

Lecture 17: Intro to Literature & the Environment, *Buddhism, Ideology*

Buddhism and Earlier (and Later) Traditions

The spiritual context of ancient India had a strong influence on the Buddha's teachings. Buddhism is made of non-Buddhist elements in the same way that a flower is made of non-flower elements. In the West, Buddhism is often associated with the ideas of reincarnation, karma, and retribution, but these are not originally Buddhist concepts. They were already well established when the Buddha began teaching. In fact, they were not at all at the heart of what the Buddha taught.

Thích Nhất Hạnh

The idea of reincarnation suggests there is a separate soul, self, or spirit that somehow leaves the body at death, flies away, and then reincarnates in another body. It's as though the body is some kind of house for the mind, soul, or spirit. This implies that the mind and body can be separated from each other, and that although the body is impermanent, the mind and spirit are somehow permanent. But neither of these ideas is in accord with the deepest teachings of Buddhism.

Thích Nhất Hạnh

We can speak of two kinds of Buddhism: popular Buddhism and deep Buddhism. Different audiences need different kinds of teachings, so the teachings should always be adapted in order to be appropriate to the audience...In popular Buddhist culture, it is said there are countless hell realms that we can fall into after dying. Many temples display vivid illustrations of what can happen to us in the hell realms—for example, if we lie in this lifetime, our tongue will be cut out in the next. This is a kind of “skillful means” to motivate people to live their lives in more ethical ways. This approach may help some people, but it may not help others...

[T]hese teachings are not in accord with the ultimate truth..

Thích Nhất Hạnh

One day a group of young people came to ask the Buddha, “Of all these teachers, whom should we believe?” “Don't believe anything, not even what I tell you!” replied the Buddha. “Even if it's an ancient teaching, even if it's taught by a highly revered teacher. You should use your intelligence and critical mind to carefully examine everything you see or hear. And then put the teaching into practice to see if it helps liberate you from your suffering and your difficulties. If it does, you can believe in it.” If we want to be a soulmate of the Buddha, we need to have a discriminating, critical mind like this.

Thích Nhất Hạnh

Although the West had encounters with Buddhism even in the medieval period, in the second half of the 20th century it became of considerable interest in certain quarters (see, for example, Jack Kerouac's 1958 *The Dharma Bums*).

By the early 21st century, "secular buddhism" (aka "Buddhist agnosticism" and by other names) had become influential in the U.S. and elsewhere - in part through mindfulness practices.

"What is presented today as an ancient meditative tradition is actually a selective rendering of an ancient meditative tradition, in some cases carefully manicured...There's no scandal here. There's nothing wrong with modern interpreters of Buddhism being selective—even, sometimes, creative—in what they present as Buddhism. All spiritual traditions evolve, adapting to time and place, and the Buddhist teachings that find an audience today in the United States and Europe are a product of such evolution."

Robert Wright

"Modern mindfulness meditation isn't exactly the same as ancient mindfulness meditation, but the two share a common philosophical foundation. If you follow the underlying logic of either of them far enough, you will find a dramatic claim: that we are, metaphorically speaking, living in the Matrix. However mundane mindfulness meditation may sometimes sound, it is a practice that, if pursued rigorously, can let you see what Morpheus says the red pill will let you see. Namely, 'how deep the rabbit hole goes.'"

Robert Wright

"All of this made it clearer to me why *The Matrix* had come to be known as a 'dharma movie.' Though evolutionary psychology had already convinced me that people are by nature pretty deluded, Buddhism, it turned out, painted an even more dramatic picture. In the Buddhist view, the delusion touches everyday perceptions and thoughts in ways subtler and more pervasive than I had imagined...

"The more I looked into Buddhism, the more radical it seemed, but the more I examined it in the light of modern psychology, the more plausible it seemed..."

"Buddhism offers an explicit diagnosis of the problem and a cure. And the cure, when it works, brings not just happiness but clarity of vision: the actual truth about things, or at least something way, way closer to that than our everyday view of them.."

Robert Wright

It can be argued that Buddhism is not, properly speaking, a religion, but nonetheless is functioning as one for a great many people.

"Spirituality is not religion. It is a path for us to generate happiness, understanding, and love, so we can live deeply each moment of our life. Having a spiritual dimension in our lives does not mean escaping life or dwelling in a place of bliss

outside this world but discovering ways to handle life's difficulties and generate peace, joy, and happiness right where we are, on this beautiful planet."

Thích Nhất Hạnh

All quotes from Thích Nhất Hạnh in this section are from *The Art of Living: Peace and Freedom in the Here and Now* (HarperOne, 2017).

Robert Wright is quoted from *Why Buddhism is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment* (Simon & Schuster, 2018).

Impermanence (Anicca)

Impermanence

Anicca (Pali)

Anitya (Sanskrit)

Mujō (Japanese)

Note that we have no writings from the Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama), but that it is conjectured that he spoke Pali.

Recall (from Lecture #5, in particular) that in Western dualistic thinking the physical and the metaphysical have been conceived as a binary structure in opposition with the metaphysical imagined as being eternal. Examples would be God, heaven, and the human soul.

This was not only a religious (Christian) conviction, but also a cornerstone of Western metaphysics, as Plato challenged the traditional Greek view, which Heraclitus concisely expresses, that all of nature was impermanence. However, in Plato's radical deconstruction, which came to define Western metaphysical thinking, true nature is eternal and immutable.

In Buddhism, by contrast, impermanence (anicca) is celebrated and a central part of the belief system.

"Impermanence is something wonderful. If things were not impermanent, life would not be possible. A seed could never become a plant of corn; the child couldn't grow into a young adult; there could never be healing and transformation; we could never realize our dreams. So impermanence is very important for life. Thanks to impermanence, everything is possible."

Thích Nhất Hạnh

In the Western tradition, the gaze was often cast away from the here and now to an imagined metaphysical realm (i.e. heaven). In contrast, in Buddhism the focus is on the here and now.

"We may agree with the truth of impermanence, and yet we still behave as though everything is permanent, and that is the problem. This is what prevents us from taking the opportunities available to us right now to act to change a situation, or to

bring happiness to ourselves and others. With the insight of impermanence, you won't wait. You'll do everything you can to make a difference, to make the person you love happy, and to live the kind of life you would like to live."

Thích Nhất Hạnh

"We may fear dying, and yet we find it hard to imagine growing old. We cannot believe that one day we might not be able to walk or stand. If we are lucky, one day we will be old enough to sit in a wheelchair. Contemplating this, we value every step and know that in the future it will not be like it is now. Recognizing impermanence allows us to cherish the days and hours that are given to us. It helps us value our body, our loved ones, and all the conditions that we have for happiness in this moment. We can be at peace knowing we are living our life to the fullest."

Thích Nhất Hạnh

"Keeping this awareness alive in our daily life can help us see clearly how to make good use of the time we still have. The Buddha taught the Five Remembrances—a contemplation to recite at the end of every day—as an exercise to lessen our fear of death and remind us of the preciousness of life. PRACTICE: THE FIVE REMEMBRANCES You may like to take a moment to read these lines very slowly, with a pause to follow your breathing and relax between each remembrance. I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old. I am of the nature to have ill health. There is no way to escape ill health. I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death. All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them. My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. They are the ground upon which I stand"

Thích Nhất Hạnh

"The art of happiness is the art of living deeply in the present moment. The here and now is the only time and place where life is available and where we can find everything we are looking for, including love, freedom, peace, and well-being."

Thích Nhất Hạnh

All quotes from Hanh in this section are from *The Art of Living: Peace and Freedom in the Here and Now* (HarperOne, 2017).

The Doctrine of Non Self (Anattā)

The Doctrine of Non Self

Anattā (Pali)

Anātman (Sanskrit)

Recall that in West dualistic thinking human beings are imagined as composed of a body and a soul. Many Buddhists argue that there is no separate soul, believing that this is part of the Buddha's core message. In this radical monistic approach, not only

is there no immortal soul, there is no human self that endures throughout our lifetime.

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus said, "You can never bathe in the same river twice." The river is always flowing, so as soon as we climb out onto the bank and then return again to bathe, the water has already changed. And even in that short space of time we too have changed. In our body, cells are dying and being born every second. Our thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and state of mind are also changing from one moment to the next. So we cannot swim twice in the same river; nor can the river receive the same person twice. Our body and mind are an ever-changing continuum. Although we seem to look the same, and we are still called the same name, we are different. No matter how sophisticated our scientific instruments, we cannot find anything in our person that remains the same and that we can call a soul or a self. Once we accept the reality of impermanence, we have to also accept the truth of no self.

Thích Nhất Hạnh

"According to the Buddha's core teachings on no self, impermanence, and interbeing, the mind is not a separate entity. The mind cannot leave the body and reincarnate somewhere else. If the mind or spirit is taken from the body, the spirit no longer exists. Body and mind depend on each other in order to exist. Whatever happens in the body influences the mind, and whatever happens in the mind influences the body. Consciousness relies on the body to manifest. Our feelings need to have a body in order to be felt. Without a body, how could we feel? But this doesn't mean that when the body is dead, we disappear. Our body and mind are a source of energy, and when that energy is no longer manifesting in the forms of body and mind, it manifests in other forms: in our actions of body, speech, and mind."

Thích Nhất Hạnh

"Unfortunately, many Buddhists still hold on to the idea of a self to help them understand the teachings on reincarnation, karma, and retribution. But this is a very diluted kind of Buddhism, because it has lost the essence of the Buddha's teachings on no self, impermanence, and our true nature of no birth and no death. Any teaching that does not reflect these insights is not the deepest Buddhist teaching."

Thích Nhất Hạnh

"'Rebirth' is a better description than 'reincarnation.' When a cloud turns to rain, we cannot say that a cloud is "reincarnated" in the rain. 'Continuation,' 'transformation,' and 'manifestation' are all good words, but perhaps the best word is 'remanifestation.' The rain is a remanifestation of the cloud. Our actions of body, speech, and mind are a kind of energy we are always transmitting, and that energy manifests itself in different forms again and again."

"We are continued in our children, in our students, in everyone whose lives we have touched."

Thích Nhất Hạnh

"You too are always changing form. You browse through a family photo album and come across a photo of yourself as a young child. Where is that little child now? You know that it is you. You have the same name, and yet it doesn't look like you. Are you still that child or are you someone else? This is a practice of contemplating your own signlessness. Today you look, speak, act, and think differently. Your form, feelings, perceptions, and consciousness are all very different. You are not fixed or permanent. So you are not the same person, but you are not a totally different person either. When you are no longer caught in specific images or appearances, you can see things more clearly. You can see that the little child is still alive in every cell of your body. It is possible to listen to and take care of the little boy or little girl in you at any time. You can invite that child to breathe with you, walk with you, and enjoy nature with you."

Thích Nhất Hạnh

"In this very moment all of us are dying. Some of us are dying more slowly and some of us more quickly. If we can be alive now, it is because we're dying at every moment. We might think that someone else is dying and we're not. But we shouldn't be fooled by appearances...

There are two levels of truth about birth and death. At the level of conventional truth, we can say there is birth and death, beginning and ending, creation and destruction...

In that sense, birth and death are real. They are important. They are useful concepts. But they are not the whole truth."

Thích Nhất Hạnh

The first wrong view we need to liberate ourselves from is the idea that we are a separate self cut off from the rest of the world. We have a tendency to think we have a separate self that is born at one moment and must die at another, and that is permanent during the time we are alive. As long as we have this wrong view, we will suffer; we will create suffering for those around us, and we will cause harm to other species and to our precious planet. The second wrong view that many of us hold is the view that we are only this body, and that when we die we cease to exist. This wrong view blinds us to all the ways in which we are interconnected with the world around us and the ways in which we continue after death. The third wrong view that many of us have is the idea that what we are looking for—whether it be happiness, heaven, or love—can be found only outside us in a distant future. We may spend our lives chasing after and waiting for these things, not realizing that they can be found within us, right in the present moment.

Thích Nhất Hạnh

Listen to how dramatically Walpola Rahula, a Buddhist monk who in 1959 published an influential book called *What the Buddha Taught*, put the matter: "According to the teaching of the Buddha, the idea of self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality, and it produces harmful thoughts of 'me' and 'mine,' selfish desire, craving, attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and other defilements, impurities, and problems. It is the source of all the troubles in the world from personal conflicts to wars between nations. In short, to this false view can be traced all the evil in the world." Kind of makes you wish more people would realize they don't have a self!

Robert Wright

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Buddhism and Ecology

"At first it seems as though things exist outside one another. The sun is not the moon. This galaxy is not another galaxy. You are outside me. The father is outside the son. But looking deeply, we see that things are interwoven. We cannot take the rain out of the flower or the oxygen out of the tree. We cannot take the father out of the son or the son out of the father. We cannot take anything out of anything else. We are the mountains and rivers; we are the sun and stars. Everything inter-is. This is what the physicist David Bohm called "the implicate order." At first we see only "the explicate order," but as soon as we realize that things do not exist outside one another, we touch the deepest level of the cosmic. We realize that we cannot take the water out of the wave. And we cannot take the wave out of the water. Just as the wave is the water itself, we are the ultimate. Many still believe that God can exist separately from the cosmos, his creation. But you cannot remove God from yourself; you cannot remove the ultimate from yourself. Nirvana is there within you." Thích Nhất Hạnh

We can visualize our human body as a wave, and our cosmic body as all the other waves on the ocean. We can see ourselves in all the other waves and all the other waves in us. We don't need to go looking for our cosmic body outside us. It is right here within us at this very moment. We are made of stardust. We are children of the Earth, made of all the same elements and minerals. We contain mountains, rivers, stars, and black holes. In every moment of our life the cosmos is going through us, renewing us, and we are returning ourselves to the cosmos. We are breathing the atmosphere, eating the earth's food, creating new ideas, and experiencing new feelings. And we are emitting energy back into the cosmos, in our thinking, speech, and actions, in our out-breath, in our body's warmth, and in releasing everything we

have consumed and digested. In this very moment many parts of us are returning to the earth. We don't return to the earth and cosmos only when our body disintegrates. We are already inside the earth, and the earth is inside us.

Thích Nhất Hạnh

About thirty years ago I was looking for an English word to describe our deep interconnection with everything else. I liked the word "togetherness," but I finally came up with the word "interbeing." The verb "to be" can be misleading, because we cannot be by ourselves, alone. "To be" is always to "inter-be." If we combine the prefix "inter" with the verb "to be," we have a new verb, "inter-be." To inter-be reflects reality more accurately. We inter-are with one another and with all life.

Thích Nhất Hạnh

If we see the Earth as just a block of matter lying outside of us, then we have not yet truly seen the Earth. We need to be able to see that we are a part of the Earth, and to see that the entire Earth is in us. The Earth is also alive; it has intelligence and creativity. If the Earth were inert matter, it could not give birth to countless great beings, including the Buddha, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, and Moses. The Earth is also mother to our parents and to us. Looking with the eyes of non-discrimination, we can establish a very close relationship with the Earth. We look at the Earth with our heart and not the eyes of cold reasoning. You are the planet, and the planet is you. The well-being of your body is not possible without the well-being of the planet. And that is why to protect the well-being of your body we must protect the well-being of the planet. This is the insight of emptiness.

Thích Nhất Hạnh

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Non-craving

Craving or Thirst

Tanha (Pali), Tṛṣṇā (Sanskrit)

"The concentration on non-craving is an opportunity to take time to sit down and figure out what true happiness really is. We discover that we already have more than enough conditions to be happy, right here, in the present moment."

Thích Nhất Hạnh

The art of happiness is the art of living deeply in the present moment. The here and now is the only time and place where life is available and where we can find everything we are looking for, including love, freedom, peace, and well-being. Happiness is a habit. It's a training. With mindfulness, concentration, and insight, we can free ourselves from feelings of restlessness and craving, and realize that, right

now, we already have more than enough conditions to be happy. This is the contemplation on non-craving.

Thích Nhất Hạnh

Contemplating non-craving is another way to practice the concentration on aimlessness. Each one of us has a big block of craving inside. We're always looking outside ourselves for something to make us feel satisfied and complete—whether it is food, sensual pleasures, money, a relationship, social status, or success. But so long as we have the energy of craving in us, we're never satisfied with what we have and with who we are right now, and true happiness is not possible. The energy of craving sucks us into the future. We lose all our peace and freedom in the present moment and feel we can't be happy until we've got what we're craving. But even if you do get the object of your craving, you never feel truly fulfilled.

Thích Nhất Hạnh

We may spend our lives chasing after wealth, status, influence, and sensual pleasures, thinking they will improve the quality of our life. And yet we end up not having any time left to live. Our life becomes just a means to make money and become "someone." The Buddha used the image of a fish biting on an attractive bait. The fish doesn't know that there's a hook hidden in the bait. It looks so delicious, but as soon as the fish bites, it gets hooked and caught. The same is true with us... Once we can see the hook, whatever it is we're craving simply won't be appealing anymore, and we'll be free. At first we think that if we let go of what we're craving, we'll lose a lot. But when you finally release it, you see that you have not lost anything after all. You are even richer than before, because you have your freedom, and you have the present moment,

Thích Nhất Hạnh

Every one of us has insight. We know that the object of our craving isn't worth it. We know we don't want to get hooked. We know we don't want to spend all our time and energy on it. And yet we can't let go. This is because we don't know how to apply our insight. We need to take time to stop and reflect deeply on our situation to identify what it is we're craving. And then we have to identify the hook. What is the danger? What is the suffering hidden in it? We've got to see all the ways in which running after and craving these things has made us suffer.

Thích Nhất Hạnh

The same is true with chasing after signs of success, wealth, or status. We may do it, not because we think it's important, but because we think others expect it of us. But when we truly see the cost of these pursuits, and the hook in them, we won't want to keep running after them anymore. We make use of the insight that we are already enough. We don't have anything to prove.

Thích Nhất Hạnh

We may take refuge in our work, not because we need the money, or because we really want to do it, but because our work distracts us from the painful feelings deep inside. We're rewarded by a sense of achievement in our work, and before we know it, we get addicted to our work. Maybe we turn to films, TV series, the Internet, or computer games, or we listen to music for hours on end. We think these things make us feel better, but as soon as we turn them off, we feel just as bad, if not worse, than we did before. It has become a habit to reach for the phone or computer and immerse ourselves in another world. We do it to survive. But we want to do more than just survive. We want to live.

Thích Nhất Hạnh

At the time of the Buddha there was a successful and generous businessman called Anathapindika. He was very loved by his people, and they gave him the name Anathapindika, meaning "the one who helps the destitute." One day Anathapindika brought several hundred businessmen to hear the Buddha teach. The Buddha taught them that it is possible to live happily right in the here and now. Perhaps he was aware that many businesspeople have a tendency to think a bit too much about success in the future. In his teaching, the Buddha used the expression "living happily in the present moment" five times. He emphasized that we don't have to wait for more conditions of happiness in the future. We don't have to look for success in order to be happy. Life is available only in the present moment, and we already have more than enough conditions to be happy. We can train ourselves to keep bringing our attention back to everything that is going well in the present moment.

Thích Nhất Hạnh

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Thoreau and Buddhism

Throughout *Walden*, Thoreau makes clear that he was profoundly influenced by eastern philosophy and Buddhism.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, one of the leading proponents of mindfulness practice emerging out of secular Buddhism, has argued that "Henry David Thoreau's two years at Walden Pond were above all a personal experiment in mindfulness."

"From the Buddhist perspective, our ordinary waking state of consciousness is seen as being severely limited and limiting, resembling in many respects an extended dream rather than wakefulness. Meditation helps us wake up from this sleep of automaticity and unconsciousness, thereby making it possible for us to live our lives with access to the full spectrum of our conscious and unconscious possibilities. Sages, yogis, and Zen masters have been exploring this territory systematically for thousands of years; in the process they have learned something which may now be

profoundly beneficial in the West to counterbalance our cultural orientation toward controlling and subduing nature rather than honoring that we are an intimate part of it. Their collective experience suggests that by investigating inwardly our own nature as beings and, particularly, the nature of our own minds through careful and systematic self-observation, we may be able to live lives of greater satisfaction, harmony, and wisdom. It also offers a view of the world which is complementary to the predominantly reductionist and materialistic one currently dominating Western thought and institutions. But this view is neither particularly "Eastern" nor mystical. Thoreau saw the same problem with our ordinary mind state in New England in 1846 and wrote with great passion about its unfortunate consequences."

Jon Kabat-Zinn

"Henry David Thoreau's two years at Walden Pond were above all a personal experiment in mindfulness. He chose to put his life on the line in order to revel in the wonder and simplicity of present moments. But you don't have to go out of your way or find someplace special to practice mindfulness. It is sufficient to make a little time in your life for stillness and what we call non-doing, and then tune in to your breathing. All of Walden Pond is within your breath. The miracle of the changing seasons is within the breath; your parents and your children are within the breath; your body and your mind are within the breath. The breath is the current connecting body and mind, connecting us with our parents and our children, connecting our body with the outer world's body. It is the current of life. There are nothing but golden fish in this stream. All we need to see them clearly is the lens of awareness."

Jon Kabat-Zinn

Thoreau would often sit in his doorway for hours and just watch, just listen, as the sun moved across the sky and the light and shadows changed imperceptibly: There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or hand. I love a broad margin to my life. Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless though the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time. I grew in those seasons like corn in the night, and they were far better than any work of the hands would have been. They were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance. I realized what the Orientals mean by contemplation and the forsaking of works. For the most part, I minded not how the hours went. The day advanced as if to light some work of mine; it was morning, and lo, now it is evening, and nothing memorable is accomplished. Instead of singing, like the birds, I silently smiled at my incessant good fortune. As the sparrow had its trill, sitting on the hickory before my door, so I had my chuckle or suppressed warble which he might hear out of my nest.

Jon Kabat-Zinn quoting Thoreau from Walden

"TRY: Recognizing the bloom of the present moment [ala Thoreau] in your daily meditation practice if you have one. If you are up early in the morning, try going outside and looking (a sustained, mindful, attentive looking) at the stars, at the moon, at the dawning light when it comes. Feel the air, the cold, the warmth (a sustained, mindful, attentive feeling). Realize that the world around you is sleeping. Remember when you see the stars that you are looking back in time millions of years. The past is present now and here. Then go and sit or meditate lying down. Let this or any time you practice be your time for letting go of all doing, for shifting into the being mode, in which you simply dwell in stillness and mindfulness, attending to the moment-to-moment unfolding of the present, adding nothing, subtracting nothing, affirming that "This is it."

Jon Kabat-Zinn

When Thoreau says, "it was morning, and lo, now it is evening, and nothing memorable is accomplished," this is waving a red flag in front of a bull for go-getting, progress-oriented people. But who is to say that his realizations of one morning spent in his doorway are less memorable or have less merit than a lifetime of busyness, lived with scant appreciation for stillness and the bloom of the present moment? Thoreau was singing a song which needed hearing then as it does now. He is, to this day, continually pointing out, for anyone willing to listen, the deep importance of contemplation and of non-attachment to any result other than the sheer enjoyment of being, all "far better than any work of the hands would have been."

Jon Kabat-Zinn

Jon Kabat-Zinn is quoted from *Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation In Everyday Life* (Hachette Books, 2009).