’s vision of the Panopticon, seeks to automate the functioning of power within the subject.[2] TNH does this in a few simple ways: a. His version of the Buddha’s teaching dictates what are admissible emotions through a hierarchy of prioritized states and habits of mind (equanimity, nondiscrimination, peace and calm) which demands that the Buddhist monitor their thoughts, behaviors and emotions; b. TNH’s ideology produces an imperative to rid oneself of the emotions of dissent and social disquiet by relinquishing “jealousy” and “anger,” which c. curbs and undermines social revolution. In this regard, the Buddhist becomes a self-regulating function of society who does not require external discipline—they are already regulating their disquiet and despair within.

In the effort to draw these finer points into greater relief consider the following: If anger, jealousy and despair are not “Buddhist emotions” than a significant portion of one’s own inner life is not admissible, in

some respects they might even be considered an enemy—an inner “blockade” or “poison” in TNH’s terminology (Hanh 1). In direct correlation to this TNH claims that non-self cannot be realized intellectually. In two deft moves the Buddhist (or at least the student of TNH) is taught that it is necessary to transcend their reasoning faculties and to distrust a meaningful portion of their emotional life in order to be “happy.” The Buddhist then must become a constant *surveillant* of his/her own inner life (which can, of course, often be a good thing),[3] monitoring and regulating their emotions while also attempting to subjugate his/her intellect in order to realize the truth of *anatta*. This makes the Buddhist, in the words of Foucault, an “object of information.” (200) In this regard, the Buddhist must be transfigured into an object that can be analyzed, examined, probed and deconstructed, as if such *self-analysis* is capable of freeing them from their own native subjectivity (if non-self is something to be realized independent of intellect and emotion), rather than it being simply another function of subjectivity. Metaphysical circularity, like this, blinds the Buddhist to the truth of their condition with the promise of a revelation that can free them from the “prison” of their own minds—a freedom that is self-transcending. In other words this revelation is *atman*, an independent self that transcends anger, jealousy, and the intellect.

5. The Implications of TNH’s Non-View Ideology

Thich Nhat Hanh has made a transcendent self out of a non-self and a non-view out of a view. He has constructed an ideology that dictates social norms and behavioral development as well as metaphysical truths. But he claims to have done no such thing. Instead, he asserts that he is revealing the true nature of reality. These complications (or rather contradictions) in his reasoning are not koans—they are not revelatory epiphany generators. It is simply sloppy thinking. It is self-dupery and intellectual dishonesty. If TNH were to admit that his ideology is itself a view and that his concept of *anatta* is in fact *atman* then his arguments would have more substance. I’m fairly certain that

many of his teachings are therapeutic for many people, which speaks to the value of ideology and the capacity of ideological constructions to remake the world in positive ways. I'm also quite certain that TNH deeply cares about social emancipation. But this does not change the fact that TNH is practicing, at least intellectually, a profound form of dishonesty.

Such intellectual self-dupery disables critical thinking, the small portion of autonomy one might have. It makes one a self-deceiver, a psychological masochist forever frustrated in the effort to attain an illusion (a transcendent self that does not exist). It makes one a prisoner of metaphysical circularity. These qualities seem counter-productive to TNH's larger aims. From all of his talks, books and articles TNH appears to be intent upon providing therapeutic tools to alleviate suffering and to bring about greater human freedom yet the intellectual dishonesty undergirding his philosophy undermines his ostensible "larger mission."

But there are other, more subtle ways in which TNH's *atman*-infused metaphysics actually avoids suffering. His main priority is concerned with poisonous "mental formations" not political or social freedom. In many ways his weird version of non-self is intent upon transcendence (through dissociation from suffering). TNH is not seeking to apply therapy to suffering but to anesthetize the Buddhist to external suffering via freedom from "mental formations," which is eerily similar to his claim that non-self is to be realized independent of intellectual understanding. TNH's so-called "freedom from mental formations" combined with his version of non-self reveal the cornerstone of his philosophy: he is seeking a spiritual liberation from the suffering of the world. One that is independent of "mental formations," of the intellect and "poisonous" emotions. TNH is seeking a transcendent soul. Therefore, his philosophy is concerned with

dissociating from the intellect, from the emotions, from the real world conditions of suffering in order to touch a greater truth.

TNH's ideology constructs a particular type of citizen: one more concerned with their internal reality than an external one. The Buddhist, in this sense, self-regulates, self-medicates (or meditates) in order to alleviate their psychic suffering regardless of the social reality they live in. This vision of the dharma prefers anesthesia over social change, the numbing of pain over addressing the real conditions of suffering. TNH's version of Buddhism seeks to make the subject into a non-reactive, non-discriminating, non-jealous, *metta*-inspired citizen: A Buddhist who abdicates their passion in favor of an ascetic non-participatory attitude, without actually leaving society. A kind of Buddhist zombie. It makes the Buddhist into a 'good citizen,' subservient to authority (or in TNH's language "seniority").

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NOTES

[1] I don’t mean social or psychological liberation but the kind of liberation TNH is talking about when he claims we can “realize” annata independent of thoughts and emotions.

[2] The following critique could very well apply to almost any community held together by a common ideology. I only go through the trouble of drawing out the implications of TNH’s philosophy and community in order to defend my assertion that TNH’s claim to be in possession of a non-view is fallacious.

[3] Self-regulation as well awareness of one’s psychological inner workings can often be healthy practices. But they are, of course, born out of ideological constructions and are therefore not non-views and/or transcendent of ideology and theory.

Author: Shyam Dodge is a Harvard educated former monk. Raised in an ashram, he has been practicing and teaching meditation, Asian philosophy, and yoga for over 20 years. His books include a *memoir, a collection of teaching stories*, and a forthcoming war narrative of Hawaii. Shyam is an active critic and contributor to the understanding of contemporary Buddhism and yoga in North America. In addition to his work as a scholar and critic, he is a fiction writer, satirist, and pop culture essayist. Shyam's blog is [here](#). He co-founded and writes at *Yoga Brains*. You can also learn more in this [interview](#).



SPECULATIVE NON-BUDDHISM

RUINS OF THE BUDDHIST REAL