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Salvation and Liberation: Revisiting an Interfaith Classic

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Salvation and Liberation

Revisiting an interfaith classic

PHILIP NOVAK

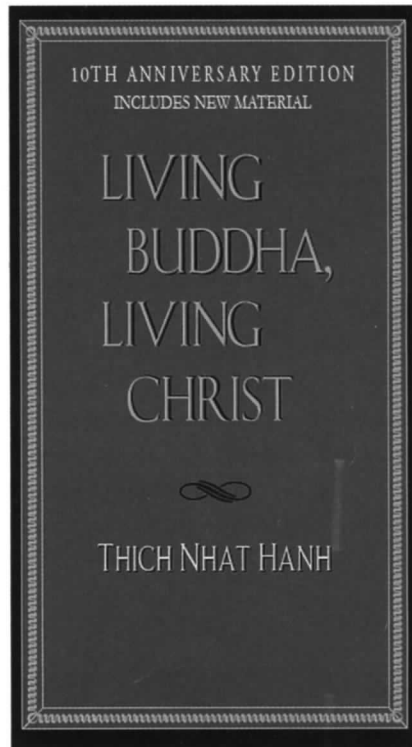
LIVING BUDDHA, LIVING CHRIST
10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

THICH NHAT HANH

New York: Riverhead, 2007

256 pp.; \$15 (paper)

"LOVE THE PITCHER less and the water more." This is how the Sufi poet Rumi fashioned the key to a global spirituality—not a new religion, but a growing recognition that the religions we have are multiform containers of a single, precious planetary resource, idioms of a universal spiritual grammar. It is hard to imagine a more beautiful heeding of Rumi's counsel than Thich Nhat Hanh's *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, a reading of Buddhism and Christianity (and, by implication, other faiths) as vast cultural-symbolic contexts for enabling human ethical maturity. With his characteristic quiet authority, Nhat Hanh portrays the two traditions as complementary modes of moving from our natural self-centeredness to a re-centering in a



higher order of existence, a process that, when genuine, bears fruits as cherished in Nairobi and Nanjing as in New York: understanding, compassion, love, kindness, generosity, honesty, patience, forgiveness, justice. These transcultural fruits belong to no one religion but are the common aim of all deserving of the name.

Thich Nhat Hanh came to the world's attention as an activist Buddhist monk during the Vietnam War, the leader of the Buddhist delegation to the Paris Peace Talks, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize. He famously coined the term "engaged Buddhism" to express the synergy of social action and meditation—and he has walked his talk. Exiled from postwar Vietnam, he

settled in southern France; now in his eighth decade, he continues to teach internationally and to guide his Order of Interbeing. Like many of Nhat Hanh's books, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* takes the form of simple dharma talks that eschew extended argument and thereby conceal his ample learning. In fact, he studied religion at Princeton, taught at Columbia and Cornell, reads the Buddhist scriptures in Pali, Sanskrit, and Chinese, and teaches in English, French, and Japanese in addition to his native Vietnamese.

Nhat Hanh's controlling assumption in *Living Buddha, Living Christ* is the unfailingly salutary power of mindfulness. The latter may be a Buddhist term, but Buddhists don't own what it points to. For Nhat Hanh, mindfulness—sustained attention or presence—is rooted in the very scheme of things, a reflection at the human level of the universe's own miraculous ability to fashion order and structure amidst a general countertrend. Mindfulness doesn't cure all, but it always cures. It corrects the mind's natural tendency toward dispersion, diffusion, and agitation, redeploing mental energy toward insight, clarity, and well-being. And it is mindfulness at which so many spiritual exercises aim. Meditation and prayer are but local cultivations of this generically human capacity. The real wonder, Nhat Hanh has said, is not to walk on water but to walk mindfully on this green earth.

From mindfulness, says Nhat Hanh, comes true listening, true understanding, and true love. When these are present in two or more gathered in Jesus's name you have a church, a community guided by the Holy Spirit.

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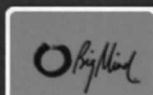


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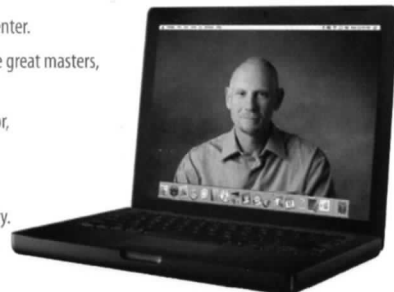
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When listening, understanding (*prajna*), and love (*karuna*) are present in two or more gathered in the Buddha's name, you have a sangha, a community guided by mindfulness. "Mindfulness is very much like the Holy Spirit," says Nhat Hanh. "Both are agents of healing"—a bold linkage that takes us to the heart of the book's title: *living Buddha* and *living Christ*. Jesus and Gotama died, but death could not contain them. They live *in* and *as* anyone who tries to follow their example, embody their understanding, practice their compassion.

Nhat Hanh thus finds remarkable agreement between the processes known as Christian salvation and Buddhist liberation. For him, the essential insight behind Christian salvation is that "all comes from God." "That is very similar to interbeing," he says, adding, "in Buddhism we call the Kingdom of God dharma." God

and dharma are therefore alternative ways of affirming that we live in the sort of universe that invites self-transcendence, one in which Christ-ness and Buddha-ness are both meaningful and possible. Buddhists sometimes miss this point by taking "dharma" to refer only to the teachings of the historical Gautama. The late, great philosopher of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in his book *Faith and Belief* (1979), abets Nhat Hanh's point so eloquently that I take the liberty to offer a long quote:

It would puncture the whole Buddhist system of thought like a noisy balloon to suppose that the dharma is simply [Gautama's] ideas . . . something he constructed. He did not concoct this; he discovered it. . . . The dharma that he taught does not owe its validity or authority to the fact that he was a wise and great

man; on the contrary, he became wise and great because he awoke to its pre-existent truth. . . . All else is evanescent. But the *saddharma*, the True Law, is eternal. . . . There is in the universe, he proclaimed, a final truth in accordance with which if a man lives he will be saved. If the universe consisted only of the flux of samsara . . . if there were no eternal dharma, then man could not possibly save himself. . . . It is living according to dharma, the pre-existing law, that saves. The decision so to live is man's own; but the fact that living so brings salvation is prior to man, independent of man. And the confidence that it will work, that it is worth pursuing: this is based on the very structure of the universe. That we live in the kind of universe where such a truth obtains, firm, reliable, and permanent, is the "good news" that the Buddha

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preached, and that his movement carried half across the world.

Taking refuge “in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha” is thus, for Nhat Hanh, profoundly cognate with taking refuge “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Taking refuge in God or the dharma is to trust that reality itself is complicit in the human quest for spiritual freedom. Taking refuge in the Son or the Buddha is to embrace a model for the actualization of that freedom. And taking refuge in the Holy Spirit (qua Church) or the Sangha is to understand our unconditional need for spiritual friends. “Without a sangha,” says Nhat Hanh, “you are lost. You can be saved only as a community.”

Nhat Hanh tells us that a Christian friend of his describes prayer as a “resting in God.” In a very similar way, he says, mindfulness is a resting

in the dharma. When we calm our minds, we see that the great ocean’s waves only pretend to be born and pretend to die. They appear and disappear in infinite number on its surface, while the ocean itself remains. Salvation or liberation for an individual wave comes when it realizes it is water. At that moment, the fear of death disappears. We suffer, says Nhat Hanh, when we see and touch only the waves. But when we touch the water—the Kingdom of God, the dharma—we feel great relief. When we touch this dimension we touch all our ancestors. They are all there, he says, all smiling.

That Jesus is both the Son of Man and the Son of God is not difficult for a Buddhist to accept, says Nhat Hanh. Jesus is truly and quite obviously a door that opens onto the Kingdom of God. But in Buddhism the dharma is said to have eighty-four

thousand doors, and Nhat Hanh politely suggests that theologians who claim that Jesus is the only door might reevaluate. To Pope John Paul II’s assertion in *Crossing the Threshold* that Christ is unique, Nhat Hanh simply replies: “Who is not unique?” On balance, however, Nhat Hanh does not find much difference between Christians and Buddhists; and what differences there are, he says, are mostly differences of emphasis. Our interdependent world calls us to “be nourished by the best values of many traditions.” As Cantwell Smith once said: “It is an important step to recognize the faith of other people. The next step is to realize that there are no other people.” ▼

Philip Novak is the Sarlo Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Dominican University in San Rafael, California and the author of The World’s Wisdom.

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