

Thich Nhat Hanh on Being and Nonbeing and Beyond

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Abstract

The Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh states what appear to be contradictions, saying that ‘everything is only for one brief instant’ but also that ‘nothing can be created or destroyed’, and similarly that ‘we are all dying and being reborn at every moment’ but also that ‘nothing can be born, nothing can die’. The aim of this paper is to resolve these apparent contradictions concerning being and nonbeing and concerning birth and death. I analyse the ideas on being and nonbeing, and on birth and death, argue that in light of what these statements are intended to convey, the contradictions can be resolved, and point to what there is beyond being and nonbeing. The paper thus shows that, at least as far as these statements go, Thich Nhat Hanh’s metaphysical framework is consistent. In addition, it reveals a practical dimension that goes beyond being and nonbeing towards a middle way based on an insight into interbeing.

Keywords: Zen, Thich Nhat Hanh, contradiction, being and nonbeing, interbeing

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บทคัดย่อ

ติช นัท ฮันห์ ประมาจารย์เซนชาวเวียดนามมีคำกล่าวถึงสิ่งที่ดูเหมือนจะเป็นความขัดแย้งในตัวเอง ความว่า “ทุกสิ่งเป็นเพียงชั่วขณะหนึ่ง” แต่ในขณะเดียวกันก็กล่าวว่า “ไม่มีสิ่งใดถูกสร้างหรือทำลายได้” ในทำนองเดียวกันมีคำกล่าวที่ว่า “เราทุกคนกำลังตายและเกิดใหม่ทุกขณะ” ตามด้วยคำกล่าวที่ว่า “ไม่มีสิ่งใดเกิดได้ไม่มีสิ่งใดตายได้” จุดมุ่งหมายของบทความนี้คือการคลี่คลายความขัดแย้งที่เห็นได้ชัดเหล่านี้เกี่ยวกับภาวะและอภาวะและเกี่ยวกับการเกิดและการตาย บทความนี้วิเคราะห์แนวคิดเกี่ยวกับ ภาวะและอภาวะ และการเกิด การตายโดยมีข้อโต้แย้งว่า เมื่อพิจารณาถึงความหมายที่คำกล่าวเหล่านี้มุ่งสื่อแล้ว ความขัดแย้งเหล่านี้สามารถแก้ไขได้ และชี้ให้เห็นถึงสิ่งที่อยู่เหนือความเป็นและการไม่มีอยู่ โดยสรุปบทความนี้แสดงให้เห็นว่า คำกล่าวเหล่านี้มีความสอดคล้องกันในกรอบคิดเชิงอภิปรัชญาของติช นัท ฮันห์ นอกจากนี้บทความนี้ยังเผยให้เห็นมิติเชิงปฏิบัติที่ พ้นสภาวะไปสู่ทางสายกลางโดยอาศัยความเข้าใจในทศน์ ภาวะและอภาวะ ตลอดจนภาวะสัมพันธ์

คำสำคัญ: เซน, ติช นัท ฮันห์, ความขัดแย้งเชิงตรรกะ, ความเป็นและความไม่เป็น, ภาวะสัมพันธ์

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1. Introduction

Zen masters are renowned for making statements that appear to be contradictory. What is the role of these apparent contradictions? Are they meant literally? Can they be resolved? Understanding the purpose of such apparent contradictions is central to understanding Zen, and is also relevant to a recent debate on dialetheism, the view that there are true contradictions (see, e.g., Deguchi, Garfield, & Priest, 2008). Zen literature provides a rich source of potential contradictions that could support the dialetheist's case depending on how they are to be understood.

This paper discusses two apparent contradictions in the works of the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, one concerning being and nonbeing, and one concerning birth and death. He states that 'everything is only for one brief instant' but also that 'nothing can be created or destroyed', and similarly that 'we are all dying and being reborn at every moment' but also that 'nothing can be born, nothing can die'. The aim of this paper is to resolve these apparent contradictions, using an analytical and argumentative method. I analyse the ideas on being and nonbeing, and on birth and death, argue that in light of what is meant, the contradictions can be resolved, and point to what there is beyond being and nonbeing. This shows that, at least in the present case, the apparent contradictions do not function to state literal contradictions but rather function as a skilful means (upaya) for a soteriological purpose, to help us realise the limits of language and not be attached to concepts but to experience reality directly so as to overcome suffering.

The paper is organised as follows. §1 analyses the statements that 'everything is only for one brief instant' and that 'we are all dying and being reborn at every moment', and argues that these indicate that there is in a sense no being – everything is impermanent. §2 analyses the statements that 'nothing can be created or destroyed' and that 'nothing can be born, nothing can die', and argues that these indicate that there is in a sense no nonbeing – there is only constant change and transformation. §3 combines these insights, and shows how the apparent contradictions disappear in light of what the statements mean. §4 draws out how the denial of both being and nonbeing can be understood as a denial of both eternalism and ontological nihilism, and points to what there is beyond being and nonbeing – a middle way based on an insight into interbeing.

2. No Being

Everything seems to be changing in every moment. The sun is rising, the flowers are blooming, the birds are singing, the monkeys are jumping, the rain is falling, and the rivers are flowing. Nothing ever seems to be the same. This idea is central to Buddhism, and is

expressed in the principle of impermanence, the idea that everything is always changing.³ Things are coming into existence when conditions are right and are going out of existence again when conditions are right. The idea is not only that things are not permanent, which would still allow them to exist over short periods of time, say for a few minutes or even only for a few moments, but that nothing is the same or exists for even more than one moment. Things are coming into existence and are going out of existence again in every moment. Thich Nhat Hanh writes that impermanence means that ‘nothing remains the same thing in two consecutive moments’ (Thich, 2017a, p. 15) and that ‘everything is only for one brief instant’ (Thich, 2017a, p. 75).

The idea of impermanence is closely related to the ideas of nonself, emptiness, and interbeing. Nonself is the idea that nothing has a separate selfbeing, emptiness is the idea that everything is empty of a separate selfbeing, and interbeing is the idea that everything depends for its existence on everything else or ‘inter-is’ with everything else. Thich Nhat Hanh interprets nonself in terms of emptiness and specifically in terms of interbeing. That is, he thinks that absolutely nothing has a separate selfbeing and that everything depends for its existence not only on something but on everything else.⁴ He argues that impermanence implies nonself, emptiness, and interbeing. Thus, if everything is impermanent, nothing can have a separate self since a separate self would be permanent and so cannot exist if everything is impermanent.⁵ He does not only take impermanence to imply nonself, emptiness, and interbeing, but also the other way around, and actually takes them to express the same idea, only in different ways. Thus, he sometimes describes them as concerning a temporal and a spatial dimension of the same idea. In terms of time, it is impermanence, and in terms of space, it is nonself, emptiness, or interbeing (Thich, 2017a, p. 75; Thich, 1998, p. 112).

The idea of impermanence does not imply that nothing exists. Things do exist. Only they come into existence and go out of existence again in every moment. But it does imply that things as we would usually conceive of them do not exist, at least not in ultimate reality. Thus, there is no self, there is no ‘me’ or ‘you’ and there are no monkeys outside jumping around on tree branches as we would usually conceive of them. Our concepts of ourselves only match things in conventional reality.⁶ Thus, when we talk about ourselves,

³ The idea that everything is always changing is not only central to Buddhism but also to philosophy and science. It is, for instance, an essential part of Heraclitus’s philosophy, expressed in his principle that everything flows (*panta rhei*). Thich Nhat Hanh often claims to agree with him that ‘You can never bathe in the same river twice’ (Thich, 2017a, p. 15) since both the river and you do not stay the same in any two moments.

⁴ See Thich (1998, p. 114). His interpretation of nonself differs both from the Abhidharma interpretation, on which the *dharmas* have a separate selfbeing, and the Madhyamaka interpretation, on which everything depends on at least something but not necessarily everything else.

⁵ See Thich (1998, pp. 112–113) and Thich (1974, p. 35).

⁶ He distinguishes ultimate and conventional reality like most Buddhists, but the distinction is a little subtle on his view since he takes them, just like everything else, to depend on each other.

about ‘me’ or ‘you’ or a monkey, we are in the realm of conventional reality and not in the realm of ultimate reality. On our usual conception, we consist, in a simplified way, of a mind and a body, persist over periods of time, and are resilient to smaller changes such as changes in our physical and mental constituents due to having a separate selfbeing. Yet, in ultimate reality, everything is only for a short moment, and so our concepts of ourselves do not match things in ultimate reality but only in conventional reality. In this sense, there is no being.

Now, Thich Nhat Hanh does not only say that ‘everything is only for one brief instant’ but also that ‘we are all dying and being reborn at every moment’. This seems a little strange. Once we talk about a ‘we’, we talk about something in conventional reality, about something like ‘packages’ consisting of mental and physical parts that persist over periods of time and are being held together by separate selves. This is because in ultimate reality, there is no such ‘we’, and so this ‘we’ must refer to something in conventional reality. However, we would normally describe these packages as each ‘dying’ and ‘being born’ only once. But the statement is that ‘we are all dying and being reborn at every moment’. The idea of dying and being reborn at every moment seems to be the idea of going in and out of existence again at every moment, the idea of impermanence. The statement thus seems to involve a ‘mixed reality’. The ‘we’ refers to something that only exists in conventional reality, to these packages, but the predicate ‘are all dying and being reborn at every moment’ is about an idea in ultimate reality, the idea that everything exists only for a short moment.

Thich Nhat Hanh seems to aim to highlight this way that the things we usually take ourselves to be, these packages persisting over some time and having a separate selfbeing, do not really exist. These packages are not only constantly changing – breathing air, drinking coffee, or walking around – but there is nothing permanent about them at all, nothing like a separate selfbeing that holds them together and lives on over periods of time.

Thich Nhat Hanh’s statement that ‘we are all dying and being reborn at every moment’ seems strange since it mixes realities. But it is not only his statement that sounds strange. The statement that ‘everything is constantly changing’ that is central to Buddhism is just as strange, and it is strange in the same way, at least from a Buddhist perspective. What are we talking about when we are saying that ‘everything’ is constantly changing? This is the statement this section started with, and the things referred to for illustration were the sun, flowers, birds, monkeys, the rain, and rivers, all of which are things in ordinary reality. The statement seems to say about things like these that they are constantly changing. But on a Buddhist view, all of these things are only part of conventional reality while the idea of constant change is reflected in the principle of impermanence, which describes ultimate

reality. Thich Nhat Hanh is aware of the strangeness of not only his but also this statement and calls it a ‘semantic absurdity’. Thus, he says,

Impermanence is a noun describing the nature of something – whether it’s a flower, a star, your loved one, or your own body. But we shouldn’t think that impermanence happens only to the outer appearance, and that inside there is something everlasting. Impermanence means that nothing can remain the same thing in two consecutive moments. So in fact there is no lasting “thing” that we can call impermanent; it’s semantically absurd to say “everything is impermanent”. The truth is that everything is only for one brief instant. (Thich, 2017a, p. 75)

He calls the statement that everything is impermanent ‘semantically absurd’ precisely because it involves a mixed reality. There is in ultimate reality no ‘thing’ that is impermanent or constantly changing. But if there is no lasting ‘thing’ that we can call impermanent, and if there is no ‘we’, or ‘I’, or monkey for that matter, should we stop talking like that? There would probably be very little left to say if we stopped referring to these things. So, should we maybe just stop talking completely? No. These things only exist in conventional reality yet it is very useful to talk like that as long as we are aware that these things are not permanent and do not have a separate selfbeing.⁷

3. No Nonbeing

The statement that ‘everything is only for one brief instant’ may appear to contradict the statement that ‘nothing can be created or destroyed’. The first indicates that everything is impermanent while the second may seem to indicate that things are permanent. To see how to reconcile these statements, let’s see how to understand the idea that ‘nothing can be created or destroyed’.

Thich Nhat Hanh often refers to the French scientist Antoine Lavoisier, who discovered the law of conservation of mass, and attributes to him the idea that ‘nothing can be created or destroyed’. Sometimes he also refers to the first law of thermodynamics, the law of conservation of energy, and also says about it that it says that ‘nothing can be created or destroyed’, this time not with respect to mass but with respect to energy.⁸ He says that the ideas conveyed in the laws of conservation of mass and energy are the same as those expressed in a passage in the Heart Sutra, which says that everything is empty of selfbeing

⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh says that words such as ‘I’ or ‘we’ are very useful conventional designations but do not properly present reality. See, e.g., Thich (2017a, p. 18) and Thich (2017b, p. 76).

⁸ See, e.g., Thich (2017a, p. 23), Thich (1988, p. 36), and Thich (2017b, p. 48).

and ‘neither produced nor destroyed’ (Thich, 1988, p. 15). He thus uses these scientific ideas to illustrate, and probably also to support, these Buddhist ideas.⁹

The law of conservation of mass says that the total mass in a closed system cannot be created or destroyed; it can only be transformed from one form to another. Similarly, the law of conservation of energy says that the total energy in a closed system cannot be created or destroyed; it can only be transformed from one form to another. Thus, when wood burns, the wood combines with oxygen from the air and changes into ashes and gases, carbon dioxide and water vapor, which float into the air. The law of conservation of mass predicts that the total mass of the wood and oxygen before the burning equals the total mass of the ashes and gases after the burning. Similarly, when a dynamite stick explodes, the chemical energy inside the dynamite stick changes into kinetic energy, heat, and light. The law of conservation of energy predicts that the total chemical energy inside the dynamite stick before the explosion equals the total kinetic energy, heat, and light, after the explosion.

The laws of conservation of mass and energy thus show that mass and energy are continually changing and transforming and cannot be lost. The idea that the total mass or energy in a closed system cannot be created or destroyed does not mean that there is one substance, or essence, or any other ‘one thing’ that is permanent. It only means that there is continuing change and transformation of mass and energy. Thich Nhat Hanh appeals to these laws to explain the idea in the Heart Sutra that things are ‘neither produced nor destroyed’. So it seems that this idea can be understood in the same way as the conservation laws. So, things are neither produced nor destroyed not in the sense that there is one substance, or essence, or any other ‘one thing’ that is permanent but only in the sense that there is continuing change and transformation. In this sense, there is no nonbeing.

Now, Thich Nhat Hanh does not only say that ‘nothing can be created or destroyed’, but also that ‘nothing can be born, nothing can die’. In a metaphorical sense, one can say of all kinds of things that they are being born or that they are dying, but in a literal sense, it would be living creatures who are being born and are dying. Thich Nhat Hanh does in fact say of all kinds of things that they are being born or that they are dying (‘a cloud never dies’) but his idea still seems to be to shift the focus to living creatures at this point, to us. There was already a sense in which we are born only once and die only once as well as a sense in which we die in every moment and are born in every moment. Now, what is the sense in which we cannot die at all and cannot be born at all?

Thich Nhat Hanh adopts a somewhat peculiar way of understanding what being born and dying means. He says that ‘to be born means from nothing you become something’ (Thich, 1988, p. 33) and that ‘to die means that from something you become nothing’ (Thich,

⁹ The *Heart Sutra* is the most important Buddhist sutra on emptiness of selfbeing which Thich Nhat Hanh, as explained above, interprets in terms of *interbeing*.

1988, p. 35).¹⁰ On a usual understanding, one can be born by becoming something from something else, such as by becoming a person from sperm and egg, and one can also die by becoming something from something else, such as by becoming ashes from a person. His understanding of being born and dying reflects the ideas of impermanence, nonself, and interbeing. Thus, if there is no separate and permanent self, and everything depends on everything else for its existence, or inter-is with everything else, there is no separate and permanent ‘person’ that develops from sperm and egg and turns into ashes. There is no sharp distinction. These ideas are supported by the conservation laws, Thich Nhat Hanh argues. Thus, he takes these laws, which imply that ‘nothing can be created or destroyed’, to show that ‘from nothing we can never become something’ (Thich, 1988, p. 34) and that ‘something can never become nothing’ (Thich, 1988, p. 36). On his understanding of being born and dying, this means that we cannot be born at all and that we cannot die at all. Thus, if being born means from nothing you become something and from nothing we can never become something, then we cannot be born, and if dying means from something you become nothing and from something we can never become nothing, then we cannot die.

What do we become if we do not become nothing? Thich Nhat Hanh explains this in this passage, in which he applies the conservation laws to Antoine Lavoisier himself.

Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier, the father of modern chemistry, is the French scientist who discovered that “nothing is created, nothing is destroyed, everything is in transformation” ... The insight and discoveries that Lavoisier made in his lifetime continue to resonate to this day. So Lavoisier has not died. His wisdom is still there. He continues in new forms. When we say that nothing is created, everything transforms, this also applies to your body, your feelings, your perceptions, your mental formations, your consciousness. (Thich, 2017a, pp. 74–75)

Thich Nhat Hanh explains that Lavoisier has not died because he continues to be in new forms. That is, he continues to be in the sense that he is transforming into other things which are then themselves transforming into other things, and so on. His wisdom is carried on in other forms and the atoms that made up his body at various points are changing into other forms. All of his body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness take on new forms.¹¹ So, he is continually changing and transforming.¹² The idea that Lavoisier can continue to be in the form of his wisdom, his ashes and the flowers that grow out of them, his children and their children, or in the hearts of the people who loved him may seem strange if one assumes that there is one permanent substance or essence such as a

¹⁰ He seems to understand ‘to be destroyed’ and ‘to be created’ in the same way. Thus, these also mean ‘to become nothing from something’ and ‘to become something from nothing’. See Thich (1988, p. 33, 35).

¹¹ These are the ‘five aggregates’, the elements taken to constitute people in Buddhism.

¹² A cloud never dies, or cannot be destroyed, in the same sense. It cannot become nothing but transforms into rain, rivers, and so on. See, e.g., Thich (2017a, p. 30), Thich (2017b, p. 47), and Thich (1988, p. 34).

‘self’ of Lavoisier that needs to continue in order for him to continue. But if everything is impermanent, there is no such self.

What do we come from if we do not come from nothing? Thich Nhat Hanh explains this by talking about our birthday. We all have a date of birth, and the concept of a date of birth is a very useful concept to have, he concedes, but it only refers to something in conventional reality. Thus, he asks if your date of birth is really the date when you started to exist, and argues that you already existed before that date. There is no precise point that one could fix as the point where you started to exist. Thus, you may have already existed as a foetus, or even in another form from the day of your conception, or even before that since the elements you are composed of were already present in the sperm and egg that came together, and maybe you even existed in all the conditions that made this coming together possible, and maybe you were already there even long before that in your grandparents, and so on. It looks like one can push back the start of your existence in some form or other forever. He says, ‘there is no moment when you did not exist’ (Thich, 2017a, p. 32). This is what the koan in the Zen tradition, asking ‘What did you look like before your grandmother was born?’, is about, he explains, it is an invitation to identify ourselves in time and space (Thich, 2017a, p. 32).¹³

On an ordinary conception, we did not exist before the time our grandmother was born, but only started to exist from the day of our birth or maybe a little before or after that. The question of personhood and the conditions on which one becomes a person as well as the point in time when one becomes a person loom large in the debate about abortion. There are various views on this, but on all views, from extremely conservative ones to extremely liberal ones, one becomes a person at least at some point between the time of one’s conception, when one is still only a unicellular zygote, and the time of one’s birth or a little later.¹⁴ So, on an ordinary conception of a person, the story of the start of our existence in Zen does not get going. The idea of what a person is is different in Zen. This difference comes about because there is only continuing change and transformation in Zen, and so existence in a variety of forms is possible. The idea that you already existed in all kinds of forms before your birthday may again seem strange if one assumes that there is a permanent substance or essence such as your ‘self’ that needs to exist in order for you to exist, but if everything is impermanent, there is no such self.¹⁵

¹³ See also Thich (1998, p. 117) and Thich (1988, p. 36).

¹⁴ An extremely conservative view is held by Schwarz (1990) and an extremely liberal view by Singer (1993). On more moderate views, there is a morally relevant break at some point in the process of development of the foetus determined by criteria such as the onset of movement, consciousness, the ability to feel pain, or viability (see Gordon, 2008).

¹⁵ It is an interesting question what implications this story of Zen has for the debate about abortion and what Thich Nhat Hanh’s views on abortion are. These questions are however beyond the scope of this paper.

Thich Nhat Hanh explains that our ‘birthday’ is really only a ‘continuation day’ (Thich, 1998, p. 117) since there is continuation every day and actually even every moment. Similarly, he proposes not to use the word ‘reincarnation’, but the words ‘rebirth’, ‘continuation’, ‘transformation’, ‘manifestation’, or, and preferably, ‘remanifestation’ (Thich, 2017a, p. 29). Thus, we are remanifestations, not only of our ancestors, but also of everything else that was needed for us to become who we are now, such as the people we meet, the ideas we think about, the coffee we drink, and so on.

Thich Nhat Hanh mentions the idea of reincarnation in ancient India to contrast it with this idea of remanifestation in Zen. Thus, he explains that the idea of reincarnation suggests that there is a separate soul, self, or spirit that somehow leaves the body after death, flies away, and then enters another body, and that on this view, the body is some sort of a house for the mind, soul, or spirit. But he emphasises that this idea does not align with the deepest teachings of Buddhism since it implies that mind and body can be separated from each other and that mind and spirit are somehow permanent.¹⁶ So, while reincarnation in ancient India was taught on the basis of the idea of a separate and permanent self, he holds that the Buddha taught reincarnation, or better remanifestation, in light of impermanence, nonself, and interbeing.¹⁷

Since it does not presume a separate and permanent self, the notion of remanifestation in Zen is in various respects a much broader notion than the notion of reincarnation in ancient India. Thus, not only animate but also inanimate objects can have remanifestations, there can be more than one remanifestation at the same time, remanifestations can occur in all kinds of forms, can occur not only after death, but already when one is still alive, and can already be there before they remanifest.

4. No Being and No Non-Being

Thich Nhat Hanh’s statements that ‘everything is only for one brief instant’ and that ‘nothing can be created or destroyed’ seemed to contradict one another since the first indicates that everything is impermanent, while the second may seem to indicate that things are permanent. Yet, in light of what the statements convey, there is no contradiction. Although the first does indeed indicate that everything is impermanent, the second does not indicate that things are permanent, but quite to the contrary, that things are continually changing and transforming.

¹⁶ He takes the ‘deepest teachings’ of Buddhism to align with the idea that everything is empty of selfbeing. Thus, the Abhidharma school, which allows for the *dharmas* to still have a separate selfbeing, would not align with the deepest teachings of Buddhism either.

¹⁷ See Thich (2017a, p. 27) and Thich (2017b, pp. 39–40).

This is clear since the idea that nothing can be created or destroyed may be understood in line with the ideas conveyed in the laws of conservation of mass and energy, which show that mass and energy are continually changing and transforming and cannot be created or destroyed. In the case of these laws, this does not mean that there is any one permanent substance or essence, but only that there is continuing change and transformation of mass and energy. The statement that ‘nothing can be created or destroyed’ thus also does not mean that there is any one permanent substance or essence, but also only that there is continuing change and transformation.

Thich Nhat Hanh’s statements that ‘we are all dying and being reborn at every moment’ and that ‘nothing can be born, nothing can die’ also seemed to contradict each other, since the first indicates that we are being born and dying at every moment, while the second indicates that we are not being born and dying at all. But again, on reflection, they do not.

There would be a contradiction if ‘to be born’ and ‘to die’ were to mean the same and were to apply to the same things. The first statement refers with ‘we’ to the packages we ordinarily take ourselves to be, which only exist in conventional reality. The second statement does not refer to anything in particular, since it is a conjunction of two negative existential statements. Yet, the domain of quantification does seem to include things in conventional reality, and thus also the packages we take ourselves to be.¹⁸ So, if ‘to be born’ and ‘to die’ were to mean the same, there would indeed be a contradiction. But this is not the case. In the second statement, ‘to be born’ and ‘to die’ mean ‘to become something from nothing’ and ‘to become nothing from something’, but in the first statement, ‘to be born’ and ‘to die’ simply mean ‘to come into existence’ and ‘to go out of existence’.¹⁹

5. Beyond Being and Non Being

The idea of impermanence, that everything exists only for a short moment, aims to deny being in a sense, since it shows that there is no permanent self, so that it is not the case that everything one might think exists exists. The idea that nothing can be created or destroyed, that nothing can come from or become nothing, aims to deny nonbeing in a sense, since it shows that there is continuing change and transformation, so that it is not the case that nothing exists. Thich Nhat Hanh thinks that the idea of impermanence shows that some sort of ‘eternalism’ should be avoided and that the idea that nothing can be created

¹⁸ After all, we are told that Lavoisier cannot die.

¹⁹ ‘to be born’ and ‘to die’ surely do not mean ‘to become something from nothing’ and ‘to become nothing from something’ in the first statement since it is surely not supposed to say ‘we are all becoming nothing from something and something from nothing again at every moment’.

or destroyed shows that some sort of ‘nihilism’ should be avoided, both of which he calls ‘extremes’.

There are those who believe that an eternal self continues to exist after the body disintegrates. We could call this belief a kind of “eternalism”. Others believe that after death there is nothing. This is a kind of “nihilism”. We need to avoid both these extremes. The insight of impermanence and interbeing tells us there cannot be an eternal, separate self, and the first law of thermodynamics – the law of conservation of energy – tells us that nothing can be created or destroyed; it can only be transformed. So it’s not scientific to believe that after our body decomposes we become nothing. (Thich, 2017a, pp. 22–23)

On a standard use, ‘eternalism’ refers to a specific view about the temporal and ontological structure of the world, the view that past, present, and future moments exist or are real, and hence that past, present, and future objects and events exist or are real; and it is often contrasted with ‘presentism’, the view that only the present moment exists or is real, and hence that only present objects and events exist or are real.²⁰ There are many uses of ‘nihilism’, but since our topic is existence, and so ontology, the relevant view is ontological nihilism, the view that nothing at all exists or is real.²¹

At some point, Thich Nhat Hanh describes eternalism as the view that everything exists or is real, and nihilism as the view that nothing exists or is real, which is in line with the standard use of these terms (Thich, 2017b, p. 14). At this point though, he speaks about them in connection with the question of what happens to a person after death. Thus, on a kind of eternalism, ‘an eternal self continues after the body disintegrates’ and on a kind of nihilism, ‘after death there is nothing’. This adds a soteriological twist. Here, it becomes clear what the aim of denying being and nonbeing is. Even though the denials of both eternalism and nihilism are also meant as general claims about the temporal and ontological structure of the world, the central point for Buddhists is of course soteriological. The aim is to reduce suffering. So how can we reduce suffering ?

Thich Nhat Hanh proposes to avoid both ‘extreme ways’ of answering the question of what happens to a person after death that eternalism and nihilism offer, which he also sometimes calls ‘extremes of being and nonbeing’ (Thich, 2017b, p. 14). If one does that, one gets the view that after death, there is neither an eternal self nor is there nothing. Things do exist, but only for short moments, and so there is no permanent or separate self that

²⁰ See Miller (2013, p. 346) and Ingram (2025, pp. 1–2). Eternalism is also often contrasted with the ‘growing block view’, the view that past and present moments exist or are real, but not future ones, and hence that past and present objects and events exist or are real, but not future ones.

²¹ See Turner (2011, p. 1) and Westerhoff (2024, p. 514). Note that ontological nihilism differs from metaphysical nihilism, which is often characterised in modal terms, such as the view that ‘there could have been nothing’, that ‘there could have been no concrete objects’ (Lowe, 2022, p. 62), or that ‘there could have been no contingent or concrete objects’ (Cameron, 2006, p. 193).

holds them together but only continuing change and transformation. Things do not depend for their existence on a permanent or separate self, but on everything else, so that everything inter-is with everything else. So, in short, there is neither being nor nonbeing, but interbeing. This alternative way of answering the question goes beyond being and nonbeing and offers a ‘middle way’.²² Illustrating the ideas of being and nonbeing and beyond with an example of a flower, Thich Nhat Hanh writes,

Reality goes beyond notions of being and nonbeing. To say that the flower exists is not exactly correct, but to say that it does not exist is also not correct. True emptiness is called “wondrous being”, because it goes beyond existence and nonexistence.’ (Thich, 1998, p. 125)

The idea of interbeing seems to offer a middle way in terms of ontology, yet in terms of soteriology, the idea alone does not suffice to find the middle way. To put it metaphorically, one does not only need to look up the middle way on the map, one also needs to walk it. The middle way is not a point on a map, it’s below our feet, in life. Only when one walks the middle way can one reduce suffering.

Thich Nhat Hanh says that the teachings of impermanence, nonself, and interbeing were ‘offered by the Buddha as keys to unlock the door of reality’ (Thich, 1998, p. 115). He highlights that they should not be seen only as ideas or doctrines in philosophy, but as insights that can be practiced to ‘help us touch reality’ and ‘live more deeply and enjoy life more’ (Thich, 1998, p. 112, 114).²³ They are something to be practiced and lived. Thus, we can practice to look at things in light of impermanence, nonself, and interbeing. We can practice to see things in a way that ‘we know that when we touch one thing, we touch everything’ or that ‘the one is in the all and the all is in the one’ (Thich, 1998, pp. 115–116). This is a form of meditation or mindful awareness, something practical, not theoretical. He thinks that we can practice not only when we do sitting meditation, but all the time, when we brush our teeth, drink coffee, walk to work, and so on. This form of practice enables us to understand impermanence, nonself, and interbeing in a deeper way and to ‘touch’ not

²² This understanding of the middle way as a denial of both being (eternalism) and nonbeing (nihilism) goes back to Nagarjuna’s formulation in the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, chapter XXIV; see Garfield (1995) for an English translation. Nagarjuna argues that nothing exists independently, that everything is empty of intrinsic nature (*sunyata*), and thus that nothing has selfbeing. His aim is philosophical and primarily negative: to avoid the metaphysical extremes of being and nonbeing. Thich Nhat Hanh adopts this insight of emptiness and expands it by interpreting it in such a way that everything depends for its existence not only on something but on everything else, thus creating a holistic and relational ontology. The idea that everything depends for its existence on everything else – or ‘inter-is’ with everything else – is the idea of interbeing. His goal in adding this positive aspect to the classical absence of intrinsic being is practical and soteriological: to help us become aware of emptiness, or interbeing, in everyday life and overcome suffering. For Thich Nhat Hanh’s discussion of Nagarjuna, see Thich (1974, pp. 113–117).

²³ I do of course treat them as ideas in this paper and so does Thich Nhat Hanh in his books. He explains the ideas and I am trying my best to explain too. This is not a problem since the aim in writing about them is not to touch reality, but only to convey them to others.

only the ‘phenomenal aspects of reality’, but also a deeper dimension of experience, namely nirvana (Thich, 1998, p. 116).

Thich Nhat Hanh calls nirvana the ‘complete silencing of concepts’ or ‘extinction of all notions’, and explains that ‘nirvana means extinction, above all the extinction of ideas’ (Thich, 1998, p. 116, 118). This includes all notions, such as those of coming and going, self and other, one and many, as well as those of being and nonbeing, birth and no-birth, and death and no-death. Nirvana goes beyond all of them and is ‘free’ from them.²⁴

Let us look at our initial statements in this light. There is no contradiction, but there is still something puzzling. The idea of impermanence, expressed in the statement that everything is only for one brief instant, may seem to suggest a particular notion of what an object or a person is, and the idea of transformation, that nothing can be created or destroyed, may also seem to suggest a particular, but different, notion of what an object or a person is. Imagine a flower, at one moment, t_1 , and imagine a blossom of the flower falls down, and now lies on the ground, at another moment, t_2 .²⁵

Considering the idea of impermanence, the flower, as one might imagine it, as existing at both t_1 and t_2 , does not exist. This is because the flower is only for one short moment. So, it seems to be something like a momentary conglomeration of parts that are going in and out of existence at every moment. The particular constellation of parts at t_1 is no longer there at t_2 . So, the flower existed only for one short moment, at t_1 . At t_2 , for sure, there is also a flower, but it is not the same flower.²⁶

Considering the idea of transformation, the flower cannot be created or destroyed, but only be transformed. So, it also seems to be something like a conglomeration of parts, but this time it can transform and exist in different forms spread out over space. The conglomerations of the flower at t_1 and at t_2 are the same flower in the sense that the flower at t_1 has now transformed into the flower at t_2 , now with the blossom being located in a different place, on the ground. Although it has a different form now, it still exists, and will still exist if the blossom withers and turns into mud and then into a new flower, or if it is being burned and becomes ashes. The flower would only take on different forms, it would also be the mud and the new flower, and ashes, all at the same time.²⁷

²⁴ Davis (2013) distinguishes six forms of emptiness in Zen. Thich Nhat Hanh often focuses on two forms, ‘lack of own-being’ or ‘interbeing’ and ‘emptiness of words’.

²⁵ The situation is parallel for people.

²⁶ This view bears some similarities to the view of ‘four-dimensionalism’ in western metaphysics, on which objects have temporal as well as spatial parts. See, e.g., Conee & Sider (2005, pp. 47–52; pp. 147–152). Yet, on the picture drawn here, a flower exists only for a short moment and so corresponds to only one temporal part of a flower rather than to a collection of temporal parts.

²⁷ This view is somewhat similar to the ‘just-matter theory’, on which quantities of matter are the only objects that exist, and a quantity of matter is defined by the matter making it up. On this view, what one may call a ‘flower’ may also continue to exist in different places scattered in space if its matter still exists. See Conee & Sider (2005, pp. 137–138). Yet, on the picture drawn here, the flower is only transforming and not persisting.

So, one might think that there are two notions of what it is to be an object and similarly of what it is to be a person. One question this raises is, which one of them is correct? Which one of them is the ‘true’ teaching of Buddhism? Or is the idea to hold on to both notions?

Looking at this in light of nirvana, it is clear that these are both only notions, notions of what it is to be an object or a person. There is an ultimate or true nature of reality, which is that of interbeing, but on top of that, we tend to create all kinds of notions, such as those of objects or people. In one case, we decide to say that an object or a person is this, and in the other case, we decide to say that an object or a person is that. But it is vital to be aware that both notions are only created, and do not present the true nature of reality properly. The true nature of reality ‘cannot be described in notions’ (Thich, 2017a, p. 47).

Even the notion of interbeing, as well as the notions of impermanence, nonself, and all other Buddhist notions, are, although they can help us to overcome suffering, ultimately also only ‘tools’, ‘methods’, or ‘instruments’ to practice. We should not be caught up in them either. Thich Nhat Hanh compares them with a famous Buddhist metaphor to a raft that we can use to cross the ocean of suffering to reach ‘the other shore’. Once we arrive, we should give the raft away to others, pass on the Buddhist teachings to others, and help them use them to get to the other shore as well.

6. Conclusion

This paper has resolved two apparent contradictions in the works of the Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. Thus, his statements that ‘everything is only for one brief instant’ and that ‘nothing can be created or destroyed’ seemed to contradict each other, and so did his statements that ‘we are all dying and being reborn at every moment’ and that ‘nothing can be born, nothing can die’. Yet, we have seen that in light of what these statements mean, the contradictions disappear. There is no contradiction in the first pair since although the first statement indicates that everything is impermanent, the second does not indicate that things are permanent, but quite to the contrary that things are continually changing and transforming, and there is no contradiction in the second pair either since ‘to be born’ and ‘to die’ do not mean the same.

The statement that ‘everything is only for one brief instant’ expresses impermanence, and shows that there is in a sense no being since there is no permanent self, so that not everything one might think exists exists, and the statement that ‘nothing can be created or destroyed’ expresses transformation, and shows that there is in a sense no nonbeing either since there is continuing change and transformation so that not nothing exists. The ideas of impermanence and transformation can be seen as denials of both eternalism and nihilism.

There is no being and there is no nonbeing, but there is interbeing. This offers a ‘middle way’ that goes beyond being and nonbeing.

Thich Nhat Hanh often uses simple, beautiful, and metaphorical language to bring Buddhist ideas to life and close to us. A vivid illustration of the limits of our language may include semantic absurdities or apparent contradictions. The aim of such a use of language is to help us realise that our concepts are only constructed and do not match ultimate reality rather than to state something literally contradictory. The apparent contradictions are thus only tools or methods, a skillful means to help us not be attached to concepts and ultimately overcome suffering.

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