

# Interview with Charles R. Strain

March 2017

1) *Dr. Strain, how did you become interested in Buddhist-Christian dialogue? How has your understanding of the role and purpose of dialogue changed over the course of the years?*

Daniel Berrigan, S.J. and Thich Nhat Hanh were my elders before I knew there was such a thing as a Buddhist Christian dialogue. As a peace activist in the late 60s, I came upon Thich Nhat Hanh's *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*. It attuned me to the sufferings of the Vietnamese people and the history of their oppression. It offered a Buddhist alternative to the ideologies of North and South. I was drawn to the Berrigan brothers as representing the radical tip of the religious wing of the peace movement and found myself in a support group for activists who followed their lead by destroying draft files in a Chicago Selective Service office.

The polarizing discourse of the American peace movement, however, left me deeply uneasy. As I pursued graduate studies it also seemed to me that a susceptibility to dualistic thinking was endemic to the political theologies whose prophetic discourse I greatly valued. Out of both existential and intellectual challenges I turned to Buddhism as an antidote, the way a diabetic must take a daily dose of insulin. Over years of practice, the antidote became daily nourishment.

In the 90s, Daniel Berrigan spent an academic term at DePaul on three occasions and I also began to reconnect with Thich Nhat Hanh's writings and eventually to practice in a sangha in his tradition. In both cases, I sensed that I was reconnecting with two of my spiritual touchstones. Simultaneously, I became interested in Buddhist-Christian dialogue prompted partly by the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1993.

While at an intellectual level I came to agree with John Cobb's position in *Beyond Dialogue: Toward the Mutual Transformation of Buddhism and Christianity*, that was not the method that I pursued in *The Prophet and the Bodhisattva*. Rather, it was a method of juxtaposition. It seemed to me that Berrigan and Thich Nhat Hanh both in their lives and their writings created a constellation, two stars distinctly different, yet joined in a field of force and meaning.

To be sure, each contained a glimmer of the other. Berrigan's friendship with Gay Catholics dying of AIDS at a time when they were stigmatized radiated a bodhisattva-like compassion, but compassion with a prophetic edge. Thich Nhat Hanh's anti-war poems were as fiery as any prophet's. Thich Nhat Hanh would say that bodhisattvas are made of non-bodhisattva elements and the same holds true of prophets. But there is another truth here. In Indra's Net each node, each jewel, reflects the whole from a unique vantage point.

The purpose of a Buddhist-Christian dialogue in this key is to magnify the two separate sources of light while simultaneously making visible the magnetic lines of force between them, the field of meaning constituted by their juxtaposition. There is a normative challenge implicit here: we are willy-nilly located somewhere in this magnetic field.

2) *Why the prophet and the bodhisattva? How did you choose these two figures and what is it that struck you about them? How would you characterize the main differences between Thich Nhat Hanh's understanding of the spiritual life and Daniel Berrigan's?*

I see the prophet and the bodhisattva as two classic embodiments of a spiritual life. What keeps a life or a work classic is its power to challenge us in unexpected ways. Classics remain demanding, disconcerting, and decentering. Finding and then working my way through Berrigan's commentaries on the Hebrew prophets and reading Thich Nhat Hanh's *Calming the Fearful Mind* in the aftermath of 9/11 had precisely that effect on me. So writing about these two advocates for peace seemed very much like coming to terms with America's collective past as well as my own, as one way to opening up a collective future.

You ask about the differences between these two ways of actualizing a spiritual life. These are most visible for me in their preferred modes of working for peace. Thich Nhat Hanh is quite clear: "Community building," he says, "is our practice." Peaceful communities are built by "being peace," and being peace takes mindful practice moment after moment. Thich Nhat Hanh refers to this practice as the action of non-action and, elsewhere, as *ahimsa*, non-harming. Berrigan, on the other hand, takes his lead from Jeremiah "bearing the yoke, breaking the jar . . . witnessing . . . the vine devoid of grapes." These symbolic acts of resistance "challenge the tyranny implicit in 'things as they are.'" The burning of draft files at Catonsville in 1968 and hammering nuclear war heads at a GE factory in 1981, thereby beginning the Plowshares Movement, were deeply connected to a Catholic sacramental spiritual engagement.

3) *Buddhism, of course, is a non-theistic tradition. What can Christian practitioners interested in social justice learn from Buddhist practitioners and vice versa?*

Christians can learn from Buddhists to deepen the connection between an inner awakening and outer revolution and the dependence of both on practice—as exemplified in Thich Nhat Hanh's Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings. Of course, given what led me to adopt a Buddhist practice, Buddhism can teach all of us about how to avoid dualistic thinking. More importantly, I suggest that much of what passes for a moral life covertly asserts forms of moral superiority—a particularly noxious form of dualism in action. Thich Nhat Hanh's signature poem, "Please Call Me by My True Names," is an antidote to that particular poison. Each time I recite "I am the Sea Pirate/my heart not yet capable/of seeing and loving," I gag, but simultaneously, my own castle of moral superiority crumbles.

Buddhists can learn from the prophetic tradition (not a monopoly of Christians) how ideologies become especially virulent when inevitably empires masquerade as God.

By aping the God of life, says Berrigan, they practice “death as a social method.” Secondly, Christians like Martin Luther King can teach Buddhists—who seem at times to be allergic to the assertion of power—that oppressors seldom, if ever, give up their power without being (nonviolently) forced to do so. Finally Berrigan calls hope “an intransitive verb.” Rather than seeing it as an attempt to escape the present moment, for the prophet it is holding oneself open to the possibility of transformation despite all evidence to the contrary.

4) *What do you believe Thich Nhat Hahn and Berrigan’s legacy will be? What can they teach us now in this time of political division and strife?*

Commenting upon his own elders (Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton among them) but especially on Jeremiah, Berrigan said, “We are drawn out of the inhuman or subhuman pit, barely, by the few who hold firmly in hand a lifeline . . . who in season and out of season summon us to awaken. . . .” That about sums up Berrigan’s legacy for me. It is his sheer, discomfiting refusal to compromise and his sacramental capacity to cut to the quick—blood poured on nuclear warheads—that frees us from our colonized consciousness, that pulls us out of the realm of “alternative facts,” the world of Oz. His commentaries on the Hebrew prophets are classics, flint striking steel. They strip away the veneer of sacrality that hides a core of violence as when Berrigan decrees that the (lower case) god of Exodus is pharaonic for executing the Egyptian children. To read these classics, as Berrigan says it was to write them, is “purgatorial.”

In a time of even greater political strife, Lincoln pledged “firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right” but firmness exercised “with malice toward none, with charity for all.” That is the best any prophet, Berrigan included, can promise.

“Show me your American Buddha,” Thich Nhat Hanh has challenged us. But no one, I believe, has done more to translate Buddhism into a Western idiom than Thich Nhat Hanh himself. He has crafted a discourse and pointed us toward a path of being peace. For those of us who recognize that these exemplars of the prophet and the bodhisattva remain light years away but no less compelling for that, Thich Nhat Hanh’s Mindfulness Trainings remain a down to earth, durable legacy.

One final, personal note: I treasure above all the poems that Thich Nhat Hanh wrote during the war in Vietnam. Meditating on a brother monk who had immolated himself, he wrote “The fire that burns him/burns in my body/And the world around me/burns with the same fire/that burns my brother.” No less than a prophet, Thich Nhat Hanh in his life and writings offers a vision rooted in shared suffering. That is a crucial legacy. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid’s protagonist says of post 9/11 America, “as a society you were unwilling to reflect on the shared pain that united you with those who attacked you. You retreated into myths of your own difference, assumptions of your own superiority and you acted out these beliefs on the stage of the world.” To any such society Thich Nhat Hanh insists that, despite all, there can be healing. “You can help your country go home to herself, recognize her pain, anger, sorrow and fear, and get some relief. This is the work of a bodhisattva.”