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Saving the World We Have... While We Still Have It

The book *The World We Have* is a philosophical work which serves as a guide to the current problems of the planet and society, assesses these problems, traces back the processes and phenomena to their spring, and provides insight into how these problems should be addressed and by whom. Some readers would say that the book does not have any practical value because it does not contain a plan of actions and consists of pure speculations and religious exhortations which have nothing to do with the real-life and down-to-earth problems. Such a perspective upon the book is cursory and sophomoric if not erroneous. *The World We Have* does have practical tools for saving the world, but they are implicit. Indeed, the book does not provide directives such as “go there” or “do this,” however, it shows the way of making the world a better place as well as the means to do it. In the book, all answers and all resources are traced back to individual self. Thus, *The World We Have* is a guide to how every single individual needs to change himself or herself in order to start and contribute to the global process of changing the world. According to the book, the key to change is an individual who acts as an integral and conscious part of the global being.

The book is a wake-up call for humanity. In order to reach the mind of the reader, the author, Thich Nhat Hanh, uses eloquent allegories and bold facts on the deplorable state of ecology and mankind. The revelations found in the book ring “the bells of mindfulness” (Hanh

3) in the reader. People are compared to sleepwalkers who live absent-mindedly in the chaos of the outer world and only complain about it or, even worse, pay no attention to what happens to the “human family” (Hanh 7). “We need a kind of collective awakening”, the book says (Hanh 6). This collective awakening, as claimed, can come through individual awakening which would later start the chain of necessary changes by “waking up” other people. *The World We Have* reveals chains which were not vivid before. This in-depth analysis of what happens in the world makes it clear that everything is interconnected and results from one another. Respectively, interconnectivity makes all people equally involved in and guilty of the global destruction, wrongdoing, and indifference to problems if they are not one’s personal issues. The book shows that not only destruction is shared but also suffering, “because we inter-are with them [other people]” (Hanh 78). This overview of chains that unite the world as well as cause-effect linkages, which make global problem personal and vice versa, provides the reader with an insight of interbeing. “To practice mindfulness and look deeply into the nature of things is to discover their true nature, the nature of interbeing” (Hanh 80). Understanding of the interbeing principle enables sustaining. Right actions on behalf of people result from understanding. In other words, philosophical speculations and the very concept of interbeing are the tools of affecting the reader. These tools appear to be extremely effective because it is the holistic vision of the interconnectivity of everyone and everything in the world which brings the reader to a necessity to assess one’s own role in the global problems. The latter inevitably leads to a consequent assessment of one’s capabilities to fix these problems. The book continues by appealing to general human and humanist values which can help one change the world. At this point, the reader starts viewing himself/herself as a tool of change and a part of the world in which a single change will resonate and spread like ripples.

Religious dogmas and Buddhist teachings, in particular, are used as instruments of awakening. Interestingly, religious ideas in Thich Nhat Hanh's narration lose their religious edge and become plain and understandable thoughts on the modern-day problems. The author does not agitate people to become Buddhists and to understand the teaching. On the contrary, he says that Buddha, in a form of consciousness and conscientiousness, can live in each of us regardless of faith, race or age. In fact, Buddha inside all people knows what needs to be done to save the planet. "Buddhism is the strongest form of humanism we have" (Hanh 11). Thus, Buddhist ideas are presented as humanist ones, and humanism is universally applicable to all people on the planet. In this regard, Hanh proceeds to the issue of the global ethic. Buddha's global ethic is the Five Mindfulness Trainings which are "concrete realizations of mindfulness" (Hanh 18).

The First Training says that, being aware of the global suffering, everyone ought to cultivate compassion, protect life, and prevent killing. As mentioned before, there are no direct references to the means by which a person can, inter alia, prevent killing. Nevertheless, the training sounds like a directive saying what is right to do leaving the reader with a choice of means. For example, one can protect life and prevent killing by refusing to kill an animal for food, or refuse to eat meat in order to decrease the demand for it so that it will make slaughterhouses less demanded. One can also sign a petition to save animals which are killed for fur, or save a human life by giving some food or shelter, or prevent a murder. Thus, the book gives directives without limiting the options. The Second Training calls to practice generosity and not to support oppression and social injustice. This training is aimed at stimulating people to do good deeds. The Third Training discusses the necessity of preserving the integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society in general. This training is an anti-destructive call. People are asked not to destroy harmonies and relationships because any kind of destruction

brings pain to the world and echoes in many places, often without people's knowing it. The Fourth Training complements and completes the previous one. It asks not to utter words of discord which can divide people and break unities. The Fifth Training is about cultivating good mental and physical health by mindful consuming. The chain reaction and the consequences of mundane human actions are extremely vivid in this training. The book emphasizes that people consume irrationally and mindlessly. They do not take into consideration the long-term and wide-range effects of their routine consumption patterns. For example, it becomes clear for the reader that eating and food production can be violent towards other species because even if we "grow" food to eat in order not to devastate natural resources by hunting the wild animals, we still harm the planet. The animals which people raise need places to feed and to be killed. Thus, people perpetrate deforestation to make room for grazing land and cause pollution by organizing and managing slaughterhouses and processing factories. Deforestation is also a negative side effect of such a seemingly harmless and "killing-less" activity as growing crops. Moreover, even the grown grains are used for feeding livestock or making alcohol instead of feeding the poor and the hungry. Such logical chains make the reader reconsider the picture of the world and its functioning. These trainings may be regarded as practical tools of saving the environment. At long last, all actions start with inner realization of their necessity, with a thought and feeling of determination, and only then they are implemented in practice in a form of adequate actions. For Thich Nhat Hanh, the processes inside a human being are equally important to physical deeds because the former precondition and precede the latter. Even thoughts and words are regarded as means of making the world either worse or better (Hanh).

"We are eating up the Earth" (Hanh 45). This statement may be called a synopsis of all mankind's wrongful doings on the planet. Hanh accentuates that current civilization is only a

transitory form of human existence on Earth. Respectively, he calls to perceive this existence mindfully. The author classifies global warming as the early symptom of the soon-to-be death of our civilization. Thus, he urges the “awakening.” This appeal is a psychological tool of affecting the reader. Thus, the book appeals to both the reader’s mind and conscience.

According to the author, cognizing and sharing insights can wake the community, and awaking is the key to actions. Individual actions combine to form a front of change which can eventually cover the whole planet. Only then will humanity change the world. Hanh believes that when people are awake, the governments will have to act accordingly. Thus, the chain reaction starts with an individual and leads to major collective and then global changes. Help oneself, help people around, and they will help others. This is the leitmotif of the book and an instruction of how to build the chain of change. This vision of change is similar to “communication circles” in social networks. Since social networks have already proved that this system of interconnectedness works extremely efficiently, a conclusion follows that Hanh’s teaching will work as well.

Work Cited

Hanh, Thich N. *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology*. Sydney:

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