



Thich Nhat Hanh's Poetics of Care

JESSE CURRAN

EVERY FALL SEMESTER, I teach a first-year college humanities seminar called “The Ethics of Engagement.” In addition to encouraging students to think about the complexity of social identity, a major goal of the course is to introduce different ethical decision-making theories in order to explore how these theories inform action in a social justice context. The curriculum presents the students with the basics of three ethical theories. First, we look at John Stuart Mill’s *utilitarian consequentialism*, which argues that actions are right or wrong based on outcomes or consequences, and the extent to which they maximize pleasure. Second, through Immanuel Kant, we explore *deontology*, the study of the nature of duty and obligation, which determines if actions are morally right or wrong based on established rules rather than on anticipating outcomes. Third, we examine Carol Gilligan’s *feminist care ethics*, which forgo rules or consequences and base determination of the moral rightness of an act on the extent to which it embraces care and concern for others.

The students enjoy this unit and the thought games we investigate. They get a kick out of experimenting with the application of particular ethical philosophies, observing how hypothetical situations can yield such very different outcomes. We play with the lifeboat problem and the trolley scenario (two philosophical thought games that push the limits of these theories), and read some columns from the *New York Times*’ “Ethicist” about topics of interest to young people: athletes who dope, sharing one’s sexual history, cheating online in school. We also read and discuss Ursula K. LeGuin’s short story, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” a scathing and chilling critique of consequentialist thinking, which questions whether all the pleasure in the world is worth the torturous suffering of one small child.

After wandering for a few weeks through these intellectual theories and hypothetical scenarios, largely grounded in European American philosophical traditions, I present the class with Thich Nhat Hanh's "Please Call Me by My True Names," a famous poem that demands much of its readers. The poem asks us to reexamine subjectivity itself (who am "I"?), in order to approach ethical action through compassion and empathetic identification. The poem assumes different notions of "self," and necessitates a powerful empathetic identification with the other:

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
and I am the arms merchant selling deadly weapons to Uganda.¹

More and more, Western science and scholarship offer theories that align with Buddhist tenets of radical interdependence. Ecological science, quantum physics, and systems thinking are perhaps the most generative points of connection that recognize complex and contingent webs of relation, which suggest identity is enmeshed. As Nhat Hanh writes, "You are there, because I am here. We inter-are. If we do not exist, nothing exists. Subject and object, host and guest, are a part of each other."²

Buddhist ethics are largely expressed in the context of compassionate action-centered virtue. Underlying virtues such as honesty, forgiveness, and understanding are metaphysical assumptions of interdependence and dependent origination, as well as an emphasis on impermanence, which depend upon a radically different sense of the "subject" than we find in most Western ethical philosophies. Western ethical theories are ultimately grounded in the idea of a distinct self who acts in the world and impacts others. However, as Nhat Hanh writes in *Good Citizens*, engaged Buddhist ethics are quite different. They begin with "an awareness of nonduality of subject and object and of the interconnectedness of all things."³ When I work to explore this concept with students, I borrow Nhat Hanh's gentle explanation of what we see when we look at a flower—it is not just the petals and the stem, but is also the sunlight, the soil, the water, and the complex network of nourishment that sustains life. Building on this conception of interbeing, Nhat Hanh's virtue-driven ethics suggest that the cultivation of compassion, honesty, and integrity creates a path of caring for the system—a kind of emotional nourishment that softens the often-rigid lines between subject and object that have come to define much of European-American culture. As a mother, I have a visceral experience of this sense of interbeing—and have felt on a cellular level the nonduality of subject and object.

I have memories of paradigm-shifting learning experiences when I was a college student. Most of these had to do with professors who were passionate about their feminist or Marxist theories. These teachers helped me to feel pride in my family's working-class identity, and to recognize the prevalence of hierarchical thinking, trauma-related disembodiment, and the devaluation of ways of knowing and being that do not rely exclusively on rationality. Often colonial in origin, such habitual patterns can justify a domination of the other. For example, reading Virginia Woolf was intellectually liberating for me. Her stream-of-consciousness style in *The Waves* brings a fluidity in language and identity that allowed me to stretch my own sense of self and to witness the expanses of interiority. As Woolf writes, "I feel a thousand capacities spring up in me. I am arch, gay, languid, melancholy by turns. I am rooted, but I flow."⁴ I was also introduced to bell hooks and Audre Lorde, whose emphasis on intersectional identity demonstrates how important it is for people who have been silenced to courageously face fears and move from silence to language and action.

Through these teachings and an immersion in a rich humanistic tradition, I was able to see that there are different patterns of thought, and that some, historically, have been used to marginalize, silence, and oppress. Part of the reason I have "fallen into" a dedicated vocation as an educator emerges from my steadfast belief in the power there is in shifting perspective. Studying Thich Nhat Hanh's writing over the years has revealed to me a wellspring of energizing perspectives for the development of my own identity as an activist, an educator, and a creative human being. Quite simply, his work radically shifted my perspective on ethical engagement in ways that heal, connect, and align with virtues like peace and compassion. That his work shifts perspectives cannot be separated from the way in which it does so: Nhat Hanh's virtuous practice is embodied in the rhythms of his language, the directness of his diction, and the beauty of his literary figures. In this sense, I have come to appreciate how his literary style generates a poetics of care.

In writing this reflection, I find myself attempting to remember the first time I read Thich Nhat Hanh. I know the book was *Being Peace*, and I believe I found it on the bookshelf of someone I was dating at the time—almost twenty years ago. I devoured the book, and it became a staple in my library. During that time, I was experimenting with meditation at a local Tibetan Buddhist center in the village where I lived. I had just started my PhD in literary studies, and in my graduate seminars we were reading Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, and Roland Barthes, post-structural literary theorists who were greatly interested in the instability of literary texts. The lucid wisdom of *Being Peace* spoke to my heart, a type of counter-wisdom to the intimidating and sometimes ob-

scure theoretical prose that dominated my syllabi. His language was presented like a gift, like an embrace, like a warm cup of tea on a damp February morning. In graduate school, ownership of knowledge became a type of cultural commodity, but in *Being Peace* I was reminded of intellectual humility, and of the importance of understanding a larger context, beyond the university: “Guarding knowledge is not a good way to understand. Understanding means to throw away knowledge.”⁵

During that time, I was able to center myself and come into my voice through practicing meditation. I would go on to spend the next decade practicing different forms of contemplation, eventually finding a strong sangha through the practice of hatha yoga. My scholarly area of specialization became Environmental Poetics; I wrote about how important contemplative and meditative practices have been to ecopoets, from the ancient Roman poet Horace to Emily Dickinson to contemporary voices like W.S. Merwin and Jane Hirschfield. Both poetic awareness and composition are, first and foremost, practices. And rather than accolades, fame, and masterpieces, I believe what matters is one’s loyalty to stepping back into the river of words and living a life with the senses and heart open. I believe what matters is commitment to the virtues of practice, recognizing how such an approach supports and connects to the practices of others. Consider, for example, the beloved poet Mary Oliver, and her daily practice of taking walks into the woods or along a shore. In hundreds of poems she reveals the sense of inexhaustible wonder that emerges from observing and celebrating the rhythms of the natural world.

• • •

I realize that for many years, Thich Nhat Hanh’s writings have helped me live—and teach—both ethics and poetry. For me, there is no other writer whose language is so authentic and close to the source of *how things are*, in that they seamlessly bond mind and body in restorative ways. There may be no better example of this than Nhat Hanh’s love of *gathas*—short verses that can be memorized and repeated to guide thought and action. As Nhat Hanh writes in *Being Peace*, “Our mind is like a river, with many thoughts and feelings flowing along. From time to time, it is helpful to recite a gatha, a short verse, to remind us what is going on.”⁶ Gathas offer simple language that might align with rhythmic breathing to guide daily labors. Some of my favorite examples include, “Peace and joy in each toe—/ my own peace and joy” and “Washing the dishes / is like bathing a baby Buddha. / The profane is the sacred. / Everyday mind is Buddha’s mind.”⁷ Over the years, I memorized many of

Nhat Hanh's gathas and used them to channel the river of thought into clear expression amidst the daily frenzy—when putting on my socks, washing the dishes, or taking a mindful breath and slowing down to take pleasure in the joy of the images. Through the gathas, I have found a deep restorative nurturance and experienced a type of moral beauty that has fortified my spirit at the end of challenging days: “Resting in the ultimate dimension, / using snowy mountains as a pillow / and beautiful pink clouds as blankets. / Nothing is lacking.”⁸ They have reminded me that, indeed, *nothing is lacking*.

Increasingly, I am becoming interested in how language, poetic language in particular, might minister to the reader. As a teacher, I am often aware of how language might challenge the reader, requiring discipline and sustained effort. Reading Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, for example, is a particular type of labor that can be both rewarding and alienating. Poetry has a reputation for being difficult, and philosophy even more so. Though much poetry and more theory these days is crafted with daring diction, lilting language, and rhizomatic rhetoric, the complete directness of Nhat Hanh's writing has always astounded me. It has always reinforced that language itself, when stripped down to the essentials, is metaphorical and resounds in its accessibility and connectivity—and that such connectivity is restorative. This synergy speaks a profound truth about interbeing. There is a warmth in his words, a welcoming invitation, a refuge—a commitment to healing rather than separating. In a way, the language practices the virtues it seeks to centralize. Consider, for example, a poem like the “Good News”:

The good news is that your child is there before you,
and your arms are available:
hugging is possible.⁹

I cannot read these lines without feeling hugged. It's the words that hug me. Using the second person address, which intimately speaks to *me*, the reader, the repetition of the words “good news” throughout the poem provides a rhythm that counters the daily bombardment by the news cycle. I often think of this poem when I hug my beautiful children.

Semester after semester, I include Nhat Hanh's writing and teachings in my college classes. I also routinely integrate his meditations and excerpts from his writings in my “Yoga and Poetry” class, which I've been teaching every Friday morning for over a decade. His gathas and mantras often slip out in my teaching recitations without me realizing—so thoroughly has his language become a refuge for me, and a kind of script to repeat and pass on. *Breathing in, I smile, Breathing out, I release*. His language offers a praxis of sorts—a virtuous path to fortify the breath, to guide action and the evolution of ethical character. As

Nhat Hanh writes, “In Vietnamese, we translate ethics as *dao duc*, the virtuous path. *Duc* means virtue in the sense of honesty, integrity, and understanding. The word is small, but it implies a lot—forgiveness, compassion, tolerance, and a sense of common humanity—all the good things that everyone needs.”¹⁰ What I have learned through time with Nhat Hanh’s language is that his literary style does this ethical work—it practices compassion and tolerance and suggests a receptive common humanity. His language seeks to reduce suffering. The words are sometimes small, but they mean so much.

If there is an ethics in poetry, perhaps it is here—in the poet’s commitment to particular virtues. How is the poem an expression of love? Of equanimity, gratitude, compassion? How does the writer’s use of language create an inclusive and tolerant space that widens understanding? How do the words, and the pauses between them, help us breathe deliberately? How does language nurture the heart? How might educators design curricula that nourish students while simultaneously situating care and compassion as subjects of inquiry, intellectual exploration, and social justice advocacy?

This summer, I am guiding an independent study, co-created with my student Jacob, which we call “The Literature of Peace and Justice.” I will read *Being Peace* yet again, and offer it to Jacob, a bright and open-minded young person with ambitions for a diplomatic career. I’ll be curious to hear Jacob’s first impressions, and how he responds to *Being Peace* after reading a range of other texts. I will encourage him not just to think about the ideas in the text, but also to consider how Nhat Hanh’s prose makes him feel. I will ask him to reflect on what he will carry with him.

When I got married about a decade ago, the best wedding present we received was from the Blue Cliff Monastery gift shop. It was a Nhat Hanh pen and ink drawing in a floating frame, which now hangs on our dining room wall. The black calligraphy simply states, *This is it*. Three words that point to the present moment—the room, the people, and the world—precisely as it is. Three words that gently encourage me to feel gratitude for my family, my household, my community. They point to the present and to the work of taking care of what is right here. Day after day, year after year, season in and season out, these three words care for me.

JESSE CURRAN, PhD, is a mother, poet, essayist, scholar, and educator who lives in Northport, NY. Her creative and scholarly work have appeared in a number of journals including *About Place*, *Spillway*, *Leaping Clear*, *Green Humanities*, *Blueline*, *Ruminate*, *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, *The*

Trumpeter, and *Still Point Arts Quarterly*. Jesse is also certified in hatha yoga and permaculture design, two practices that inform her commitment to contemplative service and community building. She is currently serving as the Interim Director of the Honors College at SUNY Old Westbury.

NOTES

1. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Call Me by My True Names: Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2001), 72.
2. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 71.
3. Thich Nhat Hahn, *Good Citizens: Creating Enlightened Society* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2008), 2.
4. Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (New York: Harcourt, 2006), 73.
5. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987), 43.
6. Ibid, 54.
7. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment: Mindfulness Verses for Daily Living* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2006), 64, 92.
8. Thich Nhat Hanh. *Cultivating the Mind of Love* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2004) 110.
9. Nhat Hanh, *Call Me by My True Names*, 188.
10. Nhat Hanh, *Good Citizens*, 4-5.

THE ARROW

A JOURNAL OF WAKEFUL SOCIETY, CULTURE & POLITICS

Subscription Information

To subscribe to *The Arrow Journal*, please visit <https://arrow-journal.org/subscribe/>.

Account Management

To manage your subscription account, please visit <https://arrow-journal.org/account/>.

Submissions

For information about our submission guidelines, please visit <https://arrow-journal.org/submissions/>.

Content

To view past issues, of the journal please visit <https://arrow-journal.org/issues/>.

To view open access articles and essays, please visit <https://arrow-journal.org/open-access/>.

Donate

To make a donation to support our publishing, please visit <https://arrow-journal.org/donate/>.

The Arrow Journal is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. EIN 46-4728561. Donations are tax-deductible.

...

Vision

At *The Arrow Journal*, we envision an awake society in which humans create political, economic, and cultural practices and institutions that support all people in discovering their innate worth, wisdom, and compassion; in living meaningful and fulfilling lives; in celebrating and respecting human diversity; and in promoting the health, resilience, and flourishing of the more-than-human world.

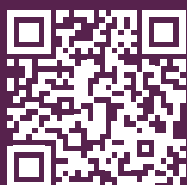
Mission

The *Arrow Journal* fosters thoughtful, nuanced, and scholarly investigation of the applications of contemplative wisdom traditions to addressing global challenges. We aim to be a tool of compassionate disruption of habitual cultural, political, and economic norms that wreak havoc on people and planet. In this way, we encourage contemplative practitioners to sharpen their understanding of how dharma calls on them to show up for suffering and injustice in the world. Simultaneously, we invite policymakers, scholars, and activists to consider alternative ways of knowing that fall outside the western mainstream as necessary and useful perspectives for meaningfully confronting the challenges we face as a global community.

What's in a name?

In many cultures, the arrow is a traditional image of bravery and precision. Within the speed and chaos of our present world, the arrow symbolizes the courage to define a clear direction for how we might benefit others and society.

Subscribe to
The Arrow Journal



THE ARROW

A Journal of Wakeful Society, Culture & Politics

VOLUME 10 | ISSUE 1 | SPRING 2023

Online ISSN 2768-055X | Print ISSN 2768-0568

