



## **MY PRACTICE IN THE ULTMATE AND HISTORICAL DIMENSIONS**

**By  
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My practice has often been a clumsy and ineffective dance between the Ultimate and Historical Dimensions. The Ultimate refers to Nirvana, the Kingdom of God and like metaphors and is distinct from the Historical, where our everyday realities of existence are located. Between these two dimensions lies the Action Dimension, which is secured through the practice of cultivating the Six Paramitas – meditation, understanding, generosity, the mindfulness trainings, inclusiveness and diligence. The cultivation of these attributes provides a conduit for the energy of the Ultimate Dimension to penetrate the domain of the Historical Dimension. At the same time the actualization of the Three Dharma Seals takes place – Impermanence, Non-self and Nirvana – as we realize liberation. That is the main idea anyway. The Lotus Sutra provides a rich discourse for the exploration of these levels, attributes and dimensions, but this exploration is not my initial focus.

My focus today is on my difficulties with this main idea of dancing between the Ultimate and Historical Dimensions. Thich Nhat Hanh uses the wonderful analogy of waves and water to help us understand how the Ultimate and Historical dimensions of reality are interwoven, and why we must learn to touch both of them. Waves rise, they fall and die when they wash up on a sea shore or river bank – this is the analogy for the Historical Dimension. Many other notions within time/space constraints situate the wave clearly within the historical dimension of viewing reality, which provides a metaphor for our daily existential cycle of life. No matter what attributes are applied to waves there is always a constant. While a wave is about its business of being high or low, born or dying, coming or going, it is always water. The constant of water is what Thich Nhat Hanh refers to as the Ultimate Dimension. With the interconnected nature of waves and

water, the idea is that if we touch the waves of life deeply with our insight then we can touch the water of life - the Ultimate Dimension that we can call Nirvana, the Kingdom of God. This is a transcendent reality, a dimension outside of time and space, distinct from the time and space constraints of our daily existence.

I have heard Thich Nhat Hanh many times express the waves and water analogy, and the metaphorical qualities appeal to my mind. They make intellectual sense. But my experience was such that deep looking into my waves did not lead me to touch the water of the Ultimate Dimension. My waves did not shoot me through to the water as I expected them to, certainly after listening to Thich Nhat Hanh say that this was the case! I wondered for a long time about this disjunction between my intellectual acceptance of this notion and the lack of personal experience. There were three logical options for me to investigate.

1. The first option was that my teacher was **incorrect** to use this analogy.
2. The second option was that my teacher was **neither correct nor incorrect**. He was simply very generous in choosing not to chart the difficulties for his disciples to transition from waves to water.
3. The third option was that Thich Nhat Hanh was **correct** and that something crucial was missing from my practice.

I eliminated the first option as I have trust and faith in my teacher. There may be something to the second option as I know how generous a teacher Thich Nhat Hanh is, that he may choose to encourage his disciples rather than chart the difficulties on the path. Yet, I realized very early on that the real investigation was the third option - to investigate just what was the crucial piece in my practice that was missing.

You see, dear friends, I was very aware that my waves were too small to carry me through to the Ultimate Dimension. They were too small in terms of insufficient concentration, insight and mindfulness. What I needed was a tidal wave, a Tsunami in Japanese, to make my waves full of concentration, insight and mindfulness so that this energy could provide the “voltage” to transition from waves through to water. A tidal

wave has the properties of increasing energy and appears to disobey the second law of thermodynamics. The only way a tidal wave diminishes is when it encounters a land mass. Over the ocean it simply increases its energy. Tidal waves have acquired some respectability in science and are described as “solitons,” with characteristics of both wave and particle and therefore a kinship with elementary particles such as the photon and electron. My investigation was into my internal state for the causes and conditions that would make my waves into “solitons,” into tidal waves full of concentration, mindfulness and insight. As I pondered this deeply I stumbled across what had to take place within me.

It was Silence. Deep Silence. This is where I found the causes and conditions that would provide tidal waves of un-diminishing energy to my cells and consciousness. Silence produced Tsunami was the initial equation. As a consequence I could then truly look deeply into my suffering, into the dark areas that held hostage all my mental formations of a negative nature. And so over the past ten years I built more and more silence into my everyday life. On a daily basis I stop, look deeply and dialog with the feminine seeds in my consciousness – a training learned from my native American medicine teachers. In silence I listen deeply to the communications from the wholesome attributes of feminine wisdom, insight and compassion within me to address issues and questions. For a long time now this has been and still is my fieldwork of life, observation and understanding the field of consciousness within me through the eyes of the internal feminine. Silence and deep looking were certainly important yet the dialog with the internal feminine was key. My consciousness was guided by these seeds of awareness to transform difficulties and impediments in my life, enabling me to move on. I would make diary entries with my questions and dilemmas, doubts and misgivings, then wait quietly for a reply from within. This for me was a very deep form of meditation. As I posed daily diary entries to the internal feminine I wrote with respect, love and gratitude and would simply wait for counsel to arise from inside. It was often not what I expected at all, hence my faith in its integrity.

My profession enabled me to set aside blocks of time and my home and sangha life supported by my wife, Carolyn, and the entire Pine Gate sangha enables me to retreat into silence on a regular basis. In this way – through silence and deep looking – my waves became bigger, more infused with concentration, insight and mindfulness. Silence, deep silence and dialog with the internal feminine provided the causes and conditions for my waves to become Tsunami. As I continued to stop in the silence and look deeply into my shadows, there emerged the experience of touching the water. Thich Nhat Hanh, my teacher, was correct. I had to discover for myself the significance of silence, deep looking and consulting with the wisdom of the internal feminine. The fruits of this practice of silence and non-action were many and particularly manifest in my study of the Lotus Sutra. But let me begin with two very tangible benefits.

### **High School Murders and the Post 9/11 World**

After the murders at Columbine High School in Colorado I put this practice to good use, to first of all prevent myself from being overwhelmed and secondly to provide guidance and solace. The specter of children shooting children in high schools shocked me very deeply. I was deeply offended by the carnage and very angry at society for creating the causes and conditions for children to end up murdering other children. I also had meditation students who had settled in Colorado and they had phoned me in a panic. I knew I could be of little help to them, for I was not in the appropriate space to give counsel to anyone. I first of all had to find the bedrock of understanding and compassion within myself before I could communicate anything worthwhile to others. To communicate from anger and shock was not something I was prepared, or trained, to do. I requested my friends to focus on Walking Meditation, to calm themselves and others around them, and that I would get back to them once I had taken care of my own anger and distress.

After three days of silence and meditation I wrote an essay titled “Yes, It Can Happen Here,” which provided understanding and guidelines about what to do. It was directed to parents, teachers and children and was sent far and wide across North America and later

Germany. Steps of mindfulness in terms of specific meditations to deal with grief, anger and hatred were provided in addition to a clear understanding of what had brought events to this particular state. This essay is reproduced in “Guidelines to Recreate Our World,” Chapter Seven of *The Essential Spiral* (Prattis, 2002, 234 – 247). It emerged in almost one piece and it is really a tribute to my teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh the Zen Buddhist master I study with. I looked deeply into the causes of the shootings and saw clearly the likelihood that with the passage of time people would become removed from any sense of personal responsibility. I felt it was a necessary priority to provide protective measures for our children, and to make them aware of the Buddha’s Mindfulness Trainings as a refuge from the violence that was in them and around them.

Allow me to also speak of my own meditation practice after 9/11. When I learned about the extent of the horror, I went into a deep silence and practiced deep looking to generate calm and clarity, to try and understand. It was not easy, as there was so much disbelief, shock and outrage within me which only silence could take care of. It took a great deal of walking meditation, being aware of the feelings that arose and using conscious breath to acknowledge and take care of the strong feelings. I slowed down with meditation and came to a stop, looked deeply and touched the well of understanding that would have been inaccessible if I did not diligently meditate at this time of crisis. I wanted to understand, to grasp the roots of suffering, so that anything I might say or do could act to alleviate such suffering – my own and everyone else’s. This could only be achieved through the practice of deep silence and non-action. From that place my 2002 book was written – *The Essential Spiral: Ecology and Consciousness After 9/11*. It was born from that practice. It was written from the benefits of silence, deep looking and deep understanding, so that I may provide insights for the wider community. My meditation practice embraced my shock, anger, and later my grief when I learned that a friend from my university days at Oxford had perished in the twin towers on September 11, 2001. I do see clearly and this is thanks to the many years of silence, mindfulness practice and meditation in times of crisis, as well as in times of peace and happiness. My response to 9/11 was guided from silence by the actively cultivated energy of compassion. I do not pretend that this was easy. It was not, but it was the only thing I could do to generate

lucidity and take steps that are consistent with the call made by Thich Nhat Hanh (1992) and the Buddha to be Peace.

### **The Lotus Sutra**

The final fruit of the practice of silence that I bring to your attention was my study of the Lotus Sutra. The practice of silence had given me a better understanding and experience of the Ultimate and Historical Dimensions. After Thich Nhat Hanh's 2002 retreat on The Hand of The Buddha where he explored the Lotus Sutra in great detail, I applied myself to study Burton Watson's 1993 translation of the Lotus Sutra from the Chinese version done by the Central Asian scholar-monk Kumarajiva done in 406 CE.

Prior to this intensive study I was much more comfortable with accepting the Buddha in the Historical form. The story of the Buddha's life, awakening and ministry was enough for me and I had not paid too much attention to the Buddha in the Ultimate Dimension. That changed radically through reading the Lotus Sutra from my practice of silence. For in the Lotus Sutra the Buddha in the Ultimate Dimension is revealed in no uncertain terms. In its beauty, grandeur and compelling intimacy with all that is, ever was, and ever will be, my discomfort and skepticism about the Ultimate Dimension of the Buddha disappeared. As I read different chapters of the Lotus Sutra I found myself transported to the worlds and dimensions described. I would read a little, then put the book down as I felt myself going deeply into meditation. I was profoundly moved by the words, the dimensions, by the energy that was still there through the series of translations into Chinese then into English. And I would remain in a trance like state for hours. My wife Carolyn would come home from work, take one look at me and say:

“You've been reading the Lotus Sutra again, haven't you?”

She was right!

My direct experience of the energy of this Mahayana masterpiece brought home to me so many insights. The most pertinent one being the realization that I would not be able to experience the Lotus Sutra in this way if my waves were still too small – lacking in insight, concentration and mindfulness. Over the years I had remedied my small wave syndrome through protracted periods of deep silence and deep looking which I still continue. Without the silence and what it enabled, I am sure I would have had a different experience from my study of the Lotus Sutra – a superficial reading that would not have allowed me to touch its depth and magnificence.

I came through this process with waves that are not so small anymore, with joy and happiness, and a full heart to share with everyone. I also perceive a distinct cycle of interconnectedness. I feel empowered by my study of the Lotus Sutra, a study resting in stillness from a place of deep silence and non-action. This takes me to a state of instituting yet more silence into my life even when I am talking to someone. Thus I become available to the Three Gems in a manner I was not before. My waves carry more voltage, my Six Paramitas are filling up rather than being half empty. My engaged practice for peace and the environment rests on a foundation of silence and the necessity of non-action. The true art of doing nothing! It all weaves together like a spider's web glistening in the morning dew. It is so lovely.

The Lotus Sutra is full of the activities of bodhisattvas and of how we may understand their role. The bodhisattvas are described as being immersed in the Ultimate Dimension, and from there they return to the Historical Dimension to transform suffering. This is the Action Dimension – shaped for us through the Six Paramitas. As “water” bodhisattvas live the life of a “wave.” Their example in choosing to do so encourages us to step away from fear and take our own steps on the bodhisattva path – into freedom.

*Lotus Sutra sings.*

*Fresh dharma rains penetrate*

*My heart – wide open.*

*This essay is a component of “The Buddha At The Gate,” the opening chapter of Ian’s forthcoming book “Living Breath: Stories, Essays and Meditations.”*

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