

Article

Environmental Revolution in Contemporary Buddhism: The Interbeing of Individual and Collective Consciousness in Ecology

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Abstract: A spiritual awakening is necessary to address the global ecological crisis and to bring about an environmental revolution. The aim of this paper is to bring together various passages from Thich Nhat Hanh's works that refer to a collective consciousness and environmental revolution, in order to gain some insight into what the view of contemporary Buddhism might have been on the idea of Buddhist environmentalism. This paper is divided into three main areas: the concept of interbeing, the view on the interdependent nature of individual and collective consciousness, and the various interdependent elements influencing the transformation of consciousness that could bring about an environmental revolution in ecology. In using the concept of interbeing coined by Thich Nhat Hanh, I argue that this understanding of the interconnected relationship of everything in the world will enhance the awareness of a global environmental movement for a better future, which is possible.

Keywords: Buddhist environmentalism; spiritual awakening; environmental revolution; climate change; ecology; mindfulness; interbeing; Thich Nhat Hanh; contemporary Buddhism

1. Introduction

Recent studies have shown that almost all climate scientists agree that human actions have caused climate change (Cook et al. 2016; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change n.d.). The effects from global climate change are significant, and they are a grave and urgent reality, considering the markedly increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events throughout the world, rising global temperatures and sea levels, changes in agricultural ecosystem and precipitation patterns, more frequent droughts and heat waves, more intense and stronger hurricanes, and so forth. Over the last 50 years, human activities have contributed to global warming, and many international scientific organizations have published statements to endorse this position¹. However, this consensus continues to be questioned.

On 1 June 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump announced the withdrawal of the United States from the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change dealing with greenhouse gas emission mitigation, adaptation, and finance, which was supported by 196 other countries during the United Nations Climate Change Conference in 2015². He appears to be skeptical about climate change, and argues that climate scientists and foreign bureaucrats have their political agenda and that the Paris Agreement will undermine the U.S. economy. The next day, editorial boards from major newspaper agencies praised

¹ The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has listed around 200 global scientific organizations claiming that climate change is real and is human-induced (NASA n.d.a & n.d.b).

² (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change n.d.; The White House 2017b).

his decision³. However, I must highlight here that his view does not represent the United States and the whole world; his case is merely an example taken to illustrate that climate change has been framed as a political issue instead of a scientific and existential one. In fact, there are many ways in which the Americans, below the federal level, are adhering to the Paris Agreement, for instance, in the actions of California Governor Jerry Brown⁴ and other initiatives like the U.S. Climate Alliance.⁵

The climate issue has obviously been exploited to serve political purposes and to build a coalition of support. The consensus or non-consensus on human activities that cause climate change reflect political affinities and policy preferences over social commitments. Many surveys were conducted on American perceptions towards climate change, and religious belief is one of the differentiators among the heavyweights of partisanship and ideology⁶. The surveys done in United States may not be representative of the whole world, but they do provide a basic understanding of the general perceptions on climate change, based on the belief that the sufferings of all human beings regardless of nationalities and races are the same. This is notwithstanding the fact that those least responsible for climate change are the most vulnerable and affected if global warming is not averted. This is seen for instance in the risk of disappearance of the low-lying states in the Maldives in the Indian Ocean, and Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands in the Pacific Ocean (Park 2011). Thus, I believe a collective awakening in the sense of an understanding on the interdependent relationship between living beings and the environment, which is also fundamental to the sciences of biological ecology (Barash 2013) and quantum physics (Ricard and Trinh 2001), is necessary to promote Buddhist environmentalism in addressing global ecological crisis.

Earlier studies have used the greenhouse effect and global warming synonymously with climate change. I will use the latter term for consistency throughout this paper. I must acknowledge that the terminology may cause different perceptions when public awareness and opinion regarding this issue are perpetually affected by education and media coverage. Global warming is the major anthropogenic cause of climate change, and climate change accelerates threats to other social and natural systems. Governments and agencies in the world play a key role in initiating strategies and actions towards climate-resilient pathways for more sustainable development.

Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh has conducted various retreats and talks for environmentalists and can be considered as an environmentalist. He has been hailed as a progressive reformer, a peace activist, a global spiritual leader, a creative artist, a prolific poet, and an accomplished scholar with more than 100 titles published by different publishers. Christiana Figueres from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), who led the Paris climate negotiations in the world's climate fight, credits the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh in helping her to "develop the strength, wisdom and compassion needed to forge the unprecedented deal backed by 196 countries" (Confino 2016).

There are many discussions about global climate change by other Buddhists from different Buddhist traditions (Lama 2005; Stanley et al. 2009). There are other sources that consider Buddhist ecology and environmentalism in general, like Johnson (2006) and Sponsel (2012, chap. 5). I have chosen Thich Nhat Hanh for this paper as he has translated his understanding from the Three Main Streams of Buddhism⁷, reconciled the complexity in these teachings into the concept of interbeing, and offered practical applications of mindfulness in daily life as an efficacious tool for the spiritual goal of self-transformation. I believe his ideas and works reflect the situations and the needs of this contemporary world.

³ (The White House 2017a).

⁴ (Gardels 2018).

⁵ Available in <https://www.usclimatealliance.org/>.

⁶ (Langer Research Associates 2018).

⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh classifies the development of Indian Buddhist Philosophy and doctrine from the time of the Buddha to about the 7th century CE into three periods according to the periods for the transmission of Buddha's teachings. The first stream of Buddhism is original or source Buddhism, and refers to all the teachings Buddha gave during his lifetime. The second stream of Buddhism refers to many-schools Buddhism that branched out more than a century after Buddha's *parinirvāna*. The third stream of Buddhism is Mahayana Buddhism, which emerged to promote the Bodhisattva Ideal during the 1st and 2nd century CE (Thich 2006, p. 247).

The aim of this paper is to draw on Thich Nhat Hanh's ideas and works to gain some insight into: (1) the contemporary presentation on the concept of interbeing, (2) the view of contemporary Buddhism on the interdependent nature of individual and collective consciousness with the Earth, and (3) how the various interdependent elements could come together in influencing the transformation of consciousness to bring about environment revolution.

2. The Concept of Interbeing in Contemporary World

The creation of interbeing is mainly used by Thich Nhat Hanh to explain all Buddha's teachings in an easily accessible contemporary way. The meaning of interbeing is the same as **Interdependent Co-Arising** or **Dependent Co-Arising** or **Dependent Origination** (*pratītyasamutpāda* in Sanskrit, *paṭiccasamuppāda* in Pāli) (Thich 1999, p. 225). The Law of Dependent Origination describes the dynamic relationships between the roots of motivation, afflictions and sufferings, and the interaction of the 12 links (*Nidāna*)⁸ in two-dimensional cause and effect:

- (1) Ignorance
- (2) *Karmic* formations (mental impressions)
- (3) Consciousness
- (4) Name-and-form (mind and body)
- (5) Six sense bases
- (6) Contact
- (7) Feeling
- (8) Craving
- (9) Grasping
- (10) Becoming (*karmic* force)
- (11) Rebirth
- (12) Aging and death

For instance, the *karmic* formations of body, speech, and mind formed in the past condition the arising of consciousness or mental awareness in the present. The *karmic* force of intentional action brings about consequences and keeps the cycle of *samsara* turning. As Buddha aptly puts it in *The Great Chapter: Penetrative* (Aṅguttara Nikāya⁹ *Sūta* 6.63), "It is volition, bhikkhus, that I call *kamma*. For having willed, one acts by body, speech, or mind" (Bodhi 2012, p. 963). It is necessary to highlight that the early Buddhist texts mention that *kamma* does not wholly determine results. There are various conditions that may instigate the process due to the characteristics of non-self and impermanence. Hence, the cause–condition–effect relationship which can be expressed in the process of Dependent Origination answers the continuity of existence that experiences the *karmic* effects.

The simplest way to express the above Interdependent Co-arising process is through an important formula below. It is also formulated in two dimensions with the conditions that lead one factor to the arising of another, and the conditions that lead to their cessation. This key principle can be expressed in a simple formula as in many *sūta*¹⁰, for instance, in *Enmity* (Aṅguttara Nikāya *Sūta* 10.92):

⁸ The 12 links in Buddhism consist of 12 interdependent causes and effects that illustrate the cause of rebirth and suffering with a view to help one get out from the rebirth and suffering cycle.

⁹ Aṅguttara Nikāya (Bodhi 2012) is a collection of numerical discourses given by the Buddha. It is one of the five *nikāya* or collection of Buddhist scriptures in the *Sūta Piṭaka* as defined in footnote 10.

¹⁰ *Sūta* (Pāli; Sanskrit, *sūtra*) refers to the original discourses of the Buddha preserved in Pāli and Sanskrit, as well as Chinese and Tibetan translations. They are categorized under *Sūta Piṭaka* (Basket of Teachings) in the *Tipiṭaka* (The Three Baskets of Teachings or the Buddhist Canon), where the other two are: *Vinaya Piṭaka* (the rules of conduct for the community of monks and nuns) and *Abhidharma Piṭaka* (the commentaries on Buddha's teachings). Today there are two full versions on the collections of Buddha's discourses: (1) *Nikāya*, the Pāli version that belongs to the Southern Transmission, and (2) *Āgama*, the Chinese version that belongs to the Northern Transmission. The Pāli *Nikāya* is written down in Sri Lanka, translated into English, and currently readily available, whereas the translations of Chinese and Tibetan versions into English are not yet

When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises.

When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.

(Bodhi 2012, p. 1463)

Interestingly, though the 12 links and its three lifetimes¹¹ interpretation have become the standard version for most Indian Buddhist schools, there are still variations of 6 links (see *Dīgha Nikāya*¹² *Sūta* 1), 9 links (see *Dīgha Nikāya Sūta* 9), and 10 links (see *Dīgha Nikāya Sūta* 14) found in early Buddhist texts. To refresh the teachings suitable for contemporary world, Thich Nhat Hanh invented the term “inter-be” by combining “inter” and “to be” (Thich 1996, p. 61) to interpret the interpenetration and interdependent and interconnected relationship of everything in the reality and in the world. The essential nature of interbeing is the understanding of “this is, because that is” (Thich 2012, p. 428). In his words:

In early Buddhism, we speak of Interdependent Co-arising. In latter Buddhism, we use the words interbeing and interpenetration. The terminology is different, but the meaning is the same. (Thich 1999, p. 225)

His interpretation of interbeing is influenced by the thoughts of Nāgārjuna¹³ where he links it with emptiness¹⁴ in *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra*¹⁵ or *A Treatise on the Perfection of Great Wisdom Sūtra* (Thich 1999, p. 226):

When we understand impermanence and non-self, we understand Interdependence Co-Arising. In this *gatha*, Nāgārjuna links Interdependent Co-Arising with emptiness: All phenomena that arise interdependently, I say that they are empty. Words come to an end, because their message is false. Words come to an end, because there is a Middle Way. (Thich 1999, p. 226)

The invention of this new word illustrates the dynamic and open approach in understanding the reality and responding to the world of contemporary times. He integrates all the teachings in Buddhism with this concept of interbeing by connecting every existence in the cosmos to explain how one can apply Dharma¹⁶ in daily life. Hence, in replacing the terminology of Interdependent Co-Arising with interbeing, this new term represents his realization that all the teachings in Buddhism are in the nature of interbeing in ultimate reality; at the same time, this new term communicates the concept of emptiness in which nothing can exist independently by itself. He illustrates with examples:

For a table to exist, we need wood, a carpenter, time, skillfulness, and many other causes. And each of these causes needs other causes to be. The wood needs the forest, the sunshine, the rain, and so on. The carpenter needs his parents, breakfast, fresh air, and so on. The each

completely done. The Chinese *Āgama* is translated from Sanskrit or Middle Indo Aryan dialects into Chinese around the end of the 4th century CE. The Buddha's discourses are arranged according to length.

¹¹ Ignorance and mental formations belong to past life; consciousness, name-and-form, six-sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, and becoming belong to present life; and birth, old age, and death belong to future life.

¹² *Dīgha Nikāya* (Walshe 1995) is a collection of long discourses given by the Buddha. It is one of the five *nikāya* or collection of Buddhist scriptures in the *Sūta Pitaka* as defined in footnote 10.

¹³ Nāgārjuna (CE 150–250) is one of the greatest exponents of Early Mahāyāna Buddhism, and set forth emptiness and brings together concepts like non-self and Interdependent Co-arising as basic Buddhist tenets.

¹⁴ Emptiness in Buddhism does not mean nothingness. It is empty of a separate existence—self; it is the Middle Way of existence and non-existence. When one realizes emptiness, one realizes the interdependence, interconnectedness, and interpenetration nature of everything.

¹⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh's reference is from Étienne Lamotte (1949), *Le Traité de La Grande Vertu de Sagesse* (Louvain, Belgium: Institut Orientaliste).

¹⁶ *Dharma* (Sanskrit; Pāli, Dhamma) refers to the teachings of the Buddha. The historical Buddha (The Enlightened One) was called Siddhārtha Gotama or Sakyamuni Buddha, who attained Perfect Enlightenment and was liberated from the cycle of birth and death. The Buddhist system consists of The Three Jewels—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

of those things, in turn, has to be brought about by other conditions. If we continue to look in this way, we'll see that nothing has been left out. Everything in the cosmos has come together to bring us this table. Looking deeply at the sunshine, the leaves of the tree, and the clouds, we can see the table. The one can be seen in the all, and the all can be seen in the one. One cause is never enough to bring about an effect. A cause must, at the same time, be an effect, and every effect must also be the cause of something else. Cause and effect inter-are. The idea of a first or only cause, something that does not itself need a cause, cannot be applied. (Thich 1999, p. 222)

The other implication of his understanding on interbeing is a protest against social injustice and discrimination. To him, the objective of his Engaged Buddhism¹⁷ is to provide an expression for spiritual practice as a basis for all actions and that's why he advocates that all social works are for personal and social transformations. The social workers who give help and the recipients of help are partners in common tasks (Thich 1987).

For instance, he asserts that one should have gratitude in sharing with the poor because helping them is in fact helping oneself to cultivate for liberation¹⁸. His understanding is that by helping others, one can overcome the perception of "self" in the attitude or mind they have when giving help or receiving help from each other. He advocates the ideal attitude is to perform without any attachment to any form so that one can realize the emptiness of self, in which everything is interdependent on each other.

This understanding can be seen from his engagement with the West, he often reminds people to understand their culture and tradition to discover traditional spiritual values that are Dharmic in their content. Since flowers are made up of the non-flower elements of sun, rain, consciousness, etc., he contends that Dharma is not different from non-Dharma since Dharma is not separated from other teachings in the society, and that "there are spiritual values in Western culture and tradition—Judaism, Islam and Christianity—that share the essence of Buddhism" (Thich 1992, pp. 63–64).

Thich Nhat Hanh advocates that the basis of all Right Action includes every element in the Noble Eightfold Path¹⁹ that rests in Right Mindfulness (Thich 1999, pp. 94–98). He encourages the contemplation on the interbeing of subject and object of the mind. The vision of interbeing is based on the insight that everything is connected to everything else:

Everything in the cosmos is the object of our perception, and, as such, it does not exist only outside of us but also within us. If we look deeply at the bud on the tree, we will see its nature. It may be very small, but it is also like the earth, because the leaf in the bud will become part of the earth. If we see the truth of one thing in the cosmos, we see the nature of the cosmos. Because of our mindfulness, our deep looking, the nature of the cosmos will reveal itself. It is not a matter of imposing our ideas on the nature of the cosmos. (Thich 1999, p. 81)

There's a debate among the scholars in Buddhism on whether the Buddha raised concerns about environmental problems, and whether the Buddhist Canon encompasses the environmental ethics (James and Cooper 2007, pp. 93–96; Harris 1991, p. 101–14). Harris (1994, pp. 45–56) even concluded that the Buddhist's causal process has made the environmental ethic impossible and the Buddhist Canon does not support any related presuppositions. However, there is no agreed principle for a

¹⁷ Engaged Buddhism, which has its roots and existence since long time in the history of Buddhism, emphasizes practicing Dharma in daily life.

¹⁸ Liberation in Buddhism means freedom from sufferings and attaining the supreme state of perfection (awakening or enlightenment). This liberation from the cycles of rebirth or the achievement of *nirvāṇa* or *nibbāna* is the goal of Buddhist cultivation.

¹⁹ The Noble Eightfold Path is the Middle Path that leads to liberation or Enlightenment. It is characterized by the following eight factors: (1) Right Understanding, (2) Right Thoughts, (3) Right Speech, (4) Right Action, (5) Right Livelihood, (6) Right Effort, (7) Right Mindfulness, and (8) Right Concentration.

meaningful analysis on this and the debate remains abstract. As opposed to his understanding, this paper points out the important and profound implications of interbeing to demonstrate that ecology is intrinsic to Buddhism and Buddha is an environmentalist. Such ideas do provide an opportunity for Buddhism to contribute a solution to the ecological issue on climate change. It also reflects his belief that the solution to the ecological problems is a transformation of our consciousness related to our notion of happiness and lifestyle (Thich 2014).

In Buddhism, the conventional labelling in the manifestation of formation or objects from our cognition or concept is not an unchanging entity or reality. To understand the ultimate reality of it, one has to investigate the nature of interbeing where the presence is a combination of many factors and conditions. “Everything contains everything else” and “everything penetrates everything else”—this is the teaching of interbeing (Thich 2007, pp. 59–60). This paradigm shift requires the practice of **mindfulness** to realize the nature of interbeing, with the awareness that Earth and all beings are interconnected and indivisible as a single entity, and cultivation of the **insight** that one’s consciousness is also the consciousness of the Earth. He added:

At the same time, we lose ourselves in buying and consuming things we don’t need, putting a heavy strain on both our bodies and the planet. Yet much of what we drink, eat, watch, read, or listen to is toxic, polluting our bodies and minds with violence, anger, fear, and despair. As well as the carbon dioxide pollution of our physical environment, we can speak of the spiritual pollution of our human environment: the toxic and destructive atmosphere we’re creating with our way of consuming. We need to consume in such a way that truly sustains our peace and happiness. Only when we’re sustainable as humans will our civilization become sustainable. (Thich 2014, p. 11)

Thich Nhat Hanh believes that a simpler lifestyle and a plant-based diet offer solution for a more sustainable future. One of his projects is the organic vegetable farms setup in all Plum Village centers to promote mindfulness, community building, and sustainability, and to organize retreats and workshops to practice, heal, and reconnect with Mother Earth through mindful agriculture. His other projects for his monastic community include a commitment to reduce gas consumption and usage of car by 50 percent, to observe “No Car Day”²⁰ once weekly, and to reduce ecological footprints through the “Earth Peace Treaty Commitment Sheet”, which could serve as a model for other communities (Thich 2004b). He emphasizes that “only love can save us from climate change”, and only through understanding the interconnectedness (interbeing) of everything can we protect Mother Earth with our love and compassion (Confino 2013).

In continuation from Thich Nhat Hanh’s works on the nature of interbeing, I will further draw on his passages to discuss the interbeing of collective consciousness that reflect his revolutionary idea on spiritual environmentalism, and how the realization of interbeing can deal with climate change.

3. The Interbeing of Individual and Collective Consciousness with the Earth

In Buddhism, a human being is made up of body and mind in the form of Five Aggregates—form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Thich Nhat Hanh regards the body and mind as interconnecting with nature and ecology as the embodiment of the whole cosmology:

- (1) The whole cosmos is our body, and we are also the body of the entire cosmos. (Thich 2006, pp. 43–44)
- (2) The Five Aggregates contain everything—both inside us and outside of us, in nature and in society. (Thich 1999, p. 176)

²⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh proposed the practice of “No Car Day” across the globe during his speech to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Paris in 2006 (Plum Village 2006).

- (3) Consciousness is, at the same time, both collective and individual. The collective is made of the individual, and the individual is made of the collective. (Thich 1999, p. 181)

In *Love Letter to the Earth* (Thich 2013) and public talks (Thich 2014), Thich Nhat Hanh's common message is a reminder for all to see environment and ourselves as a single inseparable entity, and the realization of the nature of interbeing in everything as a universal responsibility that can deal with climate change:

We have been talking about the environment as something different from us, but we are the environment. The non-human elements are our environments and we are the environment of non-human elements. So we are one with the environment, we are the environment, we are the Earth. The Earth has the capacity to restore balance. Sometimes many, many species have to disappear in order for the balance to be restored.

In 2014, he published a statement on climate change for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), where he talked about our relationship with each other and with the Earth:

This beautiful, bounteous, life-giving planet we call Earth has given birth to each one of us, and each one of us carries the Earth within every cell of our body [. . .]

Whatever nationality or culture we belong to, whatever religion we follow, whether we're Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Jews, or atheists, we can all see that the Earth is not inert matter. She is a great being, who has herself given birth to many other great beings—including buddhas and bodhisattvas, prophets and saints, sons and daughters of God and humankind. The Earth is a loving mother, nurturing and protecting all peoples and all species without discrimination.

When you realize the Earth is so much more than simply your environment, you'll be moved to protect her in the same way as you would yourself. This is the kind of awareness, the kind of awakening that we need, and the future of the planet depends on whether we're able to cultivate this insight or not. The Earth and all species on Earth are in real danger. Yet if we can develop a deep relationship with the Earth, we'll have enough love, strength and awakening in order to change our way of life. (Plum Village 2015)

Thich Nhat Hanh derives his understanding of interbeing from the teachings that **human beings and non-human beings are interconnected**, so if there is pollution in the environment, the vegetables and minerals will be affected, and human survival will be threatened. We live in a world of collective mental construction where all manifestations come from consciousness (Thich 2006, p. 192). He argues that since human beings are made up of non-human elements, the whole ecological system, which includes the animal, air, water, forest, mountain and ocean, needs to be protected as all are each a cell in the body of the planet (Thich 1992, pp. 40; Thich 1999, p. 126):

We put a lot of energy into advancing technology in order to serve our lives better, and we exploit the non-human elements, such as the forests, rivers, and the oceans, in order to do so. But as we pollute and destroy ourselves as well. The results of discriminating between human and non-human are global warming, pollution, and emergence of many strange diseases. In order to protect ourselves, we must protect the non-human elements. This fundamental understanding is needed if we want to protect our planet and ourselves. (Thich 1992, p. 39)

He derived his insight on the interconnectedness of all beings and the cosmos from *Prajñāpāramitā Diamond Sūtra*²¹, where the Buddha mentions that all conditioned *dharma*s (composed things) are like a

²¹ *Prajñāpāramitā Diamond Sūtra* is a *Mahāyāna sūtra* from the collections of *Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) *sūtras*. It focuses on the teachings of emptiness in all things and is an essential *sūtra* for Chan (Zen) Buddhism.

dream, magical things, water bubbles, mere images, a drop of dew, a flash of lightning, and that is how one should observe and meditate on them. Accordingly, the antidote to this is to apply mindfulness and concentration energy to understand the nature of interbeing, and finally realize insight on the true nature of absolute reality with deepened awareness and understanding without conceptual ideas including interbeing and non-self.

His inspiration of interbeing is also derived from three main themes in the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*²²:

- (1) Everything is a product of the mind
- (2) Everything is a mental construct
- (3) Everything goes beyond time and space

The *Avataṃsaka* realm is believed to be another creation of the mind (Thich 1996, p. 92), and the whole universe is condensed in one grain of dust, where one can see the whole universe. The two important sentences in the *sūtra* that illustrates the concept of interbeing are “one is everything, everything is one” and “the whole cosmos can be contained in a single grain of dust”²³. When viewed in this light, the Earth can be seen as one body of living organism, everything is in the cosmos. He explains:

In the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, the cosmos is described as a lotus flower with many petals, each of which is also a full lotus, the petals of which are also a full lotus, and so on. Whenever we see one thing in the *Avataṃsaka* realm, we always find everything in the cosmos in it. The notions small and large do not exist here. When we stand facing the ocean, we may feel small and insignificant compared with the ocean. When we contemplate a sky filled with stars, we may have the impression we are nothing at all. But the thought that the cosmos is big and we are small is just an idea. It belongs to our mind and not to reality. When we look deeply at a flower, we can see the whole cosmos contained in it. One petal is the whole of the flower and the whole of the universe. In one speck of dust are many Buddha lands. When we practice that kind of meditation, our ideas of small, large, one and many will vanish. (Thich 1996, p. 88)

The Hua Yan Sect (华严宗) in China was founded by Du Shun (CE 557–640), based on *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (Cleary 1993), and had profound influence on the later Chan school²⁴. It integrates the teachings of *Mādhyamika*'s²⁵ emptiness with *Yogācāra*'s²⁶ “mind only” in its *sūtra*. It depicts the interconnectedness and interpenetration of all things in space and at all levels of reality, emphasizing “All in One, One in All”. Examples are the analogies of “the drop of water at one with the sea” and “the grain of sand that contains the universe” (Dumoulin 1994, p. 47). Thich Nhat Hanh introduced *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, which was written after 1st century CE by a number of great enlightened teachers, and developed slowly, only being completed the 5th century CE. It gave birth to the Hua Yan Sect in Chinese Buddhism around the 7th century CE, as “a jewel of humanity” because it illustrates the profound concept of the interbeing nature in which one can see the whole universe as represented in a multitude of elements in a flower.

²² *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* is a *Mahāyāna sūtra* that reveals the evolution of thoughts from Early Buddhism to Mahāyāna Buddhism. It teaches the interconnectedness of all things in the universe from the point of view of Enlightenment.

²³ This is according to a transcript talk on “Taking Refuge” by Thich Nhat Hanh (Thich 1998).

²⁴ Both the Hua Yan and Tian Tai Sect (天台宗 Lotus School) in China focus on the philosophical syntheses of the teachings on different texts and a range of practices. The other two practice-oriented schools select some texts to study and limit their practices to a few: these are the Jing Tu Sect (净土宗 Pure Land) and the Chan Sect (禅宗 *dhyāna* in Sanskrit, *jhāna* in Pāli, Zen in Japanese).

²⁵ *Mādhyamika* is a school of Mahāyāna Buddhism that focuses on the teachings of the Middle Way founded by Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva. The Middle Way, in relation to the existence or non-existence of things, teaches that all phenomena arise depending on the conditions and are empty of a permanent self.

²⁶ *Yogācāra* is a school of Mahāyāna Buddhism that focuses on the teachings of the Knowing or Mind-Only founded by Maitreyanātha, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu. The name implies the application of yoga. The concept of Knowing explains that all phenomena exist only as the processes of “knowing” and all experiences are “mind only”.

Based on his understanding of contemporary times, he integrates all the Buddhist teachings with this concept of interbeing to reconcile on any differences that may arise and to focus on mindfulness practice in daily life. This represents his realization that all the teachings in Buddhism are in the nature of interbeing in the ultimate reality.

Thich Nhat Hanh developed a hermeneutic interpretative approach to the canonical literatures, for instance, in explaining his insight of impermanence and non-self. He explains impermanence from the perspective of time—time is impermanent because nothing can remain the same for two consecutive moments. He explains non-self from the perspective of space, where one is made of elements which is not him or her, and that one can realize a constantly changing “self” (Thich 1999, p. 132). He is able to draw heavily on Theravada, Mahayana, and Zen teachings to present sophisticated concepts in a simple way for the modern Buddhists to connect with daily life. Thich Nhat Hanh believes that to understand and realize all Buddhist teachings, including the Three Marks of Existence or Three Dharma Seals (impermanence, non-self and *nirvāṇa*²⁷), one needs to see them in the light of interbeing, where all teachings are based on Interdependent Co-Arising, and if any teaching is not in accordance with Interdependent Co-Arising, then it cannot be Buddha’s teachings (Thich 1999, pp. 226, 140–41).

4. The Transformation of Consciousness for the Environment Revolution in Ecology

In the history of Buddhism, it is told that the Buddha expounded the first discourse at Sarnath on the Middle Path of avoiding the two extremes of self-mortification and self-indulgence. He explained it as the Noble Eightfold Path under the Fourth Noble Truth (Path towards the End of Sufferings)²⁸. The Noble Eightfold Path can be analyzed in terms of the three categories of morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). With the cultivation of the two qualities of mind in *vipassanā* meditation (mindfulness and concentration), it will give rise to insight and finally lead to liberation.

Buddhists believe that the practice of mindfulness and concentration can generate deep insights which brings liberation. Mindfulness is a tool for awakening and awareness on the nature of things. All the methods taught by the Buddha come together into the way of mindfulness, and hence, mindfulness as the way to mind’s liberation is fundamental of Buddhist meditation (Kabat-Zinn 2003; Ñyāṇaponika 1962). Mindfulness means awareness and looking deeply (Thich 2012, p. 117). *Right mindfulness* (*samyak smṛiti* in Sanskrit, *sammā sati* in Pāli) is considered as “the heart of the Buddha’s teachings” and it is possible to live deeply in mindfulness that could penetrate in all aspects of one’s life (Kabat-Zinn 2003; Thich 1999, p. 64; Ñyāṇaponika 1962).

In Buddhism, the whole spiritual process has a three-tiered structure of morality, concentration and wisdom, where morality is the basis of all trainings. These three practices, from applying mindfulness in everything to producing the power of concentration, and to bringing forth deep insight, could lead one to freedom from sufferings. The Buddhist’s theory of motivation rests on three basic roots of human nature: greed, hatred and delusion. An action could be motivated by these three unwholesome²⁹ forms in different combination. Basically, wholesome actions are non-attachment,

²⁷ The Three Marks of Existence in Buddhism refer to the three characteristics of all existence. It is necessary to point out that his teachings on the Three Marks of Existence here are based on the Northern Transmission, instead of the Southern Transmission where impermanence, non-self, and suffering are the three marks or seals as in the *Dhammāpāda* verses 277, 278, and 279 (Dhammānanda 1992, p. 502–4). He thinks that *nirvāṇa* is used in Mahāyāna Buddhism because suffering is a feeling but *nirvāṇa* is the true nature which is freedom from suffering and extinction of all concepts or ideas. He proves that this is stated four times in the *Samyukta Āgama* (Sūtra 262 Taisho 99) of the Northern Transmission (Thich 1999, p. 22) and by Nāgārjuna in *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Śāstra*.

²⁸ The Four Noble Truths are discovered, understood, and realized by the Buddha. They represent the reflective path for spiritual development, which is to learn and study (*pariyatti*), apply and practice (*paṭipatti*), and realize the *dhamma* (*paṭivedha*). The four truths are: (1) there is suffering, (2) there is a cause of suffering, (3) there is an end of suffering, and (4) there is a path out of suffering.

²⁹ Wholesome or unwholesome mental factors in Buddhism are dependent on the roles they play in relation to the acts they give rise to.

loving-kindness, and right understanding. Cultivation of the positive qualities are the antidotes to the negativities. Thus, only when the wholesome roots of motivation are uncovered and cultivated can positive transformations happen.

With the vision of interbeing, Thich Nhat Hanh has converted the Five Buddhist Precepts³⁰, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path into some concrete training and techniques for practice to lead one towards inner transformation, mostly adapted to modern situation and western culture suitable for westerners. He offers both the initiated and uninitiated a mindfulness guide in the practice for happiness, integrating worldly activities as a necessary part of the meditation path. He advocates that meditation practice should be integrated with all activities and mindful living as a way of life. He makes no distinction between spiritual activities and worldly activities when he determines that one needs to establish mindfulness in every moment of daily life. He extends this understanding further from activities associated with social development to art and culture. He has translated his insight and compassion in the presentation of artistic forms through his Zen meditation practice. One could derive insights from the core Buddhist teachings by drawing examples from his poems and calligraphies. Through innovative mindfulness practices, he strategically makes interbeing understandable across each culture, making Dharma relevant, accessible, and practical across cultures and suitable for the contemporary world.

For the traditional Buddhist Five Precepts, he reformulates the universal code of ethics as the “Five Mindfulness Training” to offer a more concrete way to practice from the traditional Buddhist Five Precepts. He rewords³¹ “*sīla*” as “training”, instead of “precept” because the intention for this translation is to cultivate non-harmful ways of acting and thinking in focusing the practitioners’ awareness on inner determination, rather than external authority (Thich 1997, p. 125). Thich Nhat Hanh elaborates that *sīla* also means mindfulness since the essence of the precepts is mindfulness. He compares the *Vinaya* (the rules of conduct for the community of monks and nuns) with Noble Eightfold Path and discovers that precept is mindfulness itself, and to him, the basis of precept must be mindfulness to be an authentic precept (Thich 2004a, p. 12). Again, the language and concept applied here reflect a certain extent of environmental ethics in the world of interbeing:

1st Mindfulness Training: Reverence For Life

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating the insight of interbeing and compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, or in my way of life. Seeing that harmful actions arise from anger, fear, greed, and intolerance, which in turn come from dualistic and discriminative thinking, I will cultivate openness, non-discrimination, and non-attachment to views in order to transform violence, fanaticism, and dogmatism in myself and in the world. (Thich 2009, p. 36)

I need to mention that *Prajñāpāramitā Diamond Sūtra* and *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* have deeply influenced his environmental and ecological outlooks in which everything is interconnected; he believes that protecting the Earth is protecting our future (Thich 1996, p. 89). He discovered *Prajñāpāramitā Diamond*

³⁰ The Five Buddhist Precepts are the five rules of training to abstain from (1) killing living beings, (2) stealing, (3) sexual misconduct, (4) lying, and (5) intoxication.

³¹ According to the Plum Village website, there are over 200 resident monastics in Plum Village France out of around 600 monastics in all the centers in the world. There are up to 8000 international visitors to Plum Village France every year to learn the art of mindful living, making it the largest and most active Buddhist monastery in the West. Every year there are special retreats for different professions from businessmen to teachers, as well as veterans, Israelis, and Palestinians. In each summer retreat, there are about 2000–3000 participants from at least forty countries. There are more than 45,000 participants yearly in the United States and Europe. In the last two decades, more than 100,000 retreatants have made a commitment to follow the Five Mindfulness Trainings (5MTs). In 2008, Thich Nhat Hanh started an international Wake Up movement to train young people in mindful living to take care of themselves and nourish happiness to build a more compassionate society. Thousands of young people from 18 to 35 years old gathered together to follow the 5MT.

Sūtra as the essential teaching of the Buddha for protecting the environment, the Buddha's teaching of non-self means man is made of non-man elements; if we destroy non-man elements, we destroy ourselves (Fritzgerald 1995, p. 27). This resonates perfectly with his goal of incorporating the concept of interbeing in formulating the training for mental cultivation.

In addition, the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings (14MTs) formulated by him includes the Ten Wholesome Deeds³² and the Noble Eightfold Path. The first seven trainings focus on mind-related trainings. All teachings and trainings begin with Right View and Right Thought. The eighth and ninth precepts deal with speech-related trainings, and the last five deal with body-related training³³. All 14MTs interconnect with each other in exercises to gain insight, for instance:

11th Mindfulness Training: Right Livelihood

Aware that great violence and injustice have been done to our environment and society, we are committed not to live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. We will do our best to select a livelihood that contributes to the wellbeing of all species on earth and helps realize our ideal of understanding and compassion. Aware of economic, political, and social realities around the world, as well as our interrelationship with the ecosystem, we are determined to behave responsibly as consumers and as citizens. We will not invest in or purchase from companies that contribute to the depletion of natural resources, harm the earth, or deprive others of their chance to live. (Thich 2009, p. 125)

I can draw a parallel between the 11th MT and the Right Livelihood in the Noble Eightfold Path, since both have a goal to practice a vocation that does not harm physically or morally the nature and humans. The work is connected to the practice of the Way to Enlightenment, and thus, it reveals Thich Nhat Hanh's insights that the practice in daily life has to nourish one's understanding and compassion. His thought on collective *karma* is expressed through "our interrelationship with the ecosystem" where individual *karma* is attached with the collective *karma*. In view of engaging oneself to create more opportunities for Right Livelihood, one possible way is to create new jobs to replace the manufacturing of arms and weapons and its related industries, which have caused much destruction and death in the world.

With the belief that understanding our mind can make the practice of meditation easier, Thich Nhat Hanh creates *Fifty Verses* (Thich 2006) to describe the nature of mind and to use it for practice.

Verse Thirteen

Seeds and formations

both have the nature of interbeing and interpenetration.

The one is produced by the all.

The all is dependent on the one. (Thich 2006, p. 81)

In the world of *Avataṃsaka*, "the one is present in the all, and the all is present in the one". This verse indicates the influence of *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* in Manifestation Only³⁴ teachings. Fa Zang (CE 643–712), who is the third of the five patriarchs in the Hua Yan Sect, was the first to include *Avataṃsaka*

³² The Ten Wholesome deeds in Buddhism refer to the abandoning of three negative conducts of the body, four negative conducts of the speech, and three negative conducts of the mind: (1) no killing, (2) no stealing, (3) no sexual misconduct, (4) no lying, (5) no divisive speech, (6) no harsh speech, (7) no frivolous speech, (8) no covetousness, (9) no ill-will, and (10) no wrong view.

³³ The information is briefed in his Dharma talks and some books, like *Interbeing* (1987), *Friends on the Path* (Thich 2002) and the updated version are available in <http://www.orderofinterbeing.org/for-the-aspirant/fourteen-mindfulness-trainings/>.

³⁴ In continuation of *Vijñaptimātra* teachings, Thich Nhat Hanh prefers to use "Manifestation Only" for his work on the nature of mind, instead of Mind Only or Consciousness Only which he believes both are often mistaken as Idealism (Thich 2006, p. 23 footnote#2).

teachings into the nature of mind in his *Notes on the Mystical in the Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (Thich 2006, p. 81). Accordingly, the infinitely small contains the infinitely large, and the infinitely large contains the infinitely small, their natures are the same. Similarly, one mental formation contains all other mental formations; one seed contains all other seeds. With this understanding, Thich Nhat Hanh mentions that the seed of anger contains the seed of love, and the seed of delusion contains the seed of Enlightenment; they are not separated and hence making transformation possible (Thich 2006, p. 168).

The idea of interbeing is to get rid of dualism and relativity, and to see the whole world as one single entity. In a similar vein, scientific evidence has pointed to the ancient belief that Mother Earth is a single living organism with both living and non-living beings co-existing in a vast and complex self-regulatory system (Lovelock 2000a; Lovelock et al. 2016; Mitchell 2008). Lovelock (2000b, p. 25) explains that the “evolution of organisms is so closely coupled with the evolution of their physical and chemical environment that together they constitute a single evolutionary process, which is self-regulating. Thus, the climate, the composition of the rocks, the air, and the oceans are not just given by geology; they are also the consequences of the presence of life”. He concluded that “for each of our different actions there are only consequences” (Lovelock 2000a, p. 132), illustrating again that Buddhism and Science have parallel thinking.

In the above Verse Thirteen, Thich Nhat Hanh uses the metaphor *indra net*³⁵ in the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* to describe the interconnectedness of the universe, and flower to illustrate the principle of interbeing. He explains that a flower is made up of non-flower elements³⁶ such as clouds, soil, and sunshine, and without these non-flower elements, the flower is not able to exist (Thich 2006, p. 82). He also explains that our organs and the cosmos are interdependent on each other: our lungs need the mountains and trees for breathing, and hence, the mountains and tress are also our lungs (Thich 2006, p. 83). As he says, “Our body is the body of the cosmos, and that the cosmos is our own body.” If living things are made up of non-living elements, then non-living things can contain life (Thich 1996, p. 88).

I believe his understanding is in accordance with the Buddha’s teaching on “This is, because that is” which implies “everything is related to everything else”. This understanding of interpenetration reflects his environmental ethics and concerns. Since our life and the environment we live in inter-are, the contemporary ecological and environmental concerns cannot be ignored. For this, I believe that a spiritual awakening in understanding the interdependent relationship between living beings and the environment is necessary to promote Buddhist environmentalism in addressing the global ecological crisis.

5. Conclusions

I hope the ideas and passages drawn from Thich Nhat Hanh’s works have made it clear that living and non-living beings in this cosmology are interrelated and interdependent on each other. The beings and their actions are inseparable and closely related in the world. In the Buddhist cosmology, everything is connected to everything else. Thus, protecting the Earth is protecting ourselves. I argue that the understanding of interbeing is necessary as a solution to bring awareness to climate change, with the capacity to understand the shared responsibility in creating a better future.

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³⁵ The *deva Indra* in Buddhism is depicted as a Dharma protector who owns an infinite net of gems that hangs over the palace, the universe. The metaphor of *Indra net*, which has a jewel at each vertex on the net that is reflected in itself all other jewels and in the palace, is used to describe the interconnectedness and interpenetration of all things in the universe.

³⁶ To support his argument, Thich (2006, p. 82) gives an example on the British nuclear scientist David Bohm’s ontological concepts for quantum theory: implicate order and explicate order. He has proven that one can identify the presence of all other particles in one particle. The nature of a particle shows the implicate order or ultimate dimension where “everything is inside of everything” and the explicate order or historical dimension where “everything exists outside of everything” (Bohm [1980] 2002).

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