

# **‘The Path of Return Continues the Journey’ – Engaged Buddhism and the Prajñāpāramitā Heart Sūtra in the Popular Theatre of Thích Nhât Hanh**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

During the Vietnam War, the intensity of the suffering inflicted by the incessant warfare compelled many Buddhists of Vietnam out of their pagodas, into the streets and onto the battlefields. A protest movement led by the United Buddhist Congregation of Vietnam forged a ‘middle path’ between the communist North and the American-allied anti-Communist South. Grounded in an ethical foundation of non-violence and non-partisanship, the Buddhists sided with neither the North nor the South and sought not victory for one side but an end to the suffering. The Buddhist Struggle Movement attempted to traverse the vast distance between Washington, the bastion of anti-Communism, and the rice fields of rural Vietnam, where ideologies were meaningless in the context of such extreme destruction. The Buddhist Struggle Movement represented the powerless suffering masses – the peasants of Vietnam: as such, it can be understood as a manifestation of popular culture. In a country that was eighty percent Buddhist, the protest movement was a ‘rice-roots’ movement of the people. What began as a struggle against religious repression grew into a struggle against political oppression, which managed to bring down the iniquitous Diem government. Ultimately, the movement became a nationalist struggle for peace, which confronted the monstrous military power of the United States of America.

Both clergy and laity were involved in challenging the superpowers and their policies of destruction. Volunteer Buddhist social workers were ceaseless in their action for relief, healing and reconciliation. They evacuated villagers, established cease-fire lines, reconstructed bombed villages, housed and cared for war orphans, and facilitated developments in rural Vietnam. Direct protest took many forms. Members of the laity shaved their heads in evocation of Buddhist values and presence and family altars were placed in the streets in

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the paths of approaching tanks. Other types of activism included fasting, non-cooperation with the government, non-violent civil disobedience, and helping and protecting deserters and draft resisters. While some forms of protest were extreme, such as the several self-immolations, artistic works of poetry, music, painting and theatre were valuable mediums of communication, inspiration and education on a popular level.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the most influential theoretician of the Buddhist Struggle Movement was the Venerable Thích Nh'ât Hanh. A Vietnamese Zen Buddhist, scholar and poet, Nh'ât Hanh is today an esteemed leader of the now global movement of Engaged Buddhism. The continuing evolution of Engaged Buddhism involves utilising the ancient teachings and practices of Buddhism in contemporary contexts of political and social activism. Nh'ât Hanh first articulated the notion of a Buddhist ethic of engagement during the Vietnam War. He expressed his theories and beliefs in a steady stream of publications. He wrote numerous articles, books, poems, and a dramatic work which called for peace and reconciliation and spoke for the majority of the Vietnamese people who had no voice of their own.<sup>2</sup> As he has recalled, '[we] used literature and the arts as 'weapons' to challenge the oppression.'<sup>3</sup> Nh'ât Hanh earned the title 'anti-war poet' and was condemned by both Hanoi and Saigon who considered him a threat to their political agendas. Countless of Nh'ât Hanh's associates and student volunteers were killed on the battlefield, assassinated, or imprisoned for their non-violent activism. Nh'ât Hanh documented these killings in his poems and specifically his dramatic work. Accordingly, these works incited much controversy and their distribution, which became necessarily subversive, contributed to Nh'ât Hanh's ultimate exile from Vietnam.

This paper will pursue a critical reading of Nh'ât Hanh's dramatic work, titled *The Path of Return Continues the Journey*. The first paragraph of Nh'ât Hanh's introduction to the play reads:

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<sup>1</sup> See Sallie B King: 'Thích Nh'ât Hanh and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam – Nondualism in Action,' in Christopher S Queen and Sallie B King editors, *Engaged Buddhism – Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, New York, 1996, 335-7.

<sup>2</sup> For Nh'ât Hanh's poems see Thích Nh'ât Hanh: *Call Me By My True Names – The Collected Poems of Thích Nh'ât Hanh*, Berkeley, 1999. For his dramatic work see Thích Nh'ât Hanh: 'The Path of Return Continues the Journey', in *Love In Action – Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* Berkeley, 1993, 9-36.

<sup>3</sup> Thích Nh'ât Hanh: 'Love In Action' in *Love In Action*, op cit, 41.

## *Buddha of Suburbia*

At 12.30 a.m. on July 5, 1967, in the village of Binh Phuoc, Gia Dinh Province, a group of strangers abducted five young men, brought them to the bank of the Saigon River, and shot them. All five were volunteer workers in the School of Youth for Social Service, [the SYSS] a non-violent organisation that sought only to heal the wounds of war and reconstruct the villages. Their names were Tuan, Tho, Hy, Lanh, and Dinh. Tuan was a Buddhist novice.

Four died immediately. The fifth, Dinh, survived, but his clothes were soaked in blood and he lost consciousness. The strangers thought all five were dead, so they left.

Silence on the river. There are many stars in the sky, but no moon. A small sampan comes gently to the shore. Mai appears. The sampan is large enough to take the four, only four, because the fifth, Dinh, is still alive, and must stay behind. (9)<sup>4</sup>

This is where the play begins, just after the murders have taken place. Upon their raft, the five characters journey from the finite to the infinite, traversing the primordial waters of creation towards re-creation. Thus, the play unfolds as a metaphysical exploration of life beyond death; uniting the realm of the living with the realm of the dead, and offering assurance of the illusion of separation.

Within the context of investigating the interface between art, spirituality, and popular culture, the play can be read on three levels. Firstly, the play can be understood as an artistic work that is a manifestation of popular culture as well as a means of engagement with that culture. The play attempts to convey the meaning of Engaged Buddhism and its spiritual values through the medium of theatre. Secondly, the play can be read as a kind of poetic commentary on the *Prajñāpāramitā Heart Sūtra*, one of the most popular and quintessential Mahāyāna scriptures. The play symbolically represents the metaphysical truth of emptiness, or non-duality, which is the doctrinal theme of the *Heart Sūtra*. Within Buddhism as a whole, and the Mahāyāna in particular, there is an evident tension between rational thought and conceptual language, and direct perception and spiritual experience. I will suggest that the play, like the *Prajñāpāramitā*, or 'Perfection of Wisdom' literature,

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<sup>4</sup> Henceforth, references to quotes from the play will be given in parentheses within the text.

utilises language and the dramatic form creatively in order to deal with the issue of ineffability. Finally, I will suggest that the play, like the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras*, or the Zen *kōan*, is intended to serve as a meditative guide, for the audience or reader, towards spiritual experience or insight into the illusion of life and death as binary opposites. I will also suggest that the creative act of writing the play was, for Thích Nh'ât Hanh, a kind of religious praxis.

### **THE PLAY AS A REPRESENTATION OF ENGAGED BUDDHISM**

The image of an elderly Buddhist monk sitting in meditation engulfed in flames on a Saigon street has become a paradigmatic icon of Engaged Buddhism. While the self-immolations of the Vietnam War era were widely publicised, the assassination of the four SYSS workers was a largely undocumented incident of terrorism. *The Path of Return Continues the Journey* bears witness to the unrecognised deaths of the activists and pays homage to their devotion to altruistic activism. The characters of Nh'ât Hanh's play can be understood as 'Buddhas of Suburbia,' or perhaps 'Bodhisattvas of the Battlefield.'

From the beginning of the play there is a sense of reconciliation and resolution in the dialogue. Upon the small boat that is to carry these spirits to 'the other shore,' the characters confront their deaths with serenity and acceptance. They laugh and banter, listen and remember, lucidly recalling the moment of their horrific deaths without sorrow or attachment and, most strikingly, with forgiveness. We are compelled to question how the murdered are able to forgive their murderers.

A principle teaching of Nh'ât Hanh's Engaged Buddhism, which is a pervasive theme in his poetry and this play, is the practice of 'identifying the real enemy.' Nh'ât Chi Mai, one of the five characters in the play, was a young Buddhist nun who worked with the SYSS. In 1967, Sister Mai immolated herself for peace. She is also depicted as a bodhisattva. Throughout the play, Nh'ât Hanh uses Mai's voice as his own. She relates the notion of the 'real enemy':

Those who are shooting at this very moment do not know who they are fighting. All are victims...  
Men kill because, on the one hand, they do not know their real enemy, and on the other, they are pushed into a position where they must kill...

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So, men kill unjustly and in turn are killed unjustly, and it is their own countrymen who kill them...  
Who is really killing us? It is fear, hatred, prejudice. (30-2)

The practice of 'identifying the real enemy' reflects the Engaged Buddhist emphasis on personal responsibility and inner transformation and it is grounded in the Buddhist belief in the non-duality of self and other. It is the false separation of self and other which causes suffering; ultimately, the true enemy is to be found in this fundamental delusion. Nh'ât Hanh proposes that rather than objectifying our fear, hatred and prejudice onto the 'other,' we must transform the roots of violence within the self through spiritual practice. Our own *inner* enemies of fear, hatred and prejudice can be transformed and the non-duality of self and other can be realised. The Dalai Lama has called this 'internal disarmament.'<sup>5</sup> Nh'ât Hanh's essential teaching is that the only way to create peace is to 'be peace.' He further proposes that the realisation of the interdependence of self and other can induce the complete empathic identification with the perpetrator or the oppressor which gives rise to understanding and non-judgment. This practice of non-dual identification reveals that the perpetrators of suffering are in as much pain as their victims as they suffer from ignorance of their true selves and the true nature of reality. Such understanding gives rise to compassion and forgiveness.

The students of the SYSS were taught to 'prepare to die without hatred.' Nh'ât Hanh instructed:

Our enemy is our anger, hatred, greed, fanaticism, and discrimination against men. If you die because of violence, you must meditate on compassion in order to forgive those who kill you. When you die realising this state, you are truly a child of the Awakened One. Even if you are dying in oppression, shame, and violence, if you can smile with forgiveness, you have great power... If you die with compassion in mind, you are a torch lighting our path... Your love has become eternal.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> H H the Dalai Lama XIV: *New Millennium Message* @ [www.anglefire.com/on/GEAR2000/hhdl.html](http://www.anglefire.com/on/GEAR2000/hhdl.html)

<sup>6</sup> Nh'ât Hanh: *Call Me By My True Names*, op cit, 19.

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The characters of Nh'ât Hanh's play have attained the wisdom instilled by insight into the non-duality of true reality and they have actualised the bodhisattva's concomitant boundless compassion.

Within the Buddhist tradition, the doctrines are often referred to via the analogy of the raft. Upon commencing the spiritual life of the practitioner, the meditator is known as a 'Stream Enterer' who then journeys across the waters of consciousness to the 'other shore' of enlightenment upon the raft of the Buddha's teachings. Once the practitioner has reached the other shore, and both shores are realised as one, the raft is abandoned. The central metaphoric image of the raft in Nh'ât Hanh's play can be understood in a similar way. In the introduction Nh'ât Hanh refers to the play as his 'boat'; it is his vehicle for the transmission of the teachings of Engaged Buddhism and his fundamental faith in non-duality. In this sense, the play is educational, prescriptive and instructive.

In his attempt to speak **to** the people and **for** the people, I would suggest that Nh'ât Hanh has consciously chosen the medium of theatre to communicate his teachings in a relatable context. Furthermore, theatre can be a powerful and critical method of communication among the illiterate. I would also suggest that Nh'ât Hanh wrote within an Asian narrative tradition utilising the characteristic dream or visionary genre. Typical traits of this genre include: the transformation of identities to emphasise existential fluidity; the dead come back to life; the prevalence of ghost figures; illusory events which are not considered unreal, communication through silence or analogy and allusions to the folk literature of the popular cultures of Central, East, and South East Asia.<sup>7</sup> All of these conventions can be recognised within Nh'ât Hanh's play and it is within this context that the play can be understood as a manifestation of, and a means of engagement with, the popular culture of Vietnam. In a study of Buddhist philosophy in fiction, Francisca Bantly suggests that within this 'pan-Asian literary genre... fiction transcends its commonly understood function of merely expressing ideas and situations through its narrative medium to actually embodying the expressed truths in itself as a work of art.'<sup>8</sup> The Catholic peace activist Father Daniel Berrigan has deemed Nh'ât Hanh's play 'a work

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<sup>7</sup> See Francisca C Bantly: 'Buddhist Philosophy in the Art of Fiction' in F Reynolds and D Tracy, editors, *Discourse and Practice*, Albany, 1992, 83ff.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

of authentic Buddhist art<sup>9</sup> and I would suggest that expressed through the medium of theatre, the characters do indeed embody compassion and the truth of non-duality.

### **THE PLAY AS A COMMENTARY ON THE *HEART SŪTRA***

The second level on which the play can be read reveals Nh'ât Hanh's exegetical enthusiasms. Nh'ât Hanh includes the *Prajñāpāramitā Heart Sūtra*, in the play's 'List of Characters.' Accordingly, *The Path of Return Continues the Journey* can be read as a metaphoric commentary on this Mahāyāna scripture. Furthermore, Nh'ât Hanh, like one of the characters in the play, has drawn inspiration from the *sūtra* – from both its doctrinal teachings and its method of teaching. I would suggest that Nh'ât Hanh's work can be understood within the context of the tradition of Mahāyāna Buddhist scholars who have concerned themselves with the creative tension that exists between what can be said and what is unsayable.

The *Heart Sūtra* expounds the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness, *∅-ānyatā*: that all things, including the five aggregates that constitute the self, are 'empty' of independent existence; that the true nature of ultimate reality is non-dual; that all things are interconnected, interdependent, and arise simultaneously in mutual constant co-production and in constant change. The *Heart Sūtra's* metaphysics of emptiness reveals the illusion of the concepts of birth and death. The *sūtra* claims: 'all dharmas are marked with emptiness; they are neither produced nor destroyed.'<sup>10</sup> When approached dualistically through the rational mind, the habitual understanding of death is one of an absolute end, of nothingness, of oblivion. However, the *Heart Sūtra* reveals that death is a transformation that in no way resembles annihilation. Being can never be reduced to non-being: because everything is empty of its own separate inherent existence and because everything is causally dependent upon everything else, nothing is ever really born and nothing ever really dies. Thích Nh'ât Hanh is fond of using the term 'Happy Continuation Day' to replace

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<sup>9</sup> Berrigan, 'Speech Is All Of Forgiveness,' op cit, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Nh'ât Hanh's translation and commentaries on the *Heart Sūtra* are revealing. See Thích Nh'ât Hanh: *The Heart of Understanding – Commentaries on the Prajñāpāramitā Heart Sūtra*, Berkeley, 1988, 1.

'Happy Birthday.' He is also fond of saying 'To be or not to be – that is **not** the question.'<sup>11</sup>

The *Heart Sūtra's* metaphysical landscape of eternal emptiness is the landscape of Nh'ât Hanh's play. Nh'ât Hanh represents the resolution of life and death through the characters who are completely identified with the entire universe. Nh'ât Hanh has granted the dead with the omniscient wisdom and perception of the *bodhisattva* which is so often lost to the realm of the living. As Mai recognises: 'the eyes of the living have a difficult time seeing the whole of life (20)... Death is change, a sudden evolution, that's all.' (27) Perceiving the impermanence of every moment of life, every breath, Tho says: '[our lives were] a second by second evolution, while our own deaths tonight are the evolution of an entire period, an entire cycle.' (27) Energetically, or karmically, these five lives continue beyond death, while in the realm of the living, all they have said and done in the name of peace will continue to have influence and create inspiration. As Mai says to Tho: 'You are present everywhere.' (27). Nh'ât Hanh often uses the analogy of the wave and the ocean to explain birth and death – a wave is empty of a separate self but it is full of water; a wave is 'born' from water and wind but when it ceases, it does not **end**, it **returns** to the ocean. It is just the **form** or **idea** of the wave that ceases. In the play, Mai's analogy relates: 'If you set fire to a piece of charcoal, it burns red and becomes heat. When the fire dies, the charcoal is reduced to ash. Heat is the afterlife of the charcoal... Nothing can be lost.' (26)

The *Heart Sūtra* teaches that the conceptual **idea** of life and death as separate realities is an obstacle to true liberation. When they are perceived as separate, we inevitably form an attachment to life while death becomes a shunned dark realm of fear. This attachment reifies the illusion of a separate finite self, which is the cause of all suffering. According to the Mahāyāna, language reinforces and perpetuates this kind of dualistic conceptual thought. As the Buddhist scholar David McMahan explains:

According to virtually all schools of Asian Buddhism, language constructs a false sense of oneself and the things of the world and

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<sup>11</sup> See Thích Nh'ât Hanh: *Going Home – Jesus and Buddha as Brother*, London, 1999, 23-7.



erects a labyrinth of artificial meanings within which consciousness becomes imprisoned.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, there is a pervasive suspicion of language throughout the Buddhist tradition. Much has been written about the '14 Undeclared Views,' fourteen philosophical and metaphysical questions which the Buddha 'answered' by remaining silent.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, a number of Mahāyāna texts reiterate the claim: 'From the moment of his enlightenment to the time he passed away, the Tathāgata Buddha did not utter a single word.'<sup>14</sup> The point is that ultimate reality, or truth, is ineffable – *nirvāṇa* is the realm of the 'signless,' as the *Prajñāpāramitā Diamond Sūtra* states. Ultimate reality can only be experienced – it cannot be expressed in language or in any teaching because it has transcended all words and all speech, all concepts and all ideas. Ultimately, any direct discourse on metaphysical non-duality is inherently self-defeating.

While the Mahāyāna comprehended the limitations of language in expressing true reality, and the tendency for language to foster delusion, the body of Mahāyāna literature is vast. In fact, the Mahāyāna re-affirmed language for practical purposes. In order to deal with the problem of ineffability, the authors of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature developed a dialectical discourse which intends to shatter conceptual finite thought and push the mind beyond dualism towards the realisation of the infinite. The *Heart Sūtra*'s eminent axiom 'form is emptiness, emptiness is form' is a clear example of this paradoxical dialectic.

Zen Buddhism also utilises language as a tool to destabilise entrenched dualistic logic and thought. As Roshi Phillip Kapleau describes it, the Zen Masters 'deliberately throw sand into the eyes of the intellect to force us to open our minds' eye and see the world and everything in it undistorted by our concepts and judgements.'<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the *Prajñāpāramitā* dialectic becomes poetry when expressed by the Zen Masters. The following famous edict poetically recapitulates the dialectic:

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<sup>12</sup> David L McMahan: *Empty Vision – Metaphor and Visionary Imagery in Mahayana Buddhism*, London, 2002, 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 176-181.

<sup>14</sup> See José I Cabezón: *Buddhism and Language – A Study of Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism*, Albany, 1994, 171.

<sup>15</sup> P. Kapleau: *The Three Pillars of Zen*, New York, 1966, 70.

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Before practicing Zen, rivers were rivers and mountains were mountains. When I practiced Zen, I saw that rivers were no longer rivers and mountains were no longer mountains. Now I see that rivers are again rivers and mountains are again mountains.<sup>16</sup>

It is within this linguistic context of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* and Zen poetics that Nh'ât Hanh's play can be understood. Within this context it can be proposed that allegorical or poetic language and narrative are viable and appropriate means of illustrating and substantiating indefinable truth.<sup>17</sup> The play is a fictional dramatic narrative that metaphorically presents Nh'ât Hanh's claim to the truth of emptiness: art and truth interconnect. Nh'ât Hanh uses the poetic language of metaphor and the dramatic form to refer to and represent the ineffable. In doing so, he confronts and challenges our concepts of life and death. Mai comments:

[The world of the dead is] not as far away from the world of the living as people generally believe... A lot of the sorrow that plagues the living comes from their belief that the two worlds are unbridgeable.  
(15)

Nh'ât Hanh affirms that by transcending our concepts of life and death and realising that they are two halves of one continuous cycle, which is interconnected with the entire universal cycle of life, the two worlds **can** be bridged and we can be liberated from fear and suffering.

Buddhism contends that rather than attempting to change the world to suit us, and our insatiable desires, it makes more sense to change ourselves; to transform our perception; to be in accord with the world. How we experience reality is dependent upon the clarity of our

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<sup>16</sup> Attributed to Ch'ing-yuan Wei-hsin. See D T Suzuki: *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, New York, 1964, 13, n 1; see also Thích Nh'ât Hanh: *Zen Keys – A Guide to Zen Practice*, New York, 1995, 94.

<sup>17</sup> F C Bantly has argued this of fiction. She suggests that fictional discourse rather than denaturalised philosophical discourse is the most adequate and efficacious linguistic mode for the expression of Buddhist ontology and soteriology. See F C Bantly: *Discourse and Practice*, op cit, 83ff. Bantly composed her argument in response to Paul Griffiths defence of the privileged status of abstract doctrinal language in the formation of Buddhist claims to truth. See Paul Griffiths: 'Denaturalising Discourse – Abidharmikas, Propositionalists and the Comparative Philosophy of Religion', in F Reynolds and D Tracy, editors, *Myth and Philosophy*, Albany, 1990, 57ff.

perception, whether it is locked in attachment and clouded in the delusion of duality, or whether it is illuminated by the light of emptiness. We can create a heaven or a hell out of reality with the power of our minds. Nh'ât Hanh today teaches what he calls 'the art of mindful living' and in the play he asserts that this *art*, the *art* of transforming our minds and our perception, which is the practice of Buddhism, is the means of liberation. Tuan, the novice, states: 'The mind is like a painter. It can paint anything it wants.' (15) As Mai elaborates:

We each paint our own lives. If your work is broad and free, your life will be broad and free, also. That is all. We create our own worlds with our visions, conceptions, and thoughts. We might create a constricted world of suffering and sorrow, or one that is immense and free, a truly beautiful place. The essential ingredient is a spirit of openness, tolerance, and freedom...

Every artist is capable, through his art, of reaching the supreme objective of life itself. (33)

### THE PLAY AS RELIGIOUS PRAXIS

This brings us to the third level on which the play can be read which reveals that *The Path of Return Continues the Journey* is designed to have a specific effect on the audience or reader. In its attempt to poetically and metaphorically allude to the ineffable truth, and dramatically represent true reality, the play becomes more than a piece of theatrical entertainment or performance. The scholar Paul Williams has recognised that the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtras* are more than just texts. He states: '[A *sūtra* is] not just a free-standing, self-explanatory item, but an entity embedded in religious practice, a guide to and product of spiritual experience.'<sup>18</sup> I would suggest that Nh'ât Hanh's play is also 'a guide to and a product of spiritual experience – that the theatrical experience of watching the play could inspire spiritual experience or insight and that the creative experience of writing the play was for Nh'ât Hanh spiritual praxis itself.

Stephan Beyer has recognised the prevalence of visionary and allegorical narrative in the Mahāyāna texts. He states:

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Williams: *Mahāyāna Buddhism – The Doctrinal Foundations*, London, 1989, 37.

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The metaphysics of the *Prajñāpāramitā* is in fact the metaphysics of the vision and the dream: a universe of glittering and quicksilver change is precisely one that can only be described as empty. The vision and the dream become the tools to dismantle the hard categories we impose upon reality, to reveal the eternal flowing possibility in which the Bodhisattva lives.<sup>19</sup>

Nh'ât Hanh also presents his metaphysic as a visionary narrative. Furthermore, in his attempt to reveal to the audience 'the eternal flowing possibility' that is the union of life and death, the play does indeed become a tool to 'dismantle the hard categories we impose upon reality.' Nh'ât Hanh's purpose is to inspire spiritual insight. Whether he achieves this or not is, I suppose, a matter of personal experience. But he does utilise certain devices and strategies which help him in his task.

Firstly, the medium of theatre allows Nh'ât Hanh to symbolically represent, to **show** to the audience rather than **explain**, the ineffable truth of emptiness. Moreover, through the audiences' theatrical experience, we identify with the characters; the duality between the audience and the actors dissolves and we are drawn into the 'reality' of the play. Nh'ât Hanh does not directly say that life does not end at the moment of death but he shows us and we **experience** it. This is an intuitive and direct experience of theatrical absorption, the so-called 'suspension of disbelief.' This experience can be equated with the spiritual experience which is brought about by meditative absorption.

A second feature that can be recognised is that the primary dramatic actions of the play are more like non-actions. The play reflects the minimalism, stillness and repetition of Zen aesthetics and practice. Indeed, the only action that really takes place is the repetition of the characters' hands rowing the boat, which can be perceived as metaphorically representing the practice of Buddhist meditation and the repetition of the breath. In this sense, the action of rowing can be seen to have a meditative effect upon the audience.

The most obvious theatrical device Nh'ât Hanh uses is the representation of the dead as still existent in their material bodies. They are 'invisible characters,' spiritual beings who we know to be

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<sup>19</sup> Stephan Beyer: in Williams, op cit, 52.

dead but who illogically appear before us as quite tangible and corporeal. The characters exist in a formless state of non-duality, beyond temporal and spatial existence. They have returned to their transcendent original nature ; Buddha-nature. And yet they have subjectivity. Daniel Berrigan has noted:

These spirits are as they were before death. And this is the genius of Thich Nh'ât Hanh. His dead have the verisimilitude of the living. They are young, they push shadows back instead of joining them.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, Nh'ât Hanh breathes life into the dead, he heals their wounds. And though we know the play is visionary and allegorical, we are impressed that death is not an ending – that 'the path of return' does indeed 'continue the journey.'

Nh'ât Hanh has spoken of his initial response to the deaths:

I was in Paris when I heard about the assassination of four students of the School of Youth for Social Services, a school I had helped start. I cried. A friend said, 'Thây, you should not cry. You are a general leading an army of nonviolent soldiers. It is natural that you suffer casualties.' I said, 'No, I am not a general. I am just a human being. It is I who summoned them for service, and now they have lost their lives. I need to cry.'<sup>21</sup>

The idea that artistic creation can function as religious praxis is prevalent in many schools of Buddhism. To repeat Mai's comment: 'Every artist is capable, through his art, of reaching the supreme objective of life itself.' (33) This line can be read as an instance of authorial intrusion. With regard to Nh'ât Hanh, his art is the art of narrative creation inspired by spiritual practice, and the supreme objective is **love**. For the author, the play embodies the transformation of individual suffering into an offering of forgiveness, reconciliation, hope and compassion. Thus, I would suggest that the play is as much a personal spiritual rite and a profession of faith and love, as it is an expression of grief. Understood in this context, the play becomes an act of communion with the dead. Ultimately, it reads as a celebration of life, an act of worship; homage to those who died, a poetic eulogy of praise.

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<sup>20</sup> D. Berrigan: in Nh'ât Hanh, *Love In Action*, op cit, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Nh'ât Hanh: *Call Me By My True Names*, op cit, 25.

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Initially, *The Path of Return Continues the Journey* appears to be a simplistic poetic drama, a quiet meditation upon life and death. However, penetration and analysis reveal an elucidation of the teachings of Engaged Buddhism and the metaphysics and dialectic of the *Prajñāpāramitā* teachings, profound in its theological insight and authentic in its dramatic expression. The skill of the bodhisattva, the *upāya*, is the ability to convey the teachings in ways that are suitable and understandable to whoever is being addressed. Thích Nh'át Hanh's ability to translate the complexities of Buddhist philosophy through metaphoric and symbolic mediums deems him the exemplar of a *bodhisattva*, or indeed, a 'Buddha of Suburbia.'