



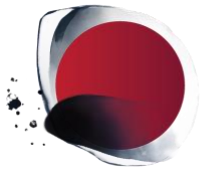
Being Peace¹



In “Being Peace” Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

“If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud there will be no water; without water, the trees cannot grow; and without trees you cannot make paper. So the cloud is in here. The existence of this page is dependent on the existence of a cloud. Paper and cloud are so close.”

¹ Thich Nhat Hanh. (2001, September). Rest in peace. E-mail message.



As in so many things Thay (Vietnamese for Teacher, an honorific often applied to Thich Nhat Hanh) is able to capture in a few words multiple interrelated Buddhist concepts. First there is Dependent Origination - the paper will not arise without the cloud (and sun and woodsmen and paper manufacturers, etc.). Next there is Anatman - not-self. The paper cannot be defined as always paper - it was previously cloud and tree and sun and so many other things and it will be in the future perhaps fire and ash, or shreds becoming more paper, or garbage moldering in a dump.

I have dealt with the individual concepts in other meditations, but today I want to look at the poetic vision that Thay refers to. When you look at paper what do you see? Do you see a blank sheet that must be filled for an assignment? A sheet full of details of a bill you must pay? The raw material for a paper airplane? I think for most of us the answer to this question is going to be phrased in the current existence of the paper - or what is written on it. I want you to think for a moment like the poet in Thay's passage.

When you next have an opportunity, pick up a piece of paper and think about all the things that go into it. Remember that these causal links don't just go back one generation. The tree that most directly gave rise to the paper was itself brought into being by previous trees, and rain, and sun, and so forth and this goes back to the first ancestors of the tree. The chain of arising doesn't end there but goes further back to the chemical components of the first trees then to the concreting disk of dust and gas that gave rise to the Sun and the Earth. Further back still the chain continues to the arising of the first stars who's burning and eventual extinction gave rise to the elements that eventually became our star and planet...and this is just a piece of paper.

It's easy to get lost in this contemplation, but that is to continue being trapped in samsara. The purpose of this exercise is not to be so mesmerized by the past that you forget the current existence of the paper, but rather to simply begin the process of realization. Realization that the way things are now is not the way they've always been.



Realization that the way things are now is not the way they will always be. Realization that we as well are part of this chain of arising and our actions will give rise to other things in their turn.

Use the paper - that's what it's for. Live your life - that's what it's for. Just do so knowing that what you see, and feel is not all there is. When you are done with the paper the use to which you've put it will have given rise to other effects. The paper continues in these effects. When your life is done the actions that you've done will give rise to other effects.

You continue in these effects.

Paper is paper, but that's neither what it's always been nor what it will always be. Paper is paper but it could not arise without the cloud. It has no being without the cloud. You are paper and cloud. Live your life so that the cloud will have been happy to have given rise to you. Live your life in such a way that the rain from your cloud nurtures compassion and altruism so that the fruit to which it gives rise will be sweet and fragrant.”

Reference

Thich Nhat Hanh. (2001, September). *Rest in peace*. E-mail message.

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