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Way Out Voices: A Phenomenology of Interbeing

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Abstract: *Interbeing* is a foundational teaching of Thien Su (Zen master) Thích Nhất Hạnh, beloved Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist who has worked closely with Chan Khong, an expatriate Vietnamese Buddhist nun. Together they founded Plum Village retreat center in the Dordogne region of France. This volume of invited essays – taken as a whole – reveals the inspirational power of the word *interbeing* as a focus for creating common ground within scholarship for voices not so often heard. Metaphorically, this *phenomenology* is what Nhất Hạnh might call a “hugging meditation.”

Keywords: Interbeing, co-arising, community, *ghosti*, transcendental phenomenology

Dedication

We are dedicating this issue of our journal to artist Donna E. Schill, who in her 80s continues a lifelong spiritual practice of extraordinary experimental art at the intersection of personal history, cultural philosophy, friendship, and wonder. Donna is an active grandmother and much-loved member of the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness, the Jean Gebser Society, and the EcoSangha Zen group at Seattle University. This past spring, Donna experimented with a new technique to create the “sugar-lift Buddhist, with quizzical eyes” who now graces (and opens) our inquiry with his smile. The original is a full-figure wooden statue at the Seattle Asian Art Museum.



Figure 1. *Sugar-lift Buddhist, with Quizzical Eyes*. Donna E. Schill, April 2017. Reprinted with permission of the artist.

The Voices

'You see, mon petit camarade,' said Aron to Sartre. . . 'if you are a phenomenologist, you can talk about this cocktail and make philosophy out of it!'

Beauvoir wrote that Sartre turned pale on hearing this. She made it sound more dramatic by implying that they had never heard of phenomenology at all. In truth, they had tried to read a little Heidegger. A translation of his lecture 'What is Metaphysics?' had appeared in the same issue of the journal Bifur as an early Sartre essay in 1931. But, she wrote, 'since we could

not understand a word of it we failed to see its interest.' Now they saw its interest: it was a way of doing philosophy that reconnected it with the normal, lived experience. (Bakewell 2016, 3)

What a privilege it has been to put together this mashup of voices of *interbeing*. The issue came together in the tumultuous and emotionally draining months that marked the end of 2016 and beginning of 2017. Just a handful of the 14 writers I reached out to knew the Buddhist context of the word. Most (including myself) were initially unfamiliar with *interbeing* and asked me to define the concept—something I could do only by asking them questions and supporting their insights. From start to finish, the editing experience often verged on the ecstatic, and I already miss it.

Midstream in the process, artist and communications specialist Diane Hirabayashi Carter mentioned that she so appreciated the opportunity to write in her own “authentic voice.” This was exactly what I was after but had been unable to articulate. She and several of the other contributors (David Blumenkrantz, Tahn Pamutto, and Tom Goodridge) spoke about the joy of being in the flow, opening to play, and experiencing an almost childlike, selfless curiosity as they wrote. As an editor, I began to experience and encourage such feelings as the *interbeing* of deep scholarly inquiry and whole self. I imagined the result as a variation on the transcendental phenomenological approach of Clark Moustakas.

What began for me as service to the profession grew into a quest, an initiation into an art of anthropology I dreamed about many years ago. I couldn't wait for the drafts and ideas to arrive. Most exciting were the quasi-disembodied “way out voices” I

heard as the evolving *essays* started to talk to each other! The experience was quite similar to the novelist's experience as characters begin to write themselves. Voices began to share insights in the form of virtually identical phrases, diagrams, and concepts. Peter Champoux's graphic of water emerging alive from the core of Earth, for example, was a virtual duplicate of Thích Nhất Hạnh's early rendering of interbeing as co-arising.

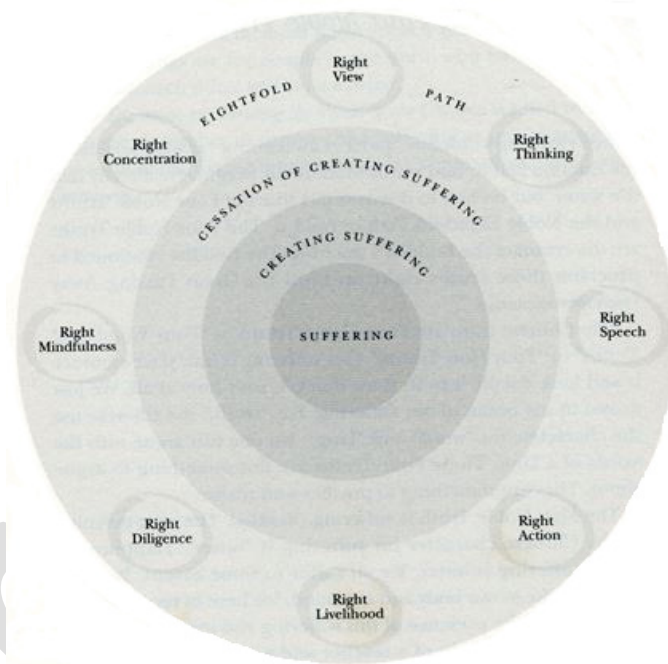


Figure 2. The Four Noble Truths & the Noble Eightfold Path. Reprinted from *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* (1998) by T. Nhất Hạnh with permission of Parallax Press, Berkeley, California.

Linda Miller Cleary (Morse Distinguished Professor of English Education at the University of Minnesota, now emeritus) reviewed and provided comments on each

essay. A writing partner for many years with Ojibwe scholar Tom Peacock, Linda has published extensively on cross-cultural research ethics and language learning (Miller Cleary 2013). In an email early in 2017, she wrote me that she, too, had begun to experience the voices “coming full circle. That’s Tom Peacock’s term for it. I think we create interbeing just by paying attention to it, as we have been, talking about all of this.”

Our mutual friend K. Stevens (Stevie) Westmoreland (the General’s daughter) introduced me to the concept of interbeing in the first place, about two years ago, as we walked the beach in Maine. “Co-arising. Do no harm” she told me, and then shared the story of Thầy’s hugging meditation (Plum Village 2017). *Thầy* is a term of love and respect for Thích Nhất Hạnh and means *master teacher*. Several months later, upon her return from a pilgrimage to holy sites in India, Stevie gifted me with “a leaf from the Bodhi [banyan] tree, where the Buddha received enlightenment.” A fig leaf. It was truly overwhelming to hold the thing, yet I remained stuck on the *do no harm* part of interbeing. I kept thinking of E. O. Wilson (Holldobler and Wilson, 1990) and how guilty I felt every time I poisoned carpenter ants. It took many more months for me to even begin to understand Thích Nhất Hạnh’s philosophy.

I became aware of David Haskin, who is ordained in the Nhất Hạnh’s Order of Interbeing, in a dream, not as an apparition but as a voice repeating “prison interbeing” over and over again. I typed these words into Google the next morning and found his Coming Home Project work with prisoners in solitary confinement. I emailed him, and

the next day (November 16, 2016) received this response along with his permission to reprint an article he had written:

Not long after I started doing this work more than seven years ago, a fellow sangha member asked me why I was doing it. What blurted out of my mouth was: "It's my practice of Interbeing." I said that because it had quickly become obvious to me that, although many, if not most, of the inmates had had lives quite different from my own, looking more deeply found the commonalities, the inter-connectedness. Prison mindfulness practice is, first and foremost, quite practical and behavioral. But we also try very hard to impart this sense of inter-being, as well as discussions about topics such as compassion, generosity and other points of Dharma.

Thích Nhất Hạnh, who turned 90 in 2016, is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, teacher, author, poet, peace activist, and inspiration for the Thích Nhất Hạnh Foundation. Stevie is his devoted student and has, for years, hosted a sangha in our community. Her next guidance was to point me in the direction of the *Daily Good: News That Inspires* website. I was skeptical. Mary Poppins poked me with her umbrella. Almost everyone I knew was facing the reality that participation in all the resistance activities we had signed on to was not remotely possible. Politics had cast a tangible pall over bi-partisan, long-time friendships in our small community. I felt sometimes as if I were walking on eggshells. But Stevie asked me what could be wrong with a little good news every morning and forwarded an essay from professor Robin Wall Kimmerer's personal memoir *Braiding Sweetgrass*, which was featured in *Daily Good*.

Kimmerer's piece invited me into an interbeing of Native American heritage, scholarly botany, activist conservation, and a language learner's frustration with *why* the grammar of her Potawatomi ancestors avoided the use of nouns. Her insights resonated deeply with a breakthrough vision of love I once experienced in an ayahuasca ceremony: the two old rivers of my parents' lineages merging together and flowing as one into me and my brothers.

As a "scholarly anthropologist," I remain attracted to interbeing as a possible expansion of Florence Kluckhohn's (1953) classic "being, doing, becoming" personality typology. Her work, and Plato's, remain the clear stand-outs in my memories of undergraduate school along with Evans-Pritchard's musings on linguistics and culture. My romance with their ideas began at about the time Frank Sinatra released *Strangers in the Night* ("do, be, do, be, do"), and I guess I must have merged them. My work half a life later proposing a lineage of the divine feminine as geometric consciousness (Hagens 2006b) could be reasonably pegged as a linguistic rehash in the guise of sex and personality in Greek mythology: grandmother Gaia/universe; her daughter Mnemosyne/memory; and the granddaughters, the nine Muses. Eternal grandmother Gaia (*being*) convinces son Cronos (time) to castrate and kill his father, Uranus. Mnemosyne (*becoming*) has an affair to remember with Zeus and gives birth to the Muses – dancing, bi-polar nymph-like goddesses of the arts and sciences who inspire mortals to *do*.

From the perspective of this creation paradigm, the original essential "harm" of castrating (and killing) Uranus seems to have been the mythically "noble" response that

would relieve the suffering children (*inside him!*) that he had swallowed. Life could continue. In many ways, Gaia's order was actually not all that different from the choice I made with the carpenter ants. They were swallowing our home. I wondered if the "God" side of my bicameral mind was the one making the decision or if I was just being selfish. I've come to the conclusion that consciously following the noble eightfold path could be an individual's experience of the interbeing of myth and reality – a sacred rationale for choice-making that relieves the suffering of the greater whole within which self (or not self) arises.

In this vein, giant mythical presences figure in two of the essays. Edward Simon has contributed an incisive consideration of Sasquatch and other historical and mythical giants as an ages-old manifestation of suffering. Tom Goodridge writes about Green Man from his deeply sensitive commitment to children's spiritual development and as a Quaker naturalist. The Green Man figure, too, seems to appear across cultures at times when there is environmental suffering. Both essays open the door to the idea that interbeing implies that when suffering is externalized (blamed on a condition outside the self), a larger than life interior voice will cry out in pain for acknowledgement.

James Hillman's (2009) theory of the *interiorization of community* is a possible avenue to understanding Thích Nhất Hạnh's teaching that one must locate the source of suffering as existing within one's heart and relieve it by following the eightfold path. Buddhist scholars suggest these tenets can be found in all religions.

James Miles practices another kind of interiorization of community: *ubuntu*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu's philosophy of full humanity. In June 2017, several months after his essay was completed, James sent me this email.

I just completed DePaul University's Asset-Based Community Development certificate program (geared to the same Veteran's program I referenced in my article). Initially I took the training to get an inside look at the program and support my task of developing curriculum for them. What actually happened was I found myself looking at this veteran-and-veteran-family community with intrigue, compassion, and growing interest. I imagine it helps that I am a veteran myself ☺ Working with members and stakeholders of this community really sheds light on how we as a country have this underlying and often insidious habit of seeing people almost exclusively as utility over community. Maybe this is part of the capitalist legacy spurring the protest (though it seems like much of the protest is a bit misguided).

David Blumenkrantz's essay grew from the commitment of his entire professional life to youth and community development projects, now culminating in a replicable, community-based "Planetarium Initiatory Event." He uses a mix of myth, science, and ritual as appealing to adolescents as to their parents. The strategy is to incubate ongoing activities that promote interiorization of community and diminish the suffering and harm that often manifest as a "collision of transitions" when children reach puberty and parents face middle age at about the same time.

Tahn Pamutto, an ordained practicing forest monk in the Theravada Buddhist tradition, offers an exceptionally clear explanation of not-self, which could be described as total interiorization of community. With this highly disciplined practice comes an awareness that there literally is no *self*. The spiritual problem is an individual's conflation of an experience into "what *I* know" rather than into "that's interesting." I hope to meet Tahn as he wanders the forests of New England living within interbeing parameters of simplicity, austerity, and diligent effort.

Aeon magazine recently queried online readers on what one word they would want to banish from serious conversation. Garfinkel (2017) chose *interesting*, invoking the raised eyebrow of Spock from the original Star Trek series. I could see what he meant (cf. "like" on Facebook), but I love feeling interested. The *Online Etymology Dictionary* website traces the word *interesting* back to *interesse* where *inter* = between and *esse* = be + ing! I hadn't thought about *interesting* in this way, ever, until coming upon Garfinkel's suggestion to banish it as meaningless, overused, imprecise, lazy. . . .

Once I'd embraced *interesting* as *interbeing*, almost anyone and anything morphed into an example of how wonderful and ubiquitous it really was. An example is the birthday gift from my brother (economist John Hagens) of Mike Shanahan's *Gods, Wasps and Stranglers: The Secret History and Redemptive Future of Fig Trees* (2016). I have a tiny company, *Bees Birds & Bugs*, so was anxious to read about a new insect. Who knew that a *banyan* is a fig tree! The Buddhist tree of enlightenment (the Bodhi) was likely the very same species as the tree in the Garden of Eden (think fig leaves rather than apples). Isis, Nut, and Hathor are all embodied in myth as fig trees. There are over

700 named varieties of fig trees, and each one is in a uniquely delicate, absolutely essential relationship with a *different*, barely visible wasp species. A single wasp must burrow into a fig to pollinate the tree's flowers which are found *inside* the fruit. Evolutionary survival bargains such as these *are* Earth, are co-arising, as science is coming to realize (Pakenham 2016).

I watched *humor* co-arise with *struggle* as I edited. After days of frustration with Photoshop's blasted "lasso" feature, in came neo-Texan Timothy Morton's declaration that ecological awareness is just another name for context explosion: "Normally we try to contain or curtail the lassoing business. But ecological awareness means you have started to allow the lassoing to go on and on, possibly forever." I began to laugh and typed *interbeing* into the Google search bar. It presented 301,000 entries in 0.80 seconds. You can even "Shop Interbeing on Amazon." *How do I work this?*

Another afternoon, as I sat alone, in reverence, with forest monk Tahn Pamutto's crystalline explication of the distinction between interbeing and *not self*, I broke out laughing again. *How did I get here? This is not my beautiful house! This is not my beautiful wife!* More to the point, how did David Byrne weasel his way into my consciousness?

I had to smile when my totally radical and brilliant colleague Pamela Booker chose to cast her laser gaze upon, of all things, interbeing among the characters in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. She nailed her point that, with many aspects of experience, the circle will never close (that would be the fairy tale of the lasso), and it is time to negotiate the parts and pieces of one's life that don't fit. I had to ask myself: Why do I

find Lucy's antics annoying and those of the beloved Afghani character Nasruddin delightful?

Nasruddin opened a booth with a sign above it:

Two Questions On Any Subject Answered For Only 100 Silver Coins

A man who had two very urgent questions handed over his money, saying,

"A hundred silver coins is rather expensive for two questions, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Nasruddin, "And the next question, please?"

(Mission of Maitreya 2017)

Peter Champoux's depiction of a suffering, living, water-enlivened planet Gaia exponentially enhanced my understanding of Rick Muller's metaphor of the individual human as a "mobile terroir." Definitions of *terroir*, a vintner's term for the composite environmental qualities of a particularly distinguished vineyard, do not take into account the suffering that grapes experience owing to transplanting and other temporary environmental stresses that give fine wines their character. Also in the shadows are the mediations of vineyard keepers who watch over the grapes and nurture the degree of sweetness in the "bruise." Poet Michael Tarabilda decided to contribute a single poem reflecting on wine and prayer, and now Dionysus danced on my desktop. All of this has felt, literally, holy. I am particularly grateful to Rick for his support and friendship along the way.

In some of my other anthropological writing, I have stretched etymology a bit to imagine Gaia as a "dung ball," not unlike the Aztec Tlazolteotl. At the same time, I imagine her as a liminal geometric interbeing (Hagens 2006a) akin to a virus: the

symmetrical merging into what geometers refer to as the *perfect dual* of icosahedron (water) and dodecahedron (life potential). Viruses straddle the interbeing of life and dormancy. Water is the catalyst. As *guests*, viruses “prune” the weak in suffering *host* populations at the same time that they become one with the strong. This creates a kind of immunity in which *both* survive and become – am I saying this? – stronger together. The very, very old “old European” word for this kind of partnership was *ghosti*. It means both *host* and *guest*, one being and not two.

Suffering seems to me to be the tie between Buddhism and Christianity. And, of course Islam. The icon of a suffering Jesus on a cross, above an altar, is very different from the guest Jesus who knocks at the door. The icon puts suffering “outside of me.” Beyond choice. Perhaps the aniconism in Islam prevents this? David Blumenkrantz treats that knocking in a secular context as a young person’s “need to know the universe” that arises when the time for initiation has arrived that invites a commingling within self as Holy Ghosti, as *inter-esse*. The idea that Jesus (the sacred heart) will take on and relieve our suffering is, again for me, the Buddhist idea that if I (as host) live a life attentive to the eightfold path, I will not harm myself (as guest). Since all creation is one and co-arises, I will be “doing no harm.”

In closing, I now think of the emergent “way out voices” as transcendental phenomenological themes among countless others that will contribute to an anthropology of consciousness as interbeing. At the same time, each of the essays stands alone as the sharing of a very personal art of conscious living in interbeing. Each has its own integrity of risk, generosity, and informed thought. My intention, I suppose,

has been to oversee the creation of an artwork worthy of reading in the bathtub on a cold night. I wanted to warm the spirit, bring a smile, demystify a word, and show the enormous flexibility and choice the contemplation of interbeing can bring to scholarship. The authors have not disappointed. Enjoy!

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