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“Engaged Buddhism in Retreat” Revisited A Reply to Barbara Newell’s Response

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Abstract: This is a reply by Lisa Kemmerer to a response provided by Bhikshuni Chan Tung Nghiem (Barbara Newell) (titled “Peace in Oneself, Peace in the World: The Real Heart of Engaged Buddhism—A Response to Lisa Kemmerer,” pp. 145-147) to Kemmerer’s original commentary (titled “Engaged Buddhism in Retreat,” pp. 135-143) published in the Summer 2008 issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* (volume VI, issue 3). The journal issue was dedicated to the exploration of the engaged buddhism of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese buddhist and Zen master.

This is a reply to Ms. Newell’s comment on my article published in the Summer 2008 special issue on Thich Nhat Hanh.

Ms. Newell responded to me as if I were a pilgrim looking for Zen solutions, instead of a scholar well versed in Buddhism calling attention to some rather grievous inconsistencies between Thich Nhat Hanh’s teachings and certain practices which I observed at the Colorado retreat. Zen silence would have been much preferred to the various replies that I received, none of which addressed the issues at hand: What of the many sentient creatures who suffered and died unnecessarily in the prime of their lives because those running Thay’s retreat choose to serve dairy products and eggs?

Ms. Newell dismisses my inquiries as “mere intellectual” pursuits, but my comments concern core Thich Nhat Hanh teachings, and practices that I observed at the Estes Park retreat, more specifically, contradictions between teaching and practice which I observed. I accept that the sexism and elitism which I observed may have been merely situational, since I base my comments on just one retreat. This still leaves the problem regarding food offered in the dining hall, which cannot be brushed off as mere coincidences, and which fails fundamentally to speak for compassion or peace for all beings.

To respond appropriately to any given situation, an individual must have some understanding of that situation. For exam-

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ple, we must be aware of sweatshops—what they mean and how they operate—to respond in any meaningful way to sweatshops. Once we are aware that a particular practice causes suffering, we can decide whether or not to support or protest that practice or industry.

Because of Thich Nhat Hanh's focus on compassion, the Colorado retreat purposefully offered only vegetarian foods, and absolutely no alcohol. Yet in response to my encouraging a vegan selection, Ms. Newell indicates that offering only vegan foods in the dining hall would be controlling, and much too strict to impose on "a broad spectrum of people who are not yet ready to, for example, go totally vegan or even be full-time vegetarians," and Thich Nhat Hanh retreats do not intend to "force" 800 participants to be vegan. But the retreat *did* "force" 800 adults to be vegetarian, and to abstain from alcohol. Why, then, does offering a vegan diet for the sake of compassion seem controlling when offering a vegetarian diet does not?

Based on her responses, I assume that Ms. Newell does not understand the dairy and egg industries—more specifically the suffering and mass deaths caused by these industries. Alternatively, she believes that human preferences, tastes, and habits are more important than the life and sufferings of other sentient creatures, and that this attitude is consistent with the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh. I turn to these industries so that Ms. Newell and other readers will understand how central the matter of a vegan diet is to compassion and peace for all beings.

EGG AND DAIRY INDUSTRIES

"Dairy" Cattle¹

Cows, like humans and other mammals, only lactate after they give birth, at which time they produce milk for their off-

spring for roughly ten months. To produce milk, cows are artificially impregnated every year. They carry their young for ten months, but their calves are taken shortly after birth, though the mother—like most mothers—tries desperately to protect and keep her offspring. Her calf gone, the cow's nursing milk is then extracted and sold. What happens to her calves?

The veal industry exists because of the dairy industry, and was created to take advantage of an abundant supply of unwanted male calves. Male calves are either killed shortly after birth and sold as 'bob' veal for low-quality meals (such as frozen TV dinners), or they are chained by the neck in a two-by-five foot wooden crate, where they are unable to turn, stretch, or lie down comfortably. These calves are fed a liquid milk substitute that is deficient in iron and fiber, designed to create an anemic, light-colored flesh that is prized as veal. Veal calves are usually slaughtered when they are just four months old.

Genetic manipulation and dietary controls cause extraordinary and unnatural milk output in "diary" cows. Cows are so exhausted by the dairy process that they are often "spent" after four or five years of repeated impregnation, birth, calf-robbing, and constant milking machines. "Spent"

¹ To understand the moral and spiritual importance of this topic, one must know what happens behind the scenes. Such information can be found on many websites, including VIVA! USA (<http://www.vivausa.org/visualmedia/index.html>), PETA (<http://www.petatv.com/>), HSUS (<http://video.hsus.org/>), PCRM (<http://www.pcrm.org/resources/>), Farm Sanctuary (<http://www.farmsanctuary.org/mediacenter/videos.html>), and Vegan Outreach (<http://www.veganoutreach.org/whyvegan/animals.html>). Information on dairy cattle and laying hens was taken from the following sites: HSUS Factory Farming Campaign (http://www.hsus.org/farm/resources/research/welfare/welfare_overview.html#76), farmsanctuary's FactoryFarming.com (<http://www.farmsanctuary.org/issues/factoryfarming/>), and VIVA!USA Guides (<http://www.vivausa.org/activistresources/guides/murdershewrote1.htm#>).

cows—whose milk production has dropped—are sent to slaughter; most cows are pregnant when they are slaughtered, and their bodies are used for soup, burgers, or processed foods. "Dairy" cows end up in the flesh industry—both calves and their mothers are destined to slaughter for human consumption.

Slaughter

Legislation offers minimal protection (at least on paper) for mammals during slaughter: They are supposed to be "stunned" (rendered unconscious) before they are killed (federal Humane Slaughter Act, 1958). But slaughter, like almost all businesses, is driven by economic regulators such as efficiency and profit and loss. In the slaughterhouse, the quicker each farmed animal is killed, the higher the profit margin. Workers must be paid for their time, and while one animal's body is on the dismemberment line, no other body can be processed. Consequently, the economic necessity for speed often makes effective stunning impossible. A USDA survey concluded that stunning was either "unacceptable" or a "serious problem" in 36 percent of slaughter houses for sheep and pigs, and 64 percent of those for cattle. Even more remarkable, chickens, turkeys, ducks—every species of poultry—is exempt from the federal Humane Slaughter Act. Ninety percent of those killed for food in the U.S. are birds.

There are several slaughterhouses stunning methods: captive bolt pistol (cattle, most calves, and some sheep); electric stunner (pigs, most sheep, and some calves); and though not required, an electrified water basin for birds.

Electric Stunner

There is, as yet, no way to determine exactly how much electric current is required to properly stun a large or medium

sized pig or sheep. Insufficient current will paralyze the victim but not prevent sensation. Too much current will result in 'blown loins': bruising caused by capillaries that have burst, which reduces the value of the flesh; managers often lower the electric current to prevent this bruising.

When an animal enters the slaughterhouse, a worker clamps the electric stunner (imagine ear phones on an insulated handle) onto the victim's head, then triggers an electric shock. As with all high-speed assembly-line operations, human and mechanical errors are common. Consequently, many pigs, calves, and sheep emerge fully sentient and conscious.

Captive Bolt Pistol

A captive bolt pistol is placed against a cow or calf's forehead, then fired, driving a rod through the skull and into the brain. If done properly, the animal will immediately lose consciousness. Poor aim, a hurried shot, or a sudden movement from the cow generally results in tremendous pain and damage to the victim, but not stunning. Because the assembly line keeps moving, and workers are pressured to process animals as quickly as possible, improperly stunned animals are pushed forward. Conscious animals bellow and struggle as they travel down the line to be disassembled.

Downers

Transporting animals to slaughter is a rough business. The meat industry calls animals who arrive at slaughter too sick or injured to stand or walk, "downers." Undercover investigators have repeatedly documented downed animals being kicked, beaten, pushed with bulldozers, and dragged from transport trucks with ropes or chain, often bellowing.

"Laying" Hens

Shortly after hatching, without anesthesia, chicks are "de-beaked" to reduce injuries caused by stressed birds in overcrowded conditions—the tips of their sensitive beaks are sliced off with a hot blade, cutting through bone, cartilage, and soft tissue. Some chicks bleed to death, or die of shock, as a result of debeaking. It is difficult for hens to peck food, in their normal fashion, with cut beaks.

When hens reach eighteen weeks of age, they are put into 1.5 square foot cages (slightly bigger than your average microwave oven). Although the average hen's wing span is 2.5 feet, four or more birds are stuffed into each of these small cages. Needless to say, the birds cannot stretch their wings, and their bodies constantly rub against wire, causing featherless sore spots. Hens remain in these tiny cells, laying eggs, until they are shipped to slaughter, usually at about a year and a half old, though hens can live to upwards of fifteen years.

When a hen's egg cycle begins to decline, if they are not old enough for slaughter, they are put through "forced-molt," in which they are starved and kept in total darkness for as long as eighteen days. This shocks their exhausted bodies into another egg-cycle, but also causes some hens to lose more than 25% of their body weight. Forced molt claims the lives of 5-10% of the "laying" hen population.

Hens in the wild lay roughly twenty eggs per year, but factory farmed hens yield 250 eggs (or more) annually. Hens sometimes suffer from "cage layer fatigue," a condition in which they become "egg bound," and die because they are too weak to expel even one more egg. Though these birds have a strong urge to create a nest and sit on their eggs, factory farmed hens cannot do either. Each egg rolls onto a conveyor belt and is taken away to be boxed.

Hens lay eggs (and cow's produce milk) as part of their basic biological func-

tioning—not because they are well cared for or contented. Factory farms are not conducive to hen health. Factory farmed hens suffer from prolapses (the uterus is expelled along with the egg), egg peritonitis, cancers, infectious bronchitis, and severe liver and kidney disease. Because egg shells require a tremendous amount of calcium, they also suffer from calcium deficiencies resulting in broken bones, paralysis, and premature death.

Because egg-laying chickens have been bred for maximum egg production, they don't grow fast or large enough to be routinely killed for meat. Many spent hens are thrown into a wood chipper in order to avoid the cost of transport and slaughter. Undercover investigators documented Ward Egg Ranch (California) throwing more than 15,000 spent laying hens into a wood-chipping machine, alive. Despite tremendous outcry from a newly informed and horrified public, the district attorney declined to prosecute, noting that disposing of hens in a wood-chipper is legal and is a "common industry practice."

Male chicks are of no economic value, and are literally discarded the day they hatch. Each year billions of male chicks are gassed, crushed, or thrown into garbage bins to die of dehydration or asphyxiation; their bodies are used as fertilizer or as feed for farmed animals. As with spent hens, another common method to eliminate male chicks is to toss them into a grinder. Eyewitness accounts describe struggling, peeping chicks being dismembered by metal blades.

After just one year of egg production, hens are "spent," and some hens are sent to slaughter for soups, baby food, stock cubes, school dinners, pot pies, the restaurant trade, animal food, or other low-grade products (for which their "spent" bodies are shredded). Their brittle, calcium-depleted bones often shatter during transport, or when they are handled at the slaughterhouse. They are transported in

open cages, or crates stacked on open trucks, without food, water, or protection from rain, snow, or sun, though they travel as much as eighty miles per hour in all weather conditions for many hours. Some birds inevitably freeze to death, while others die of heat stress or suffocation. It is cheaper to absorb high transportation mortality rates than pay for enclosed trucks.

There are no United States laws regulating the slaughter of fowl, yet 90 percent of those killed for food in the United States are birds. At the slaughterhouse, they are dumped onto a conveyor belt, but some flapping and frightened birds inevitably miss the belt and fall onto the ground, where they are either crushed by machinery, or die of starvation or exposure.

Birds who land on the belt are hung upside down by their legs, in metal shackles. For the sake of efficiency, most slaughterhouses attempt to stun the birds—it is much easier to kill a bird who is not struggling for her life. As the birds move along the assembly line, hanging upside down, turning their heads to see what might befall them, their heads are supposed to be dragged through an electrified basin of water. Some birds, particularly smaller ones, raise their heads to avoid the water, and continue along the line fully conscious. As with electric tongs, the amount of current needed to properly stun birds is uncertain; too much power damages the flesh, reducing profits, so that managers tend to err on the side of lower electric current. As a result, birds are usually immobilized by the electric basin, but remain fully capable of feeling pain.

After the electric water basin, the hen's throats are cut either by hand or by a mechanical blade. With slaughter lines running up to 8,400 chickens *per hour*, accuracy is the exception rather than the rule. The birds are then submerged in scalding water (with intent to loosen their feathers), and those still conscious—millions annually—are boiled alive.

ADDITIONAL STATISTICS FROM THE U.S. ANIMAL INDUSTRIES

Chickens

- Nearly ten billion chickens are hatched annually.
- 300 million "laying hens" are factory farmed for eggs each year.
- Because of the factory farming egg industry, 200 million male chicks are killed annually soon after they hatch.
- More than 95% of hens are factory farmed in giant warehouses, and must live out their life in less than two square feet of space.
- One million factory farmed "broiler" chickens are killed each hour.
- "Broiler" chickens reach market weight just 45 days after hatching, and are sent to slaughter, though hens can live upwards of fifteen years.

Cattle

- Every year thirty-five million cattle are exploited for beef, nine million cows for milk, and one million calves for veal.
- Cows exploited for dairy are subjected to a dehorner that scoops, gouges, or cuts horns from a cow's head.
- "Dairy" cows are often killed at four to seven years of age, despite a life expectancy of more than twenty years.
- To produce veal, one million calves are confined in crates measuring 2-5 feet.
- Cows naturally produce just over two tons of milk per year, but Bovine Growth Hormone (BGH/BST) has increased milk output so that cows now provide as much as thirty tons of milk annually, enough for *ten* calves.
- One-in-five factory farmed "dairy" cows secretes pus from her udders, which invariably mixes with her milk.
- "Dairy" cows endure mechanized

milking for ten out of twelve months per year (including seven months of their nine-month pregnancies).

- Thousands of factory farmed cattle arrive at slaughter injured, or too dispirited to walk, and are kicked, beaten, or forcibly dragged from transport trucks.

An informed individual is unlikely to consider concern for hens and cows in the dairy and egg industries “merely intellectual.” Such knowledge is critical to choosing and offering a compassionate diet.

REGARDING MS. NEWELL’S RESPONSE

Some people fool themselves into believing that they *must* eat meat. A balanced vegan diet is nutritionally complete (<http://www.veganhealth.org/>). (Of course a vegan diet, like *any* diet, is likely to be unhealthy, if it is not balanced.) There is no biological need to eat flesh, dairy, or eggs—especially if one lives where food choices abound. While there are societies in remote corners of the world that require animal products to achieve a balanced diet, Estes Colorado is not one of them.

In light of what we know about the egg and dairy industries, let us reflect on Ms. Newell’s quote from Sister Chan Khong:

Thay Nhat Hanh asks us to practice mindfulness deeply every time we eat or drink. If we do so, we may find that our appetite for meat and fish begins to diminish. The important thing is to be aware of what we consume. I have met people who cannot be vegetarian because of medical reasons, but who respect life more than many vegetarians. Some vegetarians are too extreme, and are unkind to those who cannot give up meat-eating. I am more comfortable with a meat-

eater than an extremist vegetarian who is filled with self-righteousness.

In this quote, Khong (and Newell) suggest that mindfulness can include choices that cause extreme suffering and premature death, but we “may” tend away from these practices. What matters is not the suffering, according to Khong (and Newell), but that we be aware that we are consuming flesh, dairy, and eggs. Furthermore, she notes that some one can be too extreme in their compassionate actions, and that advocating for the downtrodden can be “unkind” to those committed to exploitation, especially those who believe they cannot remain healthy without that exploitation. Khong (and Newell) also indicate, I suspect unknowingly, that violence to the point of death is better than nonviolence with an attitude.

Are Newell and Khong really “more comfortable” with causing tremendous suffering and mass premature death to other sentient creatures than they are with a commitment to compassion that some may perceive to be self-righteous? Do Newell and Khong prefer people who trade in slaves, or sell girls, or willingly invest in and profit from sweatshops, over those who staunchly reject such exploitation, but do so with an attitude? Would Thich Nhat Hanh’s retreat have invested money in any of *these* forms of exploitation? Of course a vegan diet cannot be equated with self-righteousness, whereas the consumption of factory farmed dairy and eggs is always directly linked with suffering and slaughter. While self-righteousness is unattractive, painful exploitation culminating in the premature death of billions of sentient creatures is downright ugly.

A glass of alcohol is unlikely to cause anywhere near the amount of suffering that is *inherent* in every slab of cheese served at the Estes Park retreat. Alcohol was not served, dairy and eggs were. Those in

charge of Thich Nhat Hanh retreats seem unaware of what dairy and eggs cost in real pain and loss of life. Factory farming, like sweatshops and selling girls into prostitution, are extremely harmful even in miniscule doses. When one has a choice—and Thich Nhat Hanh's retreat organizers in Estes Park did have a choice—neither a little enslavement, nor a little factory farmed cheese, are consistent with compassion and peace for all beings. Just as surely as a vegetarian diet was offered, a vegan diet might have been offered.

An extreme stand against cruel exploitation and unnecessary slaughter is not a character flaw. I suspect that both Ms. Newell and Sister Khong find even a little torture and a little murder unacceptable; factory farmed dairy and egg products are bought at the price of prolonged misery and premature death for billions, not to mention extensive environmental degradation. Those in charge of Thich Nhat Hanh's retreat in Estes Park chose to buy suffering and death—a choice that is not consistent with Thich Nhat Hanh's core teachings of compassion and peace for all beings. My hope is that this will not always be the case.