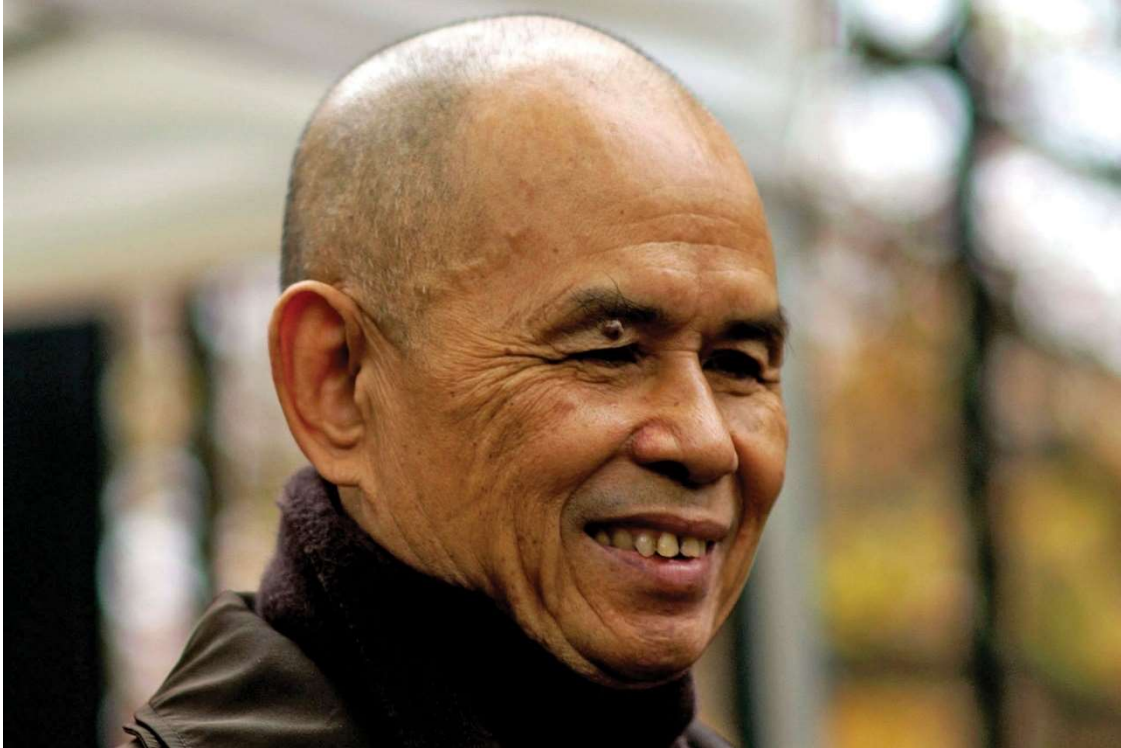


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Mindset

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Thich Nhat Hanh, 2006. Photo: WikiCommons

Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet

Thich Nhat Hanh
Rider: 2021

By now everyone knows how likely it is that human-caused global warming and its attendant environmental degradation will spell the annihilation of most forms of life inhabiting the planet.

But this has all happened before. At the end of the Permian Period, 252 million years ago, it was volcanoes in Siberia that were polluting the atmosphere with carbon dioxide. Palaeontologists call it ‘the Great Dying,’ because temperatures rose by 8°C, killing off up to 96 per cent of all species on Earth. That’s not 100 per cent, though, and the surviving plants and creatures adapted themselves to whatever misshapen niches were still available. Eventually a vast new ecosystem grew up, very different to the last one, but just as rich and complex.

Thus, at the beginning of another Great Dying, we read in *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*, ‘According to the deepest insights of Buddhism, there is no life and death. After extinction, life will reappear in other forms.’

Buddhism likes cycles. Its cosmology, like that of Hinduism, is based on them. In monotheistic religious systems like Christianity, Islam and Judaism, time is a line with a beginning, a middle and a definitive, apocalyptic end. In Buddhism you have a wheel instead.

The universe might seem to perish every few billion years, whether by fire, water or wind, but then it merely brushes itself off and begins the cycle again with different suns, different planets, different beings.

That might seem a bit dated as a model for the way things work, but the ideas of some contemporary scientists have begun to chime with it. Notably those of Roger Penrose, winner of the 2020 Nobel Prize in Physics, whose theory of Conformal Cyclic Cosmology sketches out exactly such a roundabout of endless destruction and renewal.

You might say that from the perspective of eternity, the problems of a few carbon-based bipeds don't really amount to a hill of beans. But that's not much of a comfort if everything you've learned to love in this world is teetering on the brink of the abyss.

'You have to breathe very deeply,' notes *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*, 'in order to acknowledge the fact that we humans may one day disappear.'

Can we do anything about it? If we want to know what we can do to rein in carbon emissions, there are already plenty of books out there. There are also plenty of books telling us what we can do in order to produce sustainable food and energy, and even more books telling us whose fault it probably is that we're in this mess in the first place. *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet* doesn't go down any of those routes. Instead, it sets out to tell us what Buddhists can do. Or, more accurately, to tell us what the mindfulness encouraged by Buddhism can do to help all of us, Buddhists or not, to figure these problems out.

The idea of Buddhists *doing anything* might come as a surprise to many readers. That's partly because Buddhism has its historical origins in solitary meditational practice and the monastic retreat, and so is regularly perceived as disengaged from social concerns, or even as solipsistic. And it's also partly because so much Buddhist ideology focuses on unqualified acceptance of the realities of our existence as physical beings with profound limitations. This last has tended to earn Buddhists a reputation for passivity and submissiveness, as personal or political oppression is able to be viewed merely as a symptom of life's inherent unsatisfactoriness rather than an evil that ought to be resisted.

But Thich Nhat Hanh, the ostensible author of *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*, begs to differ. A Zen Buddhist monk originally from Hue in central Vietnam, he hatched the idea for what would later be nicknamed 'Engaged Buddhism' during the wars for the country's independence. 'So many of our villages were being bombed,' he has written elsewhere. 'Along with my monastic brothers and sisters, I had to decide what to do. Should we continue to practice in our monasteries, or should we leave the meditation halls in order to help the people who were suffering under the bombs? After careful reflection, we decided to do both—to go out and help people and to do so in mindfulness.'

The watch word here is *suffering*. The state of death isn't really a big deal in Buddhism, because there's considered to be no essential difference between being and non-being. 'At the level of the ultimate truth,' Thich Nhat Hanh comments in *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*, 'there is no such thing as death; there is only continuation.' But suffering is a different matter altogether. It's suffering, or rather the need to reduce the amount of it in the world, that allows the Buddhist to act out of compassion, and to intervene on behalf of the Earth.

'The fate of the planet depends on our action,' he says. 'It doesn't depend on a god. It doesn't depend on chance. It depends on our true action.'

But despite this, and despite its title, *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet* isn't a book about environmental activism, or even about environmentalism, and people who come to it looking for one will be disappointed. Put together by Thich Nhat Hanh's associates at the Plum Village Monastery in France, where he spent most of his later years, and edited by his disciple Sister True Dedication, it's more an anthology of his wide-ranging observations on mindfulness and compassion that at times reads like a self-help title. There are intriguing sections on life-work balance, there's a chapter named 'True Love: Is it the Real Thing?'. There is useful instruction on basic meditation, and even parts discussing whether or not police officers and battlefield troops should be instructed in mindfulness.

This last is one of the most interesting elements of all, and hints at how this book can be useful in an environmental context. Thich Nhat Hanh is worried about the possibility soldiers might be taught meditation techniques in order to help them kill more effectively. 'Breathing in, I know the enemy is there,' he imagines, 'Breathing out, I pull the trigger.' But then he realises this is liable to have unintended consequences. 'With one mindful breath, we can get the insight that life is precious. If you instruct a soldier in right mindfulness, he'll have insight, he'll have right view. Once he has right view, he cannot do wrong.'

The message is that whoever is practising it, and for whatever reason, mindfulness meditation is always beneficial. When the mind stills and looks at itself, right here, right now, self-awareness naturally follows. And understanding of one's situation as a physical organism follows that, and then understanding of one's situation as an integral part of something much larger. 'If we wake up together,' Thich Nhat Hanh proposes, 'then, we have a chance. Our way of living our life and planning our future has led us into this situation. And now we need to look deeply to find a way out, not only as individuals but as a collective, a species.'

Essentially, then, this isn't a book about what we can do to effect a positive change in the way human beings exploit the natural environment, it's more a primer for establishing the mindset necessary for such action to begin. As such, it's to be welcomed.



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