



A review of
Our Appointment With Life
*Sutra on Knowing
the Better Way to Live Alone*

by Thich Nhat Hanh

Parallax Press, Berkeley, CA, 2010, 62 pages

When we read a book about the Dharma, we should ask: “Does this book help me on the Way?” If we ask this question about Thich Nhat Hanh’s *Our Appointment With Life*, the answer is yes. We should also ask, “How does it help?” The book answers with direct and deceptively simple advice.

This is a book that takes up the Bhaddekaratta Sutta (Majjhima Nikaya 131) to point us to a crucial and rarely addressed area of practice. Coming from a man who has seen horrors we can only guess at, the book deserves respect for its unswerving insistence on taking up the Buddha’s advice to take the Path into one’s life in a serious, challenging way. The heart of Buddhist practice is in how one trains oneself, accepts a discipline that often goes against the grain, and leaves behind the heedless and distracted world that will always call us back.

But this leaving is not a physical one. It is a change in the way we relate to our everyday experience of ourselves and of others. Renunciation is a central aspect of the Buddha’s teaching, yet there is little examination of what is meant by it in popular writing on the Dharma, so we owe Thich Nhat Hanh our gratitude for this book. He has taken on a subject of profound meaning, difficult to understand, and has given the reader access to it that can serve as a jumping off point for contemplation and practice.

“Looking deeply at life as it is,” the Buddha says in the Bhaddekaratta Sutta, *Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone*, “in the very here and now, the practitioner dwells in stability and freedom.” To look deeply at life requires a stable mind, not only because we seek quiescence, but also because this looking can be painful and difficult. When we see the myriad conditions that lead to this hurt, we can be freed of it. This is one level of understanding the statement.

At another level, this mindfulness in itself is aloneness. The book is about a very subtle and deep issue. Renunciation, or aloneness as Nhat Hanh rightly puts it, is a way of being that requires a practical and practiced understanding of the Satipatthana Sutta as well as the cultivation of those mind states that lead to liberation.

Much as it would be nice to be able to read the Buddha’s teachings exactly as they are recorded, it is not realistic and it is misleading. We don’t know very much about the context in which the Buddha taught, and as Richard Gombrich points out (in *What the Buddha Thought*), most of the nuances, puns, and layered meanings of what the Buddha said are lost to us and not recoverable. We just don’t know enough about the context. There is for example, the intriguing story in the sutta that a god “of the 33rd level” asked a monk about seclusion. It was this question that led to the Buddha’s teaching. Why would a god of such attainment want to know about

seclusion? And why approach a monk rather than the Buddha himself? It is possible that this allusion was obvious to the audience of the time, and gave a level of meaning to the teaching that is lost to us. So we have to interpret or rely on others' interpretations, not only because of our ignorance of the source material, but also because the teachings are being presented to contemporary listeners with very different associations and perspectives to what's written. And it's to this audience that this book speaks.

Nhat Hanh interprets the Bhaddekaratta Sutta in terms of practice as well as attitude. This is an antidote to the tendency to take the suttas/sutras literally, in this case to assume that renunciation means leaving the world and living a life of physical seclusion. Just because it is simple—and presented in a simple way—doesn't mean that it's easy. The book begins with this definition: "Living alone means living to have sovereignty over ourselves," and to be freed from the past, the confusions of the present, and anticipation of the future. This kind of freedom is the fruit of the disciplined and serious practice of mindfulness, practice that's undertaken "day and night." It can lead one to the experience of existential aloneness that I believe is the outcome of practicing *sati*. (The word *sati* itself has to be interpreted—it can have several different meanings). It is a state free of psychological and emotional enmeshment with others, of *mana*, the conceits that create the impression of connectedness where there is none. This kind of aloneness can facilitate the ability to discern between attention to content of thoughts and the phenomenon of thinking itself.

In the course of this kind of practice, we can recognize and confront the ghosts of the past and future, and the book promises that when this comes about we are freed from their influence and able to return to the present moment. "We only have to smile at them. We only need to breathe and . . . say, 'Oh, I know you are a ghost.'"

Nevertheless, there is an essential caveat: this smile is not an easy one to come by, and the book can give the impression that it is. Because it is so short, it has to present very subtle issues very briefly. This smile is a description of a state of equanimity that arises spontaneously from a life of practice, practice that oftentimes entails the opposite of smiling: confronting fear, despair, confusion, as they arise in the mind. Hanh describes this as recognizing the past for what it is: a ghost. But it is not a ghost until we can come to understand the difference between a thought and a 'mere' thought. This discernment is the sword by which you kill the Buddha when you meet him in the road. This is the difference between *papanca* and *ni-papanca*, and the ability to discern the distinction, born of "deep observation," is hard won and not always stable. It means no less than establishing a *vihara*, a dwelling place, that is outside the self.

We should not mistake the brevity of the book, however, so as to give the reader the impression that she only needs to smile and things will be set right. Such brevity lends itself to idealistic and abstract interpretations that make it seem as if the issue were clear when it often is not. The spontaneous smile is a long time in the making; the intentional smile as a response to suffering does little to change things. In fact it may lead to repressing pain rather than examining it; smiling to push away rather than to be with. There is an awful lot of this kind of advice in popular Buddhism, and it is not a good thing.

Considering that the author has seen the worst of what ignorance and enmeshment can lead to, we can have faith that his smile is born of great suffering, discipline and faith in the Dharma.



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