

“A Good Life Sees Virtue in Responsibility,” Sofia Guedes Vaz and Olivia Bina

Comment by Diana Almeida (CEAUL)

“Your action, what you do, depends on who you are. The quality of your action depends on the quality of your being. Suppose you want to offer happiness to someone. You are eager to make a person happy. This is a good idea, but if you yourself are not happy, you can’t do it. To make another person happy you have to be happy yourself. So there is a link between doing and being. If you don’t succeed in being, you can’t succeed in doing.

Happiness becomes possible when we realize we have a path, when we know where we are going ... Happiness is feeling you are on the right path every moment, you don’t need to arrive at the end of the path to be happy. You are happy right here and right now.

...

Look at the tree in the front yard: the tree doesn’t seem to do anything. It just stands there, vigorous, fresh, and beautiful, and everyone benefits from it. That is the miracle of being. If a tree is less than a tree, all of us will be in trouble. If a tree can be a real tree, there is hope, there is joy.

So if you can be yourself, that is already love, that is already action. Action is based on nonaction, and nonaction is the practice of *being*.”

Hanh, Thich Nhat (89-90)

To comment on the failure of the contemporary Western socio-economic system, with its emphasis on material productivity and its instrumental, competitive approach, I have quoted the Buddhist monk, writer and peace activist Thich Nhat

Hanh. Evoking the traditional dichotomy between “being” and “having” (central to the consumerist society), he introduces a third element — “doing,” which represents *techne*, our urge to dominate the world through action. His words advocate the return to the quality of “being,” to the possibility of a peaceful inner discovery and realization before any urge to do. I therefore want to talk about how to be ourselves and how to let trees be (and, by synecdoche, planet earth with its complex net of ecosystems).

Taking into account that, according to Aristotles, “being pleased is a condition of the soul,” and that the criteria to evaluate *eudaimonia* are subjective and cannot become external, at the risk of incurring into totalitarian, demagogic discourses, I suggest that the spiritual dimension is a major component of the human search for happiness. Thus, I will briefly describe i) meditation, a tool to develop the personal awareness at the roots of virtue ethics, and ii) permaculture, a practical model to implement a sustainable way of living.

Experiments have proved that regular meditation decreases levels of anxiety and helps to develop positive emotions, improving the potential for happiness; it also strengthens the immune system and drastically increases concentration (Nettle 157-158). Indeed, this practice allows an emotional detachment from the stream of consciousness and provides access to a much more objective, non-judgmental evaluation of one’s thoughts. Furthermore, it allows us to access supra-discursive modes of consciousness, enlarging our mainly rational apprehension of the world. According to Buddhist philosophy, whose influence permeates most of the so-called New Age approaches to spirituality, when one meditates she experiences a direct perception of reality, unmediated by external frames of reference. This state of enhanced awareness, resulting from a regular daily practice, reveals the limits of our physical observations and rational insights, eventually showing us things as they are, not as we would like them to be. It is noteworthy that psychological approaches to happiness argue that this state of mind seems to result “at large part from how we address what happens in the world, not [from] what actually happens” (Nettle 92).

One of the illusions in which our mind persistently dwells on is the existence of a permanent, separate ego, disconnected from a larger cosmos, and shaped by our direct control (vs. contingent on rules that so far, despite the progress of science, remain largely unknown). When we reach a higher level of awareness (at least) two things become clear: in the material dimension which we inhabit, everything is subject to change, and our suffering (or lack of happiness) results from not recognizing nor accepting the law of impermanence; our being exists in a multidimensional reality resulting from a set of dynamic interconnections (apparently quantum physics has already proved that our consciousness cannot be isolated from the global reality of the phenomenological world).

This leads to the second practical tool I have mentioned — permaculture, a concept developed in the 1970s by the Australian Bill Mollison, based upon the presupposition of doing the minimum to have the most effect, avoiding the destructive effects subjacent to the idea of dominating nature. Also called do-nothing farming, permaculture aims to create (or recreate) balanced ecosystems where the design of the soil, the choice of plants, the treatment of natural resources (namely water) guarantee an effective outcome. It is a holistic system that contemplates food, energy, shelter, and infrastructure in a communal based perspective, valuing the earth, people and equitable sharing of the planet's limited resources.

Gautier Gras, a teacher working in one of the several permaculture projects being developed at the moment in Sintra, describes this approach as an art of living based on the study of the natural patterns, in order to develop the human capability to become co-creative beings. He also stresses the philosophical implications of the movement, especially the change from a conceptual paradigm of lack and fear (fueling the rhetoric of the crisis) to one of trust and abundance, considered as an exponential (not a linear) concept. Understanding that humans are integrated in a synergy that includes a myriad of realms mirroring each other, a permaculturist has the ability to manifest potential energy simply by providing the conditions for nature to be the best of herself. Already a widespread phenomenon amongst alternative cultures with millions of followers

all over the world, permaculture can be practiced in rural and urban environments alike and it might be one of the answers for a greener planet.

To conclude these succinct remarks, personal awareness does make individual responsibility possible and provides the tools for an active ecological citizenship.

Indeed, a good life asks for a virtuous engagement in the imperative to create a more sustainable way of living as a legacy for future generations. It seems to me that many of us are already on the path of being.

### **Bibliography Quoted**

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