

Mindfulness, Interbeing and the Engaged Buddhism of Thích Nhất Hạnh

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for mum and dad

Abstract

This thesis explores the practices of mindfulness, interbeing and Engaged Buddhism proposed by Thích Nhất Hạnh (born 1926), a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, writer, poet, calligrapher and peace activist, who was nominated for the 1967 Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King, Jr. After being exiled from Vietnam in 1966, Thích Nhất Hạnh lived in France until 2016. He currently resides in Vietnam, intending to spend his remaining days in his home country. Thích Nhất Hạnh is known for his teachings on integrating mindfulness into daily life. He coined the term “interbeing” and promoted the concept of “Engaged Buddhism”, which links meditative practices with social engagement as well as applying them to everyday situations, with the aim of bringing benefit and wellbeing of humanity.

This research adopts the qualitative method of ethnography with the intention to fill a gap in the current mindfulness literature, which largely focuses on quantitative methods. To understand and capture the experiences of mindfulness practitioners first-hand, I collected data through fieldwork at Plum Village – a Buddhist monastic community and retreat center that Thích Nhất Hạnh established in France in 1982 – where I conducted participant observation and ethnographic interviews. As mindfulness is essentially experiential and none of us can access minds other than our own, an autoethnographic approach is incorporated in the methodology. The data collected are examined from the perspective of a newly developed theoretical framework based on Pierre Bourdieu’s social theory of habitus, which provides new insights into the potentially transformative effects of mindfulness practice in the contemporary world. The findings reveal the ways in which Thích Nhất Hạnh has transformed the traditional Buddhist teachings to suit his modern audience and illustrate how his teachings can affect people’s daily lives and have an impact on society.

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Preface

It is from my personal experiences of mindfulness practices that this project came into being. The idea for conducting a research project on mindfulness arose unexpectedly. I was a music student when I did my bachelor's degree at the University of Hong Kong (HKU). At the time, music was the passion of my life. I was never interested in any religions; I thought they were all superstitious. During my bachelor studies, I spent a year at the University of Canterbury (UC) as an exchange student. I brought my cello here and studied music; it was a fantastic experience. However, after I returned to Hong Kong from my exchange studies, I had great difficulty readjusting to my life back home. Life in Hong Kong was very different to life in New Zealand. My exchange experience made me think a lot about life, such as why people lived so differently in various parts of the world, why some people had an easier life, and why some had to go through so many difficulties.

At the same time, while I was finishing my last semester of bachelor studies at HKU, I came across a new one-semester interdisciplinary course called "Buddhism and Life" which was open to all students to take. I wondered how a superstitious subject could be taught at a university. What made it even more perplexing was that the course lecturer was a Buddhist monk. I never thought that a monk might have a PhD or teach at a university. Out of curiosity, I attended the first class of the course to see what it was all about.

I was totally fascinated by the first class of the course. The monk appeared to be a very skillful lecturer. He presented the Buddhist teachings in a humorous yet inspiring and practical way. Some of the stories he told back then, more than 15 years ago, still come to my mind from time to time. I decided to take the whole course after this memorable first class.

The Buddhist teachings taught in the course were answering the many questions that I had after my exchange studies. Gradually, I became more and more interested in Buddhism. At the same time, I lost interest in music.

I therefore went on to pursue Master of Buddhist Studies at HKU after my undergraduate studies to learn more about Buddhism. The year studying the master programme was a wonderful experience; it opened my eyes and my mind. After that, I thought that I should go back to music. I thus went to the University of Otago (in Dunedin) to do a master's thesis in musicology, which investigated how a New Zealand classical music composer tried to integrate elements of Māori culture into his music. I found that the more I understood the composer and his music, the more I understood myself and others. Although I was researching a music topic, it was actually more a way for me to learn more about myself and the world.

On my return to Hong Kong, I worked as a research assistant in the field of music and visual arts education. During that time, I continued to practise meditation and read books about Buddhism, particularly those by Thích Nhất Hạnh. My mindfulness practice and those books helped me to see the suffering in myself and the world deeply. I was so moved by the experience that I felt that I needed to do something that could help relieve the suffering in the world, no matter how little the contribution might be. As I enjoyed doing research, I thought it could be a way for me to offer something to humanity.

This was how the idea arose of conducting research on mindfulness. Thích Nhất Hạnh's straightforward and practical approach to presenting mindfulness, in particular, motivated me to focus on his teachings in my research. I knew that if I wanted to have a real impact on the

world, I had to transform myself first (which is the spirit of Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism). I thus needed to find a research process that could facilitate my own transformation. The best thing for me to do appeared to be practising with the community at Plum Village, as I knew from my own meditation experience that merely reading and analyzing texts would not bring about transformation. This was why the method of participant observation was chosen for this study.

Apart from having the direct experience of the practice myself and making observations of others at Plum Village, it would also be important to hear about the experiences of other practitioners. Listening to how mindfulness practice had an impact on people's life while they were participating in the retreat at the monastery seemed to be a practical way to gain an insight into others' experience. This was why the method of ethnographic interview was adopted for this study.

From there, step by step, this research came into being in 2015. It was, however, not a straightforward process. It took more than three years from the point when I had the idea to carry out research on mindfulness to my finally arriving at UC to start my studies. Many obstacles appeared along the way. At times, I doubted if this project would ever come to fruition. But somehow things evolved in a direction that made this research possible.

After my dream of conducting this study had come true, however, more obstacles appeared. Many times, I wondered if I would have the chance to see the research through to the end. But somehow, again, things happened, and people appeared at critical moments to offer help. My study is now finally nearing completion. The pain and struggles in my PhD journey have provided me with numerous opportunities to apply what I had learnt during my fieldwork at

Plum Village to my own real life situation. Consequently, my mindfulness practice has deepened. So, while my research process was full of roadblocks and setbacks, it did facilitate my own transformation. I am truly fortunate to be able to conduct this research during the last six years, having received abundant support from the universe. This is the miracle of the interbeing nature of ourselves and all things.

In this thesis, I use both first-person singular (i.e. I/me/my) and first-person plural (i.e. we/us/our), with the intention of conveying to my readers that they are part of the journey of this research, or at least not totally removed from the process, as they are looking at my words on a computer screen or printed on a stack of paper. It is my hope that this thesis does more than providing new knowledge about mindfulness. It is also an open invitation to the readers to engage in mindfulness practice to experience the transformation for themselves.

Chapter 1

Introduction

“What do you see from this piece of blank A4 paper?” said the visiting assistant professor who taught the course on mindfulness meditation that was part of the Master of Buddhist Studies programme I did more than 15 years ago, as she held up the paper with her left hand. Having never learnt meditation before and having heard all sorts of mysterious things about it, I thought she was going to perform some supernatural act!

It turned out that she tried to demonstrate something ordinary yet not perceptible to our ordinary senses. In an attempt to show that everything was interconnected to everything, she said: “This piece of paper, in fact, contains the whole world”. Because in order to make its existence possible, we needed trees, which required soil, sunshine, rain, and so on. In the same way, all these relied on other things to exist. We also needed workers in the industry to turn trees into paper and deliver it to us. These workers, in turn, depended on other people (such as their parents) and things (such as food) to exist. If we took any of these elements away, that piece of paper would not be able to come into being. Therefore, if we were mindful, we would be able to see the whole world in a single piece of paper. The same could be applied to anything, including a person.

I later found out that this is one of the classic examples that the Zen Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh uses to illustrate how all things in the world are inextricably interconnected – what he calls the interbeing nature of reality (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2005a). As straightforward as the interbeing nature of a piece of paper sounded, I had never thought of reality this way.

Being made aware of these connections really opened my eyes and my mind, and later on also my heart.

However, even though I had gained a deeper understanding of reality after attending the lecture, I continued to see the paper and everything else as isolated entities. I made an effort to try to see everything as interconnected, but no matter how hard I tried, it simply did not work. The paper was just an object that was separate from the trees and me. This happened because, as I later came to understand, there is a difference between intellectual understanding and intuitive awareness. The former – the knowledge of interbeing – was what I had at the time, but only the latter – the insight of interbeing – allows us to directly experience the interbeing nature of reality.

What happens is that “often when we read, we only gain some intellectual satisfaction. Such understanding does not make for a real shift in our consciousness” (C. Titmuss, 2000, p. 8). That is why we continue to see the paper as an isolated entity even though we agree with what Thích Nhất Hạnh says about the real nature of the paper. It remains an abstract idea as long as it is merely an understanding at the intellectual level (i.e. the knowledge of interbeing). To truly understand his example, we need to “see how it relates directly to our life...and just let the truth of that statement run deep into our being” (C. Titmuss, 2000, p. 8). For Thích Nhất Hạnh (2009a), mindfulness practice is a way to cultivate the insight of interbeing.

The cultivation of the insight into the interbeing nature of reality has important implications in the modern world because “awareness of interconnectedness fosters a sense of universal responsibility” (Kraft, 1996, p. 66). When we recognize that we are involved in the

circumstances we deplore, we will want to do something about them (Kraft, 1996). Similarly, Thích Nhất Hạnh (2002a) states that once we see our contribution to the world's suffering, we will be able to act accordingly to cultivate understanding, reconciliation and forgiveness. This implies that we all share the responsibility for the creation of violence and hatred in the world. The way we live, consume and handle the worlds' problems and our relationships with others have contributed to their creation (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2002a). Without an awareness of interbeing, we unknowingly contribute to the problems and violence in the world in our everyday life.

This perhaps explains why in the past decades, despite the momentous developments in science and great leaps in technological innovations intended to enhance the quality of life, all forms of violence and conflicts continue to exist, whether at the global, national or societal levels. In fact, to achieve genuine and lasting peace among and within nations, the Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2020) points out that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed” (p. 5). The Dalai Lama emphasizes this: “Although attempting to bring about world peace through the internal transformation of individuals is difficult, it is the only way” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1992, p. vii). Thích Nhất Hạnh also stated that lasting peace “is not just the absence of war but a transformation of our heart” (Kim, 2006, p. 43). They all point to the significance of personal transformation in creating a more peaceful world, highlighting the role of cultivating the insight of interbeing in relieving the suffering in the world. Thích Nhất Hạnh (2005a) believes “the Buddhist principle of seeing and acting nondualistically will totally change our way of life” (p. 85).

Growing out of my personal experiences of the Buddhist practices, this research aims to examine the impact of mindfulness on modern practitioners. Studies on mindfulness have grown exponentially in recent years, with the majority of them investigating its effectiveness in alleviating psychological symptoms, such as anxiety (e.g. Craigie, Rees, Marsh, & Nathan, 2008), and physical conditions, such as chronic pain (e.g. Kabat-Zinn, 1982), as well as enhancing mental well-being (e.g. Harnett et al., 2010). These studies, which mainly focus on quantitative methods, provide us with ample useful and new knowledge about the various (beneficial) effects of mindfulness on people in today's world.

However, these studies generally look at mindfulness outside the Buddhist context, presenting it as a clinical intervention to reduce symptoms or a scientific technique to enhance well-being, which are not what mindfulness originally aims for. In the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness is one of the core teachings of the Buddha for achieving enlightenment – the complete cessation of suffering – through the development of insight into the nature of reality (Rāhula, 1974). In view of the lack of research on mindfulness in the Buddhist context, this study investigates the impact of mindfulness on modern practitioners from the Buddhist perspective.

This study explores the practices of mindfulness, interbeing and Engaged Buddhism proposed by Thích Nhất Hạnh, a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, writer, poet, calligrapher and peace activist born in 1926, who was nominated for the 1967 Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King, Jr. After being exiled from Vietnam in 1966, Thích Nhất Hạnh lived in France until 2016. He currently resides in Vietnam, intending to spend his remaining days in his home country.

Thích Nhất Hạnh is known for his teachings on integrating mindfulness into daily life. He coined the term “interbeing” and promoted the concept of “Engaged Buddhism”, which links meditative practices with social engagement as well as applying them to everyday situations, with the aim of bringing benefit and wellbeing to humanity. His reinterpretation and adaption of the ancient teachings to suit a contemporary audience has made a significant impact on Buddhist practice in the West. For more than four decades, Thích Nhất Hạnh has travelled regularly, leading retreats and giving talks around the world. His teachings and writings have been growing in popularity, particularly in the West.

Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings and writings are known for their practicality, simplicity and clarity, as well as inspirational and poetic qualities (Kornfield, 2005). However, despite their significance, there does not seem to be any research locating Thích Nhất Hạnh’s adaptations in the traditional teachings and there has so far been little research into the impact of his teachings on contemporary mindfulness practitioners. Most research concerning Thích Nhất Hạnh focuses on his Engaged Buddhism as well as his political and social activism during wartime Vietnam (e.g. Chapman, 2007; Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000; S. B. King, 1996). Those studies that look at Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings primarily examine his writings or philosophies but not the practices taught by him (e.g. Waistell, 2012). Moreover, the handful studies that concern the impact of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings on practitioners (e.g. Walcher Davidson, 2012) have not addressed the issues in relation to the Buddhist tradition of mindfulness trainings.

In view of the limitations of past research, this study examines the teachings and practices taught by Thích Nhất Hạnh in depth. It investigates how these teachings and practices could affect people’s daily life and have an impact on society, providing new insight into the

potentially transformative effects of mindfulness practice in the contemporary world. Below are the two aims and the nine research questions¹ for this study:

Aims

- (A) To examine the way that Thích Nhất Hạnh has made use of, adapted and transformed the traditional teachings of mindfulness and Buddhist philosophy.
- (B) To investigate the experiential impact of his teachings and practices on contemporary practitioners.

Research questions

- (1) What are the characteristics of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices?
- (2) What are the differences and similarities between his teachings and the traditional teachings of mindfulness and Buddhist philosophy?
- (3) Why do people engage in the practices?
- (4) What are the philosophical and experiential implications of mindfulness for our understanding of categorical distinctions (e.g. self and other, human and nonhuman)?
- (5) How do practitioners apply the teachings and practices in their daily life?
- (6) What impact have the teachings and practices had on their daily lives, social situations and relationships, etc?
- (7) What impact has practicing with a sangha/group had on practitioners?

¹ This is an updated list of the research questions. Details regarding the changes made to the original list of the research questions can be found in Chapter 5.

- (8) How do practitioners' own spiritual backgrounds fit with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices?
- (9) What challenges or difficulties do they face when applying the teachings and practices in their daily life?

This study adopts the qualitative method of ethnography with the intention to fill a gap in the current mindfulness literature, which largely focuses on quantitative methods, as mentioned above. To understand and capture the experiences of mindfulness practitioners first-hand, I collected data through fieldwork at Plum Village – a Buddhist monastic community and retreat center that Thích Nhất Hạnh established in France in 1982 – where I conducted participant observation and ethnographic interviews. As mindfulness is essentially experiential and none of us can access minds other than our own, an autoethnographic approach has also been incorporated in the methodology.

The data collected are examined from the perspective of a newly developed theoretical framework based on Pierre Bourdieu's (1990b) social theory of habitus. Buddhism and Sociology are not generally considered as a relevant pairing. It appears that there has been scant research exploring the possible links between these two disciplines (e.g. Schipper, 2012), with only a few of them attempting to relate Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings to sociological theories (e.g. Noy, 2008). However, I consider such a cross-disciplinary dialogue to be an effective way to understand the Buddhist teachings in a sociological context, providing an opportunity to examine the impact of a contemporary adaptation of ancient wisdom in the modern context. Such an examination, as I will demonstrate in this thesis, allows us to gain new insights into the impact of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings on contemporary practitioners.

Part I (Chapters 2-4) of this thesis establishes the historical context and the newly developed theoretical framework for this study. Chapter 2 provides a brief history of the Buddhist practice of mindfulness – one of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s key teachings – identifying a few major interpretations of mindfulness in the past 2,500 years. The chronological overview serves as a background to our examination of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s unique interpretation of mindfulness, which aims to be relevant to the modern world.

Chapter 3 provides a brief history of the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, based on which Thích Nhất Hạnh coined the term “interbeing” to illustrate that all things co-exist with each other. Understanding the meanings and implications of this doctrine in different discourses allows us to see how Thích Nhất Hạnh’s innovative teaching of interbeing has skillfully captured the meaning of dependent origination in a way that is relevant to our current world, and I consider what kind of impact its realization can have on contemporary practitioners.

Chapter 4 discusses the creation of a theoretical framework for investigating the data collected for this research. The proposed framework situates the Buddhist teachings of mindfulness and interbeing within the context of Pierre Bourdieu’s social theory of habitus.

Part II (Chapters 5-11) of this thesis encompasses the application of the newly created theoretical framework to Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings and the participants’ experience of the practices at Plum Village. Chapter 5 presents the methodology employed in this study – ethnography incorporating an autoethnographic approach, participant observation, ethnographic interviews and thematic analysis. It provides details of the methods and the procedures used in data collection and analysis as well as the strategies employed to ensure

the validity of this qualitative inquiry. All of the methods discussed informed how the research questions were investigated.

Chapter 6 examines the formation of Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism during wartime Vietnam and after the war in Vietnam when he was already settled in France, revealing the ways in which Thích Nhất Hạnh has adapted the traditional Buddhist teachings in accordance with different circumstances to suit the specific needs of the people concerned.

Chapter 7 provides an overview of Thích Nhất Hạnh's key teachings, focusing on the Five Mindfulness Trainings and the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing (*Tiếp Hiện* Order), which are designed to make the Buddhist doctrines relevant to the daily life of modern society. The discussion in this chapter paves the way for the subsequent chapters, where I analyze the impact of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and the practices at Plum Village on practitioners.

Chapter 8 looks at Plum Village and its monastic and lay communities, examining the significance of sangha practice, which is an essential aspect of mindfulness training in Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings.

Chapter 9 investigates ways that the interview participants first came into contact with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and what led them to attend their first Plum Village retreat. This information helps us better address and appreciate the participants' feedback on the various activities and practices in the retreats at Plum Village, which will be examined in the following chapter.

Based on the data collected during my fieldwork at Plum Village, Chapter 10 examines how Plum Village practices could bring about practitioners' inner transformation in the context of the newly developed theoretical framework developed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 11 identifies the key characteristics of “mindful habitus” using the conceptual model that I developed in accordance with the eight path factors of the Noble Eightfold Path in Chapter 4. These characteristics are investigated in the context of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and the practices taught at Plum Village, with reference to the experiences reported by the interview participants.

Chapter 12 provides a summary of the key findings of this study in relation to the research aims and the research questions, highlighting the contributions this study makes to our understanding of Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism and the experiential impact of his teaching and practices on contemporary practitioners, as well as the fields of mindfulness research, Engaged Buddhism and sociology. The limitations of this study and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

Part I

Historical Context and Theoretical Foundations

Chapter 2

A Brief History of Mindfulness

Introduction

This chapter looks at the Buddhist practice of mindfulness (*sati*) – one of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s key teachings – identifying a few major interpretations of mindfulness, from its earliest understandings in ancient India more than 2,500 years ago, to its re-interpretations as modern Buddhism emerged during the colonial era in Asia in the late 19th century and early 20th century, to its contemporary interpretations in secular contexts in the past few decades. The chronological overview serves as a background to our examination of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s unique interpretation of mindfulness, which aims to be applicable to Buddhist as well as non-Buddhist and secular contexts. The research questions addressed in this chapter are thus: (1) What are the characteristics of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings and practices? (2) What are the differences and similarities between his teachings and the traditional teachings of mindfulness and Buddhist philosophy?

Mindfulness in early Buddhism²

It is important to understand the original purpose and meaning of mindfulness as explained by the Buddha if we want to put it into practice properly and get the most out of it. Doing so also allows us to examine the way that Thích Nhất Hạnh has made use of, adapted and transformed the traditional teachings of mindfulness in his Engaged Buddhism. According to the *Satipatṭhāna Sutta* (*Discourse on the Establishment of Mindfulness*), one of the most important texts in the Pāli Canon³ that concern mindfulness training, “the Buddha indicates

² Since this section concerns the Pāli literatures, the italicised non-English terms mentioned in the text are in Pāli unless otherwise indicated.

³ The Pāli Canon, preserved in the Pāli language, is the earliest and the most complete extant collection of Buddhist scriptures (Bodhi, 2011).

the goal of the practice to be the extinction of suffering and the attainment of *nibbāna* (Sanskrit *nirvāṇa*), a state of transcendent bliss and peace” (Bodhi, 2011, p. 21), which is also the goal of Buddhism: “transcendence, awakening (*bodhi*), a profound transformation of human consciousness, reached through ethical and meditative training” (Ditrich, 2016, p. 200). In fact, the Buddha proclaims that “[w]hat he teaches...is just suffering and the ending of suffering...” (Bodhi, 1999, p. 6). This means, despite the existence of many Buddhist doctrines and practices, they serve only one purpose – the cessation of suffering (*nibbāna*), which is achieved through transforming our consciousness.

In the early Buddhist traditions, most monasteries focused on studying scriptures, with only a small number of monastics called “forest monks” devoting themselves to meditation (Lopez, 2002; Sharf, 1995). For the laypeople, Buddhist practice involved mainly “devotion, development of generosity and virtue and the generation of merit” (Ditrich, 2016, p. 206). Besides, the attainment of enlightenment (*nibbāna*) was regarded by many traditional Buddhist schools as very unlikely after the death of the Buddha (Lopez, 2002). “Buddhist philosophical ideas and meditative praxes emerged mainly from the individuals or monastic communities that were initially situated outside the political centres, engaging only with a minority of the population” (Ditrich, 2016, p. 201). Thus, meditation was not practised by the laity and the majority of monastics; it was limited to only a certain small number of monks.

The *sutta* explains the arising of mindfulness by contemplating the body (*kaya*), feelings (*vedanā*), mind (*citta*) and experiential phenomena (*dhammās*) (Bodhi, 2011). Here, mindfulness (*sati*) is understood as present moment awareness – a type of observation that is alert but non-reactive, receptive, equanimous and detached, so that the mind would not get caught up in thoughts and ideas (Anālayo, 2006). However, in the “establishment of

mindfulness”, *sati* is never practised as an isolated contemplative activity but is always cultivated simultaneously with three other mental qualities, namely clearly knowing (*sampajāna*), diligence (*ātāpi*) and freedom from desire and discontent (*vinneya abhijjhādomanassa*). The reason for developing these four mental qualities together is obvious when the Buddha, in another occasion, “pointed out that *sati* on its own, despite its manifold advantages, might not suffice for eradicating ill will” (Anālayo, 2006, p. 51).

While mindfulness (*sati*) is bare awareness without thinking, clearly knowing (*sampajāna*) is “the conceptual input needed for taking clear cognizance of the observed phenomena, based on mindful observation” (Anālayo, 2006, p. 111). Such knowing of the mind is “the ability to fully grasp or comprehend what is taking place...[which] can in turn lead to the development of wisdom (*paññā*)” (Anālayo, 2006, p. 39). *Sati* can deepen clearly knowing but it is the latter that gives rise to insight into the true nature of reality, having the capacity to eradicate what is unwholesome and establish what is wholesome. Specifically, the focus of the contemplation is on the arising and passing away of all phenomena of life – their inherently insubstantial and impermanent nature. The quality of diligence (*ātāpi*), referring to a balanced and persistent use of energy, is to avoid too much or inadequate effort in our practice. The absence of desire and discontent (*vinneya abhijjhādomanassa*), which is the outcome of the practice, is regarded as the faculty of concentration (Anālayo, 2006).

Mindfulness (*sati*) is also the first factor of the Seven Factors of Awakening, which are the mental qualities that facilitate one’s progress towards awakening. The other six factors include investigation-of-dhamma (*dhammavicaya*), energy (*virīya*), joy (*pīti*), tranquility (*passaddhi*), concentration (*samādhi*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*). Since these “awakening factors form a conditionally related sequence, with *sati* as its initial cause and

foundation...the development of the awakening factors is a natural outcome of practising *satipaṭṭhāna*” (Anālayo, 2006, p. 232). This is perhaps not a surprise because certain awakening factors correspond to the three mental qualities that are developed simultaneously with *sati* described in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* as mentioned above.

The second factor investigation-of-*dhamma* (*dhammavicaya*) means looking into the nature of subjective experience, discerning what is beneficial and what is not in accordance to the Buddha’s teachings, as one moves towards awakening. The third factor energy (*virīya*) refers to the persistent efforts, both mentally and physically, needed in the practice. The fourth factor joy (*pīti*), a kind of non-sensual joy, arises as insight deepens with continued practice. The fifth factor tranquility (*passaddhi*) is a state of physical and mental calmness, which leads to concentration (*samādhi*) where the mind is without any distractions, eventually giving rise to equanimity (*upekkhā*) – a balanced and detached mind that facilitates awakening (Anālayo, 2006). Here, we can see that the awakening factors of investigation-of-*dhamma*, energy (*virīya*) and concentration (*samādhi*) correspond to the mental quality of clearly knowing (*sampajāna*), diligence (*ātāpi*) and freedom from desire and discontent (*vinneya abhijjhādomanassa*) in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice respectively.

Moreover, mindfulness is listed among the five faculties (*indriya*) and powers (*bala*), in the following order: faith (*saddhā*), energy (*virīya*), mindfulness (*sati*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*pañña*). These five faculties and powers have the function of resolving, exerting, establishing, not distracting, and seeing, respectively, and need to be in balance and harmony with each other. In particular, there needs to be a balance between faith and wisdom, and between energy and concentration (Buddhaghosa, 2010). Because “faith alone, without wisdom, can easily become mere credulity” (Conze, 1993, p. 6); but too much

wisdom without enough faith “errs on the side of cunning” (Conze, 1993, p. 23). In the same way, too much energy with a lack of concentration causes agitation; and excessive concentration with insufficient energy results in idleness. Mindfulness, however, has a unique role among the faculties and powers: it needs to be strong all the time, “for mindfulness protects the mind from lapsing into agitation through faith, energy and understanding...and from lapsing into idleness through concentration...it is as desirable in all instances as a seasoning of salt in all sauces...” (Buddhaghosa, 2010, p. 125). As indicated by its central position, the task of mindfulness is to balance and monitor all the other faculties and powers by noticing what is excessive or inadequate (Anālayo, 2006).

Similar to the awakening factors, certain faculties and powers apart from mindfulness, also have correspondence with the mental qualities cultivated in *satipaṭṭhāna* practice. We find that energy (*virīya*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*pañña*) parallel diligence (*ātāpi*), absence of desire and discontent (*vinneya abhijjhādomanassa*), and clearly knowing (*sampajāna*) respectively. This suggests that *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is essential for the development of the five faculties and powers.

Apart from its significance within the meditative context, mindfulness is also embedded in the Four Noble Truths, the first teaching given by the Buddha after his enlightenment, which “lay down the blueprint for the entire body of the Buddha’s thought and practice and set up the basic framework of the individual’s path to enlightenment” (Geshe Tashi Tsering, 2005, p. 9). So here we can gain an even better understanding of the position and prominence of mindfulness within a wider context of the Buddha’s teachings. The four truths are: “(1) Life inevitably involves suffering, dissatisfaction, and distress. (2) Suffering is caused by craving,

rooted in ignorance. (3) Suffering will cease when craving ceases. (4) There is a way to realize this state: the Noble Eightfold Path” (Fisher, 2014, p. 144).

The word “suffering” used here in the Four Noble Truths (and actually in the context of Buddhism, more generally) is a common translation of the Pāli term “*dukkha*”. “Suffering, however, represents only one aspect of *dukkha*, a term whose range of implications is difficult to capture with a single English word” (Anālayo, 2006, p. 242). The Buddha mentions *dukkha* as “the impermanent nature of all conditioned phenomena” (Anālayo, 2006, p. 243), which is the very essence of our existence. *Dukkha* therefore “refers to a basic unsatisfactoriness running through our lives” (Bodhi, 1999, p. 6). This includes the physical and mental conditions that exist within all beings, namely “birth, old age, sickness and death...as well as separation from loved ones or pleasant conditions; association with unpleasant persons or conditions; and not getting what one desires” (Mahinda, 2013, p. 89). And “even during the moments of joy and happiness, there is *Dukkha* because these moments are all impermanent states and will pass away when conditions change” (Dhammananda, 2002, p. 114).

However, we suffer not due to the impermanent nature of things but our misconception of them, seeing the impermanent as permanent (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009c). And this is why the Buddha refers to *dukkha* as impermanence (Karunadasa, 1999). As Eriksen and Ditrich (2015) explain:

Although physical pain is an inevitable experience, it is only linked to suffering when we react to the pain unskillfully (with, for example, anger, fear or aversion). This reaction to the pain is conditioned by an inability to understand and accept the impermanence of all phenomena of life. (p. 65)

Because of the wide range of implications of *dukkha*, some find that other translations such as ‘discontent’ or ‘unsatisfactoriness’ may be a better way to describe the term (Huxter, 2015). Since “suffering” can most effectively express the kind of *dukkha* we are concerned with in this research, I will keep it in my discussion. But it is important to understand the underlying meanings of the word used here and elsewhere in this thesis.

As mentioned before, the Buddha taught only two things – suffering and its cessation. Through understanding the meanings of *dukkha*, we come to see why his first truth proclaims that life by its nature involves suffering, dissatisfaction and distress. The fact that our misconception of how things really are is the source of *dukkha* naturally reveals the second truth – suffering is caused by craving, rooted in ignorance of the real nature of reality. The remedy is then to remove the cause of suffering, and thereby his third truth asserts that suffering will cease when craving ceases through gaining insight into how things truly are. The fourth truth is the Noble Eightfold Path, which provides the practical tools to overcome suffering. The first two truths thus address the Buddha’s first concern – suffering; and the last two truths address his second concern – liberation from suffering.

Mindfulness is integral to the Noble Eightfold Path, which is also called the Middle Path because it “avoids the extreme of self-mortification that weakens the intellect and the extreme of self-indulgence that retards moral progress” (Nārada, 1998, p. 404). This path consists of the following eight factors: right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*), right intention (*sammā saṅkappa*), right speech (*sammā vācā*), right action (*sammā kammanta*), right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*), right effort (*sammā vāyāma*), right mindfulness (*sammā sati*) and right concentration (*sammā samādhi*). Although these factors are traditionally laid out in the order shown, it does not mean that they are developed one by one sequentially. The eight factors are interrelated, co-

existing with and reinforcing each other. Having said that, however, “the presence of right mindfulness is also a requirement for the other path factors” (Anālayo, 2006, p. 49) because it is regarded “as a guarantor of the correct practice of all the other path factors” (Bodhi, 2011, p. 26). In the Pāli canon, mindfulness is compared with the gatekeeper of a town, identifying and permitting only those who are entitled to go into the town; therefore, “the presence of well-established *sati* prevents the arising of unwholesome associations and reactions at the sense doors” (Anālayo, 2006, p. 54).

Each of the eight factors involves the word “right”, a translation of the Pāli term *sammā*, “which literally means ‘togetherness’, or ‘to be connected in one’... the decisive criterion for describing...[a path factor] as ‘right’ is whether it is developed in conjunction with the other factors of the noble eightfold path” (Anālayo, 2006, p. 72). This means that mindfulness is considered as right mindfulness only when it is developed within the context of the eightfold path. Looking at *satipaṭṭhāna* practice, one finds that the three mental qualities that are cultivated simultaneously with mindfulness – clearly knowing, diligence, and freedom from desire and discontent – parallel the path factors of right view, right effort, and right concentration respectively. Moreover, *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is done by contemplating the body, feelings, mind and experiential phenomena, which essentially address all the path factors. This means that mindfulness in the context of *satipaṭṭhāna* practice is already right mindfulness; as Anālayo (2006) summaries:

sati requires the support of being diligent (*ātāpi*) and of clearly knowing (*sampajāna*). It is this combination of mental qualities, supported by a state of mind free from desires and discontent, and directed towards the body, feelings, the mind, and *dhammas*, which becomes the path factor of right mindfulness. (pp. 50-51)

Basically, only “the type of mindfulness that leads to wisdom and awakening is called right mindfulness. Wrong or unskillful mindfulness, on the other hand, may involve remembering to be attentive in a way that does not lead to wisdom and may be harmful” (Huxter, 2015, p. 42). In this context, *sammā* “could be understood...[as] complete, authentic, fully, skillful, appropriate, or correct” (Huxter, 2015, p. 34). Gunaratana (2001) finds that “skillful” and “unskillful” best express the meaning intended because “[t]he basis of Buddhist morality is that acting in unskillful ways leads to unhappy results, and acting in skillful ways leads to happy results” (p. 27). Thích Nhất Hạnh (1999) explains that “[r]ight and wrong are neither moral judgments nor arbitrary standards imposed from outside. Through our own awareness, we discover what is beneficial (‘right’) and what is unbeneficial (‘wrong’)” (p. 11). This brings out the important message that in the Buddhist context, moral expressions such as “right”, “wrong”, “good”, and “bad” carry meanings that are different from what they typically convey. Watts’ (1951) account below reveals the underlying problems of moral conduct merely based on standards derived from outside:

Nothing is really more inhuman than human relations based on morals. When a man gives bread in order to be charitable, lives with a woman in order to be faithful, eats with a Negro in order to be unprejudiced, and refuses to kill in order to be peaceful, he is as cold as a clam. He does not actually see the other person. Only a little less chilly is the benevolence springing from pity, which acts to remove suffering because it finds the sight of it disgusting. (p. 132)

While externally this person’s actions seem to be charitable, faithful, unprejudiced, peaceful and benevolent, all the things that are done cannot be regarded as “right (*sammā*)” because they “are based on an inflated sense of self-importance, on a sense of self that continuously demands to be gratified and protected against external threats to its omnipotence” (Anālayo,

2006, p. 205). They are all about “me” and that is why “[h]e does not actually see the other person”. All these things are done for the sake of making oneself feel good and appear to be great according to certain outside standards. They result from what Buddhism regards as the three poisons – *lobha* (greed or attachment), *dosa* (aversion or hatred) and *moha* (delusion) – which are innate tendencies “in human nature that make us prone to act wrongly and to understand things incorrectly” (Flanagan, 2014, p. 178).

The first poison [*lobha*] disposes us to be egoists, to be selfish; the second poison [*dosa*] disposes us to be disappointed, angry, resentful, rageful, and possibly violent, when we don’t get what we want. The third poison [*moha*] disposes us to project our desires onto reality and to believe that we both need and deserve everything we want and that our happiness depends upon acquiring what we desire. (Flanagan, 2014, p. 179)

Hence, “[t]he cause of suffering is the self-centred desire which manifests itself in many forms...To say that man suffers is the same as saying that man is motivated by self-centred desires” (Karunadasa, 1999, para. 42). As such, these seemingly moral behaviours will not lead us to awakening or free us from suffering (*dukkha*) because these actions come from a deluded (*samoha*) mind – a mind that does not comprehend reality correctly, not being able to see the non-self (*anatta*) nature of our existence. This, in turn, illustrates the indispensable role of right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*) – rather than external standards – in leading the moral life. As Karunadasa (2001) points out:

The Buddha says that he sees no single factor so responsible for the suffering of living beings as wrong view (*miccha diṭṭhi*), and no factor so potent in promoting the good of living beings as right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*). This is the rationale for Buddhism’s emphasis on the importance and relevance of the right view for the practice of the moral life. A

system of morality, if it is to be oriented towards the right direction, should be based on a correct view of reality, on a proper understanding of our world of experience. (p. 1)

Skillful or right actions (*sammā kammanta*) are therefore done in accordance to our insight of the nature of reality, consequently “[t]he purpose of responding nonviolently isn’t to show what a good person you are. It isn’t even to be a good person. It comes, rather, from a simple understanding of the truth” (Eisenstein, 2018, para. 23). Since right actions are not determined by external standards but our mindful discernment of what is most beneficial to a situation, it is possible that right actions would go against what are typically perceived as moral behaviours. With a mind that perceives things as they truly are, we do not think of our actions in terms of moral or immoral, good or bad – our response to circumstances is simply a selfless process that comes naturally and spontaneously.

Since “right” is the most frequent translation used, I will keep it in my discussion to avoid confusion of terminology. But it is important to remember that all the Buddhist teachings aim to purify the mind, so while the eight factors of the path provide guidance to “restrain immoral actions and promote good conduct, their ultimate purpose is not so much ethical as spiritual” (Bodhi, 1999, p. 40).

The discussion of the meanings of mindfulness and its role in certain important categories of concepts in early Buddhism reveal that mindfulness is indispensable to the path of awakening. This is perhaps not a surprise because “mindfulness has a special role in the development of wisdom, presented in Buddhism as a mental factor which arises together with mindfulness” (Ditrich, 2013, p. 184). While mindfulness is essential to our awakening, however, mindfulness on its own is not sufficient. It is therefore never practised as an isolated

contemplative activity, but always cultivated simultaneously with other mental qualities so that realization could be possible. Specifically, as summarized in the figure below, there are three mental qualities that always go with mindfulness, which are:

- (i) clearly knowing / investigation-of-*dhamma* / wisdom / right view
- (ii) diligence / energy / right effort
- (iii) absence of desire and discontent / concentration / right concentration

Four Mental Qualities in <i>Satipatṭhāna</i> Practice	Seven Factors of Awakening	Five Faculties and Powers	Noble Eightfold Path
(Mindfulness being developed with other qualities)	(Mindfulness as the foundation for other factors)	(Mindfulness needs to be present for other factors)	(Mindfulness needs to be present for other factors)
mindfulness	mindfulness	faith	right view
clearly knowing	investigation-of- <i>dhamma</i>	energy	right intention
diligence	energy	mindfulness	right speech
absence of desire and discontent	joy	concentration	right action
	tranquillity	wisdom	right livelihood
	concentration		right effort
	equanimity		right mindfulness
			right concentration

Figure 1: Summary of the position and role of mindfulness in four major categories of concepts in early Buddhism

To summarize:

Right mindfulness is strongly linked to the ethical and soteriological aspects of the doctrine of Buddhist philosophy: mindfulness protects the mind from reacting with desire and aversion and thus prevents reactive suffering. It facilitates, in conjunction with clear comprehension, the development of wisdom that eventually leads to freedom from

suffering (*dukkha*) and negative responses to life, such as anger, fear, grief, clinging. Furthermore, mindfulness is presented as a foundation for moral and ethical growth, which is expressed in blossoming of wisdom and compassion, in relation to oneself, other beings and the environment (Eriksen & Ditrich, 2015, p. 65).

Mindfulness in modern Buddhism⁴

As Buddhism expanded to various parts of India and Asian countries, there were variations in the positioning of mindfulness among different Buddhist schools; however, the concept and practice were always integrated within the Buddhist doctrines. It was during the colonial era in the late 19th century and early 20th century in Asia that new forms of Buddhism developed, with mindfulness being positioned at the forefront of the teachings. The stress on and the popularization of mindfulness in this period consequently facilitated the global proliferation as well as the later secularization of the practice (Ditrich, 2016).

Modern Buddhism refers to a diverse range of new forms of Buddhism that have emerged since about 150 years ago, as a result of colonialism where traditional Buddhist schools in Asia met with Christianity and modernity in the form of science, rationalism and romanticism (Ditrich, 2013; Lopez, 2002; McMahan, 2008). At the same time, Buddhist texts, being also available in English and other European language translations, became accessible to more people. And with the migration of a larger number of Buddhist followers to the Western world in the second half of the 20th century because of the Vietnam War and the Chinese occupation of Tibet, these new forms of Buddhism spread and developed even further (Lopez, 2002).

⁴ Since this section concerns the Pāli literatures, the italicised non-English terms mentioned in the text are in Pāli unless otherwise indicated.

The various forms of modern Buddhism share certain characteristics: they embrace the values of modern science and are active in social engagement, putting emphasis on meditation over ritual, “equality over hierarchy, the universal over the local, and often exalt[ing] the individual above the community” (Lopez, 2002, p. xi). Thus Buddhism is being presented as “a system of rational and ethical philosophy, divorced from the daily practices of the vast majority of Buddhists, such as the worship of relics, which are dismissed as superstitious” (Lopez, 2002, p. xix). While these aspects of modern Buddhism appear to be in contrast to those of earlier Buddhist schools, its reformers claim that this new discourse is not some novel teaching but simply “a return to the teachings of the Buddha, or better, to his ineffable experience beneath the Bodhi tree on that night of the full moon in May” (Lopez, 2002, p. xxxiii). Accordingly, the modern Buddhist discourse “has been largely drawn from the earliest textual records in Pāli, grounded in the Four Noble Truths, the doctrine of non-self, dependent origination with a strong emphasis on meditation as the essence of Buddhist praxis” (Ditrich, 2013, p. 182). However, Lopez (2002) points out that many of the characteristics of modern Buddhism “originated not with the Buddha but with Buddhist reformers of the nineteenth century who were themselves responding to the colonial situation” (p. xxxiii).

It was in the late 19th century, in Burma (Myanmar), that meditation began to be resurrected. This happened as a response to British colonialization, which caused a decline in Buddhism in the country.⁵ Burmese Buddhist monk Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw (1870-1955) and his disciple Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982) are two of the key figures in the meditation revival. The meditation practice that Mahasi Sayadaw learned from Mingun Jetavan Sayadaw, who

⁵ The emergence of new forms of Buddhism that emphasized meditation linked Buddhism with Burmese national identity, reasserting Burmese culture and the people’s self-esteem (Lopez, 2002; Sharf, 1995).

himself received instruction from a forest monk, was based on the *Satipatṭhāna Sutta* (*Discourse on the Establishment of Mindfulness*), “which has been revered in modern Buddhism as the seminal text on mindfulness” (Ditrich, 2013, p. 186). This meditation practice, which is known as *vipassanā* (insight meditation), aims to cultivate insight through paying attention to the movement of one’s abdomen as it rises and falls with each in-breath and out-breath respectively (Lopez, 2002; Mahasi Sayadaw, n.d.). While it is presented without “the ritual, liturgical, and merit-making elements” that are part of the earlier forms of Buddhist practice (McMahan, 2008, p. 186), Mahasi Sayadaw (n.d.) does require lay practitioners to observe the Eight Precepts⁶ during the meditation periods, emphasizing that they are essential for the cultivation of insight. The Eight Precepts are specific rules of discipline for lay people to follow, which are related to the ethical aspects of the Eightfold Path, namely right speech, right action and right livelihood. Besides, Mahasi Sayadaw (n.d.) states that, when this mediation is practised properly, the attainment of awakening is possible “in this your present life” and he encourages the practitioners to “work ardently with this end [the attainment of awakening] in view so that your training will be successfully completed” (p. 2). In 1941, Mahasi Sayadaw started teaching *vipassanā* (insight meditation), which became a core practice of modern Buddhism, to monks and laypeople alike in his own country, Thailand, Ceylon, and later on also in Europe and America, popularizing it around the world (Lopez, 2002). As a result of the meditation revival in the colonial period, the accessibility of meditation practice has been greatly enhanced, with it being practised by a large number of both laity and monastics in everyday life.

⁶ The Eight Precepts include abstaining from: taking the life of any living being; stealing; sexual relations; false speech; taking intoxicants; eating after noon; entertainments and cosmetics; and luxurious beds (Snyder, 2006).

The *vipassana* revival carries considerable significance for modern Buddhism. Traditionally, there are two types of Buddhist meditation, namely *samatha* (serenity meditation) and *vipassanā* (insight meditation). The former, which aims at developing a state of one-pointed concentration, is considered as preparatory for the latter, which could lead to awakening. Mahasi Sayadaw is thus exceptional in presenting *vipassanā* (insight meditation) as the beginning practice without asking practitioners to receive training in *samatha* (serenity meditation) first (Lopez, 2002; Sharf, 1995). While attracting a large number of followers, such an unconventional and simplified approach to meditation, also, unsurprisingly, met with criticism (Sharf, 1995). “The strong emphasis on meditation as the central form of Buddhism practice marked one of the most extreme departures of modern Buddhism from previous forms” (Lopez, 2002, p. xl). As mentioned above, before modern times, meditation practice was not practised by laypeople and the majority of monastic communities. And while most traditional Buddhist schools see the attainment of awakening as a remote possibility, modern Buddhism claims that, as asserted by Mahasi Sayadaw (n.d.), such an attainment is very possible in present life (Ditrich, 2016; Sharf, 1995). Thích Nhất Hạnh (2017b) also asserts that *nibbāna* “is a state of coolness, peace, and nonfear that can be experienced in this very life, with this body and with our five skandhas⁷” (p. 21). Again, such a standpoint regarding the actual possibility of attaining enlightenment has sparked controversy (Sharf, 1995).

Despite these various innovations of meditation practice in modern Buddhism in Burma, we see that it is still integrated within the framework of the Buddhist ethical and soteriological teachings. And in terms of a broader social and global context, what is significant about these

⁷ *Skandhas*, a Sanskrit word, means aggregates; the five *skandhas* refer to form (i.e. body), feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness, which are the five elements that comprise a person (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2017b).

adaptations and re-interpretations of mindfulness as a result of the *vipassanā* (insight meditation) movement, is that:

the new foci, and especially mass meditation practice amongst the laity and the consequent simplification of the methods with the assurance of quick results prepared the grounds for further popularisation, firstly from Buddhist monastics to Buddhist lay practitioners, and then to the new stage – i.e. the modern secular interpretations and applications of mindfulness. (Ditrich, 2016, pp. 207-208)

Another form of modern Buddhism, which is known as “Engaged Buddhism” (the topic of this research), emerged in the mid-20th century as an activist movement. The term “Engaged Buddhism” was coined by Thích Nhất Hạnh in an attempt to make the Buddha’s teachings applicable to everyday life (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2008b). This movement reinterprets meditation practice, linking it with social engagement and everyday situations with the aim of bringing benefits to the world (Ditrich, 2013). It transforms an originally solitary practice into social actions, “striv[ing] to relieve suffering by addressing human rights, war, poverty, injustice, and environmental degradation” (McMahan, 2008, p. 152). Thus, “[s]uffering was often interpreted by modern Buddhists to mean not the sufferings of birth, ageing, sickness and death, but the sufferings caused by poverty and social injustice” (Lopez, 2002, p. xxxiv). This is a re-interpretation of the concept of *dukkha* (suffering), with the aim of responding to the problems of our current society – the modern kind of *dukkha*.

Mindfulness in contemporary secular contexts

Since the late-20th century, *vipassanā* (insight meditation) has expanded from Asia to different parts of the world, as a result of colonization and globalization (Ditrich, 2016). Consequently, various forms of modern Buddhism that emphasize meditation, particularly

mindfulness, have also emerged in the West. And from the 1970s onward, mindfulness has become more and more popularized and secularized, being applied in various new contexts, which can be generally categorized into two related domains, namely those “with psychotherapeutic and ‘wellness’ foci. In this transplantation process, mindfulness has been, probably for the first time in the history of Buddhism, abstracted from its Buddhist context; consequently, new issues have arisen in respect to its conceptualisation and practice” (Ditrich, 2017b, p. 205).

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Professor of Medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, is an influential figure in the secularization of mindfulness as well as the popularization of secular mindfulness in the West, “contribut[ing] to a growing movement of mindfulness into mainstream institutions such as medicine, and psychology, health care and hospitals, schools, corporations, the legal profession, prisons, and professional sports” (UMASS Medical School, 2017, para. 3). In 1979, Kabat-Zinn, drawing on the *vipassanā* (insight) meditation developed in Burma (Ditrich, 2017a, 2017b; Christopher Titmuss, 2014), founded the eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme – “a well-defined and systematic patient-centered educational approach which uses relatively intensive training in mindfulness meditation as the core of a program to teach people how to take better care of themselves and live healthier and more adaptive lives” (Kabat-Zinn, 1996, p. 163). Here, immediately, we see that the goal of mindfulness training in the MBSR programme is very different from the Buddhist one; while the former intends to enhance our life quality, the latter aims to lead us to enlightenment (*nibbāna*) – i.e. the complete cessation of suffering (*dukkha*) – through realizing the non-self (*anatta*) nature of our existence. For this, Farias and Wikholm (2019) criticize that:

...the science of meditation is promoting a skewed view: meditation wasn't developed so we could lead less stressful lives or improve our wellbeing. Its primary purpose was much more radical – to rupture your idea of who you are; to shake to the core your sense of self so that you realize there is 'nothing there'. But that's not how we see meditation courses promoted in the West. Here, meditation has been revamped as a natural pill that will quieten your mind and make you happier. (p. 152)

According to Kabat-Zinn (2003), mindfulness is “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (p. 145). Gethin (2011) points out that, in the clinical context, to characterize mindfulness as “non-judgmental” may be a practical approach to emphasize its therapeutic effect in decreasing rumination; but from a Buddhist perspective, such characterization might imply that “being non-judgmental is an end in itself and that all states of mind are somehow of equal value, that greed is as good as non-attachment, or anger as friendliness” (p. 273). Wallace (2010) explains the kind of judgment involved in mindfulness in the Buddhist context, pointing out the importance of having such discerning capacity: “Judgment as an expression of wisdom is not in the business of judging the self. It is in the business of recognizing what are wholesome and unwholesome mental factors” (Wallace, 2010, p. 118). As also delineated in the earlier section of this chapter, the *Pāli* texts liken mindfulness to a town's gatekeeper who identifies and permits only those who are entitled to go into the town, meaning that mindfulness (with the support of other mental qualities) does make discernment, differentiating wholesome mental states from the unwholesome ones.

In addition, the MBSR programme advises participants to consciously cultivate seven attitudinal qualities when practising mindfulness, namely non-judging, patience, a beginner's

mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance and letting go (Santorelli, 2014). Mikulas (2011) raises the matter of including attitude components, such as acceptance, in Western psychological definitions of mindfulness. He explains that while acceptance helps develop mindfulness, mindfulness itself is not about accepting or rejecting, but rather “simply observing any accepting or rejecting that is done by some other part of the mind” (p. 3).

The goal and meaning of mindfulness, therefore, are considerably different between Buddhism and Western psychology. In fact, when mindfulness is applied in Western psychology, its Buddhist origin is seldom or only briefly mentioned (Gethin, 2011). As Kabat-Zinn (2003) explains:

The intervention needed to be free of the cultural, religious, and ideological factors associated with the Buddhist origins of mindfulness, because the objective was not to teach Buddhism or even ‘to make great meditators’ out of people, but to offer an environment within which to experiment with a range of novel and potentially effective methods for facing, exploring, and relieving suffering at the levels of both body and mind, and understanding the potential power inherent in the mind/body connection itself in doing so. (p. 149)

Now, we come to see that the purpose of the MBSR programme, as explained by Kabat-Zinn, has informed how mindfulness is presented, which in turn has an impact on the practice itself and its outcomes. Here, the mention of its Buddhist origin is avoided as it is seen as irrelevant, and perhaps even an obstacle, in achieving the objective of the programme. Consequently, the ethical and soteriological aspects of the teachings, which are integral to attaining the religious goal of enlightenment, are also removed. Thus, the MBSR programme, while consisting of intensive mindfulness training, does not include training in Buddhist

ethics, namely those that are related to right speech, right action and right livelihood (the third, fourth and fifth factors of the Eightfold Path). Right view and right intention (the first and second factors of the Eightfold Path) are also missing, as the programme makes no reference to the Four Noble Truths or other related doctrines, such as non-self and emptiness. As Ditrich (2017a) points out:

although psychotherapy and other domains that employ mindfulness also result in loosening of identification with experiences and increased adaptability, the identity is generally not questioned, nor is this possibility raised in Western applications of mindfulness. Being situated in Western psychological paradigms, mindfulness is viewed instead as a method to enhance psychological health, perceived as a sense of stable identity, with well-defined boundaries and self-esteem. (p. 17)

Hence, while mindfulness in the context of Western psychology may offer numerous physical and mental health advantages⁸, it cannot be regarded as “right mindfulness (*sammā sati*)”. This is not to say that it cannot benefit us, but simply that it is not “right mindfulness” without grounding in the Buddha’s Eightfold Path, because “within Buddhist frameworks, mindfulness cannot be presented as a meditation method *per se*, i.e., to lead on its own to liberation from suffering, but can be practised only in conjunction with other aspects of meditational and ethical training” (Ditrich, 2017a, p. 8). Although secular mindfulness can alleviate certain aspects of our *dukkha* (suffering), such as illness or stress, it does not address

⁸ Numerous studies reveal that mindfulness is beneficial in a variety of clinical contexts, which include oncology (e.g. Labelle, Campbell, & Carlson, 2010), anxiety (e.g. Craigie et al., 2008), depressive relapse (e.g. Kuyken et al., 2008), and addictions (e.g. Brewer et al., 2011); there are also studies indicating the effectiveness of mindfulness for promoting emotional well-being (e.g. Harnett et al., 2010; Jain et al., 2007).

the root of *dukkha* which is our ignorance of the non-self and empty nature of all phenomena. Secular mindfulness is therefore not right mindfulness as it does not aim to and presumably also cannot solve the fundamental predicament of our existence.

From 1979 onward, the MBSR programme and its variations, apart from being applied in clinical contexts for reducing mental and physical symptoms, have also been implemented in a diverse range of non-clinical settings, such as schools, prisons, sport training and the workplace (Kabat-Zinn, 1996), for managing stress as well as enhancing well-being, contentment, productivity and enjoyment of life (Ditrich, 2016). These aims, again, are not the original purpose of Buddhist meditation, but a reflection of “modern society’s aims and values such as personal satisfaction, stress reduction, individual self expression, self fulfilment, self maintenance, and pursuit of happiness, to name a few” (Ditrich, 2013, p. 189). In this context, mindfulness is:

presented as psychological, spiritual, or scientific techniques rather than as religious practices. This way of thinking about meditation as a technique detachable from the wider ethical, social, and cosmological contexts of Buddhism is implicit in the nineteenth century and becomes explicit in some of the earlier western discussions of meditation that began to be written in the mid-twentieth century. (McMahan, 2008, p. 185)

While secular mindfulness appears to have brought numerous benefits to our contemporary world, the fact that the practice is divorced from the broader framework of its religious ethics and soteriology has given rise to concern about its potential for being misused and causing harm. One example where mindfulness is considered as being abused is in its application in corporate environments. For this, Purser and Milillo (2015) remark that mindfulness is

exploited for calming staff unease, sustaining unhealthy workplace environments, directing attention to profit making and serving institutional power; they criticize that

the mindfulness movement has yet to engage in seriously questioning as to why stress is so pervasive in modern corporations. Instead, corporations have jumped on the mindfulness bandwagon because it conveniently shifts the burden on to the individual employee; stress is framed as a personal problem, and mindfulness-based interventions are offered as means of helping employees cope and work more effectively and calmly within such toxic environments. (p. 16)

And this is made possible through

defining mindfulness as being in the present moment in a non-judgemental way, [which] inhibits any deep questioning by the staff of companies whose policies exploit people and the environment...This single one liner places the responsibility of the stress, anger and despair on the individual while keeping any policies of a corporation free from inquiry. The major policies of a company can be a significant contribution to stress and personal conflict. (Christopher Titmuss, 2013, para. 13)

This example of mindfulness being misappropriated demonstrates how the meaning and understanding of mindfulness could have a great impact on the practice itself as well as its outcomes. The example illustrates why the Buddha emphasizes that mindfulness needs to be cultivated simultaneously with other mental factors, particularly right view which informs our ethical discernment, enabling us to see the real cause of our suffering and to respond accordingly. Right mindfulness is not just a form of value-free concentrated awareness, but “includes our capacity to make judgements in the present and act wisely and directly on those

judgements” (Christopher Titmuss, 2013, para. 14). In this case, rather than merely looking at one’s emotions and difficulties with an accepting and non-judgemental attitude, right mindfulness empowers the practitioners to act in accordance with their mindful discernment, such as taking actions to make changes to the existing harmful corporate environment or even leaving one’s job for a healthier work environment elsewhere.

Another more extreme example where mindfulness is deemed to be misused is its implementation in the military. The eight-week Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness Training (MMFT) programme, which is a derivative of the MBSR programme, is used to train soldiers to perform more effectively in war zones and to recover more quickly from combat-induced trauma (McDonough, 2014). Christopher Titmuss (2014) laments that “support[ing] international war crimes through mindfulness training in the military...constitutes the gravest abuse possible of the application of mindfulness as taught by the Buddha” (para. 29).

Elizabeth Stanley (2014), a former US Army captain as well as the creator and researcher of the MMFT programme, defines mindfulness as “the ability to pay attention and notice what is happening while it is happening, without the mental filters of judgment, elaboration, or emotional reactivity” (p. 970). She explains that mindfulness training could reduce killing by preventing soldiers from mistakenly shooting civilians; because with mindfulness,

they are more likely to pull the trigger only when they really need to – when imminent harm actually exists in the environment – and less likely to pull the trigger reactively, giving in to strong impulses, such as fear, vengeance, uncertainty, anger, or confusion. (Stanley, 2014, p. 980)

However, Purser and Milillo (2015) point out that the aim of right mindfulness “is not calming the breath to improve marksmanship, but to develop compassion, wholesome mental states, and skillful behaviors (nonharming) for all sentient beings, including those perceived as ‘enemies’” (p. 17). This means that instead of aiming at advancing one’s shooting skills so that less people would be unintentionally killed, right mindfulness, which is informed by right view, allows one to realize that killing is not right action and being a soldier is not right livelihood. In fact, it is very difficult for someone who has right mindfulness to use a gun to harm others. With mindful discernment, the practitioners may question the violent nature of war and refuse to participate in it.

However, once a nation has decided to enter a war, there will be soldiers. And when we are in the war zones where we could be killed anytime, we need to protect ourselves. A very effective way to do so is to kill or harm others – our perceived enemies – first. In such circumstances, mindfulness as being taught in the MMFT programme may appear to aid soldiers to function (i.e. harm and kill) more effectively, as well as to recover from war-induced trauma more quickly, therefore protecting them better. So, this is actually a very complex issue. In this context, a more burning question perhaps would be: “How did someone become a soldier in the first place?” or “What caused a war?” I will, from the perspective of dependent origination (or interbeing), explore some possible answers to these questions in a later section of this chapter and in Chapter 4. A concern for life’s burning questions like these and our skillful responses to them are at the core of Engaged Buddhism.

What is important here is to see that the way that mindfulness is being utilized in the MMFT programme – as a performance enhancement and resilience skill that is free from ethical considerations – goes against the Buddha’s Eightfold Path. While presenting mindfulness as

non-judgemental present awareness provides therapeutic benefits in clinical settings for relieving physical and psychological symptoms, a similar presentation in other contexts, such as corporations and military, runs the risk of being misapplied and causing harm.

What happens is that the many physical, psychological and cognitive benefits brought about by mindfulness as shown in scientific studies are simply the by-products of the practice, not the goal (Ditrich, 2013; Purser & Milillo, 2015). There is, of course, nothing wrong about starting to practice because of the potential advantage mindfulness can bring to us. But if we only focus on the by-products of the practice in the belief that they are what mindfulness is all about, it is not only that the benefits we receive would be very limited, but we overlook the damage it can potentially do to us as well. Maex (2011) rightly comments that:

It was a stroke of genius to take mindfulness training out of the Buddhist context, but the risk might be that, instead of opening a door to the Dharma (the Buddhist teaching), it might also close a door leading to the vast richness of that context full of valuable insights and practices. (p. 165)

We need to keep in mind that “mindfulness belongs to a path of inquiry, of examination of causation for suffering, of awakening, of compassion which leaves no stone unturned. It is an eight-fold path not a one-fold path (mindfulness)” (Christopher Titmuss, 2013, para. 18).

Mindfulness in Thích Nhất Hạnh’s Engaged Buddhism

The above overview of the meanings and implications of mindfulness in various times and contexts allows us to examine Thích Nhất Hạnh’s interpretation of mindfulness in a wider context. Since Thích Nhất Hạnh’s mindfulness practice aims to be applied in Buddhist as well as non-Buddhist and secular contexts, we will examine to what extent he has skillfully

reframed “right mindfulness” so that it can be effectively applied to our everyday life across a variety of settings.

Mindfulness, for Thích Nhất Hạnh,

is the energy of being aware and awake to the present moment. It is the continuous practice of touching life deeply in every moment of daily life. To be mindful is to be truly alive, present and at one with those around you and with what you are doing. We bring our body and mind into harmony while we wash the dishes, drive the car or take our morning shower. (Plum Village, 2014b, para. 1)

I have observed several innovative elements here that bring uniqueness to his definition of mindfulness:

- (1) Mindfulness is presented as a practice and a type of energy rather than a technique or a skill; it is uncommon to describe mindfulness as a type of energy.
- (2) It does not only involve awareness but also awakening, meaning that we do not just pay attention to the present moment, but also realize something deeper in the moment through touching life deeply.
- (3) It is a process in which we are fully alive, actively engaging in the present moment rather than just passively observing what is happening.
- (4) It is a process in which we are entirely present with not only with what is happening within ourselves but outside of us as well.
- (5) It does not just take place during retreats, formal meditation practice or stressful moments; it needs to carry on without interruption throughout every moment of the day, including when we are in the kitchen, the car or the shower.

According to this definition of mindfulness, the goal of the practice is to be awake to the present moment through touching life deeply throughout the day. The goal and the means are thus essentially one, which is another important aspect of this definition.

Apart from the definition above, Thích Nhất Hạnh, on another occasion, emphasizes that mindfulness is not tool or instrument, but a path and a way of living.

Mindfulness is not a tool or instrument to get something else – whether that something is healing, success, wealth or winning. True mindfulness is a path, an ethical way of living, and every step along that path can already bring happiness, freedom and wellbeing, to ourselves and others. Happiness and wellbeing are not an individual matter. We inter-are with all people and all species. (Plum Village, n.d.-h, para. 6)

Here, Thích Nhất Hạnh warns people that “true” mindfulness (i.e. mindfulness in the context of the Eightfold Path) is not the kind of mindfulness that is presented or used in the secular context in today’s world.

Summary

The meditation practice of mindfulness has Buddhist roots that can be traced back more than 2,500 years. Since the earliest textual record in the Pāli Canon (and in fact since the Buddha first gave the teaching of the practice), the understanding of mindfulness has been interpreted and re-interpreted in many ways over different periods of time, regions and contexts – from the early descriptions in the Pāli texts in ancient India when it was mainly practised by the monastics, to new developments as Buddhism spread to other Asian and Western countries

when it was also practised by lay Buddhists, to modern interpretations in secular contexts where it is practised by anyone who is interested in it. Different interpretations reflect the significance of the particular contexts in which mindfulness is practised. The various understandings of the term have a direct impact on the actual practice, consequently leading to specific outcomes.

The brief overview of Thích Nhất Hạnh's interpretation of mindfulness shows that he has adapted the traditional practice in a way that can be applied in Buddhist as well as non-Buddhist and secular contexts. It is a practice that aims to be incorporated in all our everyday activities. This characteristic of his teachings and practices (research question 1) provides an indication of the novelty and uniqueness of his teachings as well as the differences and similarities between his teachings and the traditional teachings of mindfulness (research question 2). We will explore Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings further from Chapter 6 onwards.

Chapter 3

A Brief History of Dependent Origination

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*paṭicca samuppāda*), based on which Thích Nhất Hạnh coined the term “interbeing” in the 1980s to illustrate that all things co-exist with each other (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2017b). I will give an outline of the meanings of dependent origination and their respective implications in early Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism and modern Buddhism. Understanding the meanings and implications of this doctrine in different discourses, allows us to see how Thích Nhất Hạnh’s innovative teaching of interbeing has skillfully captured the meaning of dependent origination in a way that is relevant to our current world, and I consider what kind of impact its realization can have on contemporary practitioners. This chapter thus responds to three of my research questions: (1) What are the characteristics of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings and practices? (2) What are the differences and similarities between his teachings and the traditional teachings of mindfulness and Buddhist philosophy? (4) What are the philosophical and experiential implications of mindfulness for our understanding of categorical distinctions (e.g. self and other, human and nonhuman)?

Dependent origination in early Buddhism⁹

The doctrine of dependent origination (*paṭicca samuppāda*) is the Buddha’s most detailed explanation and “complete analysis of the conditions leading to suffering, together with the

⁹ Since this section concerns the Pāli literatures, the italicised non-English terms mentioned in the text are in Pāli unless otherwise indicated.

conditions leading to suffering's end" (Thanissaro, 2011, p. 16), which, again, are the only two concerns of the Buddha. In the Pāli literatures, dependent origination is expressed in a formula of twelve linked causal factors, consisting of the following factors: ignorance (*avijjā*), conditioning activities (*samkhārā*), relinking-consciousness (*patisaṅkhi-viññāna*), mind and matter (*nāma-rūpa*), six sense-bases (*salāyatana*), contact (*phassa*), feeling (*vedanā*), craving (*tanhā*), grasping (*upādāna*), becoming (*bhava*), birth (*jāti*), and decay and death (*jarāmarana*) (Nārada, 1998). It "seeks to explain the uninterrupted continuity of the life-series in *samsara* (cycle of births and deaths)" (Karunadasa, 2001, p. 5). Underlying the processes of these twelve links is this causal principle: "When this is, that is. This arising, that arises. When this is not, that is not. This ceasing, that ceases" (Dhammananda, 2002, p. 158). This means that:

A phenomenon arises because of a combination of conditions which are present to support its arising. And the phenomenon will cease when the conditions and components supporting its arising change and no longer sustain it. The presence of these supportive conditions, in turn, depend on other factors for their arising, sustenance and disappearance. (Dhammananda, 2002, p. 158)

Each factor of the twelve-linked causal formula is therefore the result of its antecedent factor and at the same time also the cause of the one following it. Consequently, when one factor stops to exist, its following factor, as a result, also stops to exist. To understand the arising of suffering is thus to understand its cessation as well since through recognizing what gives rise to suffering we know how to undo it. While the twelve-linked causal formula consists of a chain of factors, the principle of dependent origination does not operate in

a strictly linear sequence of events in time...[but] stands for the conditional interrelation of phenomena, constituting a web of interwoven events, where each event is related to other events by way of both cause and effect. Each conditioning factor is at the same time itself conditioned, which thereby excludes the possibility of a transcendent, independent cause. (Anālayo, 2006, p. 106)

Accordingly, what is significant to this twelve-linked formula is that “the causes of suffering are identifiable without reference to an external principle and without positing a self-entity which persists throughout the cycle of samsaric existence and also without subscribing to the view that suffering is befallen by chance” (Karunadasa, 1999, para. 26). By their very nature, all phenomena – including suffering and any individual – are merely impersonal causal processes without an internal or external independent entity performing them, yet they also do not happen randomly but depend on causes and conditions.

This first factor ignorance (*avijjā*) means not knowing the Four Noble Truths; therefore, not having right view, lacking the ability to see the true nature of things – their impermanent and dependent origination nature (Nārada, 1998; Thanissaro, 2011). As a result of ignorance, there arise conditioning activities (*samkhārā*), which include all mental, verbal and physical activities that directly or indirectly arise from ignorance, regardless of whether they are moral or immoral. As long as an action is caused by ignorance, an effect must follow it no matter if it is good or bad (Nārada, 1998).

Because of conditioning activities of the past, there arises relinking-consciousness (*patisandhi-viññāna*) in the next birth. All the impressions, attributes and dispositions that were conditioned in the past are latent in this consciousness, which comes into being at the moment of conception. Along with relinking-consciousness is the formation of mind and

matter (*nāma-rūpa*), which then lead to the arising of the six sense-bases (*salāyatana*). The collision between the six sense-organs (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind) and their respective sense-objects (forms, sounds, odours, sapids, tangibles and mental objects) results in six types of consciousness respectively (visual consciousness, auditory consciousness, olfactory consciousness, gustatory consciousness, tactile consciousness, mind-consciousness). Contact (*phassa*) subsequently arises at the conjunction of these three components – the sense-organs, the sense-objects and the consciousness resulting from the collision between them (Nārada, 1998).

Conditioned by contact is feeling (*vedanā*), including pleasant, unpleasant and neutral feelings. And because of feelings, craving (*tanhā*) comes into existence. There are three types of craving, namely craving for sensual pleasures, craving for being and craving for non-being. From craving there arises grasping (*upādāna*), which is a very strong clinging and attachment to desirable objects or rejection of undesirable ones. With the presence of grasping, becoming (*bhava*) occurs which leads to birth (*jāti*) in the next life. When there is birth, old age and death (*jarāmarana*), along with sorrow, pain, grief and despair, cannot be avoided (Nārada, 1998).

As noted earlier, an effect cannot exist without its causes; suffering therefore could be eradicated by following the reverse order of the twelve-linked formula. When ignorance ceases through gaining insight into the Four Noble Truths, all the factors that follow it also cease; birth, death and suffering thereby perish as well. While ignorance is the first factor of the twelve-linked formula, it is not the original cause of suffering (or the universe or anything), since the arising of everything depends on causes and conditions, implying that there is no first cause (Dhammananda, 2002). Ignorance is regarded as the first factor simply

“because it is the factor that can be manipulated into a new set of parameter values that can cause the entire system to break down” (Thanissaro, 2011, p. 35).

As shown in the causal links between the twelve factors above:

The sole purpose of this doctrine is to establish the causal structure of individual existence. Individual existence is a process of inter-dependent mental and material phenomena, all in a state of constant change. Within the empiric individuality there is no independent self-entity, mental or material, which is impervious to change. Nor is there a soul, in the form of a spiritual essence, which relates it to a transcendental reality.

(Karunadasa, 2001, p. 3)

Dependent origination as expressed in the twelve-linked causal formula aims to illustrate how our human existential predicament can be resolved through understanding the causal nature of our individual existence. In doing so, it reveals that each one of us fully accounts for all our own deeds; as the Buddha in the *Dhammapada* asserts: “These evil deeds were only done by you, not by your parents, friends, or relatives; and you yourself will reap the painful results” (Dhammananda, 2002, p. 255). This refers to conditioning activities (*samkhārā*) – the second factor of the twelve-linked formula – which constitute *kamma*, literally meaning action. This includes all intentional actions – both good and bad – produced by our body, speech and mind. Good and bad acts lead to good and bad results respectively. Thus, *kamma* refers to the law of moral causation, with rebirth as its corollary (Nārada, 1998; Swearer, 2010a). As demonstrated above, there is no self-entity within an individual; accordingly,

there is no eternal, independently existing soul to be reborn...each phenomenon or event acts as a cause that sets another into motion...The impressions of our virtuous and

nonvirtuous actions shape our experience moment-by-moment. When we die, this process continues, passing on the flame to a new life in a realm of existence that reflects our past karma [Pāli: *kamma*]. (Fisher, 2014, p. 146)

Kamma which is rooted in ignorance of the real nature of phenomena, therefore, leads to the endless cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*). The Buddha who had realized the truth had broken the cycle of rebirth, being liberated from *saṃsāra*. Consequently, he “had passed into nirvana [Pāli: *nibbāna*] upon his death, never to return” (Lopez, 2002, p. xvi). And “the traditional goal was to become an *arhat* [Pāli: *arahant*], one who works to destroy the bonds of birth and death in order to pass into nirvana [Pāli: *nibbāna*] at death” (Lopez, 2002, p. xvii).

As we will see in the later sections of this chapter, the early Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination, which solely concerns “the causes and conditions of both bondage and liberation” (McMahan, 2008, p. 158), is very different from the modern concept of Buddhist interconnectedness (or interdependence) that encourages us to embrace the world as a complex, interwoven web of connections among ourselves, other creatures and the environment. Seeing the dissatisfaction and undesirability of the worldly life in the endless cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*), the Buddha advises that the appropriate attitude to *saṃsāric* existence “is one of disenchantment and dispassion” (Thanissaro, 2016, para. 13); the early Buddhist view thereby, appearing to be rather contradictory to the modern perspective, encourages “the disengagement from all entanglement in this web” (McMahan, 2008, p. 154). This does not mean that the Buddha had no concern for our relationships with and the impacts of our actions on one another; but merely that he explained these through the doctrine of *kamma* instead of dependent origination (McMahan, 2008; Thanissaro, 2016).

The traditional view that the individual is the only one who is accountable to all that has happened to him or her is also different from, perhaps even contrary to, the modern view that each of us is co-responsible for everything that happens in the world. The implications of the contemporary outlook, as I will demonstrate, reflect the significance of the re-interpretation of the traditional teachings in Engaged Buddhism for today's societies.

Dependent origination in Mahāyāna Buddhism¹⁰

Mahāyāna Buddhism, which focuses on the cultivation of compassion and wisdom with the aim to free all beings from suffering, emerged during the 1st century as Buddhist doctrines and practices continued to develop beyond the Pāli traditions. The Mahāyāna scriptures, originally written in Sanskrit, are also preserved in various translations such as Tibetan and Chinese (Fisher, 2014). Mahāyāna Buddhism sees the Buddha and the path to awakening in a different light than early Buddhism. While early Buddhism considers the Buddha as someone who is awake, being liberated from *saṃsāra* – the unceasing cycle of rebirth, Mahāyāna Buddhism holds that “the Buddha who appeared on earth was but a physical manifestation of an eternally enlightened being, one of thousands who populated the universe to deliver all beings from suffering” (Lopez, 2002, pp. xvi-xvii). Early Buddhism aims for one to become an *arhat* (Pāli: *arahant*), one who has realized the truth and achieved *nirvana* (Pāli: *nibbāna*) whereas Mahāyāna Buddhism “taught that there was a higher goal than the arhant's achievement of liberation, namely, to aspire to become a bodhisattva (a being who is dedicated to liberating others from suffering) and work to achieve the perfect enlightenment of a Buddha” (Fisher, 2014, p. 159). The Mahāyāna *bodhisattva* ideal has had a great impact on Engaged Buddhism.

¹⁰ Since this section concerns the Mahāyāna literature which is preserved in Sanskrit, the italicised non-English terms mentioned in the text are in Sanskrit unless otherwise indicated.

Several doctrines of the Mahāyāna have contributed to the development of the modern conception of interconnectedness (or interdependence), including “the ideas of the emptiness of all phenomena, liberation within the world, the interpenetration of all phenomena, and identification of the individual with a cosmic reality” (McMahan, 2008, p. 159). Here, in particular, we will focus on two scriptures – the *Prajñāpāramitā (Perfection of Wisdom)* and the *Avataṃsaka (Flower Garland) Sūtras*.

Based on the *Prajñāpāramitā (Perfection of Wisdom) Sūtras*, Nāgārjuna, an important Indian Buddhist philosopher, made a detailed elaboration on the concept of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), asserting that “compounded things have no independent existence and no eternal reality. All composite phenomena arise and pass away, dependent on causes and conditions. The world of phenomena is therefore empty of true or inherent existence” (Fisher, 2014, p. 161). Since everything lacks an underlying independent core, he proclaims that there is no difference between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*, because they both are also empty of any inherent essence. Thus, “Nāgārjuna and the Perfection of Wisdom literature suggest that what is important is stopping the conceptual reification of any dharma at all, thus seeing all of them as empty” (McMahan, 2008, p. 157). This view is different from that of early Buddhism, which makes clear distinction between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*, stating that the goal is to attain the former so that one can be liberated from the latter and thereby end all suffering.

For Nāgārjuna, emptiness (*śūnyatā*) is identical with dependent origination. As the very essence of all entities is the absence of an individual existence, which applies to the causal principle as well. “Apprehending the true empty nature of the dharmas that make up dependent origination, therefore, can be the occasion for liberation, for their nature is ultimately the same as that of nirvana itself” (McMahan, 2008, p. 157). Consequently, the

insight into dependent origination – that is, seeing the empty nature of all phenomena – is, in itself, awakening. Such discernment in all phenomena of life, in turn, allows one to attain *nirvāṇa* within the *saṃsāric* world (this is related to Nāgārjuna’s assertion that there is no difference between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* as just mentioned above). This view again differs from the early Buddhist goal that aims to attain *nirvāṇa* through transcending *saṃsāra* (McMahan, 2008).

The Mahāyāna view on the realization of dependent origination is also different from that of early Buddhism. As shown in the twelve-linked causal formula above, the doctrine of dependent origination intends to demonstrate the factors and their underlying causal process that lead to our suffering which keeps repeating life after life (i.e. *saṃsāra*), as well as the way to end this perpetual suffering process (i.e. *nirvāṇa*). The insight into dependent origination, according to early Buddhism, therefore provides guidance to awakening but is not in itself awakening (McMahan, 2008).

Another crucial Mahāyāna canonical text that has contributed to the development of the modern conception of interconnectedness is the *Avataṃsaka (Flower Garland) Sūtra*, which describes the worldview of a Buddha, who perceives the universe

as empty of inherent existence and as arising and fading away each moment in response to the activities of mind...a universe lacking disparate objects with solid boundaries between them...he sees a constant flow and flux in the basic transformations of mind.
(Keown, 2004, para. 4)

In this fluidity without boundaries, all beings, things and events interpenetrate; every single phenomenon encompasses and impacts all others while at the same each of them is also distinct from one another (Keown, 2004; McMahan, 2008). This vast cosmological vision is compared to Indra's net of jewels:

not only does each jewel reflect all the other jewels but the reflections of all the jewels in each jewel also contain the reflections of all the other jewels, ad infinitum. This 'infinity of infinities' represents the interidentification and interpenetration of all things... (Cleary, 1983, p. 37)

The Mahāyāna views on the emptiness and interpenetration of all phenomena as well as attaining awakening within the world have significantly contributed to the modern conception of interconnectedness (or interdependence), as we will see in the sections below.

Dependent origination in modern Buddhism

Nowadays, the modern Buddhist conception of interdependence (or interconnectedness) is often considered to be identical with the traditional doctrine of dependent origination, and is regarded as the core worldview of Buddhism in the current society. However, this new conception is not a uniquely Buddhist teaching but a result of the interaction between the Buddhist and the Western traditions. This novel conception, with meanings and implications that are specific to our contemporary world, comprises diverse elements, including the early Buddhist concept of dependent origination, the Mahāyāna views on the emptiness and interpenetration of all phenomena, the discourses of German Romanticism and American Transcendentalism, as well as recent scientific and ecological thought. Like other adapted Buddhist teachings that appeared in the modern times, this new conception of interdependence emerged with an intention to address issues that are unique to today's

society. Its widespread adoption also “reflects the currency of similar concepts in contemporary discourse on many other subjects. In the age of the web, the network, the matrix, the nexus, the system, and the complex, the thing-in-isolation, it seems, is a thing of the past” (McMahan, 2008, p. 181).

The modern Buddhist interdependence, which describes the inextricable interconnectedness of everything in the universe, has implications at the individual, societal and global levels. Since the world is a complex, interlaced web of connections among ourselves, other creatures and the environment, all our actions, whether trivial or significant, will inevitably have an impact on others, regardless how far away they might be physically. Such an outlook, consequently, has deep ecological, ethical and political implications, with strong relevance to environmental, social and economic justice matters:

It recognizes that the interdependencies of the modern world are often sources of suffering. Perceiving interconnectedness may involve tracing a running shoe for sale at the local mall to global warming because of the fuel it took to ship it from China, where it in turn connects to economic injustice, since it is made by women in a sweatshop making barely enough to survive, while a huge percentage of the profit from the shoe goes to corporate executives. (McMahan, 2008, p. 152)

Interdependence, which allows us to recognize the underlying causes of social issues beyond the surface, is the essence of Engaged Buddhism, providing a fresh viewpoint and approach to the many social and political concerns that we have in the current world, such as inequality, poverty, terrorism, discrimination, etc. This novel teaching aims to show that our misperception of the world as being made up of numerous discrete entities is the real source of all these problems. Accordingly, the remedy to them is to realize the inextricable

interconnected nature of reality, thereby changing our interactions with things around us. This, in turn, encourages our active participation in and engagement with the world, “convey[ing] a sense of celebration of this interwoven world, of intimacy and oneness with the great, interconnected, living fabric of life, and an expansion of the sense of selfhood into it” (McMahan, 2008, p. 151).

The contemporary conception of interdependence is, therefore, very different from the early doctrine of dependent origination. As shown in the earlier section, dependent origination, through the twelve-linked causal formula, aims to demonstrate the conditions that give rise to the intrinsic unsatisfactoriness (*duḥkha*) of the endless cycle of rebirths (*saṃsāra*) as well as the conditions that can release one from such perpetual unsatisfactory existence (*nibbāna*). It thus regards such a binding nature of worldly life as bondage that we should disengage ourselves from. Interdependence, on the other hand, sees the interconnected nature of reality as oneness of everything that we should actively involve ourselves in. While interdependence embraces an enthusiastic attitude, dependent origination holds a dispassionate one.

Another important difference between the modern conception and the traditional teaching are their ethical implications. The Buddha talks about ethics in terms of *kamma* (McMahan, 2008; Thanissaro, 2016), the law of moral causation, which explains that good and bad acts – whether they are produced by body, speech or mind – result in positive and negative outcomes respectively (Nārada, 1998; Swearer, 2010a). The contemporary viewpoint, on the other hand, relates ethics to the interconnectedness of all things such that all our behaviours will have an effect on everything else and vice versa.

The differences in the meanings and implications between the traditional teaching and the novel conception, as illustrated above, suggest that the latter has not captured the actual meaning of the former. Olendzki (2010) comments that “in using this term [interconnectedness] we are seizing upon a notion from the Western tradition that comes easily to hand, but which misses the nuance of the Buddha’s teaching” (p. 105). The conception of interconnectedness is often understood in one of the following two ways: it invokes a perception of a link between different isolated entities such that one particular entity is associated with one other entity, or it gives an impression of entirety that is all-encompassing. However, both are not what dependent origination is about (Olendzki, 2010).

To help us understand how the ancient teaching may have been misinterpreted, let us revisit the causal principle that underlies the processes of the twelve-linked formula of dependent origination: “When this is, that is. This arising, that arises. When this is not, that is not. This ceasing, that ceases” (Dhammananda, 2002, p. 158). As the formula is presented in a chain of twelve factors, many people in the contemporary world have misunderstood the principle beneath this formula as operating in a linear progression of successive events. But what this traditional doctrine aims to demonstrate is that numerous factors arise simultaneously and seamlessly, where each factor while conditioning others is also itself being conditioned, thus each factor is both a cause and an effect at the same time (Anālayo, 2006; Olendzki, 2010). Such an inter-conditioning nature of all things is demonstrated by the metaphor of Indra’s net described before, in which each jewel while reflecting other jewels is also itself being reflected; all jewels thereby mutually reflect one another forming infinite reflections.

One seemingly single thing thus actually manifests in dependence on numerous causal factors as they evolve from moment to moment. Consequently, nothing remains exactly the same in

two consecutive moments. Everything is in the process of transforming as a network of causal factors arise and cease in every single moment; all phenomena simply “‘co-arise’ in mutual dynamic interactive relationality” (Gangadean, 2008, p. 219). Dependent origination, therefore, describes the nature of phenomena in terms of a state of flux rather than a state of stability or even a state of transient formation. “At the cutting edge of human awareness, when the mind is focused skillfully on the birthing of phenomena, there is nothing formed enough to connect with anything”. Thus, “the teaching that ‘all things are interconnected’ is a derivative conceptual construction...[which is] just an idea” (Olendzki, 2010, p. 106).

And when interconnectedness evokes an impression of entirety that is all-encompassing, it encourages us to see that one is more than a separate self, thereby establishing the idea of identifying with a greater totality, a world that is all-encompassing. However, this is not what the traditional doctrine is about. The early texts points out that identification in any form, whether with a small limited self or a bigger all-embracing world, is a source of suffering (McMahan, 2008; Olendzki, 2010).

Interconnectedness (or interdependence), thus, is not identical with dependent origination, as many people assume today. While having roots in the traditional sources, interconnectedness perhaps has not captured certain critical aspects of dependent origination. However, McMahan (2008) reminds us that, while it is important to recognize the differences between the modern and the traditional discourse, it is also crucial to see that the fundamental concern of the modern conception is the predicament our society is now in, where we face crises that could not have occurred in the ancient world when the Buddha or Nāgārjuna were still alive; “this discourse is practitioners’ constructive response to an unprecedented situation” (p. 180).

Interbeing in Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism

“Interbeing” is a word coined by Thích Nhất Hạnh in the 1980s (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2017b) to express the meanings of the Vietnamese term *tiếp hiện*, with *tiếp* meaning “being in touch with” and “continuing” and *hiện* meaning “realizing” and “making it here and now”. It serves as the foundation of the Order of Interbeing (*Tiếp Hiện*), an international Buddhist community of monastics and laypeople, which was established by Thích Nhất Hạnh in the mid-1960s as a response to the critical and desperate situation of Vietnam War (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1993a). To better understand the significance of the innovative word “interbeing”, let us start with the meanings of *tiếp hiện* through the four descriptions given above.

“Being in touch with” – the first expression describing *tiếp* – means to be in touch with the reality of both the mind and the world. When we are in touch with the mind, we know what is going on inside us (our feelings, perceptions and mental formations), realizing that understanding and compassion come from our true mind. And when we are in touch with the world, we know what is going on outside us (the domains of animal, vegetable and mineral), recognizing both the wonderful things and the afflictions in the world. While there are practical benefits for our daily life in regarding the mind and the world as the inside and the outside reality, respectively, it is important to see that, essentially, they belong to the same realm; because through knowing the mind we come to know the world, and vice versa.

“Overflowing with understanding and compassion, we can appreciate the wonders of life, and, at the same time, act with the firm resolve to alleviate the suffering” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1993a, p. 4). The other expression to describe the meaning of *tiếp* is “continuing”, which means continuing the path of awakening set out by the buddhas and bodhisattvas – the enlightened ones – who came before us (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1993a).

“Realizing” – the first expression to describe *hiện* – “means not to dwell or be caught in the world of doctrines and ideas, but to bring and express our insights into real life” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1993a, p. 5). This signifies that just having ideas or concepts about understanding and compassion is not real insight. Before we can work for peace and be helpful to others, we need to first transform ourselves through realizing compassion and understanding; because if there is no peace and tranquillity within ourselves, our actions will not be beneficial to others.

The other expression describing *hiện* is “making it here and now”, which means that peace, enlightenment and liberation are to be realized in the present moment, rather than in the future. It would be incorrect, while practising, to think that the results will appear some time later; because means and ends, as well as cause and effect, are not two different things but one. Thus, whatever we do, whether daily routine or formal practices, we do it with mindfulness and peace. While serving others, we should be at peace at the same time. To put it simply: “There is no way to peace; peace is the way. There is no way to enlightenment; enlightenment is the way. There is no way to liberation; liberation is the way” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1993a, p. 6).

To summarize, *tiếp hiện* (interbeing) means being in touch with what happens inside and outside ourselves as we continue the Buddha’s path towards awakening. We transform ourselves through realizing compassion and understanding, carrying out activities in our everyday life, while at the same time also feeling at peace within ourselves. Since there were no existing English words that could express the meanings of *tiếp hiện*, Thích Nhất Hạnh

created the word “interbeing”, which is a translation of a Chinese term found in the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* that conveys the spirit of *tiếp hiện* (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2005a).¹¹

Now, let us look at Thích Nhất Hạnh’s definition of mindfulness again:

Mindfulness is the energy of being aware and awake to the present moment. It is the continuous practice of touching life deeply in every moment of daily life. To be mindful is to be truly alive, present and at one with those around you and with what you are doing. We bring our body and mind into harmony while we wash the dishes, drive the car or take our morning shower. (Plum Village, 2014b, para. 1)

We see that his definition of mindfulness has incorporated key aspects of *tiếp hiện* (interbeing) as described in the four descriptions discussed above. In the same way, we see that the meaning of *tiếp hiện* (interbeing) has also incorporated the aspect of mindfulness. This mutual incorporation, which signifies that mindfulness should not be cultivated on its own but needs to be developed together with other mental factors, is in accordance with the traditional teachings; and here, *tiếp hiện* (interbeing) refers to right view. Such a novel definition of mindfulness demonstrates Thích Nhất Hạnh’s skillfulness in presenting right mindfulness to modern practitioners in a way that has relevance to the circumstances of today’s society.

The novel teaching of interbeing is essentially drawn from the traditional teachings on dependent origination, non-self, emptiness and interpenetration, as well as current scientific

¹¹ “In the sutra it is a compound term which means ‘mutual’ and ‘to be’... We have talked about the many in the one, and the one containing the many. In one sheet of paper, we see everything else, the cloud, the forest, the logger. I am, therefore you are. You are, therefore I am. That is the meaning of the word ‘interbeing.’ We interare” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2005a, p. 88).

and ecological thought. All these elements are reflected in Thích Nhất Hạnh's explanation of his invented word:

Interbeing means 'co-being'. You cannot be by yourself alone. You have to 'interbe' with everybody and everything else. For instance, if you look deeply into a flower you find it is made of non-flower elements like sunshine, clouds, rain and soil. Without these non-flower elements, a flower cannot exist. So it is better to say that the flower 'interbes' with the sunshine and it cannot be by itself, alone. It is the case with humans also. I am here because you are there. (Mehrotra, 2003, p. 39)

The formula "A is made of non-A elements" – an innovative and scientific way to reinterpret the non-self and empty nature of phenomena – demonstrates how the realization of interbeing can change the way we live our life, consequently having an impact on both ourselves and others. As Thích Nhất Hạnh elaborates on this formula:

humans are made of non-human elements – animal, vegetable and mineral. For the human race to survive, you have to take care of animal life, vegetable life and mineral life... The 'self' is made of non-self elements, and if we live according to that insight, we will be able to protect ourselves and our environment and stop the course of destruction. (Mehrotra, 2003, p. 42)

Interbeing and its derived formula "A is made of non-A elements" appear to be a clever linguistic strategy that avoids the risk of invoking the misperception that different separate entities are linked to each another – a mistaken perception that the conception of interdependence (or interconnectedness) could easily bring about, as I pointed out in the previous section. Here is a simple example given by Thích Nhất Hạnh (2017b):

If we continue to look into the sheet of paper, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. Without the sunshine, nothing can grow, not even us. So we know that the sunshine is also in the sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. Looking more deeply, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. We also see the wheat. We know that the logger cannot exist without his daily bread. So the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. The logger's father and mother are in the paper as well. Without all of these other things, there would be no sheet of paper at all. (p. 28)

Here, if we say that the paper and the sunshine are interconnected, it may easily give rise to the misconception that the paper is one thing and the sunshine is another thing, and that now they have some kind of relationship to each other. This is perhaps the reason why Thích Nhất Hạnh, instead of saying that the paper and the sunshine are interconnected, states that the paper and the sunshine inter-are. In fact, to make it very clear that the paper and the sunshine are not separable into two discrete entities, he also indicates that the sunshine is in the sheet of paper.

The assertion “You have to ‘interbe’ with everybody and everything else” means that we have to interbe with the things we perceive, since the perceiver cannot be separated from the perceived. As Thích Nhất Hạnh, drawing on scientific evidence, points out:

Looking even more deeply, we can see we are also in the paper...because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper becomes the object of our perception. It is becoming more and more clear to neuroscientists that we cannot exactly speak of an objective world outside of our perceptions, nor can we speak of a wholly subjective world in which things exist only in our mind. Everything – time, space, the earth, the rain, the

minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat, and even consciousness – is in that sheet of paper. Everything coexists with it. To be is to inter-be. You cannot just *be* by yourself alone; you have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is. (p. 28)

As everything coexists with everything else, the mind and the world also cannot be divided into two – the inside and the outside reality; they belong to the same reality. To make the teaching of interbeing even more comprehensible, Thích Nhất Hạnh then uses a reverse approach to describe how everything has to come together to make one thing come into existence, by saying how something would stop existing if any of the other things are removed from it:

...the sheet of paper is made entirely of ‘non-paper elements’ and if we were to return any one of these non-paper elements to their source, there would be no paper at all. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe. So the one contains the all. (p. 28)

The examples discussed above demonstrate Thích Nhất Hạnh’s creativity and skillfulness in using simple language and modern contexts to convey the profound ancient teachings to the contemporary audience.

Summary

Similar to mindfulness, the meanings of dependent origination have been interpreted and re-interpreted in various ways over different periods of time, regions and contexts. Through understanding the meanings of dependent origination and their respective implications in early Buddhism, Mahāyāna Buddhism and modern Buddhism, we can see how Thích Nhất

Hạnh's innovative teaching of interbeing has skillfully captured the meaning of this ancient doctrine in a way that is relevant to our current world and has an impact on contemporary practitioners.

The teaching of interbeing, which explains that all things in the world are inextricably interconnected, offers helpful insights relating to the philosophical and experiential implications of mindfulness for our understanding of categorical distinctions (e.g. self and other, human and nonhuman) (research question 4). This novel teaching, with its use of simple language and modern contexts, makes the traditional teachings more accessible to people in the current world. In helping people realize how things are interrelated, the teaching aims to address problems in today's society. Its derived formula "A is made of non-A elements", an innovative and scientific way to reinterpret the traditional teachings, signifies Thích Nhất Hạnh's creativity and skillfulness in conveying his message to people. All of this highlights the differences and similarities between Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and the traditional teachings of dependent origination (research question 2), as well as the unique and innovative qualities of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings (research 1).

Chapter 4

A Habitus Transformation Model as Theoretical Framework

Introduction

This chapter aims to develop a theoretical framework that is based on Pierre Bourdieu's social theory of habitus for examining the data collected for this research. Sociology and Buddhism are not generally considered as a relevant pairing. While the former has to do with our day-to-day society, the latter tends to be viewed as a spiritual framework without much reference to our worldly existence. A conversation between these two seemingly unrelated disciplines, however, allows us to identify possible ways in which traditional Buddhist teachings could relate to modern sociological theory. Such a cross-disciplinary approach not only reveals the social dimension of Buddhism but, as I will demonstrate, it also highlights the importance of spiritual cultivation for social progress, such as achieving sustainability, peace and equality.

Situating the Buddhist teachings of mindfulness and interbeing within the context of Pierre Bourdieu's (1990b) social theory of habitus appears to be particularly promising. It helps us understand these essential Buddhist teachings in a sociological context, providing an opportunity to examine the impact of a contemporary adaptation of ancient wisdom in the modern context. Such an examination allows us to gain new insights into the impact of Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism, which is "a description of how Buddhists should manifest their beliefs in concrete activities in the world aimed at improving the lives of disadvantaged people, transforming societies, and promoting peace" (Powers, 2016, p. 606).

The theoretical framework developed in this chapter will lay the conceptual foundation for investigating the data collected in relation to the following research questions: (4) What are the philosophical and experiential implications of mindfulness for our understanding of categorical distinctions (e.g. self and other, human and nonhuman)? (5) How do practitioners apply the teachings and practices in their daily life? (6) What impact have the teachings and practices had on their daily lives, social situations and relationships, etc?

Bourdieu's concept of habitus¹²

Bourdieu's (1990b) social theory of habitus argues that our embedded dispositions (i.e. habitus) are mostly developed unconsciously through social conditioning. As a result, our perceptions, thoughts and actions, being governed by our dispositions, are also largely habitual and automatic. Since (right) mindfulness is moment-to-moment awareness of what is happening within and outside ourselves, with discernment being made based on right view (i.e. interbeing), the practice could have an impact on our unconsciously conditioned dispositions as well as our resulting perceptions, thoughts and actions.

The theory of habitus furthermore asserts that while external social contexts construct and shape our dispositions, our internalized dispositions also manifest externally through our thinking patterns, belief, attitudes, preferences, behaviours and verbal interaction with others (Swartz, 1997), thereby reconstructing and reshaping the social contexts unconsciously as well (Akrivou & Di San Giorgio, 2014). As our mindful discernment, which is informed by right view (i.e. interbeing), guides our actions and interactions with the outside world, the practice would have an impact on the external social contexts as well.

¹² Unless otherwise indicated, the italicised non-English terms mentioned in the text are in both Pāli and Sanskrit with a slash in-between them (i.e. Pāli/Sanskrit); the single italicised non-English terms mean the term is the same in Pāli and in Sanskrit.

Situating mindfulness and interbeing within the context of habitus, thus, appears to be particularly promising. It enables us to examine the wider ramifications of Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism, which involves one's active engagement with society while at the same time transforming oneself through mindfulness. Such an examination helps us understand these essential Buddhist teachings in a sociological context, allowing us to investigate the impact of a contemporary adaptation of ancient wisdom in the modern context.

I will approach habitus as an analytical concept and as a methodological device. As an analytical concept, habitus provides a theoretical framework for investigating how the sociological and the Buddhist approaches are similar and different in understanding the relationship between individuals and society. Understanding how the sociological and the Buddhist worldview differ from each other, will allow us to explore how the engaged Buddhist outlook on life could provide a fresh viewpoint and approach to current social and political concerns.

As a methodological device, the concept of habitus suggests possible ways in which the practice of (right) mindfulness and the realization of interbeing could create change in an individual and the world. Understanding mindfulness and interbeing in a sociological context thus lays the foundation for developing a model that reveals how Bourdieu's description of habitus – which I refer to as “social habitus” for easy reference – can be transformed into “mindful habitus” through Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and the practices taught at Plum Village. The newly created term “mindful habitus”, which refers to a set of mindfully cultivated dispositions that are conducive to awakening, signifies the profound change that mindfulness can bring to one's habitus.

The Buddhist approach envisions a point in our development where our being transcends habitus. Drawing on Bourdieu's terminology, I call such a state of being "habituslessness", which can be seen as a sociological way to represent the Buddhist doctrine of non-self and emptiness. Mindfulness in the context of my model (and in my thesis in general) ultimately leads to habituslessness. It is, therefore, the type of mindfulness that is conducive to awakening (i.e. right mindfulness), not the type of mindfulness that intends to relieve psychological/physical conditions or enhance well-being (i.e. secular mindfulness). This habitus transformation model (i.e. social habitus → mindful habitus → habituslessness) serves as the framework for analyzing the data collected in this research. Through this model, I will also explore certain key concepts that are associated with habitus, namely capital, field and class.

Social habitus as an analytical concept

In an attempt "to explain the intergenerational persistence of social inequality" (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014, p. 193), Bourdieu's theory of habitus seeks to explain why we act the way we do. Bourdieu (1990b) argues that our embedded dispositions (i.e. habitus), which are acquired through interacting with the social environment outside us, shape our thoughts, perceptions and actions. As Swartz (1997) notes:

Habitus results from early socialization experiences in which external structures are internalized. As a result, internalized dispositions of broad parameters and boundaries of what is possible or unlikely for a particular group in a stratified social world develop through socialization. (p. 103)

This means that a particular set of social tendencies is embodied in individuals, who belong to a specific social group. The internalized dispositions then "find expression in language,

nonverbal communication, tastes, values, perceptions, and modes of reasoning” (Swartz, 1997, p. 108), which are “related to the unconscious reproduction of external social fields” (Akrivou & Di San Giorgio, 2014, p. 1). Fields – which are “structured social contexts” (Swartz, 2002, p. 65S) – and habitus, therefore, construct and shape each other. Swartz (1997) points out that the concept of habitus “does not oppose individual and society as two separate sorts of being – one external to the other – but constructs them ‘relationally’ as if they are two dimensions of the same social reality” (p. 96). In Bourdieu’s (1990b) own words, “habitus aims to transcend... [the usual antinomy of] the individual and society” (p. 55). He thus develops the concept with the intention of overcoming the agency/structure dichotomy in sociology. As Swartz (1981) explains:

The concept represents Bourdieu’s attempt to transcend such traditional dichotomies as objective and subjective, micro and macro by relating individuals to social structure by a system of mediations in a way so that the idea that objective structures have subjective consequences is not incompatible with the view that the social world is constructed by individual actors. (p. 330)

Such an interrelated relationship between individuals and society is akin to Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teaching of interbeing, asserting that all things – including individuals and society – co-exist within each other. Accordingly, Bourdieu’s view on the mutually reproducing relationship between individuals and society corresponds to the Buddhist perspective that individuals and society inter-are.

An individual’s habitus, according to Bourdieu, is mainly influenced by the social environment of one’s own particular social group. Noble and Watkins (2003) put this simply: habitus is the “embodiment of our social location – class, gender, ethnicity, and so on” (p.

522). However, the teaching of interbeing tells us that a person's habitus goes wider and deeper than Bourdieu's description of it. From the Buddhist perspective, a person's habitus is not only shaped by one's social contexts, but also influenced by everything else in the world. For example, people living in a place where the quality of air is very poor are prone to bronchial difficulties. Such medical problems could affect their habitus, which is manifested in their bodily actions and appearance. They may wear a mask when going out (to protect themselves from the polluted air), and speak softly or walk slowly (due to breathing difficulties). The poor air quality may be a sign that the air has been contaminated by bacteria, viruses, or chemicals, or that there are not enough plants growing in the area to produce fresh air. Thus, apart from air, an individual's habitus could also be affected by disease, micro-organisms, chemicals and plants. And if we chase the sources of the air as well as micro-organisms, chemicals and plants in this case, we will see that they are all inextricably interconnected with everything else. That is why Thích Nhất Hạnh (1998) asserts that "we cannot just be by ourselves alone; we can only inter-be with everyone and everything else" (p. 58). This implies that our habitus also inter-is with everyone and everything else.

In other words, there is nothing in the world that does not influence one's habitus. The assumption that habitus is the "embodiment of our social location" (Noble & Watkins, 2003, p. 522), therefore, does not reflect the full reality of our habitus. And in fact, according to Buddhism, not only one's habitus but "the individual is understood as a matrix of dependently related events, all of them in a state of flux" (Wallace, 2001, p. 209). Drawing on his formula "A is made of non-A elements", Thích Nhất Hạnh (2001a) captures this profound Buddhist insight by saying that "[t]he self is made of non-self elements":

There are so many other non-self elements that you can touch and recognize within yourself – your ancestors, the earth, the sun, water, air, all the food you eat, and much more. It may seem like these things are separate from you, but without them, you could not live. (p. 126)

Accordingly, we may say that habitus is made of non-habitus elements, thereby signifying that habitus is the embodiment of everything, not just our social location. Using habitus in this way is to move outside Bourdieu's use of the theory, which was originally developed to overcome the agency/structure dichotomy in sociology. Such a novel approach to his theory can help us recognize the root causes of today's crisis, and enable us to respond appropriately to address the predicament we are now in.

One example of how this broadened conceptualization of habitus can offer new insights may be found in the link between the way people in many parts of the world consume plastic bags and the questions I raised earlier when discussing how mindfulness is being misused in military training:¹³ “How did someone become a soldier in the first place?” and “What caused a war?”

As a result of embedded dispositions, without much awareness, people unnecessarily use a lot of plastic bags every time they go to supermarkets. This is particularly the case if they are provided for free. Most of these carrier bags, while still new and clean, will then go to the landfill after being used just once. Since plastic bags are made from oil, our high-consumption lifestyle, as reflected in the way we use these bags each day, results in a great demand for oil. Consequently, many countries fight and kill each other over oil resources. For

¹³ For more details, please refer to pp. 27-29 under the section on “Mindfulness in contemporary secular contexts”.

this, they need to train a lot of soldiers. Our habitus, which shapes our daily consuming habit, thus contributes to the formation of the soldier's habitus, which embeds his fighting disposition. The perspective of interbeing allows us to see that a soldier's habitus also embodies the habitus of everyone else, including us here in another part of the world.

In addressing the questions posed above – “How did someone become a soldier in the first place?” or “What caused a war?” – one possible answer, as just shown, is our excessive consumption lifestyle. This example illustrates that just looking at how a soldier's social location (e.g. class, race, gender and nationality) is embodied in the way he fights in war, as the theory of social habitus suggests, would not provide the full picture of what contributed to the formation of his or her habitus. But without a comprehensive understanding of a soldier's habitus, we will not be able to recognize the actual causes of his fighting disposition. The real solutions to his predicament then cannot be identified and the problem can never be resolved. This suggests that Bourdieu's approach to habitus may not provide an accurate explanation of “the intergenerational persistence of social inequality” (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014, p. 193) which he intends to address; because if we want to gain a more complete picture of the structure of our society, we need to go beyond our social location.

By the same token, a soldier's habitus, being shaped by our habitus, contributes to others' habitus as well. Van der Kolk (2015), when talking about the impact of traumatic experiences on people, says:

Soldiers returning home from combat may frighten their families with their rages and emotional absence. The wives of men who suffer from PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] tend to become depressed, and the children of depressed mothers are at risk of

growing up insecure and anxious. Having been exposed to family violence as a child often makes it difficult to establish stable, trusting relationships as an adult. (p. 1)

With the understanding of the interbeing nature of our habitus, when we meet someone who struggles to develop stable and trusting relationships with others, we perhaps will not be surprised that our excessive consumption habit may have contributed to their difficult dispositions.

Now, as a fuller picture of a soldier's habitus is revealed, we come to see that if we want to address soldiers' combat-related suffering, instead of training them in secular mindfulness (which is non-judgemental present awareness) so that they could perform their duties – harm and kill – more competently and recover from the resulting trauma of war more quickly, it would be more helpful for each one of us to practice right mindfulness (which is present awareness grounded in right view – the insight of interbeing) so that we know how to live our life in such a way that could avoid contributing to the occurrence of war.

When there is no war, no one needs to become a soldier, which means no one will suffer from painful combat-related experiences. Altering our habitus so that we will avoid contributing to the creation of war with our actions is therefore the most effective way to address the problem of soldiers' combat-related suffering. Being able to see the interbeing nature between the habitus of the soldiers and everyone else – implying that we all share the responsibility for everything happening in the world (including the creation of war) – is at the core of Engaged Buddhism. Such an insight empowers us to do our part to make the world a better place. I will give a detailed account of this aspect of Engaged Buddhism from Chapter 6 onwards.

As illustrated above, social habitus (as proposed by Bourdieu) attempts to address social inequalities through looking at one's social location. Mindful habitus (which is informed by the engaged Buddhist approach), on the other hand, aims to address social inequalities and work towards awakening at the same time, because essentially these two cannot be separated. It does so through looking at one's social location as well as tracing all the factors that contribute to the formation of one's social location, because to identify the real causes of social inequalities calls for a more comprehensive understanding of one's social location. Mindful habitus, due to its different perspective on and approach to the relationship between individuals and society, consequently has implications in other associated concepts of Bourdieu's theory. Here I will concentrate on three key concepts: capital, field and class.

Capital

Capital, for Bourdieu, "means the resources distributed throughout the social body which have an exchange value in one or more of the various 'markets' or 'fields' which...comprise the social World" (Crossley, 2001, p. 96). In the context of social habitus, there are four main types of capital, namely economic, cultural, symbolic and social capital. Economic capital, reflecting a numerical value, amounts to money and properties (Crossley, 2001; Swartz, 1997). Cultural capital includes "verbal facility, general cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences, scientific knowledge, and educational credentials" (Swartz, 1997, p. 43). Symbolic capital refers to recognition, reputation and status, which can be signified by the awards and prizes one received or "consists in the manner in which an individual is perceived and has no objectified form as such" (Crossley, 2001, p. 97). Social capital means acquaintances, connections and networks that can assist one in accomplishing what one wants (Crossley, 2001; Swartz, 1997).

What Bourdieu intends to investigate, through his theory and its associated concepts, is “how and under what conditions individuals and groups employ strategies of accumulating, investing, and converting various kinds of capital in order to maintain or enhance their positions in the social order” (Swartz, 1997, p. 75). This means that in the context of social habitus, what individuals want is to attain power and status through obtaining the various types of capital, “secur[ing] them their privilege in society” (Crossley, 2001, p. 97).

However, what individuals endeavour to work towards in the context of mindful habitus, is awakening, relieving the suffering (*dukkha/duḥkha*) of all beings through addressing our social predicament as one cultivates insight into the true nature of reality. While possessing more capital allows one to gain more power, status and privileges, none of these can lead one to awakening. But without awakening – realizing the interbeing nature of our existence – affliction and suffering (*dukkha/duḥkha*) persists no matter how much capital and power one has. That is why social habitus, from the Buddhist perspective, is an unsatisfactory state of being.

Bourdieu “suggests that practice is the result of various habitual schemas and dispositions (habitus), combined with resources (capital), being activated by certain structured social conditions (field) which they, in turn, belong to and variously reproduce and modify” (Crossley, 2001, p. 96). This cyclic reproducing pattern between field and habitus through practice (action) – “the outcome of a relationship between habitus, capital, and field” (Swartz, 1997, p. 141) – which continues perpetually from generation to generation (Figure 2.1), parallels the Buddhist notion of *saṃsāra* – the cycle of birth and death that repeats life after life (Figure 2.2).

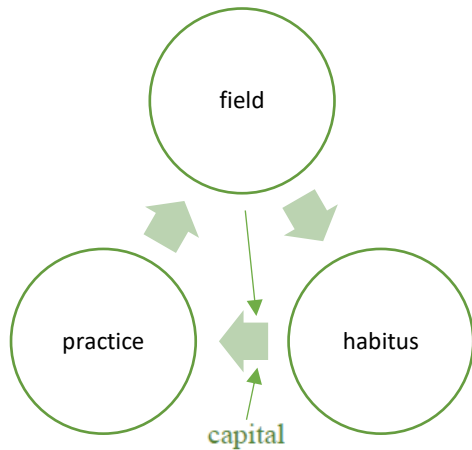


Figure.2.1: Social habitus – the cyclic reproduction between habitus and field via practice

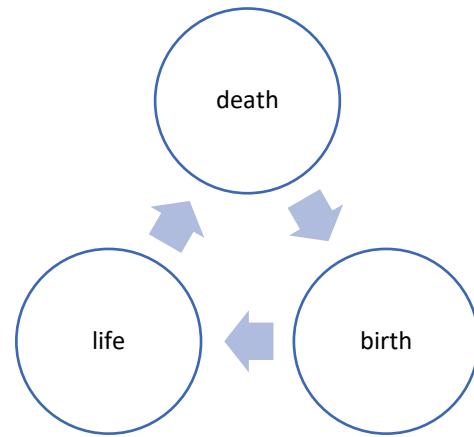


Figure 2.2: *Saṃsāra* – the endless cycle of birth and death

Figure 2: Social habitus and *samsāra* cycle in comparison

This is not to say that the elements in social habitus and in *saṃsāra*, as presented above, correspond with each other, but to point out that social habitus, like *saṃsāra*, has the nature of never-ending repetitive occurrence that is, from the Buddhist perspective, inherently unsatisfactory and painful (*dukkha/duḥkha*).¹⁴ In fact, Bourdieu develops his theory to investigate “how stratified social systems of hierarchy and domination persist and reproduce intergenerationally without powerful resistance and without the conscious recognition of their members” (Swartz, 1997, p. 6), intending “[t]o explain why inequalitarian social arrangements make sense to both the dominant and the dominated” (Swartz, 1981, p. 329). His inquiry into this intergenerational social predicament reflects the undesirable and distressing nature of social habitus, which echoes the unceasing and afflictive nature (*dukkha/duḥkha*) of *saṃsāra*. Here, one may argue that not everyone suffers in a hierarchical social structure, because while the dominated may be the underprivileged ones, the dominant are those who enjoy the privileges that their social ranks have brought to them. But if we recall the account of the

¹⁴ The comparison and parallels between social habitus and *saṃsāra* in Figure 2 simply relate to their cyclical nature. *Saṃsāra* is an incomparably broader concept that applies to all existence in the universe. Social habitus, on the other hand, concerns mainly the societal domain.

relationship between right view (*samma ditthi*) and moral conduct in the section on “Mindfulness in early Buddhism”, we see that “[t]he cause of suffering is the self-centred desire which manifests itself in many forms... To say that man suffers is the same as saying that man is motivated by self-centred desires” (Karunadasa, 1999, para. 42).¹⁵ Since individuals’ accumulation of capital, with the purpose of gaining more power and status, is a manifestation of the self-centred desire, their seemingly privileged positions, while offering some material comforts, cannot free them from suffering (*dukkha*).

In addition, due to the interbeing and non-self nature of our existence, one’s welfare cannot be separated from others’ welfare, which means that in an inegalitarian social structure where many people are in the disadvantageous positions, no one (including the privileged ones) can truly live a peaceful and happy life. Besides, Bourdieu’s investigation of individuals’ lack of conscious recognition of the perpetual difficult social situation highlights the significant impact mindfulness could have on social habitus, and I will explore this in more depth in the next section.

As social habitus has the same cyclic nature as *saṃsāra*, the cause of its continual unideal state of existence, from the Buddhist perspective, is also the same as for *saṃsāra*, namely the ignorance of the interbeing and non-self nature of reality, which I will explain further below. Accordingly, social habitus can be regarded as a manifestation of *saṃsāra* in a sociological context. The reciprocal reproduction of structures and habitus that repeats generation after generation can then be articulated as the cycle of rebirth of structures and dispositions.

¹⁵ Please refer to pp. 12-14 for more details.

If social habitus is a sociological manifestation of *saṃsāra*, the remedy for its predicament consequently is the same as for *saṃsāra*, namely awakening to the interbeing and non-self nature of reality. Such awakening can be achieved through developing mindful habitus, which involves the embodiment of a particular set of mindfully cultivated dispositions. And when “full” awakening is attained, suffering (*dukkha/duḥkha*) will cease completely; such a state of being is called *nibbāna/nirvāṇa* (i.e. liberation from *saṃsāra*) in the Buddhist context and habituslessness (i.e. liberation from habitus) in a sociological context. This, in turn, suggests that habituslessness is a sociological manifestation of *nibbāna/nirvāṇa*, and I will discuss this in more detail in the section on habituslessness.

As explained above, while increasing the various types of capital in the context of social habitus can help one to gain power, status and privileges, it cannot lead one to awakening, which is essential to liberating individuals from the undesirable cycle of rebirth of structures and habitus. In fact, Bourdieu claims that the answer to his inquiry into the persistent inegalitarian social systems

can be found by exploring how cultural resources, processes, and institutions hold individuals and groups in perpetuating hierarchies of domination and subordination. The larger issue, then, is one of power relations among individuals, groups, and institutions, but the focus is on showing how cultural socialization places individuals and groups into status hierarchies, how relatively autonomous fields of cultural activity bind individuals in arenas of conflict over valued resources, how actors pursue strategies to optimize their interests, and how the social stratification structure is reproduced. (Swartz, 1981, pp. 328-329)

This reveals that the possession of capital not only cannot lead individuals to awakening, it is actually its accumulation, with the intention to attain power and status, that keeps individuals trapped in the persistent inequalitarian social systems; and this often happens without much awareness on the part of the individual.

Considering how unlikely it is that the accumulation of the above-mentioned four types of capital could resolve our social predicament in the context of social habitus, I propose two additional newly created types of capital, namely mindful capital and wisdom capital, which are essential to the cultivation of mindful habitus. Edgerton and Roberts (2014) state that “[p]articular dispositions enacted in a given field translate into advantages or profits within that field. Those dispositions to think and act, the schematic structures of the habitus, function as capital” (p. 208). In this sense, mindful capital refers to the dispositions to think and act with (right) mindfulness; and the more mindful capital one “has”, the more frequently one will think and act mindfully and the deeper one’s mindfulness. Wisdom capital refers to the dispositions to think and act in ways that are guided by the insight into the interbeing nature of reality; and the more wisdom capital one “has”, the deeper one’s insight will be and the more frequently one will think and act in ways that are guided by that insight.

Basically, what distinguishes mindful habitus from social habitus is that the former is rich in mindful and wisdom capital while the latter is lacking in them. The more mindful and wisdom capital one “possesses”, the closer one is to the state of habituslessness. This means that the transition from social habitus to mindful habitus and eventually to habituslessness (i.e. the proposed habitus transformation model: social habitus → mindful habitus → habituslessness) is not a three-stage process, but, as the figure below indicates, a continuum

that moves us in the direction of habituslessness as we “have” more and more mindful and wisdom capital, that is as our practice and insight deepen.

However, this does not mean that we will have an abundance of mindful and wisdom capital in the state of habituslessness. Habituslessness is a state of being which transcends habitus (both social and mindful habitus), implying that it also transcends capital (all types of capital). Consequently, as shown in Figure 3, while social habitus entails four main types of capital and mindful habitus entails two more, habituslessness (i.e. liberation from habitus) entails “capitallessness” – a term that I coined to describe the state of being that is liberated from capital. This, in turn, brings out the important message that, in the context of mindful habitus, capital – whether it is mindful, wisdom, economic, cultural, symbolic, social or other types of capital – is, ultimately, not meant to be possessed or accumulated.



Figure 3: Habitus transformation model and the forms of capital

In fact, Crossley (2001) points out that:

forms of capital depend upon recognition or ‘misrecognition’ for their value. They are valuable to the extent that we agree that they are valuable. Habitus are important in this respect as they simultaneously effect and disguise these agreements. To say that we ‘agree’ upon the value of paper or plastic money, or indeed qualifications, is to recognise the arbitrary nature of these tokens of value; that they are precisely tokens. And yet we do not actively agree to their value. We assume it and treat the token as if it really had value independent of us; that is, we misrecognise these tokens as valuable. We are able to do this, for Bourdieu, because the ‘agreement’ is rooted at the level of unconscious habit. (p. 98)

This means that the various types of capital, without actually having any value in themselves, are considered valuable simply by common consent. However, instead of seeing that they are just tokens of their collectively assigned value, our social habitus, which results from our largely unconscious internalization of social structures, including the operation of capital, gives rise to our misperception that the different types of capital are intrinsically valuable, thereby worthy of investing our time, money, effort and energy to accumulate them.

The cultivation of mindful and wisdom capital, which involves moment-to-moment mindful awareness of things happened within and outside us, helps us recognize not only the arbitrary but also the interbeing nature of these tokens of value of the various types of capital, including the two new types of capital themselves. Hence, the more we “possess” mindful and wisdom capital, the more we realize that capital, in whatever form it takes, has no independent existence. Through seeing the interbeing and non-self nature of capital, we realize that capital cannot actually be possessed.

The reason I put quotation marks around words like “possessed” and “accumulated”, when mentioning mindful and wisdom capital, is to signify that they (and in fact all types of capital) are not really meant to be “possessed” or “accumulated”; the term “cultivation”, which I also use, might be a more suitable description here. I will explore what all these mean further in my discussion below, particularly in the later section on habituslessness.

The two new types of capital essentially go hand in hand with each other; the cultivation of mindful capital will naturally give rise to wisdom capital, and the presence of wisdom capital implies the presence of mindful capital as well. I therefore did not create the terms to imply that they are two very different types of capital, like the other four proposed by Bourdieu. Presenting them as two types of capital allows me to highlight the significant role of mindfulness and the realization of interbeing in the context of mindful habitus, and facilitates the efficient discussion of these topics. Besides, at the beginning of our mindfulness practice, we may “have” some mindful capital but are still lack of wisdom capital because it takes practice and time for our insight to develop. But as our practice grows, our insight deepens. This means that, depending on the progress of our practice, we may at times “possess” more mindful capital than wisdom capital; accordingly, presenting them as two types of capital also serves to emphasize that we need to practice to gain the insight. It is important to understand, however, that essentially, they cannot be separated.

Furthermore, in terms of field specification,

[c]ultural, symbolic and social capital can assume a fairly ‘field specific’ form, and their value, as such, may be tied to specific social ‘worlds’. What counts as valuable in the academic world may be of less value in relation to the theatrical, sporting or artistic worlds, for example, and the ‘connections’ and status which afford one power in one area

of life may not do so in another. Some forms of capital, however, such as economic capital, have a relatively general value on account of the pervasiveness of the field (the economy) to which they belong. The economy impinges on many other social fields, such that economic capital exerts a force within them. (Crossley, 2001, p. 97)

Mindful and wisdom capital, similar to economic capital, have a universal nature. However, mindful and wisdom capital are distinct from economic (and other types of) capital in that they are not restricted to any field because our ignorance of the true nature of reality impinges on all areas of life, such that they can exert influence within them all. Furthermore, in the context of social habitus, capital is used as a means to achieve the goal of obtaining power, with the type and the amount of capital being used depending on the social situations.

Mindful and wisdom capital, on the other hand, should ideally be “used” at all times and regardless of what social circumstances one is in; because in the context of mindful habitus, the means is also the goal at the same time. As mentioned before – “There is no way to peace; peace is the way. There is no way to enlightenment; enlightenment is the way. There is no way to liberation; liberation is the way” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998, p. 6). Therefore, mindful and wisdom capital are different from the other four types of capital in that they are simultaneously the resources, the means and the goal.

And while mindful and wisdom capital, like the other types of capital, can afford one power in certain social occasions, their value is not measured in terms of power which aims to advance one’s personal interests through establishing one’s position in a field, but their capacity to lead one to awakening which intends to relieve the suffering (*dukkha/duḥkha*) of all beings through addressing our social predicament. In fact, in the context of mindful habitus, the value of the economic, cultural, symbolic and social capital is also measured in terms of their capacity to facilitate one’s awakening.

For instance, a mindful businessman may open a shop selling organic food and Fairtrade items instead of tobacco products even though the latter may result in more financial profits (i.e. economic capital). Or, a mindful scientist may advance his/her skills (i.e. cultural capital) and collaborate with other experts (i.e. social capital) to create new technology for reducing plastic consumption to minimize environmental pollution, rather than manufacturing harmful chemicals to maximize factory production, even though the latter may attract more funding for their scientific research (i.e. economic capital). And if their business and new technology earn them a reputation (i.e. symbolic capital), they would use their influence to inspire others to do similar things regardless if it would further enhance any forms of their capital. Decisions like these, which result from their mindful and wisdom capital, are also manifestations of right livelihood – the fifth factor of the Eightfold Path.

“Bourdieu treats capital as power relations founded on quantitative differences in amount of labor they embody” (Swartz, 1997, p. 74). In this sense, mindful and wisdom capital perhaps do not fit with Bourdieu’s definition of capital very well, because they cannot be measured quantitatively nor are they “objects of struggle” (Swartz, 1997, p. 74) for power. In fact, they work to dismantle those power relations in which individuals struggle for various types of capital. Our cultivation of the two new types of capital thus has an impact on the way we see and relate to economic, cultural, symbolic and social capital, consequently influencing our approach to accumulating and converting the various types of capital. This is another indication that I did not create the terms mindful and wisdom capital to suggest that there are two additional types of capital for us to possess; instead, through adopting Bourdieu’s terminology, I use them to explain the impact mindfulness practice and the realization of interbeing could have on our habitus. Social habitus and mindful habitus, therefore, entail very different attitudes toward capital as a whole.

Field

Fields, another concept that is central to Bourdieu's theory of habitus, "denote arenas of production, circulation, and appropriation of goods, services, knowledge, or status, and the competitive positions held by actors in their struggle to accumulate and monopolize different kinds of capital" (Swartz, 1981, p. 332). As discussed above, what individuals with mindful habitus endeavour to attain is distinct from the goals of social habitus; as a result, their outlook on capital is different, which consequently leads them to have a different approach to their participation in fields as well.

Mindfulness practitioners, like most others, would invest, accumulate and convert various types of capital; however, they do so not for the sake of monopolizing certain types of capital in order to dominate a field; instead, they use them to help solve social problems – that is to relieve the suffering (*dukkha/duḥkha*) of all beings. And since the means and the goal are one, the process of accumulating or converting various types of capital should avoid causing harm to others. That is why, as the examples above illustrate, a mindful businessman would prefer to open a shop selling less profit-making products (i.e. economic capital); they would refrain from selling products that have a negative impact on the workers, the consumers and the environment, even if selling such products it could enable them to obtain much economic capital and dominate the market. Similarly, a mindful scientist would choose to conduct the kind of research that attracts less research funding (i.e. economic capital); because they would not want to create new technology that is damaging to people and nature, even if it could secure considerable financial support (i.e. economic capital) for their work, one would not want to do it. And if their business and new technology make them rich in certain types of capital, they will share their resources instead of monopolizing them. For instance, the successful businessman may use his/her reputation (i.e. symbolic capital) to help grow others'

business by promoting their little-known Fairtrade or organic products; and the experienced scientist may encourage the undertaking of similar kinds of research by sharing his/her knowledges and skills (i.e. cultural capital) with other researchers or teaming up with them or connecting them with other experts in the field (i.e. social capital).

To better understand how relations operate within fields, we need to look at the concept of position, which are explained by Jones, Bradbury, and Le Boutillier (2011) as follows:

Entities exist within a field in what Bourdieu calls positions, which relate to each other in terms of opposites or differences. For example, in a general sense, the position of a man is opposed to that of a woman, good taste is opposed to bad taste, well educated to poorly educated, and so on. In a more concrete way, to consider an area that Bourdieu himself researched, the field of higher education is partly constituted by faculties or disciplines. In this arena academics positioned in the faculty of law will be endowed with different resources to those positioned in the sciences, who in turn bring to the field different assets to those academics belonging to the arts and humanities faculties. Hence, positions carry with them different resources which individuals and groups utilize in confrontation with other individuals and groups in their attempts to secure different means and ends. (pp. 151-152)

In terms of positions within a field, mindful habitus differs from social habitus in that mindful habitus carries with it mindful and wisdom capital, which enable individuals and groups to see through the illusion of opposite relations between positions (e.g. men/women, good/bad, self/others); because “[i]nterbeing has no opposite, so we can make use of it to avoid falling into the trap of dualistic thinking” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2017b, p. 58). Thích Nhất Hạnh (2017b) explains that good and evil need each other to exist because they inter-are; it is thus

impossible for us to get rid of evil completely in the hope of just having good. In the same way,

Buddha needs Mara [the demon who attempted to distract the Buddha from reaching enlightenment] in order to reveal himself, and vice versa. Buddha is as empty as the sheet of paper; Buddha is made of non-Buddha elements. When you perceive reality in this way, you will not discriminate against the garbage in favour of the rose. You will cherish both. (p. 63)

The insight of interbeing shows us that we contain each other and thus need each other to exist; hence, men and women, good taste and bad taste, well educated and poorly educated, inter-are. Each one of these needs the other in order to reveal themselves. This in turn suggests that all positions in fields are equally important; as Thích Nhất Hạnh (2017b) further explains:

[y]ou have to work for the survival of the other side if you want to survive yourself. Survival means the survival of humankind as a whole, not just a part of it...If developing countries cannot pay their debts, everyone will suffer. If we do not take care of poorer countries, the well-being of richer countries is not going to last, and we will not be able to continue living in the way we have been used to for much longer. Only when we can touch the wisdom of nondiscrimination in us can we all survive. (p. 64)

The same could be applied to the field of higher education; contradictory to the conventional wisdom of social habitus that academics of different faculties need to confront each other in order to safeguard and advance their own interests, mindful academics, whether they are positioned in the law, the sciences, or the arts and humanities faculties, understand that they

essentially need all academics – both within and outside their own faculties – for their own interests and survival. This is in fact not so difficult to understand, because the well-being of a university will be seriously affected if some academics/faculties acquire most of the resources at the expense of other academics'/faculties' welfare. Everyone needs to do well in order for the university as a whole to function well. Mindful academics know that when the well-being of the university is at stake, all its members will suffer, so they will work for the well-being of non-academic staff and students as well as other academics, and will refrain from manipulating or taking advantage of them for the sake of their own interests.

Furthermore, mindful academics understand that a university is made of non-university elements, which include both human and non-human elements; they will thus also do their best to take care of those non-university elements. For instance, they would be cautious about using paper even though they have access to free printing in their workplace; because mindless consumption of paper would lead to many forests being destroyed, as well as the subsequent damage done to the environments, animals and ourselves. If all the trees are gone, we would not be able to survive, and all the capital that we have will then be gone as well; because capital is made of non-capital elements, including trees.

The wisdom of interbeing and non-self thus can overturn the way individuals relate to each other (as well as to non-human elements) in fields; instead of relating our positions in terms of opposites or differences, we know that all our positions are inextricably interrelated.

Hence,

contemplation of *anatta* [non-self] can expose the various types of self-image responsible for identifying with and clinging to one's social position, professional occupation, or

personal possessions. Moreover, *anatta* [non-self] can be employed to reveal erroneous superimpositions on experience, particularly the sense of an autonomous and independent subject reaching out to acquire or reject discrete substantial objects. (Anālayo, 2006, p. 206)

If in the context of social habitus, “fields are structured spaces of dominant and subordinate positions based on types and amounts of capitals [and]...positions...are determined by the unequal distribution of relevant capitals...” (Swartz, 1997, p. 123), when enough people have developed certain extent of mindful habitus, fields will be transformed into structured spaces of various positions based on roles and functions in which individuals utilize their particular sets of capital to support and complement each other (as well as non-human elements).

The different approach to obtaining and exchanging the various types of capital that results from our mindful habitus, would thus have an impact on the way we perceive the relation of positions in fields, thereby changing the dynamic within individual and across different fields. It can turn arenas of opposition, competition and domination into ones that involve harmony, collaboration and complementation. Such field transformation is possible because it entails arises from a transformation of habitus – from habitus based on self-centred desire towards habitus informed by the insight of interbeing and non-self.

Bourdieu, in explaining how individuals are trapped in the persistent reproducing structure of unequal power relationships, asserts:

Fields are structured to a significant extent by their own internal mechanisms of development and thus hold some degree of autonomy from the external environment...As a consequence, fields elicit assent to existing social arrangements and thereby contribute

to their reproduction to the extent that they engage actors within their relative autonomy. Actors ‘mis-recognize’ the arbitrary character of their social world when they take for granted the definition of rewards and of ways of obtaining them as given by fields. (Swartz, 1981, p. 332).

Bourdieu claims that what we misrecognize are the arbitrary attributes of the social world, as we assume that the collectively assigned value of various types of capital and the commonly agreed strategies of gaining them within fields are simply the way they are. These misrecognitions of the real nature of the social world could be regarded as a sociological manifestation of what the Buddhists refer to as ignorance of the real nature of reality. However, the insight of interbeing reveals that our misrecognitions go beyond what Bourdieu describes – we misperceive not only the arbitrary character of the social resources, relationships and the mechanisms underlying them, but also their non-self nature, being empty of any independent existence.

Bourdieu maintains that all these misrecognitions result from one’s social habitus, which has unconsciously internalized the way things and relations operate within inegalitarian social hierarchies; consequently, one takes them all for granted. However, from the Buddhist perspective, those misperceptions are not simply the result of our unconscious internalization of external social structures (i.e. social habitus), but are caused by our fundamental ignorance of the real nature of all phenomena. What happens is that “[t]he human mind has a tendency to reify its concepts, to add a dimension of ‘thingness’ to experiential phenomena. This immediately robs experience of its fluidity and naturalness, converting it in a series of exchanges between static and conflicting circumstances” (Mosig, 1989, p. 28). This means that we not only misrecognize the way things and relationships actually operate within social arrangements, but also misperceive the way everything exists, including our own existence.

That is why my proposed habitus transformation model does not only seek to free us from being locked in the persistent inegalitarian social structures (i.e. social habitus), but it also aims to liberate us from being trapped in the endless cycle of birth and death (i.e. *saṃsāra*) through developing mindful habitus that can bring us to habituslessness (i.e. *nibbana/nirvāṇa*).

Class

A (social) class, according to Bourdieu (1990a), denotes a group of individuals sharing “identical or similar conditions of existence and conditionings” and “the same habitus, understood as a system of dispositions common to all products of the same conditionings” (p. 59). Class is seen “in terms of power and privilege” (Swartz, 1997, p. 153), “refer[ing] to the respective amounts of the various forms of capital that individuals possess” (Crossley, 2001, p. 97). Accordingly, “Bourdieu distinguishes the dominant class from all subordinate social classes by virtue of its advantages in total volume of valued resources” (Swartz, 1997, p. 223). However, Bourdieu points out that class struggle is not just about individuals competing for capital and domination of fields, but is at the same time also about classification struggle; because

[o]ur practical everyday preferences are organized around primary forms of conceptual classifications such as high/low, brilliant/dull, unique/ordinary, and important/trivial. These primary conceptual classifications are simultaneously social classifications that serve to rank individuals and groups in the stratification order. Class struggle as classification struggle, then, involves the various practical uses we make of these primarily conceptual classifications. They dictate a ‘sense of place’ in the social order and thereby fulfill the social closure functions of inclusion and exclusion. (Swartz, 1997, p. 185)

The remarks here on the dichotomous conceptual classifications that happen in our daily life, which form the basis of social classification, is what the Buddhists regard as our fundamental ignorance of the interbeing nature of reality. The insightful observation that class struggle is rooted in classification struggle highlights the essential role of the realization of interbeing in freeing us from being trapped in the persistent stratified social structures.

Thích Nhất Hạnh's (2001b) account of the life of young prostitutes in Manila provides an effective example to demonstrate the relationship between class struggle and classification struggle as well as the way out of both. Those girls, who are from underprivileged family backgrounds, work as prostitutes to earn money to support their families. They suffer a lot, feeling impure and defiled. When they see other girls from good families wearing pretty clothes, a great sense of misery arises in them. But if one of those girls was able to

look deeply at herself and at the whole situation, she would see that she is like this because other people are like that. 'This is like this, because that is like that.' So how can a so-called good girl, belonging to a good family, be proud? Because their way of life is like this, the other girl has to be like that. No one among us has clean hands. No one of us can claim it is not our responsibility. The girl in Manila is that way because of the way we are. Looking into the life of that young prostitute, we see the non-prostitute people. And looking at the non-prostitute people, and at the way we live our lives, we see the prostitute. This helps to create that, and that helps to create this...The emancipation of the young prostitute will come as she sees into the nature of interbeing. She will know that she is bearing the fruit of the whole world. And if we look into ourselves and see her, we bear her pain, and the pain of the whole world. (pp. 57-58)

The realization of interbeing could thus undermine our fundamental dichotomous conceptual classifications (i.e. classification struggle), which in turn would deconstruct our social classifications (i.e. class struggle), and consequently the stratified social structures would break down. Since the underlying problem – our dualistic way of seeing things – is resolved, all suffering (*dukkha/duḥkha*), including social problems, ceases; we would be liberated from both class and classification struggle.

Thích Nhất Hạnh's (2001b) elaboration below is particularly relevant to Bourdieu's distinction between the dominant class and subordinate classes that is made based on how much capital people have.

Let us look at wealth and poverty. The affluent society and the society deprived of everything inter-are. The wealth of one society is made of the poverty of the other. 'This is like this, because that is like that.' Wealth is made of non-wealth elements, and poverty is made by non-poverty elements. It is exactly the same as with the sheet of paper. So we must be careful. We should not imprison ourselves in concepts. The truth is that everything is everything else. We can only inter-be, we cannot just be. And we are responsible for everything that happens around us. (p. 58)

When we are awake to how wealth and poverty inter-are, we will be careful about the ways we accumulate and exchange the various types of capital, as well as being aware of the negative effects our monopolizing them would bring to all. We will also see that it is actually impossible to rank individuals and groups in the stratified social order, categorizing everyone into different classes; because

[w]e are not separate. We are inextricably inter-related. The rose is the garbage, the non-prostitute is the prostitute. The rich man is the very poor woman, and the Buddhist is the non-Buddhist. The non-Buddhist cannot help but be a Buddhist, because we inter-are.

(Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2001b, p. 58)

Our dichotomous conceptual classifications (i.e. social habitus) cause us to misperceive the social world as being composed of dominant and subordinate classes when the truth is that the dominant class is the subordinate classes. According to the Buddhist perspective, our perception that the different types of capital are intrinsically valuable and that the operation of social relations is just the way it is, are simply illusions. There is a discrepancy between our perception and reality, and consequently all sorts of social problems are created everywhere by our mindless actions, including our unconscious reproduction of the stratified social systems.

As discussed earlier, while social habitus is regarded as the embodiment of our social location, mindful habitus is recognized as the embodiment of everything. Social habitus is then how individuals differentiate themselves while identifying with a limited set of people, putting themselves and others into categories with rankings. Mindful habitus, on the contrary, is how individuals recognize all things in them while identifying with everything, human and non-human, without discrimination. As Thích Nhất Hạnh (2017a) notes:

The insight of interbeing helps us touch this wisdom of non-discrimination. It sets us free.

We no longer want to belong just to one geographical area or cultural identity. We see the presence of the whole cosmos in us. (p. 17)

Social habitus reflects how people, mostly without consciousness, tend to put themselves and others into categories, whereas practices like mindfulness, which leads to the realization of interbeing, work to loosen our limited identification, dismantling this usual way social relations operate. Right mindfulness hence moves us from exclusive identification (i.e. social habitus) towards all-inclusive identification (i.e. mindful habitus) that eventually leads to the absence of any forms of identification (i.e. habituslessness).

Habitus transformation model as a methodological device

I have now provided a detailed discussion on the similarities and differences between social habitus and mindful habitus, examining how the sociological perspective resembles and differs from the Buddhist perspective in understanding the relationship between individuals and society. It also explored how the engaged Buddhist worldview could provide a fresh outlook on and approach to the social predicament we are facing. Following on from this, we now look at how mindfulness and the realization of interbeing could induce alteration in our habitus that influences the ways we interact with the external environment in our daily life, thereby creating change in the world. This investigation, which will reveal possible ways that social habitus could be transformed into mindful habitus, is significant, as from the Buddhist perspective, “the transformation of sociological and psychological structures must take place initially in our own minds – and those of others – if we truly hope to address the root cause of social suffering” (Johnson, 2006, para. 15),

Bourdieu (1990b) stresses that the (social) habitus “is a spontaneity without consciousness or will” (p. 56). It “involves an unconscious calculation of what is possible, impossible, and probable for individuals in their specific locations in a stratified social order” (Swartz, 1997, pp. 106-107). His emphasis that our actions and thoughts are mostly habitual, un-reflective,

unaware and automatic is particularly relevant in examining the effect of mindfulness on one's habitus. Bubna-Litic (2007) explains this nicely:

The purpose in mindfulness is an intentional engagement with the present moment, which includes the context of our habitus. The practice of mindful action brings awareness to bear on this habitus, of which we would otherwise be mindless. Although much of what forms one's habitus is learnt and automatic, Bourdieu's concept might be opened up to a swathe of cognitive processes that go on without our awareness. (p. 307)

Mindfulness allows us to be more aware of our normally mindless behaviours, "extend[ing] conscious sensing beyond the surface of our reactions to their deep, tangled, and conditioned roots" (Cargile, 2011, p. 17). This involves being aware of our habitual way of behaving on a moment-to-moment basis, providing us with the opportunity to take different actions in circumstances that otherwise would be governed by our internalized dispositions in an automatic way.

Accordingly, to induce change to our (social) habitus, we need to bring our thoughts, feelings and behaviours to our conscious attention. For Bourdieu, habitus would not function at a conscious level until there is a mismatch between one's habitus and the field (Cargile, 2011; Reay, 2004). In the case above describing how people in many parts of the world habitually use many plastic bags in supermarkets, we see that such an act happens effortlessly because their habitus matches the field. However, if they went to supermarkets in a place where plastic bags are not automatically provided, and it is expensive to purchase one, they would find that simply getting a plastic bag would require one's attention, because the cashiers there will ask their customers whether they need any plastic bags, which they have to pay for one. Many people there bring their own bags when doing grocery shopping, and there are posters

around encouraging customers to bring their own bags. In such circumstances, the originally “pre-reflexive response meets a field it does not fit, reflexivity is introduced and an individual may intentionally attempt to modify his or her behavior” (Cargile, 2011, p. 14). They then realize that plastic bags are not something to be taken for granted in supermarkets anymore. Here, they need to decide whether they want to pay for the plastic bags they usually take or bring a shopping bag themselves.

As mentioned before, in the context of social habitus, action is “the outcome of a relationship between habitus, capital, and field” (Swartz, 1997, p. 141). This means that how one would respond to this new situation (i.e. field) depends perhaps, for instance, on one’s tendency towards convenience (i.e. habitus) and one’s wealth (i.e. economic capital). In this situation, the more one gives weight to convenience and the wealthier one is, the more likely one will decide to pay for the plastic bags in supermarkets. Hence, “[c]onditions for change rather than reproduction are set up when habitus encounters objective structures radically different from those under which it was originally formed. Yet, the weight of history shapes decisively our response in those situations” (Swartz, 1997, p. 113).

While change does happen when our habitus meets with a new circumstance, Swartz (1997) points out that this kind of changes is seen as “an ongoing adaptation process [that]...tends to be slow, unconscious, and tends to elaborate more than alter fundamentally the primary dispositions” (p. 107). This suggests that behaviours and habits may constantly change, but the fundamental mindset remains the same. The change that occurs in our actions, therefore, does not have a real impact on the root level of our social habitus. After all, Bourdieu’s theory is “to emphasize the adaptive nature of most action and its social reproductive consequences. The disjuncture between habitus and field is treated more in terms of structural

lag or imperfect synchronization than in terms of structural contradictions that would generate change” (Swartz, 1997, p. 214).

We have a totally different scenario in the context of mindful habitus. With mindfulness, a misalignment between habitus and field is not necessary to initiate change, and the resulting alternation of our habitus also happens at the fundamental level. As Anālayo (2006) explains: “One of the central tasks of *sati* [mindfulness] is the de-automatization of habitual reactions and perceptual evaluations. *Sati* [mindfulness] thereby leads to a progressive restructuring of perceptual appraisal, and culminates in an undistorted vision of reality ‘as it is’” (p. 264). And here, mindfulness works by providing “a different relation to context, in which we do not change position but rather change our relationship with the (existent) contexts where we are located” (Lea, Cadman, & Philo, 2015, p. 57). This in turn enables us to experience the world differently, allowing us to develop new ways to respond to life situations, including ordinary and routine daily events.

Let us return to the example above regarding the relationship between the soldiers’ habitus and the consumers’ habitus. Consumers may take plastic bags for granted when shopping in supermarkets because in that situation their habitus and the field are well aligned. But if the consumers use plastic bags mindfully, they will be able to see the impact of such a consuming habit on others – the soldiers in this case. Once the link between the two is seen, the soldiers are no longer just some people who fight and kill in a remote country, but those whom their own actions had driven to perform those violent acts. It would then be inaccurate to say that the soldiers are violent individuals and the consumers are kind people, because the insight of interbeing reveals that both are inextricably interconnected. This means that, in truth, the violent soldiers are the kind consumers. This realization would enable consumers to

develop an alternative relationship with soldiers, which potentially leads to changes in their behaviours. Thus the consumers may change their shopping habit by bringing their own bags or reusing the plastic bags. When they keep doing this whenever they shop, after some time, their habitus will be transformed. And if enough consumers have changed their use of plastic bags, the soldiers' habitus will also be transformed without them doing anything to make such a transformation happen themselves. This occurs because the habitus of the consumers and the soldiers cannot be separated.

In this context, the consumers' decision to bring their own bags depends mainly on their mindful and wisdom capital – that is how mindful they are when using plastic bags and how much they realize the interbeing nature of themselves and the soldiers. When the consumers are rich in both mindful and wisdom capital, they will carry their own shopping bags even if plastic bags are provided for free in supermarkets. Such a decision is a natural and spontaneous outcome of our insight into the nature of reality; realizing how one's own mindless consumption habit contributes to the suffering of the soldiers (and in fact everyone involved in wars), one cannot help but change one's consumption behaviour in such a way that will avoid causing harm to others. Accordingly, one's wealthiness would not have any influence on this decision and one's tendency towards convenience would be greatly diminished, because the prime concern of mindful habitus is reliving the suffering (*dukkha/duḥkha*) of all beings. Hence, mindful and wisdom capital, while having the capacity to change one's habitus without a mismatch between habitus and field, are also a manifestation of one's mindful habitus.

When many people are mindful consumers, they will not only reduce their use of plastic products, but also extend their mindful consumption behaviours to other aspects of their life,

such as using public transport instead of driving one's own car. The demand for oil (and other natural resources) will then largely decrease. Accordingly, no soldiers are needed to go into wars to fight for natural resources. As a result, the people, who were originally soldiers, could take other jobs for their livelihood; their fighting disposition, thereby their habitus, will be transformed as they no longer need to harm and kill others in combat.

As our mindful habitus develops, we will move towards a more mindful consumption lifestyle, which will have an impact on the kinds and the amount of resources we use in our daily life, consequently affecting the way government, industry and business operate. As Galustian (2019) observes: "Awakened consumers can influence how companies act" (para. 29). All this would lead to a profound change in fields, and thereby social structures, which in turn would exert influences on others' livelihood and thus habitus as well.

As shown above, Bourdieu's theory of social habitus explains that our embedded dispositions are largely developed unconsciously through social conditioning. As a result, our perceptions, thoughts and actions, being governed by our internalized dispositions, are also mostly habitual and automatic. Mindful habitus, on the other hand, involves the embodiment of a particular set of dispositions that are cultivated with consciousness and deliberate intentions. Rather than responding to daily circumstances in an un-reflexive way, we bring our mindful awareness to our normally mindless thoughts and actions, which allows us to see deeply into the conditioned roots of our autopilot mode. We are then able to recognize the root cause of our own and shared predicaments in modern society. This will create change to the way we perceive and relate to the world, empowering us to act in a way that can help resolve social issues.

Mindful habitus

The sections above have demonstrated the indispensable role of right view (i.e. the sight of interbeing) and right mindfulness – two of the factors of the Eightfold Path – in developing mindful habitus. As explained before, all the eight path factors – right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration – inter-are, which implies that when individuals cultivate right view and right mindfulness, the other six path factors will also develop simultaneously. Below is Huxter's (2015) elucidation of the relationship between the eight path factors:

...right view is the understanding that actions have consequences and that unhelpful actions often lead to things not working out for the best. Right view leads to making skillful decisions and commitments to act in ways that are harmless, kind, and liberating (right intention). When one acts in a manner that is wise (right speech, action, and livelihood), there is a level of mental composure that is conducive to motivation and focused attention. Looking at oneself honestly (mindfulness) often requires courageous effort. The combination of effort, remembering to be attentive, and seeing deeply with focused attention gives rise to understanding. When understanding arises, this leads to right intentions, then right actions and the path of liberation continues. In essence, this eight-factored pathway describes a process for changing or releasing unhelpful habits and behaviors and developing, instead, what is helpful to reach desired goals that are beneficial for self and others. (Huxter, 2015, p. 34)

As explained and emphasized before, in the context of mindful habitus, the goal and the means are essentially one, denoting that

[t]he means of the Eightfold Path and the fulfillment of the Eightfold Path are to become the Eightfold Path. So you are practicing the goal in the means. The means is reflected in the goal and the goal is reflected in the means. (Fronsdal, 2006, para. 23)

Mindful habitus is thus the embodiment of the Eightfold Path, suggesting that the eight path factors are the set of dispositions to be cultivated in developing mindful habitus. The eight path factors are traditionally grouped under three trainings, namely: wisdom consisting of right view and right intention; morality consisting of right speech, right action, and right livelihood; and meditation consisting of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The three trainings and their respective path factors, as illustrated in the figure below, can be seen as the cognitive (wisdom), corporal (morality) and spiritual (meditation) dimension of mindful habitus.

Eight path factors	Three trainings	Dimensions of mindful habitus
right view right intention	wisdom	cognition
right speech right action right livelihood	morality	corporality
right effort right mindfulness right concentration	meditation	spirituality

Figure 4: The eight path factors and their corresponding trainings and dimensions of mindful habitus

In Chapter 11, I will use the eight path factors as the conceptual basis for analyzing the interview data and identifying the characteristics of mindful habitus. I will also draw on the data collected in my fieldwork to explore the ways that Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and the

practices taught at Plum Village help cultivate mindful habitus, which is the cultivation of the eight path factors.

Since mindfulness plays an essential role in developing mindful habitus (which is the embodiment of the Eightfold Path),

[t]he key ingredient to make this method [the Eightfold Path] work is meditation, for without the disciplining of the mind we will never be free from the dualistic thinking that clouds our experiences and generates the web of dissatisfaction and uneasiness diagnosed as the source of human suffering. (Mosig, 1989, p. 31)

Meditation or mindfulness, which belongs to the spiritual dimension of human action, is the key to resolving our fundamental human suffering (*dukkha/duḥkha*), including the numerous social and political issues that we are facing. This is possible because the practice can transform the underlying consciousness that keeps creating these problems. It aims to untangle us from dualistic thinking through realizing the interbeing and empty nature of all phenomena. This, in turn, would dismantle our unconsciously internalized dispositions (i.e. social habitus), replacing them with the eight path factors (i.e. mindful habitus). As we develop new ways of perceiving and acting in the world that facilitates our progress towards awakening, we co-create a world that is more egalitarian, sustainable and harmonious.

In a way, mindful habitus, like social habitus, is also a conditioning; we deliberately recondition our social habitus with mindfulness, transforming it into mindful habitus through cultivating the eight path factors. However, mindful habitus is a way of reconditioning that eventually leads to unconditioning – a state of being that transcends habitus, which, in keeping with Bourdieu's terminology, I will call "habituslessness". This happens when a

person has “developed the eight factors of the path to their consummation”, meaning that he or she “is no longer a practitioner of the path but its living embodiment” (Bodhi, 1999, p. 109).

Habituslessness

“Habituslessness” is a term I created to represent a sociological manifestation or the sociological equivalent of *nibbāna/nirvāṇa* – the goal of the Buddhist path – which is also referred to as “enlightenment”, “awakening” or the ultimate truth. Before exploring what the newly created term “habituslessness” means, let us first take a look at the definition of *nibbāna/nirvāṇa*.

Back in the days of the Buddha, *nirvana* (*nibbana* in Pali) had a verb of its own: *nibbuti*. It meant to ‘go out,’ like a flame. Because fire was thought to be in a state of entrapment as it burned – both clinging to and trapped by the fuel on which it fed – its going out was seen as an unbinding. To go out was to be unbound. Sometimes another verb was used – *arinibbuti* – with the ‘*pari-*’ meaning total or all-around, to indicate that the person unbound, unlike the fire unbound, would never again be trapped. (Olendzki, 2005, p. 18)

Hence, *nibbāna/nirvāṇa* literally means going out of a fire, which is no longer trapped by its fuel, signifying that the awakened person is completely unbound. Here, the fire that has gone out refers to the three poisons – *lobha/rāga* (greed or attachment), *dosa* (aversion or hatred) and *moha/dveṣa* (delusion) – which are considered as the origin of our suffering (*dukkha/duḥkha*) (Geshe Tashi Tsering, 2005). The three poisons

are described as ‘that which limits’ (*pamāna-karana*), because they set limits and constraints to our perspectives and thus prevents the total vision. One who is overcome by them is by that very reason unable to see things as they truly are (*yathabhuta*). If Nibbana

is described as ‘limitless’ (*appamana*), it is not because that Nibbana is infinite in an abstract, meaningless sense, but because it is free from these three ‘limiting conditions’. These ‘limiting conditions’ are also called ‘boundaries’ (*sima*) and therefore the *Arahant* [the one who has realized Nibbana] who is free from them is described as ‘one who has transcended the boundaries’ (*simatiga*). They are also called ‘barriers’ (*mariyada*) and therefore the *Arahant* who is free from them is described as one ‘who is living with a mind where all barriers have been broken asunder’ (*vimariyadikata-cetasa viharati*), that is, a mind that has become truly universal. (Karunadasa, 2001, p. 20)

Nibbāna/Nirvāṇa is thus “explained as the extinction of the fire of lust (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*)” (Nārada, 1998, p. 386) as well as “the complete elimination of all traces of self-centricity and ego-centric impulses” (Karunadasa, 2001, p. 9), “allowing us to experience things in their true impermanence, codependency, and emptiness (*shunyata*)” (Johnson, 2006, para. 12).

Now, we see that all the descriptions above have not offered actual descriptions of *nibbāna/nirvāṇa* itself; this is because

[b]y itself, *Nirvana* is quite unexplainable and quite undefinable. As darkness can be explained only by its opposite, light, and as calm can only be explained by its opposite, motion, so likewise *Nirvana*, as a state equated to the extinction of all suffering can be explained by its opposite – the suffering that is being endured in *Samsara*. As darkness prevails wherever there is no light, as calm prevails wherever there is no motion, so likewise *Nirvana* is everywhere where suffering and change and impurity do not prevail. (Dhammananda, 2002, p. 154)

Essentially, *nibbāna/nirvāṇa* cannot be comprehended through intellectual understanding, as the “[u]ltimate truth (*paramartha-satya*) is a nonconceptual and nondiscursive insight into ourselves and the world” (Johnson, 2006, para. 12); it can only be realized through intuitive awareness. As Watts (1951) observes: “Metaphysical language is negative because it is trying to say that words and ideas do not explain reality” (p. 142). That is why the early Buddhist scripture describes the enlightened person as someone who is “deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom as is the great ocean” (Harvey, 2004, p. 25). For this, Thích Nhất Hạnh (1996b) expresses that “[i]n Buddhism, we never talk about nirvana, because nirvana means the extinction of all notions, concepts, and speech” (p. 21), including the notion and concept of *nibbāna/nirvāṇa*. In connection to this, he explains:

Relatively speaking, there are right views and there are wrong views. But if we look more deeply, we see that all views are wrong views. No view can ever be the truth. It is just from one point; that is why it is called a ‘point of view.’ If we go to another point, we will see things differently and realize that our first view was not entirely right. Buddhism is not a collection of views. It is a practice to help us eliminate wrong views. The quality of our views can always be improved. From the viewpoint of ultimate reality, Right View is the absence of all views. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1999, p. 56)

What this means is that all these teachings of dependent origination, non-self, emptiness and interbeing are here to help us realize the truth, but they are not the truth itself, because all the Buddhist teachings, including the teaching of emptiness itself, are also empty of intrinsic nature. “Insofar as truth is a matter of grasping the categories that accurately and finally reflect some objective reality, all truth is error on the Buddhist path” (Loy, 2003, p. 25). And that is why

[m]ost of the descriptions found in the Pali sutras are in negative terms: nirvana as the end of dukkha...Evidently the vagueness is intentional. Shakyamuni's attitude seems to have been that if we want to know what nirvana is, there can be no substitute for experiencing it ourselves. (Loy, 2003, p. 29)

Accordingly, this section does not intend to provide an intellectual speculation on *nibbāna/nirvāṇa*; instead, I aim to explore the sociological implications of *nibbāna/nirvāṇa*, that is, what impact such realization could have on a person's thinking and actions as well as their subsequently effects on society. This understanding will give us an idea about where the cultivation of mindful habitus would eventually lead us.

“Habituslessness” – which draws on the terms “habitus” and “selflessness”¹⁶ – is a word I coined to represent the sociological equivalent of *nibbāna/nirvāṇa*, which is the realization of interbeing, non-self and emptiness. Accordingly, habituslessness can be understood as the emptiness of habitus, but this does not mean an absence of habitus; because

[e]mptiness means only the emptiness of self, not the nonbeing of self, just as when a balloon is empty inside it doesn't mean that the balloon doesn't exist. We are empty of a separate self, but you can't say we have no nose. Of course we have a nose; of course we have a body; of course we are there...It is like a flower, which is made only of non-flower elements. The flower is empty of a separate existence, but that doesn't mean that the flower is not there. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2017b, p. 20)

Likewise, habituslessness is made of non-habituslessness elements, namely social habitus and mindful habitus. As Thích Nhất Hạnh (2017b) writes:

¹⁶ Another term that is used to express the doctrine of non-self (*anatta/anātmam*).

Insight arises from the coming together of many causes and conditions, and one of those conditions is delusion (*avidya*). Without ignorance, there can be no insight, no enlightenment. If there were not misunderstanding and wrong views, what could we wake up from in order to be enlightened? Insight arises from our daily practice of mindfulness, concentration, and deep looking. Insight is made of non-insight elements. If there were no mud there would be no lotuses, and if there were no delusion and suffering there would be no wisdom and understanding. We have to see everything in its interbeing nature; otherwise true insight has not been realized. (pp. 96-97)

We thus cannot just have mindful habitus without social habitus because without the latter the former will not exist as well. In the same way, there cannot be just habituslessness without mindful habitus and social habitus. These three are all empty of a separate existence; they co-exist with one another. Habituslessness thereby is not some independent state of existence; it cannot exist on its own but depends on mindful habitus and social habitus to manifest.

Consequently, “habituslessness” does not mean there is no habitus; what it intends to express is that the awakened person, while having a (mindful) habitus, is not bound by his or her own habitus; because, as stated before, the person who has realized *nibbāna/nirvāṇa* is “one who has transcended the boundaries” (Karunadasa, 2001, p. 20). Thanissaro’s (2011) words below provide some clues about the sociological implications of *nibbāna/nirvāṇa* – i.e. the meaning of habituslessness:

A person engaged in the path needs to develop the skillful habits of right speech, right action, and right livelihood, and the skillful practices of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, even though eventually he/she will have to abandon these habits and practices. But their abandoning does not mean reverting to unskillful behavior.

Instead, it means continuing to follow skillful habits and practices but without fashioning a sense of self-identity around them. (p. 142)

This signifies that in the context of habituslessness, the person, while thinking and acting in accordance with the spirit of the Eightfold Path (i.e. mindful habitus), does not have any felt sense of an independent “someone” doing them. What happens is that in our daily life,

[w]e think there must be a doer, an actor, in order for action to be possible. So we say the eyes see. ‘To see’ is the action, and the eyes are the actor, the subject of seeing. There is a subject and a verb. That is the way we’re accustomed to thinking. But we easily understand that it’s not the eyes that see. When eyes and form are in contact, there is sight. Eyes are just one of the conditions that make sight possible. Many other conditions are also necessary, like light, form, time, space, optic nerve, brain, and so on. It is not correct to make ‘eyes’ the subject of the verb ‘to see.’ Sight arises contemporaneously with eyes and form.

As with the eyes, the other sense organs, in collaboration with their sense objects and the right conditions, bring about hearing and thinking, etc. So there is thinking as a result of mind and object of mind, but there is no thinker. There is feeling, but the feeling and the one who feels are not separate. No-self is the absence of an unchanging, enduring self who stands outside of the action. It is a number of phenomena coming together that make sight, hearing, knowing, and touching possible. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2017b, p. 82)

When seeing through the illusion of an independent “I” or “self” that is behind one’s thinking, feelings and actions, security is no longer a concern as there is no “I” or “self” needs to be safeguarded or glorified (Hunt, 2018; Watts, 1951). And as thoughts and behaviours are not driven by the three poisons of attachment, aversion and delusion any

more, the enlightened person would not be affected by any external circumstances. “He or she cannot be angered, for example, for nothing is ‘owned’ and so there is no need for an angry ‘defence’ of ‘I-me-mine’. There is no ‘I’ there to feel threatened by anything” (Harvey, 2004, p. 250). This will result in total freedom, being free from suffering (*dukkha/duḥkha*). “The experience or action of the moment is free to be as it is without egoic thought needing to control, defend, or will anything” (Hunt, 2018, p. 222).

The awakened ones, having seen through the false appearance of a separate “I” or “self”, also transcend all conventions and labels. They know that the labels or words themselves are not reality and that their application to reality is simply for everyday convenience. The example of the convention or the label “money” given by Watts (1951) below is particularly relevant in a sociological context:

Money gets rid of the inconveniences of barter. But it is absurd to take money too seriously, to confuse it with real wealth, because it will do you no good to eat it or wear it for clothing. Money is more or less static, for gold, silver, strong paper, or a bank balance can ‘stay put’ for a long time. But real wealth, such as food, is perishable. Thus a community may possess all the gold in the world, but if it does not farm its crops it will starve. (p. 45)

This means that the unbound minds will not confuse concepts, ideas, thoughts, labels and words with reality; they understand that the former are merely the symbols of the latter without any real substance. Those who have awakened, like everyone else, use concepts, labels and names for daily communications, but they do so without being caught in them. They are able to “look at reality without words to see it as it is...when we see reality as it is we are free to use thought without being fooled by it” (Watts, 1951, p. 141). They may refer

to themselves as “I”; however, unlike the unenlightened mind which believes that there is an independent self-entity that could be identified as “I”, they know that the so-called “I” is nothing but only a manifestation resulting from the combination of various impersonal elements and conditions. By the same token, people with an enlightened mind will not get caught by signs and appearance. For instance, when they look at a piece of paper, they also see numerous elements (e.g. tree, rain, sunshine, people, etc) in it; they are not deceived by the appearance of the paper into believing that it is an independently existing object that is separate from everything else.

Accordingly, in the context of habituslessness, when we talk about “money”, we understand that the label itself is not money. The word “money”, which gives the false impression that it is something fixed, has in fact no concrete existence. It is just a concept that describes the exchange of things and services in society. And when we use “banknotes” in their daily life, we are aware that the banknotes themselves are just pieces of paper, with its actual value being determined by common consent and subject to change depending on circumstances. Banknotes can be used to exchange for other things, such as food and clothes. However, having a lot of “banknotes” is not equivalent to having plenty of food and clothes; that is why Watts (1951) says that there is no use for us to have all the gold in the world if we do not plant our food.

Being driven by the three poisons of attachment, aversion and delusion, the unliberated person (i.e. social habitus) not only mixes up labels, concepts and words with reality, he also

does not know what he wants. He works for success, fame, a happy marriage, fun, to help other people, or to be a ‘real person.’ But these are not real wants because they are not

actual things. They are the by-products, the flavors and atmospheres of real things – shadows which have no existence apart from some substance. Money is the perfect symbol of all such desires, being a mere symbol of real wealth, and to make it one's goal is the most blatant example of confusing measurements with reality... He drinks for the percentage of alcohol ('spirit') and not for the 'body' and taste of the liquid. He builds to put up an impressive 'front' rather than to provide a space for living. Therefore he tends to put up structures which appear from the outside to be baronial mansions but are inwardly warrens. (Watts, 1951, p. 63)

In other words, those who have a deluded mind

are slaves to money, fame, power, and sensual pleasure. People may think that only with power and riches will they be secure. Yet the truth is that those with great power and wealth are the people with the greatest fear, jealousy, and anxiety. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2017b, p. 82)

As their views are conditioned and limited by the three poisons of attachment, aversion and delusion, there is the misperception that symbols, labels and signs and appearances have stable and independent existence. Such a discrepancy between perception and reality results in a great sense of insecurity. Consequently, people run after money and success in the belief that those things could provide protection for one's "self" (the poison of delusion) by avoiding being in an underprivileged position (the poison of aversion) and satisfying one's greed that can never be fulfilled (the poison of attachment). This leads to unwholesome actions, creating suffering and social injustice. However, instead of gaining security from capital, power and status, people become enslaved to them as they not only never feel they have enough of those things but are afraid of losing them as well.

The enlightened mind, on the other hand, does not cling to anything, including capital, power and status, nor feel hostile towards anything, such as poverty and adversity, because they are free from the three poisons of attachment, aversion and delusion. Having realized that everything is in a process of evolving, constantly arising and ceasing as circumstances change, there is no attachment or aversion in any situations.

The implication of *nibbana/nirvāṇa* in a sociological context (i.e. habituslessness) is thus that people would accumulate various forms of capital and gain power and status just like everyone else; but what makes them different from the unenlightened ones is that they are not caught in this accumulation. They know that capital, status and power are only symbols, appearances, labels or concepts without any essence. They do not see them as something which can be accumulated or gained. For them, those things, like all phenomena including one's "self", are merely manifestations of various causes and conditions. There is no "thingness" in them; they are only transient phenomena. If there are sufficient causes and conditions, they manifest, and it appears that we "have" them; and if there are no longer sufficient causes and conditions, they stop manifesting, and it appears that we have "lost" them.

In this realization, people are free to "accumulate" capital and "gain" power and status without blindly chasing after money and success or fearing losing them. I will call this approach towards capital as well as power and status as "capitallessness". It does not mean an absence of capital, but that one is not bound by them, being liberated from one's self-inflicted bondage. For the unawakened minds, capital, power and status are misperceived as concrete objective entities that can be held on to. Capitallessness, on the other hand, is an unbound way of pursuing capital, power and status, meaning that the pursuit is not driven by the three

poisons of attachment, aversion and delusion, but simply a manifestation of the Eightfold Path.

From the standpoint of capitallessness, capital, power and status are simply transient tools for us to use, not some substantial things to possess. These tools are useful as long as there is no grasping of them. The awakened businessmen who have a very successful business selling organic food and Fairtrade items, earning much money and reputation, would not puff up with pride, arrogantly thinking that oneself is the best. They know their success is simply a manifestation of various conditions and factors. Since there is no attachment and grasping, they would share their resources with other people, contributing to others' success. In the same way, if their business becomes unprofitable or even goes bankrupt due to a change in circumstances (e.g. having stronger competitors in the market, products no longer being popular, etc), they would not resist the situation, feeling anguished that they have lost all the money or reputation for "[t]here is no 'I' there to feel threatened by anything" (Harvey, 2004, p. 250). Their state of mind remains unaffected whether they live their life as a billionaire or a pauper.

Likewise, the same could be applied to the awakened scientists, who would stay humble when their new technology for reducing plastic consumption to minimize environmental pollution has attracted ample funding for their scientific research. They would also be willing to share their knowledge and skills with other researchers because they are aware that numerous conditions and causes are needed to make new technology possible. And if people do not appreciate their new technology, they would not be discouraged, for they understand that it takes many conditions to make people aware of the importance of protecting the

environment; when there are sufficient conditions, their new technology would naturally be put into use.

Moreover, those whose mind has been liberated are fearless. Since they are not afraid of losing anything, including capital, status and power, when confronting social injustice, they are able to speak out and act accordingly. Their peace of mind builds on the living embodiment of the Eightfold Path, not on money and fame. In the context of social habitus, people have great difficulties speaking out against injustice because they have fear of losing their status and position. In the context of habituslessness, on the other hand, the person continues to be the living embodiment of the Eightfold Path regardless of the circumstances, persistently contributing to the creation of a world that is more egalitarian, sustainable and harmonious.

Having discussed *nibbāna/nirvāṇa* and habituslessness, it is important to bear in mind that in reality “the enlightened person...cannot be pinned down in any way, as he has no focusses of attachment or I-identity...Such a person cannot be fathomed by those who can only think of a person as centred on some I-identity” (Harvey, 2004, p. 250). As I still have a strong sense of a self-identity, the discussion of habituslessness in this section is simply my attempt to explore how an awakened person would possibly think and act in a sociological context as well as the potential subsequent impacts on society. After all, there is no way to comprehend what habituslessness really means except through first-hand experience.

As the current study focuses on the cultivation of mindful habitus, with interview participants who were still in the process of cultivating their mindfulness and the insight into interbeing, there will not be further discussion on habituslessness in this thesis. Future research that

involves seasoned practitioners (e.g. senior dharma teachers, Zen masters, etc), is thus recommended to discover more about the state of habituslessness.

Summary

This chapter approached Bourdieu's social theory of habitus as an analytical concept and as a methodological device. As an analytical concept, habitus provides a theoretical framework for investigating the differences and similarities in how sociological and the Buddhist approaches understand the relationship between individual and society. As a methodological device, the concept of habitus suggests possible ways in which the practice of mindfulness and the realization of interbeing could create change in an individual and the world.

Understanding mindfulness and interbeing in a sociological context lays the foundation for developing a habitus transformation model (i.e. social habitus → mindful habitus → habituslessness) that relates to the cognitive, corporeal and spiritual dimensions of a person's experience. The newly created terms of mindful habitus and habituslessness, in particular, concern the philosophical and experiential implications of mindfulness for our understanding of categorical distinctions (e.g. self and other, human and nonhuman) (research question 4).

This proposed model, with its expanded interpretation of the related social concepts of capital, field and class, serves as the framework for analyzing the data collected in relation to the following research questions: (4) What are the philosophical and experiential implications of mindfulness for our understanding of categorical distinctions (e.g. self and other, human and nonhuman)? (5) How do practitioners apply the teachings and practices in their daily life? (6) What impact have the teachings and practices had on their daily lives, social situations and relationships, etc?

Part II

The Application of a Newly Created Theoretical Framework to Thích Nhất Hạnh's Teachings and the Participant Data

Chapter 5

Methodology for Participant Study

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the methodology employed in this study, providing details regarding the methods and the procedures used in data collection and analysis. A qualitative design – ethnography – was adopted to investigate the practice of mindfulness taught by Thích Nhất Hạnh, with the intention to fill a gap in the current mindfulness literature, which largely focuses on quantitative methods. To understand and capture the experiences of mindfulness practitioners first-hand, I collected data through fieldwork at Plum Village – a Buddhist monastic community and retreat center that Thích Nhất Hạnh established in France in 1982 – where I conducted participant observation and ethnographic interviews. I will discuss the effectiveness of using these methods to investigate the research questions of this study in the sections below.

I will also explore how looking at the experience of both the interview participants and myself (i.e. the researcher) can enhance the methodological approach in this study. As mindfulness is essentially experiential and none of us has access to minds other than our own, an autoethnographic approach was incorporated in the methodology, in addition to observing others' behaviours and asking them about their experiences. Lastly, I will explain the use of a thematic analysis for analyzing the data collected, as well as the strategies employed to ensure the validity of this qualitative inquiry. All of the methods discussed in this chapter informed the ways that the research questions were investigated.

Ethnography

This study aims to investigate the experiential impact of mindfulness practices developed by Thích Nhất Hạnh on modern practitioners. Ethnography, “in which the researcher studies [the shared patterns of behaviors, language, and actions of] an intact cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time by collecting primarily observational and interview data” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 328), appeared to be an effective strategy to understand and capture the real life experiences of those who followed Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings in a more in-depth way than quantitative methods allow.

Accordingly, I planned to conduct four months of fieldwork at Plum Village – a Buddhist monastic community and retreat center that Thích Nhất Hạnh established in France in 1982 – from 8 April to 29 July 2016. The research was reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee before I embarked on my fieldwork. I had also obtained permission of Plum Village to do participant observation and interviews with retreatants before arriving at the monastery.

Plum Village consists of five hamlets in total, namely New Hamlet, Upper Hamlet, Lower Hamlet, Middle Hamlet and Son Ha Temple.¹⁷ During my time at Plum Village, I stayed at New Hamlet, participating in the retreats just like other retreatants, which enabled me to fully immerse myself in the life there. I was thus able to conduct participant observation as well as meet those who went there for retreats, which gave me the opportunity to interview some of them about their experience of the practice.

¹⁷ More details about the hamlets at Plum Village can be found in Chapter 8.

Such a qualitative research approach allowed me (i.e. the researcher) to obtain an in-depth understanding of the topic concerned through first-hand experience of the activities (i.e. Thích Nhất Hạnh's mindfulness practices) and the people (i.e. retreatants and monastics) at the field site (i.e. Plum Village) on a daily basis. This, in turn, enabled me to investigate the following research questions of this study effectively:

- (1) What are the characteristics of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices?
- (2) What are the differences and similarities between his teachings and the traditional teachings of mindfulness and Buddhist philosophy?
- (3) Why do people engage in the practices?
- (4) What are the philosophical and experiential implications of mindfulness for our understanding of categorical distinctions (e.g. self and other, human and nonhuman)?
- (5) How do practitioners apply the teachings and practices in their daily life?
- (6) What impact have the teachings and practices had on their daily lives, social situations and relationships, etc?
- (7) How do practitioners embody Engaged Buddhism in their own life situations?
- (8) What impact has practicing with a sangha/group had on practitioners?
- (9) How do practitioners' own spiritual backgrounds fit with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices?
- (10) What challenges or difficulties do they face when applying the teachings and practices in their daily life?

At Plum Village, other retreatants just regarded me as a fellow retreatant until they came to know that I was there doing fieldwork for my research. At the beginning of my time there, most monastics also thought that I was merely one of the retreatants. Only a few nuns were aware that I had come to Plum Village to conduct my research. After three to four weeks, however, most monastics got to know that I was also a researcher. As I stayed at the

monastery for an extended period of time, the monastics came to regard me as a long-stay retreatant (16 weeks), compared to most others who stayed for only one to two weeks. With this status, I was treated differently.

One reason this happened was that they had different expectations from long-term visitors. For instance, I was expected to participate in all the daily scheduled activities. (Although all retreatants were asked to do the same, the requirements did not seem to be as strict.) Apart from this, as a researcher, the support I needed was different from other retreatants, whether they stayed for a short or an extended period of time. For this, I needed to communicate with the monastics in various ways from time to time, and often they would make additional arrangements during the retreats to support my fieldwork. Later on, as the retreats became busier, I also served as staff to assist with the activities held.

Because of my unique circumstances and my various and changing identities, my interactions with the monastics and retreatants allowed me to see different kinds of actions and behaviours exhibited by them, which revealed aspects of the community that were not normally visible to a usual retreatant but have implications for the practices and teachings conveyed. This holistic account of my situation at the field site reflects that a qualitative inquiry aims

to develop a complex picture of the problem or issue under study. This involves reporting multiple perspectives, identifying the many factors involved in a situation, and generally sketching the larger picture that emerges. Researchers are bound not by cause-and-effect relationships among factors but rather by describing the complex interactions of factors in any situation. (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 83)

As I will detail further in the sections below on the autoethnographic approach as well as in the discussion of the findings in Chapters 8-11, qualitative research seeks to uncover the multiple perspectives and realities through examining the experiences and perceptions of the individuals in the target group and the researchers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethnography thus allowed me to gain an additional level of insight compared to quantitative methods, which rarely reveal the multiple realities of any given context.

Another feature of qualitative research is that, by nature, it is an emergent design, which

means that the initial plan for research cannot be tightly prescribed, and some or all phases of the process may change or shift after the researcher enters the field and begins to collect data...These shifts signal that the researchers are delving deeper and deeper into the topic or the phenomenon under study. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 258)

As expected, some changes to the initial plan for my research occurred after I started my fieldwork at Plum Village. Key changes were made to four aspects of this research project during the data collection and analysis process: (1) thesis title, (2) interview questions, (3) participant recruitment procedure, and (4) research questions. Let me now explain the first change. The second and third changes will be discussed in the section on ethnographic interviews and the fourth in the section on thematic analysis below.

At the beginning of my study, this thesis was titled “Mindfulness and the Engaged Buddhism of Thích Nhất Hạnh” because of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s emphasis on mindfulness in his Engaged Buddhism. However, as my practice and understanding of mindfulness deepened after my fieldwork at Plum Village, it became clear to me that the insight of interbeing, which arises as a result of our mindfulness practice, is equally important in Thích Nhất Hạnh’s Engaged

Buddhism. Consequently, I changed the thesis title to “Mindfulness, Interbeing and the Engaged Buddhism of Thích Nhất Hạnh”.

An autoethnographic approach

As outlined in the Preface, this research was inspired by my personal experiences of mindfulness practice. Thích Nhất Hạnh’s practical and straightforward approach to presenting mindfulness motivated me to focus on his teachings in this research. My own experiences have shaped my understanding of the practice and the Buddhist teachings as well as my approach to the investigation of the topic. As “[g]ood qualitative research contains comments by the researchers about how their interpretation of the findings is shaped by their background” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 275), an autoethnographic approach, which acknowledges “the innumerable ways personal experience influences the research process” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010, para. 3), appears to be particularly relevant and beneficial to this research.

There are various forms of autoethnography, with varying focus on “the study of others, the researcher’s self and interaction with others, traditional analysis, and the interview context, as well as on power relationships” (Ellis et al., 2010, para. 15). I decided to adopt the approach of reflexive ethnography as it seems well-suited to my study:

Reflexive ethnographies range along a continuum from starting research from one’s own experience to ethnographies where the researcher’s experience is actually studied along with other participants, to confessional tales where the researcher’s experiences of doing the study become the focus of investigation. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740)

Apart from recounting (in the Preface) how this project arose from my personal experience of mindfulness practice, I will focus on two aspects of my own experiences as ethnographic data: (1) my interactions with the Plum Village community, both the monastics and retreatants; and (2) my experience of the practice and its relation to those of the participants.

As mentioned in the previous section, my multiple and shifting identities at the monastery – usual retreatant, long-term retreatant, researcher, and staff – provided me with opportunities to observe aspects of the community that might not normally be visible to a usual retreatant. Discussing the experiences of my interaction with the community thus offers additional information about the practice and the community. Moreover, by providing accounts of these experiences, I can also

foreground the ways in which social identities influence the research process, particularly in terms of what, who, and how we study; what and how we interpret what we observe and experience; and how we represent our observations and experiences of cultural life.
(Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 19)

This, in turn, enhances the validity of this study, as will be elaborated more in a later section.

The second aspect of my autoethnographic approach concerns my own experience of the practice and its relation to the experiences of the participants. Mindfulness is essentially experiential (Singh, 2010). It is a practice rather than a concept or a belief. Only through our own experience can we truly know what mindfulness is like. The importance of personal experience is also reflected in the practices at Plum Village. During my fieldwork there, the nuns told me that in the past when Thích Nhất Hạnh was still teaching himself, whenever people went there to do research or write about mindfulness, he requested them to have

practiced there for at least one week before conducting any interviews. For a number of reasons, I did not start my interviews until after I was there for three weeks.

Simply observing others or analyzing texts is not sufficient for understanding an experiential practice like mindfulness. We need to have direct experience of the practice ourselves. As none of us can access minds other than our own, an autoethnographic approach, which “enables access to vital aspects of human experience that cannot be accessed using other available methods” (Vryan, 2006, p. 407), is an effective methodology for examining experiences of the mind. Accounts of my own experiences of the practice are thus also valuable data for the experiential impact of the practice. They help explain how the practice could be applied in daily situations on a personal as well as theoretical level.

Kabat-Zinn (2009) points out that “it is important...for...researchers to know what they are dealing with from first-person experience before being able to authentically test the utility, efficacy, and potential of training in mindfulness...” (p. xxxi). While he considers mindfulness “in the secular coordinate system of healing and knowing within psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy, and medicine” (p. xxxi), his observation applies to any field of study on the topic. Without any personal experience, researchers would not be able to have an in-depth understanding of the mindfulness experiences reported by others. Some of my participants actually had difficulties expressing their experiences in words, which I was able to relate to because of my own experience of the practice. As Foster, McAllister, and O'Brien (2005) note: “autoethnography is useful for making connections between researcher and participant, deepening interpretive analysis of both common and differing experiences, and producing knowledge drawn from compassionate understanding and rigorous reflection” (p.

1). Relating my own experience to those of my participants can thus enhance the data analysis and discussion in this research.

Participant observation

In participant observation, “the researcher spends prolonged periods of time in the subject’s natural environment, unobtrusively collecting data. The researcher is simultaneously a participant and an observer” (Bogdan, 2007, p. 274). During my time at Plum Village, I was immersed in the daily life of the retreatants through participating in the scheduled retreat sessions and activities, observing myself, other retreatants and the monastics, as well as our interactions with one another.

For my observation of the retreatants, with the approval of the monastery, a “Note to Plum Village Retreatants” (Appendix C) was posted on the noticeboard outside the dining hall at New Hamlet. The note offered an explanation to the retreatants about my research and mentioned that I was conducting participant observation there, writing notes about observing mindfulness practitioners, as well as taking photos that involved the physical environment of the monastery and people participating in group activities. The note assured the retreatants that no individual observed would be identified in the publication or presentation of this study, nor would there be any close-up photos of the retreatants.

I generally made my observations unobtrusively. One way to do so was to observe the community from the rear. For instance, I often sat in the back row of the meditation hall during the dharma talks there. That position allowed me to observe the environment from a wider perspective without disturbing anyone. Sometimes, I would also sit in the front or in the middle of the meditation hall, which enabled me to observe from other perspectives.

However, when I sat in the front or middle, I usually could not see much behind me as I did not want to move too much, in order not to disturb others or the speaker. One advantage of staying in the field for an extended period of time was that I had many opportunities to make observations from various positions and perspectives.

I used a field notebook to write down what I had seen, heard and experienced each day. I recorded my observations on both the monastics and the retreatants, including their actions and responses to different activities (e.g. working meditation, having dinner) and the ways they interacted with each other. I also recorded my own experiences, such as my thoughts, feelings, reactions and actions when participating in the daily activities and interacting with the community. The fieldnotes, therefore, were very useful and crucial to my fieldwork. As Blommaert and Jie (2010) point out, fieldnotes “provide us with invaluable information, not only about what we witnessed in the field, but even more importantly about how we witness it – amazed, outraged, amused, factual and neutral, puzzled, curious, not understanding, confident about own interpretations” (p. 37).

In addition to my fieldnotes, I also took photos of the physical environment of the monastery and people participating in group activities, such as walking meditation and dharma discussion. These photos, which help remind me of the details of the retreat activities, facilitated and enhanced my data analysis. Photos that help explain practices and events at Plum Village have been included in this thesis.

Ethnographic interview

Singh (2010), who encourages the anthropology of mindfulness, points out that mindfulness is essentially “experiential, and we need ways of reporting this experience...such as asking

the participants of their experiences...” (p. 2). Apart from autoethnography, interviewing the retreatants at Plum Village is an effective way to explore the experiential impact of the practices on practitioners. As Kvale (1996) explains: “The research interview is an interpersonal situation, a conversation between two partners about a theme of mutual interest. It is a specific form of human interaction in which knowledge evolves through a dialogue” (p. 125). As the interview participants and I were practicing mindfulness together at Plum Village, our mutual interest in the teachings and practices taught there was obvious to each other. Besides, the interview setting at the monastery provided the participants with a comfortable environment to share their thoughts on the topics in our discussion, knowledge and experiences thus evolved naturally in our dialogues.

The interviews that I conducted at Plum Village were one-on-one semi-structured, which provided a degree of openness and flexibility to accommodate new ideas resulting from these encounters. According to my initial research plan, target participants would be recruited on a volunteer and “first come first serve” basis. There were no specific selection or exclusion criteria except for the minimum age. The participants could be of any ethnic origin and gender, as long as they were aged above 18 years. It also did not matter how long they had practised mindfulness; people who learnt about the practice for the first time during the retreat could also participate in the interviews. The only requirement was that they needed to speak in English during the interview.

As mentioned above, a “Note to Plum Village Retreatants” (Appendix C) was posted on the noticeboard outside the dining hall at New Hamlet, explaining my research to the retreatants. The note also indicated that I was recruiting retreatants to participate in an interview, which sought to understand how Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings could have an impact on

contemporary practitioners' daily life. Retreatants were invited to approach me directly if they were interested in taking part in the interview. The note assured people of the complete confidentiality of data gathered in the interview and emphasized that their identity would not be made public without their prior consent.

With the help from the nuns at New Hamlet, I made additional arrangements to draw retreatants' attention to the interview in addition to having the note put on the noticeboard. I would briefly introduce myself, my research and the interview during the weekly orientation sessions for newcomers during the Spring Retreat. The arrangement during the 21-Day Retreat and the Summer Retreat was different. Retreatants at those retreats were divided into different groups, which were called dharma families. Retreatants had dinner with their own family every evening, during which an announcement concerning the activities on the next day was made before the start of the meal. A short message about my research and the interview was included in the announcement for the second or third day of a retreat period.¹⁸ These extra arrangements for raising attention to the participant interviews had not been planned in my original participant recruitment procedure. I came up with the idea as I noticed things in the field that I could do to attract more interview participants. This is, therefore, related to the third key change to the initial plan of my research as mentioned above.

When retreatants came to me expressing their interest in doing the interview, I gave them three documents: (1) Information Sheet for Interview Participants (Appendix D), (2) Interview Question Sheet for Interview Participants (Appendix E), and (3) Consent Form for Interview Participants (Appendix F). The Information Sheet, which the participants could

¹⁸ The Spring Retreat, the 21-Day Retreat and the Summer Retreat are the three retreats that my study focuses on. More details about these retreats can be found in Chapter 10.

keep, provided details about the research and the interview. The Interview Question Sheet was provided so that the participants could think about the questions beforehand if they liked. The interview questions were shown on the sheet and also asked, with some flexibility, in the order shown below:

- (1) How and when did you first come into contact with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices?
- (2) Do you have a daily or regular practice? If so, how do you manage it?
- (3) Could you describe a way that you have incorporated mindfulness into your daily activities?
- (4) How has the practice changed the way you live your life?
- (5) Has it changed the way you see the world?
- (6) Has it changed the way you are in your relationships with other people?
- (7) Do you practice alone or with a *sangha*/group? Why?
- (8) Who or what most supports you in your practice?
- (9) What are the most important issues or challenges that arise in your daily practice?
- (10) Do you find anything problematic or challenging about his approach?
- (11) Do you have any religion? If so, how does your religion fit with what you are learning here?
- (12) Could you describe what mindfulness means to you?
- (13) Could you describe what interbeing means to you?
- (14) Are there any other experiences or comments you would like to share?
- (15) Do you mind telling me your occupation? Age? Where you are from?

Unless the participant wanted to keep the Interview Question Sheet, I usually took it back after the interview was over and reused it for environmental reasons. The Consent Form needed to be signed by the participant before the start of the interview, which was audio

recorded. The recording was used for transcribing the interviews, and the interview transcripts were sent to the participants for review before data analysis began. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, a code, which was assigned to each participant on the consent form, was used for the recording and interview transcripts. All the names shown with participants' responses in the following chapters are pseudonyms. They are not the real names of the participants.

The second key change to the initial plan of my research that I mentioned above – interview questions – occurred after I had started interviewing participants. Questions that were added concerned the following three areas: (1) the reasons that the participants went for their first retreat held by Thích Nhất Hạnh and/or his monastics, (2) their experiences of the practices and activities at the retreats, and (3) the reasons that they decided to take (or not to take) the Five Mindfulness Trainings formally. The details of why and how these questions were added are outlined in Chapters 9 and 10.

In total, 35 retreatants were successfully interviewed, with the interview participants covering a wide range of ages, spanning from 18 to 78 years old. All interviews were done individually except for two participants, who requested to be interviewed at the same time, because they were colleagues and came to the retreat together with the same intention of applying what they had learnt at Plum Village in their workplace. Depending on the responses of the participants, the interviews lasted from half an hour to two hours.

As the fieldwork was based at New Hamlet, which was for nuns and laywomen (except for couples and families who could stay in any hamlet)¹⁹, there were very few male retreatants

¹⁹ More details about each hamlet can be found in Chapter 8.

available for the interview. In an attempt to add more variety (in terms of gender) to the interview participants, I sometimes invited male retreatants to participate in the interviews if I had a chance to talk to them. I also met a long term lay resident there, who helped connect me with two male long term lay residents in another hamlet for the purpose of conducting an interview. These ways of recruiting participants for the interview, which were not included in my original plan of inviting retreatants to participate in the interview through the note, relate to the third key change to the initial research plan mentioned above (i.e. participant recruitment procedure). As it was still not easy for me to recruit male retreatants, I had interviewed more female participants (27) than male participants (8) by the end of my fieldwork. Since gender differences were not a focus of this study, the proportion of female to male participants is not considered an issue. However, in future research it might be worth investigating whether gender has a role in mindfulness practice.

Thematic analysis

After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed and the interview transcripts were sent to the participants for review. I amended the transcripts according to the feedback received from the participants, if any, and then examined them from the perspective of the newly developed habitus transformation model (i.e. social habitus → mindful habitus → habituslessness), as delineated in Chapter 4. Thematic analysis, which “is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79), was employed to explore questions relating to participants’ lived experiences of mindfulness and the effects that the practice had on them,

In analyzing the interview transcripts, categories that were developed in accordance with particular research questions and concerns were used for coding (e.g. sangha practice, first

contact of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings, participants' spiritual backgrounds, etc). I then worked inductively, looking for patterns and themes across the interviews. After that, whenever the transcripts mentioned topics related to the research questions, I proceeded to work deductively through mapping the patterns and themes identified against Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings (e.g. advice given by Thích Nhất Hạnh) and the practices taught at Plum Village (e.g. the aim of a particular practice), to see whether what the participants had experienced or done was in line with the teachings and practices offered. Thus, both a deductive and an inductive approach were taken in working on the interview data.

As shown earlier in this chapter, there were 10 research questions in this study. However, during my data analysis, I came to see that research question 7 (How do practitioners embody Engaged Buddhism in their own life situations?) actually represented the same thing as research question 5 (How do practitioners apply the teachings and practices in their daily life?). I thus removed question 7 from the list, and consequently, there are changes in the research question numbers for the last three items. This is the fourth key change to the initial plan of my research as stated above.

Below is the updated list of research questions, which I will refer to in the following chapters:

- (1) What are the characteristics of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices?
- (2) What are the differences and similarities between his teachings and the traditional teachings of mindfulness and Buddhist philosophy?
- (3) Why do people engage in the practices?
- (4) What are the philosophical and experiential implications of mindfulness for our understanding of categorical distinctions (e.g. self and other, human and nonhuman)?
- (5) How do practitioners apply the teachings and practices in their daily life?

- (6) What impact have the teachings and practices had on their daily lives, social situations and relationships, etc?
- (7) What impact has practicing with a sangha/group had on practitioners?
- (8) How do practitioners' own spiritual backgrounds fit with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices?
- (9) What challenges or difficulties do they face when applying the teachings and practices in their daily life?

Validity

To ensure the validity of the findings in this study, the following strategies, as recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018), were used: (1) triangulating data, (2) using thick and rich descriptions, (3) clarifying researcher's bias, (4) presenting contradictory evidence, (5) spending an extended period of time in the field, (6) using peer debriefing, and (7) using member checking.

(1) Triangulating data

Data were gathered from various sources, including interviews, observations, personal experience and literature.

(2) Using thick and rich description

The findings are delivered through detailed accounts of the setting, the participants' experiences (verbatim quotes), my (the researcher's) own experiences (autoethnography), the planned research procedures and the subsequent changes during the research process, as well as specific information about events and behaviours observed.

(3) Clarifying researcher's bias

At the outset of this thesis, how this study came into being because of my (the researcher's) own experience of the topic (i.e. mindfulness practice) is addressed in the Preface and the Introduction Chapter. Through adopting an autoethnographic approach, my own experience of the practice and observations during the data collection and analysis process are explicitly mentioned and described. These open and honest accounts make the research process transparent, indicating how the approach to the research and the interpretation of the findings could be shaped by my background and experience of the practice.

(4) Presenting contradictory evidence

In looking at the interview participants' experience of the practices, I not only examine how the practices were helpful in the participants' lives, but also explore how certain practices may not be helpful for some participants, thus leading them to avoid those practices. Discussing those experiences that contradict the common view of the practice provides a more comprehensive understanding of the impact the practices could have on the practitioners as well as enhancing the credibility of the findings.

(5) Spending an extended period of time in the field

I stayed at Plum Village for a period of four months, experiencing and observing the activities and people there on a daily basis, which allowed me to develop an in-depth understanding of the retreatants' experiences and the practices taught there.

(6) Using peer debriefing

My three supervisors have served as peer debriefers, who have looked over my research process and reviewed my findings, advising me of any concerns about the findings of the study.

(7) Using member checking

According to Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, and Walter (2016), this validation strategy involves several methods, namely “returning the interview transcript to participants, a member check interview using the interview transcript data or interpreted data, a member check focus group, or returning analyzed synthesized data” (p. 1803).²⁰ Due to the complexity of this study, it was not feasible to run specific findings past the participants, but I did send the interview transcripts to the participants for confirmation before data analysis began. I then amended the transcripts according to the feedback received from the participants, if any, as this would allow me to “make claims about the accuracy of the transcription of the interview” (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016, p. 1805) for my qualitative analysis.

Summary

The use of the qualitative method of ethnography to examine Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings on mindfulness in this study aims to fill a gap in the current mindfulness literature, which largely adopts a quantitative approach. Conducting participant observation and ethnographic interviews during my four-month-long fieldwork at Plum Village allowed me to gain an in-depth appreciation of the practice through first-hand experience.

²⁰ Creswell and Creswell (2018) adopt a narrower definition of member checking. For them, this method “does not mean taking back the raw transcripts to check for accuracy” but “taking the final report or specific descriptions or themes back to participants and determining whether these participants feel that they are accurate” (p. 274).

The adoption of an autoethnographic approach in this study provides information about my personal interactions with the community, thereby revealing aspects of the community that were not normally visible to a regular retreatant. Such an approach also enabled me to access data – the experience of mindfulness – that cannot be obtained through other means, as well as enhancing my analysis and discussion of participants' experiences of the practice.

Grounded in the newly developed habitus transformation model (i.e. social habitus → mindful habitus → habituslessness), thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data collected. As part of an emergent design, changes to the initial plan of this study occurred during the data collection and analysis process. The four key changes related to: (1) thesis title, (2) interview questions, (3) participant recruitment procedure, and (4) research questions. Seven strategies were employed to ensure the validity of the findings, namely (1) triangulating data, (2) using thick and rich descriptions, (3) clarifying researcher's bias, (4) presenting contradictory evidence, (5) spending an extended period of time in the field, (6) using peer debriefing, and (7) using member checking. The methodology design for the qualitative inquiry described in this chapter has informed the ways that all of my research questions were investigated.

Chapter 6

Thích Nhất Hạnh and His Engaged Buddhism

Introduction

This chapter examines the ways in which Thích Nhất Hạnh has adapted the traditional Buddhist teachings and investigates the impact of his teachings and practices on contemporary practitioners' habitus. As Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices largely emerged in the midst of the suffering created by the political and social environments of Vietnam, I will start in this chapter with a brief overview of the historical background of the country, so that we can understand his Engaged Buddhism in a wider context. After this, we will look at the lineage of the Plum Village tradition and the kinds of monastic trainings that Thích Nhất Hạnh had received in the context of the history of Buddhist social and political engagement in Vietnam. This will help us understand the impact that his monastic trainings and the relevant history of his homeland have had on his Engaged Buddhism.

We will then explore how Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices came into being within the social and political contexts of his lifetime. As the environment in wartime Vietnam was very different from the environment in France, where Thích Nhất Hạnh lived in exile later in his life, the discussion of his Engaged Buddhism will be separated into two periods of time, namely during wartime Vietnam and after the war in Vietnam when he was already settled in France. This will reveal how he adapted his engaged teachings and practices in accordance with different circumstances to suit the specific needs of the people concerned. This chapter therefore addresses the following two research questions: (1) What are the characteristics of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices? (2) What are the differences and similarities between his teachings and the traditional teachings of mindfulness and Buddhist philosophy?

A brief overview of the historical background of Vietnam

As the formation of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices came largely as a response to the suffering created by the political and social environments of Vietnam (Chapman, 2007; Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000), we need to have a look at the historical background of the country in order to appreciate his Engaged Buddhism in a wider context. Vietnam was a French colony from the late 1800s until 1954. Thích Nhất Hạnh was born in central Vietnam in 1926.

During World War II (1939-1945), France lost its control of Vietnam due to the Japanese occupation. After Japan's surrender in 1945, which brought the six-year-long warfare to a close, Vietnam declared independence. The French re-occupation of the country subsequently led to the First Indochina War (1946-1954) between the French forces and the Vietnamese nationalists, who were largely communists and eventually defeated the French in May 1954. During the eight years of combat, Vietnam was partitioned into two regimes, namely the Democratic Republic of Vietnam based in Hanoi in the north, and the State of Vietnam based in Saigon in the south. While the communist north received aid from China and the Soviet Union, the non-communist south was assisted by the United States, the United Kingdom and France (Chapman, 2007; Jamieson et al., 2019).

The Geneva Accords signed in July 1954, which marked the end of French colonialism in Vietnam, provided a transient military dividing line at the 17th parallel between North and South Vietnam, intending for elections to be held in two years' time in the whole Vietnam in order to reunify the country. However, both the South Vietnamese regime and the United States opposed the nationwide elections, worrying that the North might win. This subsequently gave rise to the Second Indochina War (1955-1975), also commonly known as the Vietnam War, between communist North Vietnam and anti-communist South Vietnam.

The North was supported by China and the Soviet Union. The South, backed by the United States, had Ngô Đình Diệm – a Roman Catholic – as its president. He perceived Buddhism as a threat to his administration, thus discriminating against its followers through various repressive measures.

The overthrow of Diệm's regime at the end of 1963, however, did not bring an end to the Buddhist struggle. At that time, the wish of the majority of Vietnamese was to end the war while the United States desired to pursue it. The tension between these two contradictory positions continued to intensify with a crackdown on the Buddhist Struggle Movement in mid-1965 (S. B. King, 1996). The 20-year combat eventually ended in 1975 when North Vietnam won the battle and reunified the country under communist rule (Chapman, 2007; Jamieson et al., 2019; The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019).

Although the war had ended, Buddhists in the country continued to be oppressed by the new regime. While the Buddhists had the goodwill to help rebuild the country, their ability to assemble tens of thousands of people at will – due to their strong network in the countryside – was perceived by the government as a huge threat that needed to be controlled. In short, “the beginning of the Buddhist engagement in Vietnam was the struggle to protect the practice of Buddhism. The goal of the movement steadily widened, however, to a struggle against political oppression and for peace” (S. B. King, 1996, p. 335).

This brief overview of the historical background of Vietnam provides the backdrop for examining the formation of Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism in the later sections of this chapter. We will explore how Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices came into

being as a response to the suffering created by the political and social environments during the French colonial period and war times in the country.

Lineage of Plum Village Tradition

While Thích Nhất Hạnh is credited with coining the term “Engaged Buddhism”, the engaged Buddhist practices developed by him and others in Vietnam and the West actually have a long history in his country and its Buddhist traditions (Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000). Looking at the lineage of the Plum Village tradition in the context of the history of Buddhist social and political engagement in Vietnam, which forms the roots of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s Engaged Buddhism, will help us understand the impact that Thích Nhất Hạnh’s monastic trainings and the relevant history of the country had on his approach to presenting the Buddhist teachings and practices to the modern practitioners.

Buddhism first arrived in Vietnam through the sea route during the 1st century, when monks from India and central Asia stopped by the country on their way to China for rest. Zen Buddhism was later introduced into the country in the 3rd century by a central Asian Buddhist monk (Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000). An Indian monk, who was a student of the third patriarch of Chinese Chán Buddhism, travelled to Vietnam in the 6th century, establishing the first Zen Buddhist School (Tỳ-Ni-Đa-Lưu-Chi School) there. The second School of Zen Buddhism (Vô-Ngôn-Thông School) was founded 250 years later by a Chinese monk, who came to the country in the 9th century (Thích Thiện Ân, 1975). By the 12th century, more than four Zen Schools had been established in Vietnam (Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000). Apart from Zen, there were also other Buddhist sects being transmitted to Vietnam by foreign masters and teachers (Thích Thiện Ân, 1975).

As Thích Thiện Ân (1975) notes: “Throughout the history of Buddhism in Vietnam many distinguished monks...contributed to the nation’s welfare and enriched Vietnamese culture through their Buddhist activities, often serving as national masters or advisors to the king on important matters” (p. 177). The involvement of Buddhism in the social and political contexts in Vietnam particularly flourished between the 11th and the 13th centuries. In 1299, Vietnamese King Trần Nhân Tông (1258-1308), having handed the rule of the country to his son, joined the monkhood himself. With the Dharma named Master Trúc Lâm, he founded the Bamboo Forest School (Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000). While it is integrated with various Chinese Chán teachings as well as Confucianism and Taoism (Soucy, 2007; Thích Thiện Ân, 1975), the Bamboo Forest School “is the one uniquely Vietnamese school of Zen founded in north Vietnam rather than transferred from China” (Soucy, 2007, p. 362). The school is so significant that, Thích Nhất Hạnh attributes the idea of Engaged Buddhism to its founder – Master Trúc Lâm (Powers, 2016), noting that: “Bamboo Forest Buddhism is a kind of engaged Buddhism” which “can be applied in all aspects of life, political, social, and cultural” (Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000, p. 37).

In the 17th century, the Lâm Tế School (that is the Chinese Linji Chán School), which blends practices of Chán and Pure Land Buddhism, was brought to Vietnam (Irons, 2008; Jorgensen, 2000; Thích Thiện Ân, 1975). Vietnamese Zen Master Liễu Quán (1670-1742), a member of the 35th generation of the Lâm Tế School, was the first ancestor of the Liễu Quán lineage established in the early 18th century in Vietnam (Thầy Pháp Dung, 2006). The Liễu Quán lineage, a native offshoot of the Lâm Tế School, and the Bamboo Forest School founded by Trúc Lâm (i.e. King Trần-Nhân-Tôn) in the 13th century are widely regarded “as the only pure Zen Buddhist sects in Vietnam, since, being founded by Vietnamese masters, their

philosophy and methods of practice derive from the culture, thought, and character of the Vietnamese people” (Thích Thiện Ân, 1975, p. 27).

Thích Nhất Hạnh belongs to the 42nd generation of the Lâm Tế School and the 8th generation of the Liễu Quán lineage. His monastic trainings involved the study of the Theravāda as well as the Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings, particularly those from the Pure Land and Zen Schools (Chapman, 2007). In his own teachings, Thích Nhất Hạnh “combines the beauty of Mahāyāna Buddhism with the principal teachings of the sutras about mindfulness of breathing and the four establishments of mindfulness. The Anapanasati and the Satipathana sutras are both very important” (Chân Không, 2007, p. 279). The Mahāyāna sūtras that Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings are based on include the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, the *Diamond Sūtra*, the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutras*, and the *Sutra on the Eight Realizations of the Great Beings* (Chân Không, 2007). His principal teacher – Zen Master Chân Thật (1884-1968) of the 41st generation of the Lâm Tế school and the 7th generation of the Liễu Quán lineage – indicated that Thích Nhất Hạnh would be appointed abbot of Từ Hiếu root temple after his passing; and Thích Nhất Hạnh still holds the position today (Thầy Pháp Dung, 2006).

Vietnam became a French colony at the beginning of the 19th century. “As resistance to French occupation strengthened, Buddhism emerged as a central focus for national aspirations” (Batchelor, 1994, p. 355). The Resistance Movement against the French colonial forces that the Buddhist monks actively participated in between 1885 and 1898 was referred to as the “Monks’ War” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1967).

About two decades later in the 1920s – at the time when Thích Nhất Hạnh (born 1926) was born – a Buddhist revival movement was initiated in Vietnam, which lasted up to the beginning of the 1950s. The revival was largely²¹ inspired by the Chinese Buddhist monk and reformer Taixu’s (1890–1947) ideas of “Buddhism for this world” (*renjian fojiao*) (Batchelor, 1994; DeVido, 2007, 2009), referring to “a Buddhism which, in accordance with Buddhist teachings, reforms society, helps humankind to progress, and improves the whole world” (Taixu, cited in DeVido, 2007, p. 257). In Vietnam, the discussion of the idea of *nhân gian phật giáo*²² or “Engaged Buddhism”²³ – that is the application of the Buddhist teachings in today’s world – occurred around that time (Batchelor, 1994; Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1967). Consequently, while the Buddhist Struggle Movement came about in the 1960s and 1970s resulted from political oppression and war in Vietnam at the time, “its institutional and conceptual roots are found in the Buddhist revival of 1920-51...which established the foundations for mainstream Buddhism’s institutional growth and influence from the 1940s to the present” (DeVido, 2007, p. 251).

There are various new elements in the Buddhist reform movement in China (as well as in other countries) that inspired the Vietnamese Buddhist revival,²⁴ such as:

²¹ Other elements that contributed to the initiation of the Buddhist revival movement in Vietnam (and also in Sri Lanka, India, China and Japan) include: “Colonialism and its political, economic and cultural networks, revolution, nationalism, internationalism, the modernization ‘imperative’, access to modern media, and a love-hate relationship with Western science and Christianity” (DeVido, 2007, p. 282).

²² *Nhân gian phật giáo* is the Vietnamese term for *renjian fojiao* (Buddhism for this world) (DeVido, 2009).

²³ While both Batchelor and Thích Nhất Hạnh refer to the idea of *nhân gian phật giáo* as “Engaged Buddhism,” DeVido (2009) clarifies that the term “Engaged” was not yet used by Buddhists in Vietnam during the 1920s-1940s.

²⁴ “[T]he Chinese Buddhist ‘Revival’ was the primary model for the Vietnamese Buddhist reformers because of the long history of interactions between Chinese and Vietnamese Mahāyāna Buddhists; because most Buddhist texts in Vietnam were written in Chinese, and because many monastics, up to the first half of the twentieth-century, had received a Chinese classical education” (DeVido, 2009, p. 422).

growth of lay organizations and lay teachers of the dharma; clinics, orphanages, and schools; a radio station; proselytizing in prisons; and the effort to start an ecumenical movement with Buddhists abroad. Also, the modern revival saw Buddhist publishing houses, reorganized seminaries for Buddhist monastics, and national Buddhist associations. (DeVido, 2007, p. 257)

As we will see in later sections and chapters, many of these elements could be found in Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism. It is worth noting that Taixu, who belonged to the Chinese Linji Chán School (i.e. the Vietnamese Lâm Tế Zen School) (Irons, 2008), shared the same tradition of monastic training as Thích Nhất Hạnh. In relation to the influence that Taixu's "Buddhism for this world" (*renjian fojiao*) and the idea of *nhân gian phật giáo* developed during the Buddhist revival in the early 20th century had on Thích Nhất Hạnh's engaged approach, DeVido (2009) observes that:

in a fundamental sense, Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism directly continues the spirit of Taixu's *renjian fojiao*, as well as the earlier Vietnamese reformers' ideas, that Buddhism is of and for this world; Buddhists can and should make this world into a Pure Land. Yet the earlier generation's *nhân gian phật giáo* and Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism differ in the instrumental sense of the terms, due to different historical circumstances after 1954 (division of Vietnam into North and South and suppression of Buddhism in both areas; full-scale war throughout the country) and new transnational influences (French existentialism, Gandhi's and Vinoba Bhave's rural development ideas, and Gandhian [and Martin L. King's] non-violent resistance tactics and global struggles for social equality, peace, and justice). (pp. 438-439)

Informed by the Bamboo Forest School, Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices are based on the Lâm Tế School and the Liễu Quán lineage, which originate from Indian and Chinese

Buddhism that are rooted in the Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings. His teachings and practices, which largely emerged as a response to the suffering created during wartime Vietnam, have their origins in the history of Buddhist social and political engagement in the country as well as transnational influences at the time. Hunt-Perry and Fine (2000) comment that, despite its roots in Vietnamese history, Thích Nhất Hạnh's engaged Buddhist approach "was a departure from the twentieth-century traditional monastic Vietnamese Buddhism. A Buddhist collective action emerged which was aimed at directly influencing public policy and establishing new institutional forms" (p. 39); it "does not stop at policy change and institutional, structural change but includes fundamental consciousness transformation" (p. 48). These are the aspects of his Engaged Buddhism that we will explore next. We will consider them in light of the monastic trainings that he received (i.e. the lineage of the Plum Village tradition) and in relation to the political and social contexts of Vietnam.

Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism during wartime Vietnam

After receiving the approval of his parents, Thích Nhất Hạnh (born 1926) was ordained as a novice monk at Từ Hiếu Temple near Huế in central Vietnam at the age of 16 (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2016). According to Thích Nhất Hạnh (2016): "The fundamental training of a novice in Vietnam is essentially to practice being present in every moment and to do whatever one is doing with full awareness" (p. 183). In other words, the foundation of the Buddhist monastic training in Vietnam is the practice of mindfulness. In the temple, apart from meditation practice and Buddhist doctrine, manual labour was also integral to the monastic trainings; "Thích Nhất Hạnh reports that he spent hours every day in grueling activities such as polishing rice and carrying buckets of water until his shoulders were red and swollen" (Powers, 2016, p. 607). The importance of manual labour as part of the monastic life is evident from the daily activities of monks and nuns at Plum Village today. In fact, the daily

practice for retreatants also involves some kinds of manual labour. Drawing on the data I collected from my fieldwork there, I will give details about this aspect of Plum Village practice in Chapters 8 and 10.

Another essential part of Thích Nhất Hạnh's monastic trainings was *gāthā*, which are “short verses to recite during daily activities to help us return to mindfulness” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1997, p. 13). He recalls:

As novices, we were handed it [a small book called *Gāthās for Daily Life*] when we entered the monastery and instructed to keep it close at hand at all times, even to use it as a pillow at night. The verses in it taught us how to stay present with our own minds in order to observe ourselves throughout the ordinary actions of daily life: eating, drinking, walking, standing, lying down, and working...The mind is like a monkey swinging from branch to branch. It is not easy to catch a monkey. You have to be quick and smart, able to guess which branch the monkey will swing to next. It would be easy to shoot it, but the object here is not to kill, threaten, or coerce the monkey. The object is to know where it will go next in order to be with it. That thin book of daily verses provided us with strategies. The verses were simple, yet remarkably effective. They taught us how to observe and master all the actions of body, speech, and mind. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2000, pp. 129-130)

This small book of *gāthā*, which was written in classical Chinese, was compiled by a Zen master from China. It was later translated by Thích Nhất Hạnh into Vietnamese in order to make the practice more natural. Nowadays, the *gāthā* in the book have been translated into various languages, becoming accessible to anyone who wants to use them for practice (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2016).

Thích Nhất Hạnh has written numerous *gāthās* to help enhance our practice. At Plum village, there were *gāthās* posted in various places (e.g. toilets, dining room) to remind retreatants to return to the present moment, so that they could become more aware of their actions. In keeping with a longstanding Zen tradition, Thích Nhất Hạnh also encourages practitioners to write their own *gāthās*. As they form an indispensable part of his teachings, I will, in Chapter 10, look at whether practitioners I interviewed for my study made use of his *gāthās* and find them helpful in their practices. In addition, I will see if they composed their own and how they did it.

After being fully ordained as a Buddhist monk in 1949, Thích Nhất Hạnh entered the Báo Quốc Buddhist Academy, whose monastic education system was confined to the study of traditional Buddhist topics. However, Thích Nhất Hạnh found it important for monks in the modern times to also have contact with non-Buddhist subjects, such as Western science, literature and philosophy as well as foreign languages. As the academy refused to make changes to its limited curriculum, Thích Nhất Hạnh and a few fellow students left the academy in 1950, moving to Ân Quang Temple in Saigon and pursuing education in Western science and philosophy at Saigon University, during which he also wrote poetry and novels to support himself (Chapman, 2007). “He was one of the first bhikshus [monks] to study a secular subject at university in Saigon, and one of the first six monks to ride a bicycle” (Plum Village, n.d.-i, para. 2).

At this point, we can already see the early signs of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s foresight and readiness to defy conformity to renew Buddhism in Vietnam – from his request to the Buddhist Academy that it should reform its curriculum to enable monks to also acquire knowledge in non-Buddhist matters, to his decision to leave the Academy when his request for a curriculum

change was not accepted, to his being one of the first monks to engage in things that other monks would not do. He had a bold vision and a sense of rebellion, possessing the capacity to bring innovative elements to the traditional Buddhist teachings that would make an impact on the contemporary world.

In addition, his strong aspiration to renew Vietnamese Buddhism is reflected in the various accomplishments he achieved as a young monk in the 1950s, such as creating his own monastery, the Fragrant Palm Leaves (Phuong Bôi) Hermitage, becoming the chief editor of the leading Buddhist magazine *Vietnamese Buddhism*, as well as publishing books and newspaper articles (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1996d, 2017b). Thích Nhất Hạnh explains how his social involvement came into being and what it means:

When I was a novice in Vietnam, we young monks witnessed the suffering caused by the war. So we were very eager to practice Buddhism in such a way that we could bring it into society. That was not easy because the tradition does not directly offer Engaged Buddhism. So we had to do it by ourselves. That was the birth of Engaged Buddhism.

Buddhism has to do with your daily life, with your suffering and with the suffering of the people around you. You have to learn how to help a wounded child while still practicing mindful breathing. You should not allow yourself to get lost in action. Action should be meditation at the same time. (Malkin, 2003, para. 5-6)

His engaged approach started to materialize when, in 1954, a newspaper invited him to write some articles on Buddhism

to offer insight as to the spiritual direction we should take in order to deal with the great confusion in the country. So I wrote a series of ten articles with the title, ‘A Fresh Look at Buddhism.’ It is in this series of ten articles that I proposed the idea of Engaged Buddhism – Buddhism in the realm of education, economics, politics, and so on. So Engaged Buddhism dates from 1954. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2008b, p. 5)

Thích Nhất Hạnh therefore “was known for his reformist take on Buddhism. At a time when the Vietnamese Buddhist establishment was largely apolitical, he believed Buddhists had to engage directly with people’s suffering – and that meant getting involved in the political life of the nation” (Kyte, n.d., para. 4). Such a socially engaged approach to Buddhism had unsurprisingly upset the traditional-minded Buddhist leaders. For instance, Thích Nhất Hạnh’s writing about the idea of a humanistic, unified Buddhism in *Vietnamese Buddhism* resulted in the publication of the magazine being suspended. He laments that “the Buddhist leaders didn’t approve of my articles” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2000, p. 7).

In 1956, his name was even removed from the records of Ân Quang Temple where he had first taken up residence six years earlier, effectively expelling him from the monastic community there (Chapman, 2007). Regarding actions like these that went against him, Thích Nhất Hạnh notes: “It was still too radical for the majority of the elders in the Buddhist establishment. They dismissed many of our ideas, and steadily began to silence our voices” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, cited in Kyte, n.d., para. 11). From the remarks below by Phạm (2001), who had worked closely with Thích Nhất Hạnh during the Buddhist Movement, we can see how forward-looking he was in renewing Buddhism:

Nhất Hạnh had always been a maverick. He was a non-conformist and a solitary figure amongst his contemporaries...As far as a vision of a modern and engaged Buddhism was

concerned, Nhất Hạnh was light years ahead of other members of the Sangha, and so little wonder many monks were uncomfortable with his charisma. He sometimes complained about the conservative elders in the Buddhist Institute. (p. 347)

Despite having the goodwill and devotion to apply the Buddhist ideals in the lives of his people, Thích Nhất Hạnh (2000) describes how he and his associates suffered tremendously from the many setbacks they had encountered:

We felt lost. Our opportunity to influence the direction of Buddhism had slipped away. The hierarchy was so conservative. What chance did we – young people without position or a center of our own – have to realize our dreams? I became so sick I almost died...It felt like the end. (p. 7)

With boldness and vision as well as the help of others, however, he was determined to make Buddhism applicable to everyday life even in the face of being opposed by the Buddhist authorities.

At the beginning of 1960s, Thích Nhất Hạnh went to the United States to study comparative religion at Princeton University, and afterwards taught Buddhism at Columbia University (Kyte, n.d.; Plum Village, n.d.-i; Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2017b). One day in October 1962, Thích Nhất Hạnh heard a sermon in a Japanese Pure Land sect temple in New York. His recount of this experience below reveals his insight into the kind of Buddhist teachings that would be helpful and appealing to Western people. This reflects his deep understanding of the cultural and religious environments in the West, which paved the way for developing his approach of his Engaged Buddhism in the West later, when he would be settled in France.

I have to admit I didn't find the sermon very inspiring. Such sermons will hardly be effective in sowing seeds of Buddhism in America. The Pure Land sect emphasizes seeking salvation from what appears to be an external source. This approach is familiar to Europeans and Americans, who have plenty of seminaries and eloquent ministers to spread the word of Christian salvation. The Pure Land sect's efforts to look like Western churches seem to me to reflect their lack of understanding of the true American needs. Americans place a high value on independence. Their children are encouraged to be self-sufficient and self-reliant. A Buddhist approach that emphasizes self-effort and self-realization, like Zen, to build, develop, and awaken the individual, seems to be better suited to the American spirit. Christianity and Pure Land Buddhism have the appearance of considering that humans are too weak to achieve salvation without divine intervention...People who live in a frenetic society, exhausted by interminable plans and thoughts, thirst for the serenity and self-contentment that a path like Zen offers. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2000, pp. 96-97)

Back in Saigon, the elderly monk Thích Quảng Đức burned himself to death a few months later on 11 June 1963, in response to the increasingly discriminatory policies against Buddhists introduced by Ngô Đình Diệm, the President of the Government of South Vietnam. With more and more protests taking place, the situation escalated. In response to Diệm's destructive administration, a United States-backed coup was launched by chief generals of South Vietnam, resulting in Diệm's regime being overthrown in November (S. B. King, 1996). At the request of Thích Trí Quang (a prominent Buddhist leader at the time), Thích Nhất Hạnh returned to Vietnam in December to help with the political situation (Chapman, 2007; Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000; S. B. King, 1996). In that year, the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, which aimed to unify both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions in Vietnam, was formed (Jorgensen, 2000; S. B. King, 1996).

Self-immolations by monks and nuns (as well as laypeople) continued to happen during wartime. While it is an extreme way to go against hostilities, Thích Nhất Hạnh, in a letter to Martin Luther King Jr, stresses that it is neither an act of suicide nor even a protest, but done simply with the intention to awaken the world (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1967). He explains that

it should not be conceived as violent. It was a manifestation of the individual's inability to bear the suffering of the people and a powerful attempt by the individual to reach the hearts of others. By demonstrating in this way the suffering of war, the self-immolator hoped that those who supported or perpetuated the war would likewise become unable to bear the pain of war and stop the actions that allowed it to continue. (S. B. King, 1996, p. 336)

While self-immolation in these cases was motivated by deep compassion, it is not to say that it – not only was not bad, but was indeed a good thing to do. As Thích Nhất Hạnh clarifies:

We do not intend to say that self-immolation is good, or that it is bad. It is neither good nor bad. When you say something is good, you say that you *should* do that. But nobody can urge another to do such a thing. So such a discussion is not pursued in order to decide whether self-immolation is a good tactic in the nonviolent struggle or not. It is apart from all that. It is done to wake us up. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, cited in S. B. King, 1996, p. 336)

This corresponds to what we have discussed in Chapter 2 regarding right (or skilful) action (*sammā kammanta/samyak karmānta*)²⁵, which is not determined by external standards but one's mindful discernment of what can be done to help with a situation. Such an act cannot

²⁵ The first term is Pāli and the second is Sanskrit.

be judged in terms of moral or immoral, good or bad. Going beyond all that, it is a selfless act that comes authentically in response to a particular circumstance.

After the fall of Diệm's regime, there was a growing number of people who refused to side with the governments of the North or the South, only yearning for the war to cease through political negotiations. The United States, however, was not interested in peaceful settlements, thinking this would lead to a loss of its influence in the region and victory for the North regime. The tension between the majority of Vietnamese (who wished to end the war) and the United States (who was eager to pursue the war) continued to rise. When in January 1965 the United States added over a hundred thousand more soldiers to the South Vietnamese military, protests against war and the United States by both Buddhists and students in Vietnam expanded dramatically, with the Buddhist Struggle Movement being cracked down on a few months later. The Buddhist struggle and demonstrations that went on afterwards were never substantial enough to overthrow the government or stop the war (S. B. King, 1996).

After returning to Vietnam, Thích Nhất Hạnh co-established Lá Bối Press and Vạn Hạnh University in 1964 (Powers, 2016; Unified Buddhist Church, 2016). The latter was “the first Buddhist university organized along Western lines” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1967, p. 46), which offered the kind of extensive curriculum that Thích Nhất Hạnh had hoped for when studying at the Báo Quốc Buddhist Academy 15 years before (S. B. King, 1996). A year later in 1965, he and his associates founded the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS), a grassroots relief organization which trained young monastics and laypeople for assisting the rebuild of villages that were destroyed by war as well as helping with education and health matters (Plum Village, n.d.-i; Powers, 2016; Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2017b; Unified Buddhist Church, 2016). Being involved in the SYSS community during the war was a life-threatening

undertaking for students; while this presented a dilemma to Thích Nhất Hạnh, he continued to hold on to the ideals of the Buddhist teachings:

When a group of unknown men had attacked the SYSS dormitories and killed two students...Nhất Hạnh felt responsible for the death of those young men because he was the one who summoned them for service. But even so he refused to condemn the murderers and showed his followers that the roots of hatred and anger lie in everyone. (Phạm, 2001, p. 241)

Thích Nhất Hạnh (2000) expresses that he was “determined not to hate others, no matter how cruelly they act...[because] man is not our enemy. Our enemies are ignorance and hatred” (p. 181). This is the central principle of the nonviolent struggle against war in his Engaged Buddhism. In fact, he advised students in the SYSS to

prepare to die without hatred. Some had already been killed violently, and I cautioned the others against hating. Our enemy is our anger, hatred, greed, fanaticism, and discrimination, I told them. If you die because of violence, you must meditate on compassion in order to forgive those who killed you. When you die realizing this state of compassion, 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. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2003a, p. 104)

In 1966, Thích Nhất Hạnh established the Tiếp Hiện Order (Order of Interbeing), which is a new offshoot of the Lâm Tế School (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998). It is “a community of monastics and lay people who have committed to living their lives in accord with the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, a distillation of the Bodhisattva (Enlightened Being)

teachings of Mahayana Buddhism” (Plum Village, n.d.-k, para. 1). “The order would seek to end war and work for social justice without taking sides” (Chapman, 2007, p. 302). In the same year, Thích Nhất Hạnh received the ‘lamp transmission’ from his principal teacher Zen master Chân Thật at Từ Hiếu Temple (his root temple), qualifying him as a Dharma teacher (Plum Village, n.d.-i; Thầy Pháp Dung, 2006). Shortly after this, in May 1966, he travelled again to the United States and Western Europe to appeal for global support to cease hostilities in Vietnam. The day before he left Vietnam, he wrote this in his diary:

If some day you receive news that I have died because of someone’s cruel actions, know that I died with my heart at peace. Know that in my last moments I did not succumb to anger. We must never hate another being. If you can give rise to this awareness, you will be able to smile. Remembering me, you will continue on your path. You will have a refuge that no one can take from you. No one will be able to disturb your faith, because that faith does not rely on anything in the phenomenal world. Faith and love are one and can only emerge when you penetrate deeply the empty nature of the phenomenal world, when you can see that you are in everything and everything is in you. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2000, pp. 211-212).

This is perhaps the ultimate embodiment of his Engaged Buddhism, in which cruelty and death cannot stop one’s desire to help those who are in need nor affect one’s peace of mind and compassion towards others, including those who inflicted terrible harm on oneself. This comes as a result of one’s realization of the interbeing or empty nature of reality, which transcends all dualities of the world that we normally perceive in our daily life. In the context of my proposed theoretical model (i.e. social habitus → mindful habitus → habituslessness), that is a manifestation of habituslessness.

Another manifestation of habituslessness in relation to Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings can be seen in a conversation that he had with his student Chân Không, in which he asked:

‘If you were to die tonight, are you prepared?’ He said that we must live our lives so that even if we die suddenly, we will have nothing to regret. ‘Chân Không, you have to learn how to live as freely as the clouds or the rain. If you die tonight, you should not feel any fear or regret. You will become something else, as wonderful as you are now. But if you regret losing your present form, you are not liberated. To be liberated means to realize that nothing can hinder you, even while crossing the ocean of birth and death.’ (Chân Không, 2007, p. 293)

The liberation Thích Nhất Hạnh refers to here results from our realization of the interbeing or empty nature of birth and death – we know that we are not bound by our physical body. In habituslessness, as we have transcended all the boundaries, we live our life freely without any fear or regret; we then would not worry about when death will come.

During his trip to the West, Thích Nhất Hạnh formed an interfaith friendship with the American Christian monk Thomas Merton, who expresses that: “He is more my brother than many who are nearer to me by race and nationality because he and I see things exactly the same way. He and I deplore the war that is ravaging his country” (Merton, cited in Apel, 2006, pp. 136-137). He also met Martin Luther King Jr., who nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize in the following year. In the nomination letter, King (1967) states that: “His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity” (para. 9). In this encounter:

A strong personal bond developed between King and Nhất Hạnh, not unlike that between Merton and Nhất Hạnh. Their relationship helped to transform the Buddhist's view of Christianity as well as strengthen his appreciation for the practice of nonviolence. At the time of their last meeting, not long before King's assassination, Nhất Hạnh recalls saying to him: 'You know, Martin, in Vietnam they consider you a bodhisattva.' He could apply this Buddhist title of honor to a Christian leader because he recognized in him the same spirit of peace and love so important to his own religious tradition. (R. H. King, 2001, p. 161)

Interreligious engagement is an important aspect of Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism; *Living Buddha, Living Christ* and *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* are two of his books that particularly contribute to interfaith dialogue. In Chapter 8, based on my interview data, I will explore whether and how his approach to Buddhism is applicable and effective to people of different spiritual backgrounds and also those without any religious belief.

According to his teachings, war which causes all to suffer is the result of misunderstanding. He thus aims for reconciliation rather than victory (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2005a). His refusal to side with either the South or the North Vietnamese Government during the war led both sides to regard him as enemy. As a result, he was banned from returning to his homeland in 1967 (Kyte, n.d.; Plum Village, n.d.-i; Powers, 2016). Buddhist leaders in Vietnam also urged him not to go back to the country as he would possibly be killed or put in prison. In fact, he was almost assassinated before he left for the trip (S. B. King, 1996; Powers, 2016). It was only four decades later in the 2000s that he was allowed to return to Vietnam thrice, in 2005, 2007 and 2008, giving dharma talks, leading retreats, meeting with the leaders of the Buddhist community, publishing a number of his books in Vietnamese and leading ceremonies for

those who lost their lives in the war (Chapman, 2007; Powers, 2016; Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2017b; Unified Buddhist Church, 2016).

During the years that he was in exile, he resided mostly in France, which granted him asylum (Unified Buddhist Church, 2016). Living in exile in a foreign land – while everything and everyone he knew were in his home country – was not easy for Thích Nhất Hạnh (2016) at the very beginning:

I have to admit that the first two years of exile were quite difficult. Although I was already a forty-year-old monk with many disciples, I had still not yet found my true home. I could give very good lectures on the practice of Buddhism, but I had not truly arrived. Intellectually, I knew a lot about Buddhism: I had trained for many years in the Buddhist Institute and had been practicing since I was sixteen, but I hadn't yet really found my true home. (p. 12)

While he had excellent knowledge about Buddhism and much experience with the practice, he realized that his insight was still not very deep. During that difficult time, he remained active and met people of diverse backgrounds, getting to know their cultures and religions. He explains:

My practice was the practice of mindfulness. I tried to live in the here and now and touch the wonders of life every day. It was thanks to this practice that I survived. The trees in Europe were so different from the trees in Vietnam. The fruits, the flowers, the people, they were all completely different. The practice brought me back to my true home in the here and now. Eventually I stopped suffering... (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2016, p. 13)

For Thích Nhất Hạnh, our true home is not located in a particular country but always in the present moment. We do not need to take any transportation; our mindful breaths and steps, which free can us from the past and the future, are enough to bring us home in the here and now “because only in this moment, in this place, called the here and the now, is life possible” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2014d, p. 123). We therefore can arrive home anywhere anytime. As a result of this experience, the phrase “I have arrived, I am home”, which represents the essence of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s own practice, has become an essential teaching of Plum Village (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2016). A calligraphy of this phrase by Thích Nhất Hạnh himself can be seen at Plum Village (figure below).



Figure 5: Thích Nhất Hạnh’s calligraphy of the phrase “I have arrived, I am home” at Plum Village

He also encourages people to use this phrase when practising walking meditation:

Usually, our in-breath tends to be a little shorter than our out-breath. When you breathe in, you may take two steps and say: ‘I have arrived, I have arrived.’ When you breathe

out, you might like to take three steps and say: ‘I am home, I am home, I am home.’

‘Home’ means being at home in the present moment where you can touch all the wonders of life. We should be able to walk with a lot of tenderness and happiness on this beautiful planet. ‘I have arrived, I am home,’ is not a statement, but a practice. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2014d, p. 121)

Thích Nhất Hạnh (2016) expresses that such an insight came “precisely because I did not have a country of my own that I had the opportunity to find my true home” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2016, p. 13). In other words, his lack of a national identity created a situation in which such a breakthrough became possible. This experience of his not only demonstrates how mindfulness practice can transform suffering into insight but also signifies that suffering is a necessary condition for insight. As the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths asserts, we need to recognize our suffering (First Truth) in order to see its cause (Second Truth); we then know that our suffering will end (Third Truth) through walking on the Eightfold Noble Path (Fourth Truth).²⁶

The phrase “no mud, no lotus”, which can be seen at Plum Village, is often used by Thích Nhất Hạnh to illustrate how suffering and happiness cannot be separated from each other:

Everyone knows we need to have mud for lotuses to grow. The mud doesn’t smell so good, but the lotus flower smells very good. If you don’t have mud, the lotus won’t manifest. You can’t grow lotus flowers on marble. Without mud, there can be no lotus...suffering is a kind of mud that we need in order to generate joy and happiness. Without suffering, there’s no happiness. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2014d, p. 13)

²⁶ Please refer to Chapter 2 for more information about the Four Noble Truths.

He further explains:

If you haven't suffered hunger, you can't appreciate having something to eat. If you haven't gone through a war, you don't know the value of peace. That is why we should not try to run away from one unpleasant thing after another. Holding our suffering, looking deeply into it, and transforming it into compassion, we find a way to happiness.
(Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2014d, p. 39)

Thích Nhất Hạnh (2014d) expresses that mindfulness, which enables us to see things deeply, has the capacity to transform the mud of suffering into the lotus of compassion, understanding and happiness. While suffering is indispensable for creating happiness, he reminds that “most of us have enough suffering inside and around us to be able to do that. We don't have to create more” (p. 14). Based on my interview data, I will explore the role of suffering in cultivating one's insight and propelling one's practice in Chapter 9.

While in France, Thích Nhất Hạnh continued to visit various Western countries, seeking their support to end the Vietnam War. In 1968, he set up an office of the Unified Buddhist Church in France, which in the following year was turned into the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation chaired by himself. The delegation worked towards making an impact in the Paris Peace Talks as well as telling the world what was happening in Vietnam (S. B. King, 1996). During the early 1970s, Thích Nhất Hạnh taught Buddhism at the University of Sorbonne in Paris (Plum Village, n.d.-i; Powers, 2016). The Vietnam War eventually ended in 1975, with the country being reunified under communist rule.

I will now close this section by examining the approach of Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism during the wartime in Vietnam, outlining six major characteristics of his

involvement in the Buddhist Struggle Movement. They are: (1) Being a backstage contributor to demonstrations, (2) Adopting compassion-based nonviolent actions, (3) Refusing to side with any political forces, (4) Being an expatriate Buddhist activist, (5) Educating people about Engaged Buddhism, and (6) Acting as an exemplar of an engaged Buddhist in social movements.

(1) Being a backstage contributor to demonstrations

While numerous demonstrations took place during wartime, Thích Nhất Hạnh did not seem to be interested in joining them like many other monks and nuns did. However, this did not mean that he disapproved of this form of protest. On the contrary, he did actively contribute, but instead of participating in the protests himself, he created slogans and songs used by people during protest. His physical absence from these acts of the Buddhist Struggle Movement appeared to be due to his personality. King (1996) comments that “as a human being he was and is more of a philosopher than the kind of activist who takes to the street” (p. 349). Phạm (2001) also remarks that: “He was first and foremost a thinker and an artist” (p. 246).

Those who have listened to Thích Nhất Hạnh’s dharma talks – whether on a screen or (better) in person – would probably notice that he is a very modest, humble and gentle monk. His soft voice seems to carry a calmness that could soothe the disturbed mind.²⁷ These qualities of his also give the impression that he would not be like the kind of activist who would take to the street, chanting and shouting slogans. Besides, as seen above, in addition to being a philosopher, he was also a teacher, writer, scholar and poet;

²⁷ In fact, even his quiet presence could bring a sense of peacefulness to those around him. I will talk more about this aspect of him in Chapter 10 concerning my fieldwork data, which include my observation of his from-time-to-time appearance in the retreats, during which he was no longer able to speak due to his stroke.

creating slogans and songs was, therefore, something he would be more skilful with. As (M. L. King, 1967) comments, “he is humble and devout. He is a scholar of immense intellectual capacity...he is also a poet of superb clarity and human compassion” (para. 6). All these indicate that Thích Nhất Hạnh was clear about what he was good at, and that he engaged himself in the Buddhist Struggle accordingly.

(2) Adopting compassion-based nonviolent actions

While Thích Nhất Hạnh was an active and outspoken social activist, he was averse to “political machinations, and much more interested in pure, spiritually based pacifism motivated by love and compassion” (S. B. King, 1996, p. 326). He explains how the actions performed by Buddhists in the Struggle Movement came about:

We did not plan self-immolations or any of the other methods that were used. But confronting the situation and having compassion in our hearts, ways of acting came by themselves. You cannot prefabricate techniques of nonviolent action and put them into a book for people to use. That would be naive. If you are alert and creative, you will know what to do and what not to do. The basic requisite is that you have the essence, the substance of nonviolence and compassion in yourself. Then everything you do will be in the direction of nonviolence. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1993b, p. 45).

For him:

Nonviolence is not a dogma; it is a process. Other struggles may be fuelled by greed, hatred, fear, or ignorance, but a nonviolent one cannot use such blind sources of energy, for they will destroy those involved and also the struggle itself. Nonviolent

action, born of the awareness of suffering and nurtured by love, is the most effective way to confront adversity. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1993b, p. 39)

Because of this, when travelling to the West, he emphasized that he was there not as a political expert, but simply to let the people of the United State know the desperate condition in Vietnam as well as the intention of the demonstrations that were spearheaded by Buddhists against both the Diệm's and Kỳ's regimes in South Vietnam (Hassler, 1966).

He worked mostly for the peasants who resided in the rural areas rather than with the people in the cities, as the environment of the former was much less politicized.

Accordingly, the students of the School of Youth for Social Service, which Thích Nhất Hạnh co-founded, would live in the countryside in order to know directly the kinds of help that the peasants needed (S. B. King, 1996).

(3) Refusing to side with any political forces

Thích Nhất Hạnh's refusal to side with either the South or the North Vietnamese Government was essentially a manifestation of his teaching on interbeing. As illustrated in Chapter 3, the derived formula of interbeing is: A is made of non-A elements. Thus, the South is made of non-South elements which include the North; and the North is made of non-North elements which include the South. One side cannot exist on its own, it needs the other side for its own existence. The South and the North Vietnamese Government, therefore, inter-are. As he knows that war, which causes all to suffer, is the result of misunderstanding, he aims for reconciliation rather than victory (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2005a).

We may then argue that he (and indeed the Buddhist Struggle Movement) sided with the Vietnamese people and went against the United States, signifying that he did take a side. Let us recall that the ultimate goal of all the Buddhist teachings is ending suffering (*dukkha/duḥkha*)²⁸. During the war, the Vietnamese people were the ones who suffered tremendously. Thích Nhất Hạnh's siding with them, thus, simply meant doing whatever he could to relieve their suffering created by the war. The establishment of the School of Youth for Social Service and the Tiếp Hiện Order (Order of Interbeing) were examples of such efforts.

What, then, about Thích Nhất Hạnh's siding against the United States? S. B. King (1996) gives an answer:

The Buddhist movement obviously never opposed the American soldiers fighting in Vietnam in the sense of perpetrating or advocating any harm to them. They saw Vietnam and American soldiers alike as victims of more powerful forces that created a confluence of events in which these people were caused to kill and be killed...In opposing the United States, the Buddhists were opposing the underlying cause of the suffering of all involved, Vietnamese peasant and soldier as well as American soldier. During the war, Nhất Hạnh in particular saw the underlying cause of suffering to be the policies emanating from Washington. It was this that he opposed. (pp. 346-347)

And this was the very reason he travelled extensively to the United States and Europe to appeal for global support to cease hostilities in Vietnam. In the context of Thích Nhất

²⁸ The first term is Pāli and the second is Sanskrit.

Hạnh's engaged practice, "social action is forwarded by opposing deeds that cause suffering while adhering strictly to nonviolence in an atmosphere ideally characterized by a freedom from personal animosity with an ultimate goal of reconciliation" (S. B. King, 1996, p. 348).

(4) Being an expatriate Buddhist activist

It follows from what is said above that Thích Nhất Hạnh:

was the single most prominent expatriate Vietnamese Buddhist activist...partially because of his Western expertise and partially because of his conviction that the roots of the war were found in the United States. He saw himself as working on the root of the problem in his talks with Western leaders and his missions to the United Nations and to the Paris Peace Talks. (S. B. King, 1996, p. 350)

While Thích Nhất Hạnh regarded his travelling to the West to meet with the key people there as being of critical importance to a peaceful solution of the war in Vietnam, he emphasized that: "It was not my intention to come to the West and share Buddhism at all. But because I was forced into exile, I did. An opportunity for sharing just presented itself" (Malkin, 2003, para. 8).

(5) Educating people about Engaged Buddhism

Education in terms of propagating the teachings and practices of Engaged Buddhism, as I see it, played an important role in Thích Nhất Hạnh works during wartime. He did so through writing books, poetry and newspaper articles on the topic of Engaged Buddhism. He also established Vạn Hạnh Buddhist University, the School of Youth for Social

Service and the Tiếp Hiện Order (Order of Interbeing), which were all set up to train monastics and laypeople in applying the engaged Buddhist teachings and practices in their work and daily life during the war.

(6) Acting as an exemplar of an engaged Buddhist in social movements

While Thích Nhất Hạnh was an influential person in the Buddhist Struggle Movement in Vietnam, he did not act as a leader like Gandhi in the *satyagraha* movement in India or Martin Luther King Jr. in the civil rights movement in the United States.²⁹ And while Thích Nhất Hạnh made reference to the nonviolent actions of both Gandhi and King in his writings (DeVido, 2009), his approach of nonviolent resistance was different from theirs:

His activism has primarily taken the form of writing and speaking on behalf of peace...He has preferred to appeal to reason rather than emotion and has endeavored by word and example to show people that there are better ways of resolving conflict than by killing one another...For him nonviolence was not merely a technique: it was a manifestation in the political sphere of a spiritual way of being in the world.

(R. H. King, 2001, p. 160)

Again, this points to the important message, as illustrated in Chapters 2 and 3, that when we walk on the Eightfold Path, all our actions are simply manifestations of our right view (*samma ditthi*), that is the interbeing or empty nature of reality. The nonviolent actions that

²⁹ Basically, the Buddhist Struggle Movement is different from both Gandhi's *satyagraha* movement and Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil rights movement, in that it "was not a movement led by a single, outstanding, charismatic leader. The Buddhists who participated in the Struggle Movement, who worked in the countryside to help peasants survive, who immolated themselves for peace – these people were moved, in fact, by the ideals of their Buddhist faith" (S. B. King, 1996, p. 355).

we adopt (in whatever situation) arise naturally from our understanding that these actions can relieve or even end our suffering (which is the ultimate goal of Buddhism). And that is why Thích Nhất Hạnh regarded the nonviolence used during the wartime Vietnam as a manifestation – in the political sphere (i.e. in the particular context of the Struggle Movement) – of a spiritual way of being in the world rather than just a technique to end the war. And his own adoption of the engaged practice in the movement – that is being an exemplar of an engaged Buddhist – is itself a very powerful way to educate people about Engaged Buddhism (i.e. the characteristic just outlined above).

Next, I will examine Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism in the post-war period, when he was already settled in France. As the political and social contexts in France were very different from those of wartime Vietnam, we will explore how Thích Nhất Hạnh adapted his engaged teachings and practices to suit the new environment.

Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism after war in Vietnam

After the Vietnam War ended in 1975, Thích Nhất Hạnh worked to rescue Vietnamese refugees, known as boat people, who attempted to get away from the country by boat and ship (Swearer, 2010b). In the following year, while attending a conference in Singapore, Thích Nhất Hạnh, with the help of others, rented two large ships, trying to rescue these people, who risked their life in crowded, unseaworthy boats on tempestuous water. Although they had successfully saved a few hundred people from their unseaworthy boats at the Gulf of Thailand, their actions upset the government of Singapore, causing Thích Nhất Hạnh and his associates to stop their rescue attempts to help these boat people to land in Guam and Australia. Fortunately, in the last critical moment, Thích Nhất Hạnh and his group managed to bring the boat people to safety without leaving them to die in the sea. Their efforts also

drew the world's attention to the difficult situation of the boat people, leading governments of various countries to increase their quotas for these people to settle in their land (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1993b, 2016). Thích Nhất Hạnh (2016) attributes all these outcomes to their continued meditation practice during those difficult times:

During those days, we practiced sitting and walking meditation, and eating our meals in silence in a very concentrated way. We knew that without this kind of discipline, we would fail in our work. The lives of many people depended on our mindfulness practice.
(p. 62)

After this, he retreated for five years to the Sweet Potato Hermitage, which he co-created in 1975 near Paris, focusing on his own meditation practice and writing (Plum Village, n.d.-i; Powers, 2016; Unified Buddhist Church, 2016). At the beginning, there was just a small community residing in the hermitage; but as more and more people joined their practice over time, the hermitage ran out of space to house its guests. Consequently, Thích Nhất Hạnh bought land in southern France, where, in 1982, he and his colleagues established Plum Village. “In keeping with the traditional ideals of the Lâm Tế order, Plum Village emphasizes incorporation of meditation into everyday life. Every activity – including washing, food preparation, walking, or work – is an opportunity for mindfulness training” (Powers, 2016, p. 612). Based on the data collected from my fieldwork, Chapters 8 and 10 will take a more detailed look at how the Plum Village community incorporated meditation into their daily activities.

Over the years, Plum Village has gradually grown into the largest Buddhist monastery in the West with more than 200 monastics residing there (Plum Village, 2019a; Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2017b). Since 2000, ten other monasteries and practice centres have been established in

different parts of the world, including three in the United States, three in Europe and four in the Asia-Pacific region. They are: Blue Cliff Monastery (New York), Deer Park Monastery (California), Magnolia Grove Monastery (Mississippi), European Institute of Applied Buddhism (Germany), Healing Spring Monastery (near Paris), Maison de l’Inspir (Paris), Thai Plum Village (Thailand), Asian Institute of Applied Buddhism (Hong Kong), Stream Entering Monastery (near Melbourne) and Mountain Spring Monastery (near Sydney). Overall, there are more than 600 monks and nuns in the Plum Village monastic community worldwide today (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2016).

Apart from establishing monasteries and mindfulness practice centres around the world, another major accomplishment of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s during the last two decades has been to make mindfulness practice more accessible to young people. In 2008, he launched Wake Up, which is a global movement for young people aged 18-35, to practice mindfulness together in order to help create a more compassionate and sustainable society (Unified Buddhist Church, 2016; Wake Up International, 2019). In 2010, he initiated Wake Up Schools, which provides training to educators in mindfulness, enabling them to apply the practice in educational contexts (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2017b; Wake Up Schools, 2017). The importance of young people as a target of his teachings is also reflected in the annual summer retreat at Plum Village, where programs are offered that are specifically aimed at children and teenagers.

In fact, during his trip back to Vietnam in 2005, Thích Nhất Hạnh appeared to keep “emphasizing that the Plum Village practice has been presented in a way that is appropriate for the young and the intellectuals of the West” (Fleet, cited in Chapman, 2007, p. 316). This appears to have resulted from what Thích Nhất Hạnh and his associates had observed in Western society:

...many people in the West yearn for understanding and love. Many Western children are exposed to physical and sexual abuse, often from parents who are addicted to alcohol or who are psychologically disturbed. Many of the stories that we've heard over the years from retreat participants have moved us deeply. No one has dropped any bombs on these people, but their hearts are battlefields, torn apart by the bombs of cruelty and ignorance. This kind of suffering can be even more painful than the lack of physical nourishment. (Chân Không, 2007, pp. 251-252)

For more than four decades while living in exile, Thích Nhất Hạnh travelled regularly around the world, giving talks and leading retreats for diverse groups of people, including prisoners, businessmen, psychologists, war veterans, Israelis and Palestinians, scientists and police officers (Chapman, 2007; Plum Village, n.d.-h). He has also written more than 100 books in English, which cover a variety of topics – e.g. mindfulness practices, commentaries on Buddhist *sūtra*, interfaith dialogue, poetry, children's stories, relationships and ecology – with many of them being translated into different languages. Accordingly, Queen (2012) notes that:

the majority of engaged Buddhists in Asia and the West are not involved in political activism. A great many are involved in 'service dharma' – helping the poor, ministering to the incarcerated, the dying, and the socially marginalized. In this they are no different from the teaching and medical missionaries from the Christian denominations and secular organizations such as the International Red Cross, Red Crescent, and Doctors Without Borders. Yet the Engaged Buddhists offer something not offered by the others. This is a philosophy of interdependence, impermanence, and universality which sees all people is [sic] equally subject to suffering and exploitation, and equally capable of realizing freedom and dignity. They have conceptions of loving-kindness, compassion, altruistic joy, and equanimity which are supported by specific techniques of cultivation. (p. 255)

As the focus of Thích Nhất Hạnh's engaged teachings and practices has shifted from the socio-political issues at the international level during wartime Vietnam to the social issues at the personal and community level after his settling down in the West, some critics argue that his approach "encourages a 'quietism' with respect to socially engaged practice in the public arena" (Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000, p. 62). For others, "[t]he assumption that individual transformation and even small sanghas functioning as base communities can effect real social transformation is naïve and idealistic" (Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000, p. 61).

Thích Nhất Hạnh's (1996c) words below, pointing out the connection between issues at the individual and the global level as well as the role of mindfulness in it, could perhaps give a response to these kinds of criticism:

Do our daily lives have nothing to do with our government? Please meditate on this question. We seem to believe that our daily lives have nothing to do with the situation of the world. But if we do not change our daily lives, we cannot change the world...When we pick up a Sunday newspaper, we should know that in order to print that edition, which sometimes weights 10 or 12 pounds, they had to cut down a whole forest. We are destroying our Earth without knowing it. Drinking a cup of tea, picking up a newspaper, using toilet paper, all these things have to do with peace. Nonviolence can be called 'awareness.' We must be aware of what we are, of who we are, and of what we are doing. When I became a novice in a Buddhist monastery, I was taught to be aware of every act during the day. Since then, I have been practicing mindfulness and awareness. (p. 107)

Hunt-Perry and Fine (2000) explain how Thích Nhất Hạnh's change of focus of his Engaged Buddhism in a Western context is appropriate and even necessary:

Thích Nhất Hạnh – in looking deeply at the root of violence, loneliness, materialism, and sorrow in Western society – has correctly seen that individual and family healing is a necessary link to cultural and political transformation. We believe that changes in public policy can indeed be advanced as socially engaged activists strengthen their individual and collective practice of mindfulness as a foundation for their activism. Peacemaking from this perspective is an all-inclusive, living activity that enters all levels of existence from the so-called internal, to family interactions, to movement-building in order to forge beneficial public policy and transform consciousness. (pp. 61-62)

This resonates what McMahan (2008) observes: “In many places where Buddhism has become a significant presence, it has been introduced and adapted in highly specific ways” (p. 19). Therefore, “even though he may be less actively involved in social causes than he once was, he remains a global thinker sensitive to social issues” (R. H. King, 2001, p. 165). Because, for Thích Nhất Hạnh:

If we transform our individual consciousness, we begin the process of changing the collective consciousness. Transforming the world’s consciousness is not possible without personal change. The collective is made of the individual, and the individual is made of the collective, and each and every individual has a direct effect on the collective consciousness. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2003a, p. 56)

The focus of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s Engaged Buddhism on changes at a personal level is particularly relevant to this research, as I consider the impact of his teachings on the practitioner’s habitus, which according to both the Buddhist teachings and the social theory will also have an effect on the external environment.

In November 2014 when Thích Nhất Hạnh had just had his 89th birthday, he suffered a serious stroke. He was hospitalized in France for almost five months and later on travelled to the United States for about six months for further treatment. He returned to Plum Village in France in January 2016 and stayed there until the end of the year. (Plum Village, 2014a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016a). It was during this period of his last stay in the monastery that I conducted my fieldwork there for four months from April to July 2016.

The stroke left Thích Nhất Hạnh paralyzed on his right side and unable to speak. However, despite his physical condition, “he has continued to offer the Dharma and inspiration through his peaceful, serene and valiant presence” (Plum Village, n.d.-i). He once said that: “In Buddhism we see that teaching is done not only by talking, but also by living your own life. Your life is the teaching, is the message...I’ll continue to teach, if not by Dharma talks then in my way of sitting, eating, smiling, and interacting with the Sangha...” (Plum Village, 2015a, para. 9). While doing my research there, I saw him come out in a wheelchair to be with the community many times, and on a few occasions I was in close proximity to him. Based on my observations and my interviews with the participants in my fieldwork, I will discuss how he attempted to continue to teach after his stroke and what impact this had on the retreatants in Chapter 10.

In early December 2016, Thích Nhất Hạnh left France for Plum Village in Thailand (which is known as Thai Plum Village), intending to stay in an environment that was more conducive to his health recovery and wellbeing. While there, Thích Nhất Hạnh visited Vietnam briefly in August 2017, which marked his fourth return to the country since being exiled (he had last visited Vietnam in 2008) (Plum Village, 2016b, 2017). He continued to stay in Thai Plum Village until late October 2018, when he went back to Vietnam again, as he had decided “to

reside at his ‘root temple,’ Tu Hieu Temple in Hue, Vietnam, to live his remaining days” (Plum Village, 2018, para. 1). In late November 2019, he travelled to Thailand, staying in Thai Plum Village for five weeks for check-ups on his health (Plum Village, 2019b). He returned to Vietnam in early January 2020 (Plum Village, 2020).

Summary

Considering the backdrop of the history of Buddhist social engagement in Vietnam and Thích Nhất Hạnh’s own monastic trainings, allows us to see Thích Nhất Hạnh’s Engaged Buddhism in a wider context, as it emerged in the midst of suffering during wartime Vietnam. This period of his monastic career highlights Thích Nhất Hạnh’s determination, boldness and visionary capacities in renewing Buddhism in such a way that could help relieve the suffering of the people in his homeland. The process of the formation of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s Engaged Buddhism not only reveals the differences and similarities between his teachings and the traditional teachings of mindfulness and Buddhist philosophy (research question 2), but also demonstrates the characteristics of his teachings and practices (research question 1).

After settling in France, Thích Nhất Hạnh’s creativity and knowledge of Western cultures enabled him to adapt his engaged teachings and practices to suit his contemporary Western audience. His humble and gentle presence, despite himself being a world-renowned Zen teacher with many followers worldwide, reflects Thích Nhất Hạnh’s wealth of wisdom and compassion. All these provide us with further information about the characteristics of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings and practices (research question 1).

Chapter 7

Key Teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh

Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of Thích Nhất Hạnh's key teachings, focusing on the Five Mindfulness Trainings and the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing (Tiếp Hiện Order), which are designed to make the Buddhist doctrines relevant to the daily life of modern society. The discussion in this chapter will pave the way for the following chapters, where I analyze how Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and the practices at Plum Village could transform practitioners' habitus, and thus have an impact on our society because our habitus and society are of an interbeing nature. As discussed in Chapter 4, in Engaged Buddhism, inner (i.e. habitus) transformation is a prerequisite for outer (i.e. society) transformation. The practices that are offered at Plum Village to facilitate habitus transformation will be the topic of Chapters 8 and 10. This chapter deals with three research questions: (1) What are the characteristics of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices? (2) What are the differences and similarities between his teachings and the traditional teachings of mindfulness and Buddhist philosophy? (4) What are the philosophical and experiential implications of mindfulness for our understanding of categorical distinctions (e.g. self and other, human and nonhuman)?

The Five Mindfulness Trainings

The Five Mindfulness Trainings are a contemporary version of the Five Precepts (*pañca sīla/pañca śīla*), which are the ethical principles – no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, and no taking of intoxicants – that lay Buddhists follow. These precepts belong to the second training of the Noble Eightfold Path – morality – which

consists of right speech, right action and right livelihood (Irons, 2008). While traditionally the Five Precepts primarily serve as the core ethical code for followers of Buddhism, Thích Nhất Hạnh renewed and reworded them “in such a way that everyone can apply them, regardless of spiritual tradition or cultural background” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2003a, p. 72). According to Thích Nhất Hạnh:

The Five Mindfulness Trainings represent the Buddhist vision for a global spirituality and ethic. They are a concrete expression of the Buddha’s teachings on the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path...To practice the Five Mindfulness Trainings is to cultivate the insight of interbeing, or Right View, which can remove all discrimination, intolerance, anger, fear, and despair. (Plum Village, n.d.-e, para. 6)

The Five Mindfulness Trainings, that is the modernized version of the Five Precepts, are therefore non-sectarian and universal in nature (Plum Village, n.d.-e). During the past two decades, more than 100,000 people around the world have received the Five Mindfulness Trainings in a formal ceremony (Plum Village, n.d.-i). And to enable these mindfulness trainings to be more applicable to the ever-changing world of our everyday life, they are updated from time to time as needed.

Thích Nhất Hạnh previously called these ethical principles “precepts” instead of “mindfulness trainings”. The change was later made because – as he describes –

many Western friends told me that the word ‘precepts’ evokes in them a strong feeling of good and evil; that if they ‘break’ the precepts, they feel great shame. During the time of the Buddha, the word *shila* (precepts) was usually used for these five practices, but the word *shiksha* (trainings) was also often used. Since the meaning of the latter is more

consistent with the understanding of how to practice them, without an absolute, black-and-white connotation, I have begun translating these practices as the Five Mindfulness Trainings. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2007c, p. 118)

Besides, he finds “mindfulness trainings” to be more effective in conveying the message that these precepts are not “commandments” or rules imposed by an authority from the outside. These precepts are not instructions commanded by the Buddha but “the insights born from directly observing suffering and the causes of suffering. They are the most concrete expression of the practice of mindfulness. That is why it is appropriate and helpful to describe them as ‘mindfulness trainings’” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2005a, p. 90). In other words: “Moral action is not obedience to a divine will nor the application of principles derived from reason. It is a response to an open investigation of reality” (Strain, 2014, p. 94). Thus, the change in terminology “again focused practitioners’ awareness on inner determination rather than external authority as the source of the intention to cultivate nonharming ways of acting and thinking” (Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000, p. 50). Essentially, “[u]nderstanding, rather than fear of punishment, is the reason for following the precepts” (Dhammananda, 2002, p. 226).

Also, “[p]recepts usually begin with admonitions concerning the body, such as not to kill. The Mindfulness Trainings...are the opposite – the ones concerning the mind come first. According to the teachings of the Buddha, the mind is the root of everything else” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2005a, p. 90). For this reason, Thích Nhất Hạnh now begins the description of each of the Five Mindfulness Trainings with the wording “Aware of the suffering caused by...” (Plum Village, n.d.-e) while formerly (when he still referred these ethical principles to as “precepts”) the wording “Do not...” was used (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1993a). The updated expression in each of the Mindfulness Trainings is then

continued with a commitment, arising out of that awareness, to cultivate beneficial qualities and refrain from action harmful to oneself and society. With the new wording, the commitment or vow undertaken in receiving the five precepts was clearly understood as a determination one was making from one's own awareness and insight, rather than in obedience to an authority perceived to be external to oneself, as could be felt in the imperative form. (Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000, p. 50)

Moreover, Thích Nhất Hạnh provides each of the Five Mindfulness Trainings with a title – namely (1) reverence for life, (2) true happiness, (3) true love, (4) loving speech and deep listening, and (5) nourishment and healing – to represent the ethical principles of no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, and no taking of intoxicants stated in the Five Precepts respectively. Compared with the Five Precepts, the new titles (and the new interpretations) in the Five Mindfulness Trainings not only give a more positive and encouraging tone to the descriptions of the ethical principles but have also expanded the scope of the original precepts to make them more relevant to contemporary society.

Below are the first few sentences of each of the Five Mindfulness Trainings³⁰ (Plum Village, n.d.-e):

(1) Reverence For Life

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating the insight of interbeing and compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, or in my way of life...

³⁰ The full version of the Five Mindfulness Trainings can be found in Appendix A.

(2) True Happiness

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I am committed to practicing generosity in my thinking, speaking, and acting. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others; and I will share my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need...

(3) True Love

Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I am committed to cultivating responsibility and learning ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society. Knowing that sexual desire is not love, and that sexual activity motivated by craving always harms myself as well as others, I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without true love and a deep, long-term commitment made known to my family and friends...

(4) Loving Speech and Deep Listening

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and compassionate listening in order to relieve suffering and to promote reconciliation and peace in myself and among other people, ethnic and religious groups, and nations. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am committed to speaking truthfully using words that inspire confidence, joy, and hope...

(5) Nourishment and Healing

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I am committed to cultivating good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming. I will practice looking deeply into how I consume the Four Kinds of Nutriment, namely edible foods, sense impressions, volition, and consciousness. I am determined not to gamble, or to use alcohol, drugs, or

any other products which contain toxins, such as certain websites, electronic games, TV programs, films, magazines, books, and conversations...

These mindfulness trainings – a contemporary reinterpretation of the traditional precepts – have expanded the scope of the original ethical principles to include aspects that are specific to today's world, such as social injustice, oppression and climate change as well as international, inter-ethnic and inter-religious reconciliations. For the Third Mindfulness Training, in addition to speaking truthfully, that is not telling lies (which the Third Precept asserts), compassionate listening is also essential. The Fifth Mindfulness Training indicates that unmindful consumption is concerned not just with taking alcohol and drugs (as the Fifth Precept claims), but anything containing toxins, such as certain kinds of food, websites, electronic games, TV programs, films, magazines, books and conversations.

Let us take the Fifth Mindfulness Training as an example to see how the scope of the original Fifth Precept has been broadened. Traditionally, the precept advises us to avoid intoxicating alcohol and drugs primarily because they “tend to mental distraction and confusion” (Nārada, 1998, p. 472). But the mindfulness training, in accordance with the interbeing nature of our existence, also links the consumption of alcohol to the harmful effects it has on others.

When we consider the drinking of alcohol through the Fifth Mindfulness Training, we see that the production of alcohol creates suffering. Drinking alcohol causes disease in the body and the mind, and leads to many deaths in car accidents. Alcohol production requires large amounts of grain that could be used to feed the starving people of the world. Alcohol is directly related to the suffering of children. For instance, to make one glass of rice wine takes a whole basket of rice. Every day 40,000 children die in the world for lack of food. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2003a, p. 77)

Accordingly, we see that the Fifth Training also links to: the First Training (Reverence For Life) because alcohol is related to the death of the starving children, the Second Training (True Happiness) because people and food are exploited for producing alcohol, the Third Training (True Love) because alcohol consumption tends to irresponsible sexual behaviours, and the Fourth Training (Loving Speech and Deep Listening) because encouraging others to drink involves unmindful speech. The Five Mindfulness Trainings, therefore, “are interrelated because the practice of mindfulness is interwoven into all aspects of our life. We ourselves are interrelated – any action we do has an effect on everything around us” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2003a, p. 76). Practising one training is, therefore, at the same time practising all other trainings as well.

As mentioned above, the Five Precepts are the core ethical code for lay followers of Buddhism; the precepts therefore “were originally probably intended to be given to a layman in order to initiate him into the Buddhist faith” (Terwiel, 2012, p. 188). This arguably still applies to regions such as China, where Buddhism and other religions exist alongside each other; the Five Precepts are thus taken as part of the lay ordination. But for Buddhist countries like Thailand, where most people were presumably born Buddhists, taking the Five Precepts does not have much to do with one’s initiation into Buddhism (Terwiel, 2012). However, despite their differences regarding the relationship between taking the precepts and the initiation aspect, taking the Five Precepts does imply one’s Buddhist identity in both cases; and the Five Precepts are also always taken together as one whole.

Receiving the Five Mindfulness Trainings, on the other hand, has nothing to do with one’s religious identity. As shown earlier, the trainings are non-sectarian and universal in nature;

anyone can practice them regardless of their spiritual tradition or cultural background.

Receiving them in a formal ceremony does not imply any religious identity but is simply an open declaration of one's commitment and determination to practice these trainings.

Moreover, unlike the Five Precepts which are traditionally always taken as a whole, people are allowed to receive only certain mindfulness trainings at a particular time if they are not ready to receive all five of them; because “[i]f you practice even one mindfulness training deeply, you will find that you are also keeping the other four, even without making a formal promise to do so. The Five Mindfulness Trainings are very much interconnected” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2007b, p. 107).

Those who aspire to receive the mindfulness trainings can usually do so at retreats. They would fill in an application form to express their wish to receive all or only certain of the five trainings in a formal transmission ceremony held at the end of a retreat period. During that time, they could also request a Dharma name to encourage their own practice.

Regarding one's readiness to receive the trainings, Thích Nhất Hạnh (2006) explains that we do not need to be fully doing what the trainings set out before we can receive them; the key is to be mindful in whatever we do. He says:

When somebody comes to us and asks if he or she should stop drinking before receiving the five mindfulness trainings (the precepts), we always tell them that they can continue to drink, but they must drink mindfully. If you drink your wine mindfully for a week, and you practice deeply, you will stop drinking after a few weeks. Nothing is forced on you; it is your own understanding, your wisdom, that tells you how to behave, that tells you how to conduct your everyday life. (pp. 76-77)

Karunadasa (2001) also notes that:

the Noble Eight-fold Path can be followed at different levels or in varying degrees of intensity. If one cannot follow it fully, one can follow it as far as possible. If the best thing is to realize the ideal, the next best thing is to be nearer the ideal...The ideal is the source of inspiration to do the right thing and to resist from doing the wrong thing. (p. 14)

Receiving the trainings can therefore motivate practitioners to realize as much as possible of what the trainings set out.

The ordinees receive a Five Mindfulness Trainings Certificate after the transmission ceremony. They are then encouraged to recite the trainings at least monthly so that they could progressively deepen their practice. If they do not recite the trainings at least trimonthly with their practice community, the validity of the transmission will be lost and they will need to take the trainings again (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2007b).

Based on my interview data, I will examine, in Chapter 10, what led my interview participants to receive (or not to receive) the Five Mindfulness Trainings and what that meant to them, particularly to those who came from a different spiritual background. I will also look at why some of them only took some but not all five of the trainings as well as the reasons why a few others took the trainings more than once.

The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing (Tiếp Hiện Order)

The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings are a set of ethical guidelines that the members of the Order of Interbeing (Tiếp Hiện Order)³¹ commit to follow and practice. As mentioned before, the Order of Interbeing – a new branch of the Lâm Tế School – is an international Buddhist community which consists of monastics and laypeople. It was established by Thích Nhất Hạnh in 1966 as a response to the critical and desperate situation of the Vietnam War.

For Thích Nhất Hạnh (2008b), the Vietnam War was a fight between two different ideologies – the Marxist-Leninist ideology held by the North (which was supported by China and the Soviet Union) and the ideology of personalism and capitalism held by the South (which was backed by the United States). He laments:

Not only did we fight with ideologies imported from the outside, but we also fought with weapons imported from the outside – guns and bombs from Russia, China, and America. As Buddhists who practice peace and reconciliation, brotherhood and sisterhood, we did not want to accept such a war. You cannot accept a war where brothers are killing brothers with ideologies and weapons imported from the outside.
(pp. 7-8)

The Order of Interbeing, which worked towards ending war and resolving social concerns without siding with any political forces, is thus an institutional expression of Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism (Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000).

³¹ Please refer to Chapter 3 regarding the meanings of the Vietnamese term *Tiếp Hiện*.

In February 1966, six people from the board of the School of Youth for Social Service were ordained by Thích Nhất Hạnh into the Order of Interbeing. This first batch of members of the Order consisted of three women and three men who were in their 20s or early 30s. Among them, “the three women chose to live celibate lives like nuns, although they did not shave their heads or take all the formal vows of Buddhist nuns, and the three men chose to marry and practice as lay Buddhists” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998, p. vii). Nhất Chi Mai, one of the female ordines, immolated herself for peace in May the following year. Thích Nhất Hạnh (1993b) recalls:

she placed a statue of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, and a statue of the Virgin Mary in front of her, and burned herself alive at the Từ Nghiêm Temple, a nunnery. She left behind letters to the Presidents of North and South Vietnam, imploring them to stop the fighting. She wrote one letter to me: ‘Thầy, don’t worry too much. We will have peace soon.’³² Nhất Chi Mai moved the hearts of millions of her countrymen, evoking the force of love. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1993b, p. 44)

After the first ordination, there were no new members joining the Order until 1981 – after a “period of experimentation” for 15 years – when the 7th member was ordained (Eppsteiner, 2017; Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000). In 1988, Cao Ngọc Phương, another female ordinee of the initial batch of the Order’s members, was ordained as a nun by Thích Nhất Hạnh, who gave her the Dharma name Chân Không (which means “True Emptiness”). She has been a close associate of Thích Nhất Hạnh after she became his student at the end of 1959 (Chân Không, 2007). She resides at Plum Village in France, leading key mindfulness practices there, such as Beginning Anew and Total Relaxation, which I will discuss more in Chapter 10.

³² His followers often refer to Thích Nhất Hạnh as “Thầy” which means “teacher” in Vietnamese (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2016).

The Order also had its first Western monastic member in 1988 (Plum Village, 2019c). Since then, more and more members have been ordained into the monastic community, which now has more than 600 monks and nuns worldwide (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2016). The Order also has over 2,000 lay members in local communities across the globe (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2012a).

The Order of Interbeing comprises two communities – the core community and the extended community. While members in both communities practise the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, the members of the former have formally received all the trainings in a transmission ceremony, having made the commitment to live their lives in according to them. The members of the extended community, on the other hand, have not made such a formal commitment yet; they are at the stage of attempting to apply the trainings in their daily life (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2005a).

For those who wish to be ordained into the core community of the Order, receiving the Five Mindfulness Trainings is a prerequisite. After that, they need to first declare their aspiration to join the core community, in writing, to the local core community (or appropriate Dharma Teachers³³ if there is not a community around the area). They will then participate in a mentorship with at least one member of the core community and practise the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings with the community for at least one year. After formally receiving the Fourteen Trainings, they have to continue their practice with a community. That is how the extended community provides support to people both before and after they are ordained (Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000; Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998, 2005a).

³³ Dharma Teachers “are members of the core community who have been selected as teachers based on their stability in the practice and ability to lead a happy life. They function to inspire joy and stability in the local Sanghas” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998, p. 108).

In terms of ordination, the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings are different from the Five Mindfulness Trainings in that the former need to be received as a whole; people are not allowed to receive only certain of them. In addition, “[w]hereas the decision to receive the five mindfulness trainings was an individual one, more and more emphasis was placed on sponsorship by a sangha, a community of practitioners, in the decision to receive the fourteen” (Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000, p. 49). This brings out the importance of practising with a sangha, which is another key aspect of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s Engaged Buddhism. Based on my interview data, I will investigate, in Chapter 8, whether my interview participants practised with a community and how that helped their practice if they did.

In sangha practice, “monks, nuns, and lay people enjoy equality in the Order of Interbeing” in order to “protect and respect the freedom and responsibility of each member of the community” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998, p. 107). During my fieldwork at Plum Village, I observed that no one – whether monastics or laypeople – enjoyed privilege in the various aspects of the everyday life there, such as work duties. I will discuss, in Chapters 8 and 10, how such an equality was embodied at Plum Village on a daily basis, and how it could protect and respect the freedom and responsibility of everyone there.

There is a brown jacket that laypeople in the core community could wear to show their identity (and this was how I recognized them at retreats during my fieldwork at Plum Village). There are some rules they need to observe; for example, they are required

to practice at least sixty days of retreat, days of mindfulness, each year, whether consecutively or divided into several periods. If they practice every Sunday, for instance, they will have fifty-two already. The people in the extended community can do that, or more, even if they don’t want to be ordained. In the core community people can choose to

observe celibacy or lead a family life. At least once every two weeks, members and friends come together and recite the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2005a, p. 89).

As with the Five Mindfulness Trainings, if the members of the core community do not recite the trainings at least trimonthly, the validity of the ordination will be lost, and they will need to take the trainings again.

The Order of Interbeing, having an emphasis on the Bodhisattva (Enlightened Being) ideal of Mahāyāna Buddhism, holds that spiritual practice should be the foundation for all our actions in daily life. Its members “seek to change themselves in order to change society in the direction of compassion and understanding by living a joyful and mindful life” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998, pp. 106-107). In order to do this, the following four principles are observed (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998):

- (1) Nonattachment from views – This is the foremost teaching of the Buddha; it means not being caught in ideologies, preconceptions, beliefs and conventions.
- (2) Direct experimentation on the nature of interdependent origination through meditation – This principle highlights that insight, which is not the same as intellectual understanding, does not come from research findings. Insight into truth only arises from direct experience of reality.
- (3) Appropriateness – For the Buddhist teachings to be able to provide help, they need to be relevant to today’s society.
- (4) Skillful means – They are the methods and images used to provide guidance, in accordance with individuals’ own abilities and situations, on walking the path shown by the Buddha.

According to Thích Nhất Hạnh (1998), the first and the second principle, which are conducive to open-mindedness and compassion, are the keys to true understanding. The third and the fourth principle, which are conducive to creativity and reconciliation, show the way to act in daily life. Grounded in these principles, the Order draws inspiration not only from the Buddha's teachings but also from the teachings of other spiritual traditions. Without adopting any particular Buddhist scriptures as its fundamental discourse, the Order aims to actualize the essence of the Buddha's teachings found in all scriptures, regardless of whether they are from the early Buddhist traditions or from the Buddhist schools that developed afterwards. "It seeks all forms of action that can revive and sustain the true spirit of insight and compassion in life. It considers this spirit to be more important than any Buddhist institution or tradition" (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998, p. 106).

The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings – a contemporary version of the 58 Bodhisattva precepts listed in the *Sūtra of the Net of Brahma* of Mahāyāna Buddhism – serve as the guidelines for people who wish to live a mindful lifestyle in accordance with the Eightfold Path (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998, 2003b, 2012a). Similar to what we discussed earlier about Thích Nhất Hạnh's renaming of the Five Precepts to the Five Mindfulness Trainings, the Fourteenth Mindfulness Trainings were also previously referred to as the Fourteen Precepts. Like the Five Trainings, the Fourteenth Trainings are updated regularly so that they can be more applicable to the modern societies, which are evolving unceasingly (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998).

While all of the Fourteen Trainings are essentially interrelated, they could be roughly divided into three groups: The First to the Seventh Training are concerned with the mind, the Eighth and the Ninth Training with speech, and the Tenth to the Fourteenth Training with the body. Like the Eightfold Path, which begins with the mind in its first two path factors (i.e. right

view and right intention), the Fourteen Trainings also begin with the mind in the first seven trainings. Similar to the Five Trainings, each of the Fourteen Trainings has the wording “Aware of/that” at the beginning of its description (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998, 2012a) while formerly (when they were still referred to as “precepts”) the wording “Do not...” was used (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1993a). Again, the approach of putting the mind first in the mindfulness trainings is different from the rules or commandments found in many other religions, which deal firstly with bodily actions by forbidding certain behaviours (e.g. Do not kill). This is because, for the Buddha, everything starts with the mind (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998).

As noted at the beginning of this section, the establishment of Order of Interbeing was a response to the suffering created by the war in Vietnam, which, for Thích Nhất Hạnh, was a battle between different ideologies. Thích Nhất Hạnh (2005a) asserts that it is more dangerous for one to stick to an ideology believing it is the only truth than for one to have a gun; because while the latter can shoot a few people, the former can kill millions. The First Mindfulness Training below (Plum Village, n.d.-f) provided “a direct answer to the war. Everyone was ready to die and to kill for their beliefs” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2008b, p. 8).

The First Mindfulness Training: Openness

Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. We are committed to seeing the Buddhist teachings as guiding means that help us develop our understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill, or die for. We understand that fanaticism in its many forms is the result of perceiving things in a dualistic and discriminative manner. We will train ourselves to look at everything with openness and the insight of interbeing in order to transform dogmatism and violence in ourselves and in the world.

It is important to point out again that right view (the 1st path factor of the Eightfold Path) is not a particular view but “the absence of all views” because wisdom and insight are not views (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2008b, p. 8).

Clinging fanatically to an ideology or a doctrine not only prevents us from learning, but also creates bloody conflicts. The worst enemies of Buddhism are fanaticism and narrowness...Holy wars do not have a place in Buddhism, because killing destroys the value of Buddhism itself. The destruction of lives and moral values during the Vietnam War was very much the fruit of fanaticism and narrowness. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998, p. 25)

Let us have a look at the opening sentence of each of the remaining 13 mindfulness trainings³⁴ (Plum Village, n.d.-f):

The Second Mindfulness Training: Non-Attachment to Views

Aware of the suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions, we are determined to avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views...

The Third Mindfulness Training: Freedom of Thought

Aware of the suffering brought about when we impose our views on others, we are determined not to force others, even our children, by any means whatsoever – such as authority, threat, money, propaganda, or indoctrination – to adopt our views...

³⁴ The full version of the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings can be found in Appendix B.

The Fourth Mindfulness Training: Awareness of Suffering

Aware that looking deeply at the nature of suffering can help us develop understanding and compassion, we are determined to come home to ourselves, to recognise, accept, embrace and listen to suffering with the energy of mindfulness...

The Fifth Mindfulness Training: Compassionate, Healthy Living

Aware that true happiness is rooted in peace, solidity, freedom, and compassion, we are determined not to accumulate wealth while millions are hungry and dying nor to take as the aim of our life fame, power, wealth, or sensual pleasure, which can bring much suffering and despair...

The Sixth Mindfulness Training: Taking Care of Anger

Aware that anger blocks communication and creates suffering, we are committed to taking care of the energy of anger when it arises, and to recognising and transforming the seeds of anger that lie deep in our consciousness...

The Seventh Mindfulness Training: Dwelling Happily in the Present Moment

Aware that life is available only in the present moment, we are committed to training ourselves to live deeply each moment of daily life...

The Eighth Mindfulness Training: True Community and Communication

Aware that lack of communication always brings separation and suffering, we are committed to training ourselves in the practice of compassionate listening and loving speech...

The Ninth Mindfulness Training: Truthful and Loving Speech

Aware that words can create happiness or suffering, we are committed to learning to speak truthfully, lovingly and constructively...

The Tenth Mindfulness Training: Protecting and Nourishing the Sangha

Aware that the essence and aim of a Sangha is the realisation of understanding and compassion, we are determined not to use the Buddhist community for personal power or profit, or transform our community into a political instrument...

The Eleventh Mindfulness Training: Right Livelihood

Aware that great violence and injustice have been done to our environment and society, we are committed not to live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature...

The Twelfth Mindfulness Training: Reverence for Life

Aware that much suffering is caused by war and conflict, we are determined to cultivate nonviolence, compassion, and the insight of interbeing in our daily lives and promote peace education, mindful mediation, and reconciliation within families, communities, ethnic and religious groups, nations, and in the world...

The Thirteenth Mindfulness Training: Generosity

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, we are committed to cultivating generosity in our way of thinking, speaking, and acting...

The Fourteenth Mindfulness Training: True Love

[For lay members]: Aware that sexual desire is not love and that sexual relations motivated by craving cannot dissipate the feeling of loneliness but will create more suffering, frustration, and isolation, we are determined not to engage in sexual relations without mutual understanding, love, and a deep long-term commitment made known to our family and friends...

[For monastic members]: Aware that the deep aspiration of a monk or a nun can only be realised when he or she wholly leaves behind the bonds of sensual love, we are committed to practicing chastity and to helping others protect themselves...

Through simply looking at the beginning sentences of the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, we can already notice that these trainings, in many aspects, overlap with the Five Mindfulness Trainings. In fact, Thích Nhất Hạnh (1998) expresses that: “When you practice the Five Mindfulness Trainings deeply, you are already practicing the Fourteen” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998, p. 58). This echoes with what his observation, noted in the last section, that “the practice of mindfulness is interwoven into all aspects of our life. We ourselves are interrelated – any action we do has an effect on everything around us” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2003a, p. 76).

He continues his explanations:

If you want to formally receive the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings and enter the core community of the Order of Interbeing, it is because you wish to become a community leader, to organize the practice in a Sangha. Only when you have the feeling that you have enough time, energy, and interest to take care of a community should you ask for formal ordination. Then you will be working together with other brothers and sisters. Otherwise, the Five Mindfulness Trainings are enough. You can practice the Fourteen without a formal ceremony, without being ordained as a member of the Order. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998, pp. 58-59)

This suggests that the fundamental difference between formally receiving the Fourteen and the Five Trainings is whether one has the desire to lead a practice community. As leadership involves a high level of selfless devotion and responsibility for others, it can be regarded as a manifestation of the Bodhisattva ideal in the context of sangha practice. Since only a handful of the participants had entered the Order’s core community, I will mainly focus on my participants’ experiences with the Five Mindfulness Trainings in this study (which will be

discussed in Chapter 10). Future research into the reasons why people decided to be ordained as members of the Order is thus recommended.

Summary

The Five Mindfulness Trainings and the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing, in which Thích Nhất Hạnh institutionalized his two key teachings of mindfulness and interbeing, demonstrate not only the relevance and practicability of his Engaged Buddhism in today's society, but also the flexibility and adaptability of his engaged approach in responding to a constantly changing world. All these are key characteristics of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices (research question 1).

The differences and similarities between Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and the traditional teachings of mindfulness and Buddhist philosophy (research question 2) can be seen in the Five Mindfulness Trainings and the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, which are a contemporary version of the traditional Five Precepts and the 58 Bodhisattva precepts listed in the *Sūtra of the Net of Brahma*, respectively. The ways that these mindfulness trainings help cultivate our mindfulness and the insight into interbeing show us the philosophical and experiential implications of mindfulness for our understanding of categorical distinctions (e.g. self and other, human and nonhuman) (research question 4).

Thích Nhất Hạnh's (1967) description of Zen, perhaps, can explain the intention and approach of all the work that he has done under his Engaged Buddhism, highlighting also the key characteristics of his teachings (research question 1):

The attitude of Thiên [Zen] towards the search for truth and its view of the problem of living in this world are extremely liberal. Thiên does not recognize any dogma or belief that would hold back man's progress in acquiring knowledge or in his daily life. Thiên differs from orthodox religions in that it is not conditioned by any set of beliefs. In other words, Thiên is an attitude or a method for arriving at knowledge and action. For Thiên the techniques of right eating and drinking, of right breathing and right concentration and meditation, are far more vital than mere beliefs. A person who practices Zen meditation does not have to rely on beliefs in hell, nirvana, rebirth, or causality; he has only to rely on the reality of his body, his psychology, biology, and his own past experiences of the instructions of Zen Masters who have preceded him. His aim is to *attain*, to *penetrate*, to *see*; once he has attained *satori* (insight) his action will conform by itself to reality. (pp. 4-5)

Thích Nhất Hạnh thus

reminds us that whatever we teach has to come from our own experience – we cannot simply pass on the words of the Buddha. Thầy only teaches us what he has experienced himself and it is because of this authenticity that his teaching moves us so deeply. (Chân Không, 2007, p. 296)

In Chapters 8 and 10, I will examine how Thích Nhất Hạnh's mindfulness trainings are embodied in the daily life of Plum Village, exploring the ways that the practices taught there can help cultivate mindful habitus.

Chapter 8

Plum Village and Its Sangha

Introduction

This chapter looks at Plum Village and its monastic and lay communities, examining the significance of sangha practice, which is an essential aspect of mindfulness training in Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings. I will first give a brief overview of the background of Plum Village as a place of practice that cultivates practitioners' mindful living (i.e. mindful habitus in the context of my proposed model) in a community setting. After that, we will look at the Plum Village monastic community, examining how its organization enables monks and nuns to not only apply mindfulness practices in their monastic life but also made them accessible to outside society. Following this will be a discussion of the lay community, drawing on findings from my interview data to investigate the background (i.e. professions, nationalities, spiritual traditions, age groups) of the lay practitioners who follow Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings.

We will then move on to the topic of sangha practice in two different contexts, namely the lay community and the monastery setting. Based on the interview data collected, I examine if the participants from the lay community were involved with a sangha or preferred to practice alone, their reasons for their preferred way of practising, and whether they found the sangha beneficial. If they built their own sangha, I consider how they accomplished that and look at the background of the members involved. In the context of the monastery setting, I provide a brief background about sangha practice at Plum Village. Details of how the various practices were integrated into the daily activities at the monastery will be explored in Chapter 10.

Hence, the discussion in this chapter aims to address the following research question: (1)

What are the characteristics of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices? (7) What impact has practicing with a sangha/group had on practitioners? (8) How do practitioners' own spiritual backgrounds fit with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices?

About Plum Village

Plum Village, a Buddhist monastery and mindfulness practice centre in southwest France, is the first and also the largest monastic community founded by Thích Nhất Hạnh and his associates, in 1982. Since then, 10 other monasteries have been established in different parts of the world, including three in the United States, three in Europe and four in the Asia-Pacific region. They are: Blue Cliff Monastery (New York), Deer Park Monastery (California), Magnolia Grove Monastery (Mississippi), European Institute of Applied Buddhism (Germany), Healing Spring Monastery (near Paris), Maison de l'Inspiration (Paris), Thai Plum Village (Thailand), Asian Institute of Applied Buddhism (Hong Kong), Stream Entering Monastery (near Melbourne) and Mountain Spring Monastery (near Sydney). These practice centres provide trainings to both monastics³⁵ and laypeople on mindful living in a community setting, demonstrating ways that we can weave (right) mindfulness into whatever we do in our daily life, with the aim of cultivating the awakening mind.

Plum Village, which now has more than 200 residential monastics (Plum Village, 2019a), consists of five hamlets in total, namely New Hamlet, Upper Hamlet, Lower Hamlet, Middle Hamlet and Son Ha Temple.³⁶ When it was established in 1982, there were only Upper Hamlet (a 19-hectare forest) and Lower Hamlet (21 hectares of cultivated land), which were

³⁵ Overall, there are currently more than 600 monks and nuns in the Plum Village monastic community worldwide (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2016).

³⁶ According to the information board that showed the names and photos of the residential monastics during my stay at Plum Village in 2016, there were 67 nuns, 77 monks, and 63 nuns in residence at New Hamlet, Upper Hamlet, and Lower Hamlet, respectively.

old farms with some stone buildings (a large barn, stables, and storehouses) located in Thénac and Loubès-Bernac respectively (Chapman, 2007; Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2016). The stone buildings in the hamlets were turned into facilities such as meditation halls, Buddha halls, kitchens and dining halls, etc.

At first, Thích Nhất Hạnh and his associates called the monastery Persimmon Village, which was the name of a practice center that the School of Youth for Social Service and the Order of Interbeing intended to establish in a city area in Vietnam in the 1970s. But when they found it impossible to plant persimmons in their newly founded monastery, they changed to planting plum trees. Accordingly, they called the monastery Plum Village instead (Plum Village, n.d.-g). There were 1,250 plum trees planted, with the number of the trees planted being the number of the first monks ordained by the Buddha himself. The money for buying those plum trees came from the pocket money of the children who went to Plum Village to learn mindfulness; and the profits made from the plums were used to support hungry children in Vietnam (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2016).

In 1996, as Lower Hamlet was closed for renovation, the monastery expanded to include New Hamlet, which is sited in Dieulivol (Chapman, 2007). This is the hamlet I stayed in during my four-month-long fieldwork. Lower Hamlet and Upper Hamlet are about three kilometres apart while New Hamlet is 25 kilometres and 20 kilometres away from the former and latter respectively. Middle Hamlet is located between Lower Hamlet and Upper Hamlet, and Son Ha Temple is close to Upper Hamlet. While New Hamlet and Lower Hamlet are for nuns and laywomen, Upper Hamlet and Son Ha Temple are for monks and laymen. All hamlets host retreatants throughout the year, except Middle Hamlet, which is a non-residential hamlet. However, when many guests would visit the monastery in summer, it would open for

Vietnamese retreatants for the Summer Retreats in order to accommodate more people; during that time, monks, laymen and laywomen would practise together there. Couples and families can stay in any hamlet.

Depending on the seasons and retreats, all retreatants and monastics from different hamlets would gather in one of the hamlets to practice together for half a day at least once every week. Therefore, while retreatants and monastics of different genders reside in separate hamlets (couples and families being the exemption), they are able to practise together at least weekly. I was thus able to visit and make observations of other hamlets every week while residing in New Hamlet during my fieldwork.

For Thích Nhất Hạnh, Plum Village

is not just a refuge from the world. It is a place of practice, where monks and nuns receive training so they can, in turn, train others. It is also a laboratory, where meditative practices are developed and refined and where procedures are worked out that can enable people to live together in greater peace and harmony. These practices and procedures are not confined to the monastery but are meant to be taken out into the world and shared with others. (R. H. King, 2001, p. 154)

Therefore, while monks and nuns stay at Plum Village, being away from the secular world, the aim is to cultivate their own practice so that the practices are not only applied in their own monastic life but can also be made accessible to outside society.

Next, we will have a look at the monastic community. It will help us understand how the monastery is a place of practice that enables monks and nuns to teach retreatants mindfulness

practices. This will also give us an idea about how the monastery serves as a laboratory for the monastic community to develop and improve mindfulness practices and procedures, so that they can be better applied in both the monastery setting and the wider social environment.

The monastic community

At the beginning, monastics at Plum Village were mainly Vietnamese. But gradually, more and more practitioners from Western countries entered the community. Chân Không (2007), Thích Nhất Hạnh's senior disciple and long-time associate, explains what happened in a practice community that consisted of members with diverse ethnic backgrounds:

At first, the integration was difficult because we all came with assumptions about each other. But the assumptions disappeared as we spent time meditating, eating, and living together. While the majority of monks and nuns at Plum Village are still Vietnamese, the number of non-Vietnamese and Western-born monastics continues to grow rapidly. I think this rich diversity is one of the things that makes Plum Village so successful and unique. (p. 244)

Living in a monastic community, particularly in one with practitioners coming from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, provides its members with many opportunities to apply their practice in everyday life. Such multicultural communal living makes Plum Village a place of practice and a laboratory where monastics can try out ways that would allow them to live together harmoniously and peacefully, despite their individual as well as cultural differences.

As a Vietnamese-based community residing in France with members coming from a diverse range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds as well as international guests, language becomes

another aspect of Plum Village that is different from many other monasteries in the world. In such a multilingual environment, those who want to join the monastic community need to be fluent in at least one of the three communal languages at Plum Village, namely Vietnamese, English, and French (Plum Village, n.d.-a). In the hamlet where I stayed, I often saw nuns taking lessons in English or French (or other European languages³⁷) from retreatants who were language teachers, in order to improve their language proficiency. Since not every monastic could speak all of the three communal languages, translation would be necessary when the community came together at meetings. Those monastics who were proficient in certain languages would help with simultaneous translation during monastic meetings as well as dharma talks.

Apart from cultural and linguistic diversity, equality between monks and nuns is another unique aspect of Plum Village:

In Asia as well as in many Western countries, men and monks traditionally play the dominant role. Women and nuns, even if they are very smart, have a secondary role. This is not the case in Plum Village. One of the guiding principles, right from the beginning, is that the sisters and brothers would have total equality. The two monastics who first received transmission to be Dharma teachers in Plum Village were both women. (Chân Không, 2007, p. 247)

During my fieldwork at Plum Village, I found that monks and nuns had equality not only in terms of leading positions, but also manual labour that needed to be done in daily life.

³⁷ One nun told me that she might later move to the European Institute of Applied Buddhism in Germany, so she was preparing to learn German.

When it comes to dividing the work, we have a system that is unique to Plum Village. In other centers, each person does a particular job, specializes in that job and remains in it for a rather long period. In Plum Village, we rotate our responsibilities. Everyone must train himself or herself in a new task every three to six months, such as working in the registration office, gardening, housekeeping, organizing transportation, maintaining the cars, accounting, food shopping, and storage. At the same time, we also are organized into teams that rotate on a daily basis through tasks like cooking, washing pots, and taking care of the bells and telephone. When someone is cooking, they may have to miss the walking meditation, but they can always attend the Dharma talk or sitting meditation. Those who have a work assignment only miss a small part of the scheduled activities. In this way, everybody can practice regularly and really help other people to practice, and not just be employees. (Chân Không, 2007, pp. 248-249)

Such an arrangement of work division ensures equality of opportunity for each monk and nun to learn different skills and techniques as well as participate in the daily activities and practice. As the monastics enrich their own practice, they can then help retreatants do the same when they join the communal life during their retreat period. While I was at Plum Village, I was impressed to see how monks and nuns were able to perform various types of minor and major tasks by themselves in maintaining the monastery, such as administrative work in the office, building garden fences, setting up sound equipment for dharma talks and activities, growing organic vegetables, cooking, cleaning, and grocery shopping. Each monk and nun had the same opportunities to take up new tasks, regardless of whether they required physical labour or were more skill-based.

As each monastic needed to take on a different responsibility from time to time, they would sometimes undertake a job that they were not proficient at, resulting in the work not being

done very efficiently. While at Plum Village, I helped with the preparation of the Summer Retreat, and I found that the nuns were not familiar with the task that we were undertaking. When I asked one of the nuns how it was done the previous year, she told me she did not know because she was responsible for something else previously. At first, I felt that this was not an effective way to assign work responsibilities. But as I observed how the nuns learned to carry out new tasks and solve any problems they encountered with patience, flexibility and creativity, it became clear to me that the goal there was not to do everything perfectly but to do each thing mindfully. Besides, they would also take on board my (or other retreatants') suggestions for accomplishing the task more efficiently. So, monastics and retreatants sometimes worked and practised together. This was an example of how the monastery serves as a place of practice and a laboratory for both the monastic and lay practitioners to develop and improve mindfulness practices and procedures.

Monastics at Plum Village thus have a very busy schedule every day: they have their work responsibilities, participate in the scheduled meditation sessions, study the Buddhist teachings, learn different languages, as well as undertake other things to support the life of the monastery. As Chân Không (2007) describes:

Our young monastic sisters and brothers learn a lot in the monastery: they improve their English writing style, learn to speak French, refine their Vietnamese, advance in Chinese and Sanskrit, work together with their sisters or brothers to cook delicious dishes for hundreds of people, learn to use the computer skillfully, drive a car mindfully, garden organically, run the sound system for public talks and for simultaneous translation, as well as many other things. They are learning practical skills for modern life as well as studying the teachings of the Buddha, and learning about the monastic way of life. (p. 248)

All these undertakings enable monks and nuns to not only apply the Buddhist teachings in today's world, but also do so with creativity, practicality and flexibility according to particular circumstances. Chapter 10, which deals with the various practices and activities done in the monastery, will explore how the teachings and practices were skillfully and effectively adapted to suit the situation.

The lay community

As noted in Chapter 6, Thích Nhất Hạnh, during his 2005 Vietnam trip, appeared to keep “emphasizing that the Plum Village practice has been presented in a way that is appropriate for the young and the intellectuals of the West” (Fleet, cited in Chapman, 2007, p. 316).

Thích Nhất Hạnh's interest in reaching the young and the intellectuals with his teachings is reflected in his launch of Wake Up in 2008, as a global movement for young people aged 18-35 to practice mindfulness together in order to help create a more compassionate and sustainable society (Unified Buddhist Church, 2016; Wake Up International, 2019), as well as in the many talks and retreats that he and his monastic sangha have held in the past decades for people in specific professions, such as businessmen, psychologists and teachers.

It is then perhaps not surprising to see that the interview participants in this study consisted of the young and the intellectuals. Out of a total of 35 participants, the majority (25) were professionals in a variety of fields, including healthcare, wellness, teaching/education, business, publishing, sustainable development and information technology. Another seven of them, who were aged between 18 and 27, were students in high school or universities. The remaining three participants, who were in their late 20s or mid-30s, were long-term residents at the monastery. Overall, two-fifths (14) of the participants were below the age of 35 and the other three-fifths (21) were aged between 39 and 78.

While all my participants appeared to represent the kind of audience targeted by Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings, it might also just be the case that the young and the intellectuals were most interested and willing to participate in my research (or research in general). The small number of participants in my study is not representative enough of the lay community. It would therefore be worthwhile to conduct further surveys, with a large sample of participants, to find out more about the background of those who follow Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings. Surveying a larger sample would reveal the majority of lay practitioners are really young and/or intellectuals, and whether Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings also appeal to people with other backgrounds.

As discussed before, Thích Nhất Hạnh presents his Five Mindfulness Trainings – a modified version of the traditional Buddhist precepts – “in such a way that everyone can apply them, regardless of spiritual tradition or cultural background” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2003a, p. 72). This means that those who follow Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings, which are non-sectarian in nature, are not necessarily Buddhists but could be people coming from any spiritual backgrounds, as well as those without any religious belief. His teachings also have a broad application, not limited to certain cultural or ethnic groups of people.

Let us then look at whether the cultural and spiritual backgrounds of the interview participants in this research reflect the universality of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings. It was found that the 35 interview participants came from six continents, namely Europe³⁸ (17

³⁸ The countries included Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, Poland and Sweden.

participants), North America³⁹ (11 participants), Oceania⁴⁰ (three participants), Asia⁴¹ (two participants), Africa⁴² (one participant) and South America⁴³ (one participant),

Concerning the spiritual background of the participants, 10 participants stated that they did not have any religion.⁴⁴ Among the eight participants who identified as Christian/Catholic, three emphasized that they never practised their religion.⁴⁵ Two other Christians believed that all religions were essentially the same. The remaining three Christians/Catholics, such as Jasmine, observed that Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings enhanced their experience of their own religion: "What I have learnt is that I can't be fully Catholic without Buddhism, or without Protestantism, or Islam; we all need each other". As Chân Không (2007) explains:

For Western friends, Thầy always advises them to get in touch with their Christian or Jewish roots. We never wish to 'convert' anyone to Buddhism. We only wish to offer everyone the light of awareness ('buddh' means aware) to shine onto their own roots so that they understand themselves better and more deeply. (p. 233)

Like other leaders in the Engaged Buddhist movement such as the Dalai Lama, Thích Nhất Hạnh never requires his followers to convert to Buddhism, but instead urges them to stay connected with their own spiritual roots (Chapman, 2007). For Thích Nhất Hạnh (2009a), the Buddhist practice enables people to understand their own roots more deeply, which in turn

³⁹ The countries included Canada, Mexico and United States.

⁴⁰ The countries included Australia and New Zealand.

⁴¹ The countries included Thailand and Singapore.

⁴² The country was Burundi.

⁴³ The country was Argentina.

⁴⁴ Four of them acknowledged having a Catholic/Christian background in terms of family upbringing or the religious culture of their home country.

⁴⁵ It appeared that they considered themselves Christian/Catholic simply because they had been baptized at birth.

helps strengthen their own spiritual tradition. He believes people can have more than one spiritual root, profiting from them all.

There were seven participants who reported Buddhism as their religion, with one of them emphasizing: “but more the Plum Village Buddhism which is not the traditional one” (Mable). Another seven participants, despite being dedicated to the Buddhist practice, hesitated to call themselves Buddhist; they preferred to use other expressions. Adam and Jack described their spiritual status as follows:

I would say that I share the worldview of Buddhism, at least to a great extent. And I practise teachings from the Buddha, and I read and study sutras and so on. (Adam)

The word ‘Buddha’ means ‘awakening,’ right? And so, I’m fully committed to the practice of awakening. But this whole notion of ‘Am I Jewish? Am I Buddhist? Am I Christian?’ that doesn’t matter to me. (Jack)

Some went on to explain why they did not want to identify with Buddhism; for instance:

I think the reason I’m hesitant is that there’s another aspect to religiousness, which is dogma, or this being bound together, which I think is very damaging and is creating a lot of suffering in the world. I don’t think that Thầy, for example, that the kind of community that he’s trying to create has that quality... (Adam)

I struggle with the word ‘religion’, because religion to me is something that’s based on faith and has a whole lot of rules around it. And I think religion needs spirituality, but spirituality doesn’t need religion. (Betty)

These comments tie in with Thích Nhất Hạnh's advice that people should follow Buddhism as a practice rather than a religion (Chapman, 2007). He explains: "Buddhism is more of a way of life than a religion" (*Editors of Tricycle: The Buddhist review*, 2003, p. 158). Those who particularly pointed out that the Buddhism they were practising was Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings, highlighted his unique approach to Buddhism.

For the three remaining participants, Angel indicated that she was an atheist. Zoey was born in a Hindu family and considered herself Hindu culturally rather than identifying it as her religion. Camila had been a Catholic for her whole life but was not sure about her religious identity at this point of her life, because she found that she was no longer able to follow certain aspects of Catholicism in recent years.

The data collected from the small number of the participants in my research shows that Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings had touched people from across the world, people with different spiritual backgrounds, and people without any religious belief. As Richey (2005) notes, Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings are characterized by "...a disregard for the cultural clothing that both religions and the religious may wear, and an interest in interpreting non-Buddhist figures (such as Jesus) along Buddhist lines" (p. 128). In fact, Thích Nhất Hạnh (2009a) envisions that one day there would be no more barriers between various spiritual traditions.

The participants of this research, which were made up of young people and intellectuals from different cultural and spiritual backgrounds, appeared to be the intended audience of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings. But due to the limitations of this research as outlined above, future research that involves a large sample of participants is needed in order to arrive at a fuller picture about those who practise Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism, in terms of their

age, education, professions, as well as cultural and spiritual backgrounds.

Sangha

Traditionally, a sangha consists of four groups of Buddha's followers, namely monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen (Bowker, 2000). But for Thích Nhất Hạnh, members of a sangha are not restricted to Buddhists, they can just be one's neighbours, friends or workplace partners. Basically, simply "having a group of people to talk to, to connect to, can be a kind of Sangha" (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009a, p. 72). Apart from one's fellow practitioners, non-human elements such as trees, rivers, rocks, air and walking paths (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009a) as well as the bell and the meditation cushion can also be our sangha members as they support our practice (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1996a).⁴⁶ According to Thích Nhất Hạnh (2002b): "A Sangha is a community of friends practicing the dharma together in order to bring about and to maintain awareness. The essence of a Sangha is awareness, understanding, acceptance, harmony and love" (p. 19).

Thích Nhất Hạnh (2002b) urges practitioners to be affiliated with a sangha as it can support and sustain our practice; and with that, our society can move to a more wholesome direction:

To practice right mindfulness we need the right environment, and that environment is our Sangha. Without a Sangha we are very weak. In a society where everyone is rushing, everyone is being carried away by their habit energies, practice is very difficult. That is why the Sangha is our salvation. The Sangha where everyone is practicing mindful

⁴⁶ Thích Nhất Hạnh (2002b) explains that considering non-human elements as part of our sangha is not a new idea but can actually be seen in the Buddhist scriptures: "A pebble, a leaf and a dahlia are mentioned in the *Saddharmapundarika Sutra* in this respect. It is said in the *Pure Land Sutra* that if you are mindful, then when the wind blows through the trees, you will hear the teaching of the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, the Eightfold Path, the Four Strengths, and so on. The whole cosmos is preaching the Buddhadharma and practicing the Buddhadharma. If you are attentive, you will get in touch with that Sangha" (p. 20).

walking, mindful speaking, mindful eating seems to be the only chance for us to succeed in ending the vicious cycle. (p. 23)

Accordingly, Hunt-Perry and Fine (2000) write that sangha, in the context of Plum Village tradition,

functions as a community of resistance countering and transforming the individualism, isolation, and greed fostered in modern Western societies. It is a base community of spiritual friends who are living in ways that nourish a culture of mindfulness, compassion, and understanding. In this way, transformation of the culture of materialism, alienation, consumerism, and violence gradually occurs. (p. 54)

To emphasize the transformative efficacy of sangha, Thích Nhất Hạnh (1996a) asserts that simply placing a person who needs to be helped in a mindful community, that person will be transformed even without himself or herself practicing. He believes the next Buddha Maitreya⁴⁷ (the Buddha of Love) is likely to be a community rather than a single person (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2008a). And when travelling to other countries, leading retreats and giving public talks, he has always gone with a large group of monks and nuns.

Sangha is thus essential for our socially engaged practice. Here, we will look at sangha practice in two different contexts, namely the lay community and the monastery setting; each of them provides a very different environment in supporting our practice. In the context of the lay community, I will examine, based on the interview data I collected, if the participants

⁴⁷ According to the Buddhist scriptures, in the past, there have been those who had realized the truth of suffering and its liberation (i.e. previous Buddhas) before the Buddha Shakyamuni (i.e. the most recent Buddha), and that there will be more Buddhas to come (i.e. future Buddhas). It is recorded that the next Buddha is called Maitreya (Sponberg, 1988).

were involved with a sangha or preferred to practice alone, the reasons for doing so, and whether they found it beneficial. If they built their own sangha, we will see how they did it and the background of the members involved.

In the context of the monastery setting, I will provide a brief background about sangha practice at Plum Village. Details of how the various practices were integrated into the daily activities at the monastery will be explored in Chapter 10.

Sangha practice in lay community

Thích Nhất Hạnh (2009a) encourages us to create a sangha ourselves if there is not one available. As sangha members are not restricted to Buddhists for Thích Nhất Hạnh, he points out that we do not need to use Buddhist language when forming a sangha. What is important is to embody the spirit of mindfulness in ourselves.

There are many people who just want to sit and do nothing, become peaceful and calm, be mindful of every moment of their daily lives. If necessary you may refrain from using Buddhist terms; just embody the Dharma in your mindful living and be fresh and communicative. If you use Buddhist language in the beginning, you will turn people off and you will not be successful... You don't have to use the word 'Sangha.' If you invite people over for tea, don't say, 'Let's have tea meditation.' Say, 'Let's have tea peacefully and be aware that we have some time to spend together, enjoying our tea and our togetherness.' If you learn to use this kind of language, you'll soon be able to build a Sangha. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009a, pp. 71-72)

Among the 35 retreatants I interviewed, the majority (32) expressed that joining a sangha was important and helpful to their practice. One of its key beneficial aspects, as emphasized by

Thích Nhất Hạnh, appeared to be sustaining one's practice. Julia described her experience as follows:

Well, in 2001 I took the Five Mindfulness Trainings and I couldn't do it by myself. They [the sangha] hold you accountable. Life just gets so busy. Right? There are so many things that pull our attention. And this is something that I really feel even more strongly about than I used to, which is that, you know, Thầy talks so much about how important sangha is, and I really agree with him on that. Because there are so many things that pull our attention and unless we have sangha to bring us back to these values or what's important here, then I don't do them very well on my own.

Julia did not get involved with a sangha after taking the Five Mindfulness Trainings in 2001. She found it difficult to maintain her practice due to various distractions in life, not having recited the trainings at least trimonthly, which resulted the validity of the transmission being lost. In 2006, she took the trainings again and practised with a sangha afterward.

Similarly, Hannah said that: "I thought I can do it [alone], I read a lot of books, I know about Buddhism, I know about the practice; but without sangha, it doesn't maintain the practice. So, I started doing that since last year". Her response also implied that one's knowledge of the practice did not guarantee one's actual practice. For her, sangha rather than knowledge was the key to one's ongoing practice.

Another beneficial aspect of sangha, as indicated by some participants, is the supporting and nurturing environment provided by it. Here are the observations Kenneth and Stella shared in regard to this:

It's so nice having a sangha that listens to you, where you can share your suffering, where you can share your happiness, that you feel you are embraced by the sangha. It's so nourishing... (Kenneth)

...there is something about coming together with people who are like-minded. I think it is also really nice to hear a teaching and then have a cup of tea afterward with somebody and talk about how you interpret that teaching; what you understood in the teaching or what you didn't understand. (Stella)

However, not all sanghas are nourishing. Roger found that his own life experience was very different from that of other sangha members; he felt like he didn't belong in the group:

There is one friend in the sangha that had her husband commit suicide. Other people have had their grandson being killed in a shooting at school. You know, things...Jesus... so sometimes I feel like a Martian, like a man from Mars among them; because all of them have problems, huge problems, and I'm kind of a very happy man. What do I do there? ...I feel like I don't fit very well.

He therefore hesitated to attend those sangha meetings. However, he somehow kept going to them because "sometimes I just feel a physical need to be there". In addition, he discovered that practising with this sangha still enhanced his practice in some way:

Okay, they [the sangha members] are weird maybe, but it teaches me at the same time tolerance. It teaches me openness. It teaches me to adapt myself to others and try to understand them, as well. And dharma sharing we have is really enlightening, because although I do not experience the suffering they have, I somehow share in the suffering they have. So it's also helping me to better understand other people.

In fact, Thích Nhất Hạnh (2002b) notes that we do not need a perfect sangha in order to be able to benefit from it. He explains:

Our transformation and healing depend on the quality of the Sangha. If there are enough people smiling and happy in the Sangha, the Sangha has more power to heal and transform. So you have to invest in your Sangha. Every member of the Sangha has his or her weaknesses and strengths, and you have to recognize them in order to make good use of the positive elements for the sake of the whole Sangha. You also have to recognize the negative elements so that you and the whole Sangha can help embrace them. You don't leave that negative element to the person alone, because he may not be able to hold and transform it by himself. (pp. 30-31)

Roger perhaps might not be aware of it himself, but he was contributing to his sangha by trying to embrace its negative elements, which were the suffering of certain members. In doing so, he helped create an environment that prompted the transformation of both himself and others in the group. His experience shows that one could still benefit from a sangha environment that might appear to be undesirable.

Maci's sangha, which was quite unusual, was the groups that she led at work. As a psychiatric nurse and cognitive behavioural therapist, part of her work was to conduct group therapy, which involved mindfulness, with her patients. Her patients were often emotional and confused when they arrived at the sessions. She would practice mindfulness with them, teaching them how to calm down. In order to do that, she had to be very mindful herself:

...because it's not a technique; if it's a technique you couldn't reach these people. When you just have it as a technique, they won't believe you, they won't do it with you. You really do have to practice yourself and show them very lovingly and kindly and do the right thing; otherwise they can't do it.

This suggests that it was exactly because her patients were not mindful that she needed to be really mindful herself, so that she could help them to become mindful as well. As she was practising herself while conducting therapy with the group, she considered these groups at work as her sangha. This is another example of how one could still benefit from practising with a group that does not possess the kind of nourishing environment mentioned above.

Apart from the various beneficial effects sangha could have on practitioners, three participants indicated that another reason they joined a sangha was to share mindfulness with others, so that more people could receive its benefits as well. As one of them explained: “I want to form a sangha because it helps me, but I also want to help other people to practice. I want them to feel they are supported too. They are not alone and stuff like that” (Natalie).

In the context of sangha practice, the desire to share mindfulness with others, in the hope that more people can benefit from it, is a manifestation of the bodhisattva ideal, which Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings are based on.

Among those 32 participants who considered sangha beneficial to their practice, about two-thirds (22) of them were meeting their sangha regularly. The main reason that the rest of the others had not joined a sangha was that there was none available in their local area. But four of those who were practising with a sangha actually created the sangha by themselves. They valued sangha practice so much that they decided to establish a sangha when they could not find one from their own area. They usually started their sangha with one to three others, who were their family members or friends who also meditated. They practised together regularly as a small group; and with time their group grew. Their sangha-building experience reveals

that a sangha does not need to be big to be of benefit to its members. A sangha that has only a few people is enough to support our practice.

Angel particularly put a lot of efforts into establishing her sangha. Instead of just having the members of her group practising together, she had her meditation teacher, who taught at the mindfulness class that she took at a mindfulness centre, lead the sangha sessions. And apart from inviting friends who did meditation to join her group, she also invited those who had not learnt mindfulness before but were curious about it. She mentioned that the changes that these curious friends saw in her inspired them to join her sangha:

...they are friends from different parts of my life. Some of them knew each other, some of them didn't. Some of them have taken classes, some of them haven't. So I started, I mentioned to some friends, they were interested, they saw how I felt, they saw the changes in me, and they were like, 'Ah! So good! We should do this!' I said if you don't want to go to class, why don't we just meet at my place...I will have food. So everybody was enthusiastic, so we do that.

This resonates with Thích Nhất Hạnh's (2009a) advice, as noted above, that when you "just embody the Dharma in your mindful living and be fresh and communicative" (p. 71), you would be able to form a sangha without the need of saying anything Buddhist, which may turn people away.

While the majority of participants regarded sangha helpful to their practice, two participants preferred to practise alone,⁴⁸ because:

⁴⁸ The one remaining participant was new to the practice, so she had not thought of whether she would like to join a sangha yet.

you give more attention to yourself and are more into the practice and by having fun instead. If you are in a group, you are obligated or feel obligated to practice and then you feel less free, I think. (Emma)

I feel like it's digging deeper, going in depth...And I can really think about the true problem of something, or the true nature of things. (Kate)

They seemed to be suggesting that sangha was a distraction or caused stress to them. Practising alone, on the other hand, allowed them to understand themselves and see things more deeply. As only two people in this research did not find sangha helpful to their practice and also due to the limited scope of this research, only little data were collected in regard to how sangha could be unhelpful to practitioners. A recommendation is to conduct future research focusing on practitioners who do not want to be involved with a sangha; the findings would help us better understand the potentially unfavourable impacts of sangha on some practitioners.

As discussed in Chapter 5, qualitative research involves multiple realities and perspectives – those experienced by study participants, as well as those experienced by the researchers who conduct the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since this project grew out of my personal (positive) experiences of mindfulness practices, my own perspective of the practice consequently would have an impact on my analysis of the interview data, resulting in the findings being potentially biased towards benefits from mindfulness practices. To address this potential bias, I not only examined the favourable effects of sangha on practitioners, but also explored how sangha could be undesirable to practitioners, as indicated by two of my interview participants. Investigating this more in further research would enable us to have a broader understanding of the effects sangha could have on practitioners. Besides, more

studies that adopt a qualitative approach on sangha practice in the lay community are encouraged to discover alternative perspectives and interpretations. A similar possible bias resulting from my own experience of the practice would also impact the interview findings reported in the next three chapters, which I will address in more detail there.

Sangha practice in monastery setting

Sangha practice in a monastery setting, where people live and practise together in accordance with a daily schedule for days or weeks or even years, is far more intensive and demanding than sangha practice in the lay community, where people practise together for two to three hours weekly or biweekly. Members in the core community of the Order of Interbeing, as noted in Chapter 7, are required to practice no less than 60 days of retreat or days of mindfulness annually while at the same time they are also expected to practise (including the recitation of the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings) with their own lay sangha at least biweekly. This indicates that if we are to be very serious with our practice, we need to practise with a lay sangha regularly throughout the year as well as with a community for a certain number of whole days during the year, ideally in a monastery setting.

At Plum Village, “monks, nuns, and lay people enjoy equality in the Order of Interbeing” in order to “protect and respect the freedom and responsibility of each member of the community” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1998, p. 107). While doing my fieldwork at Plum Village, I noticed that no one – whether monks, nuns or laypeople – enjoyed privilege in different aspects of the daily life there. One of the interview participants, as she reflected on her experience at the monastery, told me: “What I love about Plum Village is that the sisters are equal to the lay practitioners – there is no hierarchy. They sit with us at lunch time, they sit with us in the meditation room and they are just there” (Stella). I will demonstrate, in

Chapters 8 and 10, how such equality was embodied in the life of Plum Village on a daily basis, and the effect this had on practitioners.

Plum Village's multilingual sangha has created a unique opportunity for everyone there to enhance their practice. While translation was provided for all the scheduled activities, communication in such an environment still posed challenges for its members at times. For instance, during the Spring Retreat, I once worked with two nuns and another retreatant on a task. As the nuns spoke only Vietnamese, the other retreatant spoke only French, and I spoke neither languages, our communication became tricky. As a result, it took us a long time to finish the task. Thing like this happened from time to time during my stay in the monastery; and I often felt impatient and irritated in such situations.

Then, one day during the 21-Day Retreat, I again worked with a retreatant who did not share the same language. What happened this time was that there was a nun working nearby who could speak English. As she had noticed the situation, I expressed my difficulty to her. While continuing with her work with a sense of calmness, she said to me softly: "breathe and smile". All of a sudden, I realized how I had lost myself in my emotions and how tense my body was. I immediately brought my mind back to my breathing and my body started to loosen up. I then saw that there was really nothing to feel upset about. It might take a longer time to do our task, but we would finish it anyway. And in fact, we had enough time to do things slowly there; so there was no need for us to hurry at all. With this understanding, it was not so difficult to smile.

After that experience, whenever a similar situation occurred, I would remember to go back to my breathing. While at first it took me some effort to do so, with practice, I was able to do it

more and more easily each time, and my irritation also subsided more and more quickly. Gradually, I came to see how my expectation of doing things efficiently and quickly had been being shaped by the surrounding fast-paced environment. Such an expectation, which is a common characteristic of social habitus in the modern society, often causes us much stress and leads to conflict with others.

Besides, I found that the “breathe and smile” practice had saved me much energy. I was more able to ease unhelpful (or even harmful) emotions so that they consumed me less. I also started generating more compassion for myself. This is perhaps one of the reasons why monks and nuns at Plum Village were able to accomplish a range of tasks and responsibilities on a day-to-day basis. They knew how to save their energy through mindfulness practice, investing their energy wisely and skillfully. This experience of mine was another example of how Plum Village serves as a place of practice for the monastic to develop and improve their own practices, so that they could help others do the same.

Another unique aspect of the Plum Village sangha is not only that it includes children, but also that these little ones play an important role in the community. As Thích Nhất Hạnh (1996a) writes:

At Plum Village, children are at the center of attention. Each adult is responsible for helping the children feel happy and secure. We know that if the children are happy, the adults will be happy, too...I have seen some practice centers where children are regarded as obstacles to practice. We have to form communities where children are viewed as the children of everyone. (p. 200)

During the annual Summer Retreat, there would be separate daily programs that are particularly designed for children (6-12 years old) as well as teenagers (13-17 years old). Both the children's and the teenagers' programs were led by young monastics. Together with the programme for adults, there are thus three different programs in total for retreatants during that time of the year. However, there are also times when everyone will practise together:

We don't force them, but the children are invited to join us for the short periods of sitting meditation, walking meditation, tea meditation (the children have 'lemonade meditation'), and eating meals quietly, with awareness and appreciation. It turns out that many children practice mindfulness better than their parents, and when they return home, they remind their parents to come back to the present moment and enjoy the many wonders that are all around them. (Chân Không, 2007, p. 217)

While I was at Plum Village, the special place that children have at the monastery was evident from the way dharma talks were conducted during the Summer Retreat. The front row of the meditation hall was reserved for children. The monastic who gave the talk then spent the first 20 minutes or so speaking directly to the children. After that, the children left the meditation hall to participate in the activities scheduled in their own programme. The talk then continued, addressing the adult community.

There is a lot to learn about these programs at Plum Village and their impact on the child and the youth retreatants. However, this would go beyond the scope of the present study, which focused on investigating the Plum Village practices for the adult retreatants. Perhaps future research can look into children and youths learning mindfulness at Plum Village.

Summary

Looking at the background of Plum Village and its monastic community offers important insights into the characteristics of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices (research question 1). Plum Village, which was established about four decades ago, provides trainings on mindful living (i.e. mindful habitus in the context of my proposed model) in a multicultural and multilingual community setting. Its monastic community consists of hundreds of members of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, with monks and nuns enjoying equality in taking up leading positions as well as learning new tasks, regardless of whether they are physically intensive or more skill based. The monastics aim to cultivate their own mindfulness so that the practices are not only applied in their own monastic life but can also be made accessible to outside society.

The practices taught at Plum Village are designed for the young and the intellectuals, irrespective of their cultural and spiritual backgrounds. The participants in this study correspond to the target audience of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings. The variety of spiritual backgrounds among the interview participants indicates that Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices have a wide relevance and appeal (research question 8). Examining the backgrounds of the practitioners in the lay communities provides us with further information about the characteristics of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices (research question 1). However, due to the limitations of this research, with data collected from a small number of participants in a single location, future studies with large sample size need to be conducted in order to gain a more comprehensive overview of the members in the Plum Village lay community, in terms of their age, education, professions, cultural and spiritual backgrounds.

Sangha, which can support and sustain our practice, is an indispensable element in Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings. Sangha as a community where people practise mindful living – that is the cultivation of mindful habitus in the context of my proposed model – can help move our society in a more wholesome direction. In examining the significance of sangha practice, which itself is a key characteristic of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings (research question 1), we see the kinds of impact it had on practitioners (research question 7). Most participants in my research expressed that joining a sangha was beneficial to their practice, with two-thirds of them meeting their sangha regularly, including a few of those who created a sangha themselves because none was available in their local area. However, despite seeing enthusiastic responses about sangha practice from the data collected, two participants found sangha a distraction or causing them stress, hence preferring to practise alone. More qualitative studies are thus recommended in order to understand the potentially unhelpful elements of sangha practice to some practitioners as well as explore different perspectives and interpretations on the topic in more detail.

Apart from practising with a lay sangha regularly throughout the year, practising in a more intensive and demanding monastery setting is also important if one is to be very serious with the practice. That is why members in the core community of the Order of Interbeing are required to complete a certain number of days of retreat or whole days of mindfulness practice with a community every year, ideally in a monastery setting. The practitioners at Plum Village, which come from diverse cultural and spiritual backgrounds, form a multilingual and multicultural sangha. In the monastery, all practitioners, whether monastics or laypeople, take responsibility and enjoy equal freedoms. While children and teenagers play an important role at Plum Village and have their own programs during the Summer Retreat, the scope of this research is limited to adult retreatants.

Chapter 9

Plum Village Retreatants

Introduction

This chapter investigates how the 35 interview participants first came into contact with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and what led them go to their first Plum Village retreat. This will give us some insights into why they followed Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and their expectations of the outcomes of the practices taught at Plum Village, which consequently had an impact on how they perceived the effectiveness of the practices. Such an understanding will help us better address and appreciate the participants' feedback on the various activities and practices in the retreats at Plum Village, which will be examined in the next chapter. This chapter, therefore, mainly focuses on one research question: (3) Why do people engage in the practices? As mentioned in the preceding chapter, the analysis of the interview data below may potentially be biased towards advantages of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings due to my personal positive experiences of his mindfulness practices. While I endeavoured to represent the data appropriately, researchers with a different background may make different discoveries and have other interpretations of the findings, which is part of the complexity of multiple realities and perspectives in qualitative research as alerted to in Chapter 5.

Retreatants' initial contacts with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings

The interview participants generally got to know about Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings through more than one source and their experiences were often similar to each other. We can, however, broadly group them into eight circumstances according to what most inspired them to get involved in Plum Village practices: (1) Other people, (2) Chance, (3) Attending Plum

Village retreats, (4) Listening to Thích Nhất Hạnh's talks, (5) Encountering suffering in life, (6) Work, (7) Taking secular mindfulness classes, and (8) Inner guidance.

(1) Other people

One important way that the interview participants got to know about Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings was through other people, including friends, family members, colleagues and teachers. This was particularly the case for one-third (13) of the participants, with the introduction to Thích Nhất Hạnh's books being an initial inspiration to most of them. As one participant shared:

I first came into contact through one of his books five or six years ago; I think it is *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*. My brother has become interested in mindfulness meditation and so I borrowed one of his books. And I really enjoyed reading it and I felt like it really spoke to me, and so I continued to read a lot of his texts...I actually went on to purchase more books and read them over time. (Zoey)

Being introduced to Thích Nhất Hạnh and his books, for some people, plants the seed for one's readiness to get involved in the practices. This is illustrated by the following comments from one of the participants:

She [Stella's supervisor at work] suggested that I read a book of Thầy called *Be Here Now* which is on mindfulness. And so I went out and got that book, and I read it, and I liked it. And then from there, I started getting some other books of his like this one here – *Fear*. And then I brought another one on his teachings retelling the stories of Buddha...I had those books and things. And then this year, I booked a ticket to France [to learn French] and I wanted to do a retreat. A friend that I met on another retreat in Nepal, his

friend suggested that I go to Plum Village. And I didn't know what Plum Village was...So then I googled Plum Village and I was like 'Oh my Gosh! It is Thích Nhất Hạnh.' And so, that's how I ended up here on a retreat... (Stella)

Hailey had a similar experience, but the seed for her was not Thích Nhất Hạnh's books but his recordings:

In about 1994, an American friend of mine gave me a gift of six audio tapes of Thích Nhất Hạnh giving a retreat to psychotherapists. I listened to these wonderful tapes many times. When I read the name of Thích Nhất Hạnh in the [Plum Village] website [after her colleague asked if she had ever heard of Plum Village] many years later and realized that he was the main trainer in Plum Village, I immediately knew that I had to go and have him as my teacher. I had not known that he lived in Europe when I listened to his tapes.

Adam appeared to have a few people helping him to connect to Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings. Apart from receiving a book of Thích Nhất Hạnh's from a friend and knowing another friend who thought of joining Thích Nhất Hạnh's monastic community, he expressed that the most important part was having a teacher who was a nun from Plum Village. Through her, he was introduced to the Plum Village practices.

...I remember at least five years ago, I read his book *Peace Is Every Step* that I got from a friend. Maybe I should say I've been interested in Buddhism for a long time, at least since I was ten...So it's been a long time, but I would say my interest has been rekindled recently over the past few years, because I have a friend who went to stay here [Plum Village] and is considering becoming a monastic. And my supervisor in university is a sister from the Plum Village tradition.

Betty got involved in the Plum Village practice through being introduced to a Plum Village sangha by a friend, while two further participants were inspired to get involved after hearing from others about their experiences of the retreats at Plum Village. Three participants, on the other hand, decided right away to participate in the retreats at Plum Village after hearing a friend's suggestion to go there. They learnt the practices at first-hand without knowing what Plum Village was or having any prior experience in meditation. It appeared that all of them were open to the experience at that stage of their life while also having time to do so.

While Ruby was doing a French intensive course in Toulouse for a few weeks, a colleague told her about a health and well-being retreat at Plum Village. As the retreat sounded good to her and she also wanted to have a break at that time, she decided spontaneously – only two weeks prior to the retreat – to go for it. Similarly, Donna was travelling in Europe for the whole summer and had not had any plan for July. When a friend suggested she should go to Plum Village, she just went. Kate was an undergraduate student who had taken three years off from her studies to explore herself. A friend told her about Plum Village, and as she had no plans and was willing to try anything, she decided to stay at Plum Village for a month.

The examples above are illustrations of how people got to know about Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings from other people through their introduction of Thích Nhất Hạnh's books, recordings, talks and lay sangha as well as Plum Village and its practices and retreats.

(2) Chance

Three other interview participants had their first contact with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings not through others but by chance. Roger discovered Thích Nhất Hạnh's book unexpectedly.

Change then happened soon afterward:

It was like seven, eight, nine years ago, I was participating in a yoga and Zen retreat in Poland. And I found his book on a piano, and the book was *Anger*. I leafed it and I found it interesting. I had never heard of Thích Nhất Hạnh before. And then I read it at the retreat, and it was like a strike of thunder to read, because it was simple. It was clear. It was understandable. And I felt like he was talking directly to me in addressing my problem. My problem – one of my problems – was anger. I read the book, I made notes, then I came home, and I found the book on the Internet and I bought it. I read it again, and then I started applying it. Immediately, wonders started to happen. Wonders in the sense that the application of the teachings from this book really worked. I mean, it really worked for me. My relations with my family members improved fast and greatly. And I was able to better control my anger...

Kenneth got to know about Thích Nhất Hạnh through a book by a Christian author about two masters – Meister Eckhart (a Christian mystic) and Thích Nhất Hạnh:

...Thích Nhất Hạnh, who until I read this book, I didn't know. And all I read from Thích Nhất Hạnh in this book, I said, 'This is wonderful.' So when I finished reading this book, I started to look for information about Thích Nhất Hạnh, and I started buying several books.

For Mia, it happened when she was searching online for information about relaxation that she accidentally came across an approach based on Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings. She then

became interested in him and read a few of his books. In addition, she felt connected with Thích Nhất Hạnh because she is also Vietnamese herself.

(3) Attending Plum Village retreats

We see that all the participants mentioned above were somehow inspired to get involved in the practice after learning about Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings or Plum Village, whether through others or by chance. Four participants, however, did not feel much interested in his teachings when first being introduced to them. It was not until later, when they had a chance to participate in the retreats at Plum Village that they had real exposure to the teachings and practices.

While Nancy was practising Dojo Zen, her sister-in-law told her about Thích Nhất Hạnh and her thoughts of visiting Plum Village. However, Nancy "wasn't so curious about this village or this centre". After her sister-in-law mentioned it again in the following two years, Nancy finally decided to go with her for the Spring Retreat in 2016, where I interviewed her; she expressed that her experience at the monastery was positive.

Emma knew about mindfulness since she was very little because her stepfather (who she had lived with from when she was only one year old) was a mindfulness trainer. But she was never interested in it until her parents brought her to Plum Village for the summer retreat when she was 10 years old. She then knew what it was actually like to be mindful, and she enjoyed her time there so much that she returned to the monastery a few times afterward.

Mable's parents brought her to the local Plum Village sangha when she was around 13 years old, because they had friends who practiced there; but she was not interested in it. Then two years later, her parents told her brother to go to Plum Village on his own. Something unexpected happened afterward:

He went there in 2009...my parents and I would not think that he likes this kind of stuff because my brother...is really rebellious and likes to do his own things and is not interested in religion or anything. But he went here and then he changed a lot and my parents were really impressed. So, that's why next year in 2010, my parents and I went because we wanted to see why my brother changed so much.

It turned out that she liked her experience at Plum Village so much that she has kept going there every year since then.

Eliza's father, who got to know about Plum Village through reading Thích Nhất Hạnh's books, had her sister go to Plum Village. Her father was so impressed that her sister, who was a very bubbly and fast person, became very slow after staying in the monastery that he suggested Eliza should do the same. She was indeed not enthusiastic about her father's idea, but after his repeated suggestions for almost ten years, she finally went to Plum Village. She liked her experience at the retreat very much and returned to the monastery many times afterward.

It appears that some people needed to have directly experienced the practices themselves at the monastery in order to become interested in Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings.

(4) Listening to Thích Nhất Hạnh's talks

Like the cases above, two other retreatants also did not feel much interest in Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings when they were first introduced to him. But after listening to his talks when the opportunity arose, they immediately felt sure that they wanted to go further.

Ivan was born in Vietnam but moved to Germany when he was 17 years old. In Vietnam, he had heard about Thích Nhất Hạnh but was not interested in religious matters during that time. Later, finding himself in a foreign country, he became serious about Buddhism as he recognized that it was an important element of Vietnamese culture. He then often went to a local Vietnamese Buddhist community, where he had the chance to listen to Thích Nhất Hạnh's dharma talk when the Zen master visited there. He was so impressed by his talk that he decided to go and learn more about his teachings.

As we saw earlier, Thích Nhất Hạnh's books were a great inspiration for many participants to learn more about his teachings. However, this was not the case for Bella. While she enjoyed reading his book, she did not feel like going further until after hearing Thích Nhất Hạnh's talk.

I first heard of Thầy when a friend gave me a copy of the book *Peace Is Every Step*. So I read it and liked it at that time, but it didn't inspire me to go much further...then about six months to a year after that, Thầy came to Hong Kong where I was living and was giving a public talk; and another friend suggested that we went to go along to hear. So immediately after that talk I was just absolutely convinced that I wanted to know more

and become involved more and went and met some of the Hong Kong sangha, and from then on really became part of the lay sangha... (Bella)

(5) Encountering suffering in life

In Chapter 6, I have discussed how suffering is a necessary condition for developing insight. The Buddha's Four Noble Truths asserts that by recognizing our suffering (First Truth), we will be able to see its cause (Second Truth); we then know that our suffering will end (Third Truth) through practising the Eightfold Noble Path (Fourth Truth). Our suffering has the potential to create circumstances for us to get in touch with the Eightfold Path, which was the case for six of the retreatants I interviewed. The suffering they encountered in life, as described below, was what led them to Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings.

Jack learned to meditate "because I was suffering, and the practice of meditation worked for me. It relieved my suffering in an amazing way that other practices, other therapies, had not done". He later started sitting with a meditation group, which turned out to be in the tradition of Thích Nhất Hạnh. Similarly, Bruce, who had experienced a couple of depressive episodes while studying at university, believed that meditation could help him with his condition. When he looked up meditation groups, he could only find one at his university, which followed Plum Village practice. He then practised with the group for several years.

Natalie was a person who got angry easily; her friend then lent her Thích Nhất Hạnh's book *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, which she did not read right away due to distraction by other things. Then one day, as she felt really depressed and sad, she spent the whole day reading the book:

It was really interesting because after I read that book, I felt better for some reasons. I felt calmer, and I felt weird because – how can a book make me feel like this? I’ve read other books [but] they’ve never made me feel like this. And I realized that most of the things I read in that book, that felt like lots of truth and it really helped.

Daisy was introduced to spiritual practices by her boyfriend. When there was a time that they both needed to deal with anger in their relationship, they came across Thích Nhất Hạnh’s book *Anger* in a library:

We felt touched by these teachings and the way Thầy writes, and that it’s practical also. There are some exercises to practise. So for me it was good, I had some guidance as to practice. Because meditation is so vast, when you just start to know it, you don’t know actually what to do...

Two participants were in deep pain after losing their mother – After Henry’s mother passed away, his wife went to the library, looking for books by a Buddhist teacher in a Tibetan tradition to help relieve their grief. However, instead of finding those books, she found Thích Nhất Hạnh’s books. She then borrowed them, and they both really enjoyed the books. Amber had difficulty accepting people saying at her mother’s funeral that her mother was going to go to heaven. Her aunt then gave her Thích Nhất Hạnh’s book *No Death, No Fear*, which touched her deeply “because it gave so many different ways of thinking about what happens when someone’s body ceases to work”. After that, she read a few of his other books and also tried to do some of the practices.

The experiences of these participants highlight the practicality of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings and his ability to touch people’s hearts with his words, providing relief right away.

(6) Work

Four retreatants had their initial contact with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings from their work. Both Maci (a psychiatric nurse) and Julia (a clinical social worker) used dialectical behaviour therapy – a type of psychotherapy which incorporates with mindfulness that comes partly from Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings – in their job for treating patients. They therefore got to know about his teachings through their workplace. From there, they became more and more interested in the teachings.

As a hotel event organizer, one of Victoria's responsibilities at the hotel was to run mindfulness retreats. As she organized the retreat, she got to participate in it to ensure that things worked fine. She was consequently introduced to mindfulness and Thích Nhất Hạnh through the retreat instructor, who was a student of Thích Nhất Hạnh's. After organizing the retreats a few times, she started to become interested on a personal level and did more research on the practices. Jasmine heard about mindfulness and Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings from Hailey (a counsellor trainer who taught her students and staff mindfulness practices) when she went to work in Hailey's organization as the director there. Hailey later invited Jasmine to Plum Village for a three-week retreat, where I met them.

These cases show that one could learn about Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings from various fields of work, which could even provide ongoing practise opportunities on the job.

(7) Taking secular mindfulness classes

Two participants were introduced to Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings through mindfulness classes. Angel had always been involved in social justice activism but was never interested in meditation because she thought these two were not compatible with each other. It was not

until many years later, when she started talking to friends who did both, that she realized she had misunderstood the practice. She consequently took classes on secular mindfulness to learn how meditation could be connected to social engagement. Camila had a different reason for taking mindfulness classes: her psychologist, who helped her with certain personal and work issues, advised her to learn mindfulness to handle her emotions.

What happened was that both their mindfulness classes, which were offered by different organizations, had included or mentioned Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings. They then became interested in him and started reading his books. The inclusion or mention of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings in secular mindfulness classes reflects the secular nature of his teachings.

(8) Inner guidance

Doris's experience was quite unusual; she had 25 years of spiritual trainings from traditions outside the Buddhist context. She came into contact with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings through her own inner guidance:

For many years, I just knew about his name, because he often...on Facebook, then books and from other people...then one day in one of my meditations, I heard a voice [in my mind] almost literally saying: 'you are going to go into a retreat from November to February'...I didn't know where to go...some weeks later...I had dreams that I needed to go to Plum Village...then I looked at Plum Village website and I saw that there was a winter retreat from November to February. So it was my subconscious or higher spiritual guidance that sent me here [Plum Village] ...

While the way in which Doris got involved in Plum Village practices appears to be a rare occurrence, experiences like hers are worth exploring in future research to see how

common (or uncommon) they actually are. These experiences could be looked at from the perspective of transpersonal studies or related fields to examine their implications for spiritual development.

Summing-up

There were different circumstances through which the interview participants came into contact with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings. However, the underlying reason that they found his teachings appealing seemed to be that the teachings could somehow help them deal with the various issues or problems they encountered in life. The most common way for people to get to know about Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings was through others (e.g. family members, friends, colleagues and teachers), who introduced them his books, recordings, talks, and lay sangha, as well as Plum Village and its practices and retreats. The inclusion of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings in secular mindfulness classes, Western psychotherapy and educational settings due to their universal nature makes his teachings more accessible.

Regardless of whether participants' initial contact with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings was through other people or happened in some other circumstances described above, Thích Nhất Hạnh's books appeared to be a major inspiration for people to get involved in Plum Village practices. As the comments from some of the participants indicated, this reflects not only the accessibility and practicality of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings but also the simplicity and inspirational qualities of his writings.

However, while Thích Nhất Hạnh's writings were powerful and moving to many people, some people needed to have direct contact with either Thích Nhất Hạnh through attending his

talks, or with Plum Village practices through participating in retreats at the monastery, in order to engage with his teachings.

Retreatants' first Plum Village retreat

My interview with the participants started with the question about how and when they first came into contact Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings. When I designed the interview questions, I thought this question would be enough to help us understand why the participants became involved in the practices and their expectations of the outcomes, which in turn informed their perception of their effectiveness.

However, after interviewing the first few participants, I realized that going for a retreat at Plum Village, which involved time, money and one's willingness to be open to new experiences, was not a straightforward step for many people, particularly for those who had a demanding profession, needed to travel from a faraway region or were new to meditative practices or communal living. The experience of participating in retreats is simply very different from that of reading books, attending talks or practising with lay sanghas, which were the ways that the first seven participants came into contact with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings before they went on their first retreat held by Thích Nhất Hạnh and/or his monastics.

In light of this, starting from the eighth participant, I added the question about why they decided to go for a retreat held by Thích Nhất Hạnh and/or his monastics, whether it was at Plum Village, the other eight monasteries established by Thích Nhất Hạnh in different parts of the world, or a place where Thích Nhất Hạnh and/or his monastics travelled to for holding a retreat there. The reasons that motivated them to make such a step will give us further

information on participants' expectations of the outcomes of the practices and how they shaped their perception of the effectiveness of the practices.

While this newly added question was not in my interview with the first seven participants, three of them had still provided relevant information in our conversation. Consequently, responses to this question were gathered from 31 participants. What led these 31 participants to their first Plum Village retreat, which will be discussed below, falls into six main categories, namely (1) Desire to learn more about the practices, (2) Suggestion by others, (3) Inner guidance, (4) Work-related aspirations, (5) Going with parents, and (6) Intention to enter the monkhood.

(1) Desire to learn more about the practices

Most (20) participants wanted to go for a Plum Village retreat in order to learn more about the practices. Generally, people became interested in Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings after reading his books, listening to his talks or practising with a lay sangha. They then desired to go to his monastery to experience first-hand what happened there. A few participants pointed out that they particularly wanted to meet Thích Nhất Hạnh. As Kenneth expressed:

So I started reading and I read a lot of books [of Thích Nhất Hạnh's] until I decided in one moment, by reading and getting more deeply into the teachings and about Thích Nhất Hạnh's life, I realised he was already quite aged; and I said: 'I want to know this teacher before he dies.' So I told my wife about this. I said: 'I'm going to France to a monastery because I want to know Thích Nhất Hạnh personally and see what's happening there.' And she asked me if she could join me, so we came here...

Adam had two reasons for going for his first Plum Village retreat:

The primary reason is I wanted to deepen my own meditative practice, especially, I'm very interested in how to bring meditation and mindfulness not only into sitting meditation but into my everyday life...So I'm developing now a kind of educational programme for young people [in the school where he taught], and I want to bring mindfulness into that as well. So that's the second reason. I have a personal aspiration, and also, I'd like to give it to others. So I'm also interested to meet other people who have experience in bringing mindfulness into education. I was lucky to meet some people who are involved in this initiative called Wake Up Schools. And I knew about that before coming, so I hoped to meet some, and I have done that. (Adam)

So, apart from deepening his own practice, Adam also planned to meet other retreatants who had experiences in bringing mindfulness into education, which was the field of his profession. I will discuss more about his second reason in the fifth category on work-related aspirations below.

(2) Suggestion by others

For eight participants, it was because of other people's suggestions that they decided to participate in a Plum Village retreat. As mentioned before, there were those (Donna, Kate, Ruby) who decided right away to go to the monastery after hearing a friend's suggestion without even knowing anything about Plum Village or having any meditation experience. Two others were not interested in the practices but ended up in the retreat after repeated suggestions by their family members. Jasmine was invited by her colleague at work to go to Plum Village together. Stella was interested in the teachings and then happened to be in France, so the decision was not difficult for her to make.

There seemed to be two causes that led Natalie to Plum Village. After reading a book of Thích Nhất Hạnh's borrowed from a friend, she looked up the monastery's website and found that there was a summer retreat. As it was too far away from her home, she did not think that she should go. The friend who lent her the book also wanted to go to the retreat; but since he did not know English, he asked her to go for him and tell him about her experiences there afterward. At first, she still hesitated to go because she was scared to go to a new place on her own. However, there was "something inside me telling me you need to go". Her inner voice thus helped her make the final decision to go to the monastery.

(3) Inner guidance

As just mentioned above, Natalie's inner guidance was the second reason that led her to Plum Village in addition to the suggestion by her friend. For Doris, as shown in the earlier quote from her interview, it was her subconsciousness that brought her to the monastery. These two participants thus followed their inner guidance in going to their first Plum Village retreat.

(4) Going with parents

As describe above, Emma was not interested in mindfulness until her parents brought her to Plum Village for the summer retreat when she was 10 years old. She was the only participant, who went to the monastery for a retreat because of her parents.

(5) Work-related aspirations

As shown in the first category above, the second reason that led Adam to go to his first Plum Village retreat was work-related. He was developing an educational programme that would be incorporated with mindfulness. He therefore wanted to meet other practitioners who were

involved in Wake Up Schools⁴⁹, as these people had experiences in bringing mindfulness into education. While his aim to connect with other practitioners was for his work, his intention to make the practice available to others – who were his students – was a manifestation of the bodhisattva ideal, which Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings are based on. Adam was the only participant who expressed having such work-related aspirations for his first visit to Plum Village.

(6) Intention to enter the monkhood

Bruce’s reason to go to Plum Village was different from all the other participants. His intention was not to participate in a retreat but to join the monastic community. After practising with a few meditation groups in the Plum Village tradition for seven years, he decided to go to the monastery to enter the monkhood there. For four years after he had arrived at the monastery, he had tried to become a monk four times but was not successful. When I interviewed him, he had already lived in the monastery for five years and was still a layperson. At that time, he expressed that he would be happy to continue to live there as a layperson.

Summing-up

While various reasons brought the participants to their first Plum Village retreat, the general motive behind them was to gain a deeper understanding of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings through hands-on experience. At the time of my interview with the 35 participants, two-fifths (14) of them attended a Plum Village retreat for the first time, around another two-fifths (13)⁵⁰ of them had been to Plum Village retreats for five or more times, and the rest (8) had

⁴⁹ In 2010, Thích Nhất Hạnh initiated Wake Up Schools to provide training to educators in mindfulness and enable them to apply the practice in educational contexts (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2017b; Wake Up Schools, 2017).

⁵⁰ I included Bruce in this category, who had lived at Plum Village for five years since he first arrived there.

come for two to four times. The main reason that people came back for retreats again and again was to deepen their own practice.

Summary

Through exploring how the interview participants first learnt about Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings as well as what led them to their first Plum Village retreat, we gain some insight into why people engaged in the practices (research question 3). There were eight circumstances that brought the participants into contact with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings, namely (1) Other people, (2) Chance, (3) Attending Plum Village retreats, (4) Listening to Thích Nhất Hạnh's talks, (5) Encountering suffering in life, (6) Work, (7) Taking secular mindfulness classes, and (8) Inner guidance. However, what primarily attracted participants to Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings was that the teachings could somehow help them deal with the various issues or problems they encountered in life. The secular nature, accessibility and practicality of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and the simplicity and inspirational qualities of his writings made this possible.

Following the participants' initial contact with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings, there appeared to be six main reasons that led them to their first Plum Village retreat: (1) Desire to learn more about the practices, (2) Suggestion by others, (3) Inner guidance, (4) Work-related aspirations, (5) Going with parents, and (6) Intention to enter the monkhood. The motive behind all these, however, was that the participants wanted to gain a deeper understanding of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings through first-hand experience of the practices. Those who went for another retreat again and again did so in order to deepen their own practice.

Chapter 10

Plum Village Retreats and Practices

Introduction

In the context of the theoretical framework that I created for this research, the fostering of the mindful living lifestyle by the practices taught at Plum Village can be seen as the process of transforming social habitus into mindful habitus that eventually leads to habituslessness. The discussion in this chapter, which focuses on ways that Plum Village practices could turn our social habitus into mindful habitus, is based on the data collected during my fieldwork at Plum Village, where I conducted participant observation and ethnographic interviews.

We will look at how Plum Village is structured in ways that facilitate the transformation of social habitus into mindful habitus. This will be investigated based on the retreats I participated in. The background information on the relevant retreats and the daily schedules at the monastery will therefore be discussed first. After that, I will examine the experiences that the interview participants reported to occur through the practice, investigating whether or not, and how, they incorporated the practice into their everyday life, how successful they were in this, with what effects, and the challenges they encountered. Where relevant, I will also talk about my own experience and observation of the practices taught in the monastery to facilitate the discussion.

In addition, I not only look at how the practices could help practitioners cultivate their mindful habitus, but also explore how certain practices may not be helpful for some practitioners to nurture their mindful habitus, thus leading them to avoid those practices. This

will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact the practices could have on the practitioners, particularly in terms of their helpfulness in cultivating mindful habitus.

Lastly, based on my observations and responses from the interview participants, I will give an account of how Thích Nhất Hạnh attempted to continue to teach after his stroke and what impact this had on the retreatants. This may reveal aspects of his teachings that were not visible before. The discussion in this chapter is, therefore, directed at the following research questions: (1) What are the characteristics of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices? (5) How do practitioners apply the teachings and practices in their daily life? (6) What impact have the teachings and practices had on their daily lives, social situations and relationships, etc? (9) What challenges or difficulties do they face when applying the teachings and practices in their daily life?

As indicated, this chapter is not only based on the responses from the interview participants, but also on data collected through my participant observation at Plum Village.

Autoethnography is thus an important element in the discussion. Since the findings below draw in part on my account of my personal experiences of the practices, they are potentially biased towards benefits from practices taught at Plum Village. To address this potential bias, I will examine how certain practices may not facilitate the cultivation of mindful habitus for some practitioners in addition to the effectiveness of the practices in doing so. This enables us to gain a more holistic perspective on the effects of the practices on the practitioners.

Retreats

Throughout the year, there are a variety of retreats held at Plum Village, such as the Autumn Retreat, Winter Retreat, Health Retreat and Educators Retreat. While the key practices (e.g.

sitting meditation, walking meditation, working meditation, etc) are more or less the same in all the retreats, some retreats have a more intensive programme than others. The daily schedule also varies as the season and the retreat change. Each hamlet has slight variations of its practice schedule as well.

Retreatants usually stay for one to two weeks, normally arriving and departing on a Friday. If they want to extend their stay, they need to write a letter to the monastery to explain why they want to do so, the monastery then decides on any extensions on that basis. During their stay at the monastery, retreatants are separated from worldly responsibilities and distractions, and provided with an order and structure that facilitates their mindfulness practice. They are expected to observe the Five Mindfulness Trainings and participate fully in all scheduled activities. Retreatants need to refrain from accessing to the internet, using strongly perfumed personal care products, sexual activity, smoking, drinking alcohol, or using other intoxicants during their stay. All meals provided at Plum Village are vegan, and non-vegan foods are not allowed there.

I conducted my fieldwork at Plum Village from 8 April to 29 July 2016, residing in a dormitory with other retreatants at New Hamlet. During my 14-week-long stay there, I experienced four different retreats, namely the Francophone Retreat (16 - 23 April), the Spring Retreat (8 - 15 April and 29 April - 27 May), the 21-Day Retreat (1 - 22 June) and the Summer Retreat (1 - 29 July). Below I will first provide some background information on these four retreats; after that, I will discuss the various practices observed in the retreats in relation to the data I collected from my fieldwork. In keeping with the scope of this study, I will primarily focus on the main practices and activities that happened at the monastery, particularly those that were common across the different retreats I had participated in.

Francophone Retreat

The annual Francophone Retreat was for French-speakers, all the activities thus were conducted in French. This also means that non-French speakers were not accepted in the retreat. It was thus not surprisingly that I was the only retreatant there who could not speak French. The monastery very kindly tried to arrange translation for me, but since it was very difficult to have everything translated for me, I oftentimes was not able to follow the activities and practices properly. Besides, the retreat was held during the first two weeks after my arrival at the monastery, when I was still in the process of getting used to the mindful and communal living style there. Because of these factors, I was not able to conduct my fieldwork properly during that time. I thus will not discuss the Francophone Retreat in this thesis, and will instead focus on the other three retreats I participated in.

Spring Retreat

The annual Spring Retreat, which was conducted mainly in English and French, tended to be more relaxed compared to other retreats. Generally, after the retreatants had received an orientation about the mindfulness practices on the second day of their arrival there, they just went along with the community as retreatants and monastics practising together. Two days every week, everyone at Plum Village would gather at one of the three hamlets (i.e. Upper Hamlet, Lower Hamlet and New Hamlet) practising together from after breakfast until afternoon. This means that the hamlets each took turns to be the host hamlet. This way of having all at the monastery practising together reflects the importance of collective practice at Plum Village. During my stay at New Hamlet, there were 28 people on average arriving each week for the Spring Retreat. The schedule was slightly different each day. The basic pattern of the daily schedule of the retreat is outlined below:

5:00	Wake up
5:30	Sitting meditation and chanting / Touching the Earth
7:00	Exercise
7:45	Breakfast
8:30	Household delight
9:15	Dharma talk / Working meditation / Orientation for newcomers (on Saturday)
11:30	Walking meditation
12:30	Lunch
15:00	Working meditation / Dharma sharing / Question & Answer session / Watching DVD of Thích Nhất Hạnh's dharma talk / Sharing on mindful living ⁵¹ (on Tuesday)
18:00	Dinner
20:00	Total Relaxation / Beginning Anew / Sitting meditation / Touching the Earth / Five Mindfulness Trainings Transmission Ceremony (on Thursday)
21:00	Light out and Noble Silence begins

21-Day Retreat

The biennial 21-Day Retreat is designed for the members of the Order of Interbeing as well as experienced practitioners who follow Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings. The retreat in 2016, with the theme title "Vulture Peak Gathering", was the 50th anniversary of the Order of Interbeing. In the past, retreatants were expected to participate in the whole 21 days of the retreat, but that year the retreat was divided into two segments, comprising 11 days each. Retreatant could participate in either or both parts.

At New Hamlet where I stayed, 120 lay practitioners in total joined the retreat; some of them stayed for the whole 21 days while others only participated in the first or second segment. There were around 90 retreatants in each of the two segments of this retreat. All dharma talks in the retreat were conducted in English, with instant translation into several other languages,

⁵¹ The sharing on mindful living was about the Five Mindfulness Trainings.

including French, Mandarin, Spanish, and Vietnamese. A transmission ceremony for the Order of Interbeing aspirants to receive the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings was also held.

In this retreat, retreatants were grouped into different dharma families, each of which were responsible for particular tasks throughout their stay (e.g. cleaning, pot washing, vegetable chopping, etc). Retreatants had dinner with their families every day and did dharma sharing in families. At New Hamlet, there were seven dharma families, which were formed around languages – two families for English speakers, two families for Vietnamese speakers, one family for French speakers, one family for Spanish speakers and one family of young adults who mainly spoke English (translation was available for those few who did not understand English). Each family, which consisted of nine to 17 people, was led by two nuns, who facilitated the dharma sharing sessions and guided working meditation. There were also one or two laypeople working as staff, who assisted in their assigned family. I was one of the staff in my dharma family.

In each segment of the retreat, there were seven days on which everyone at Plum Village would gather at one of the three hamlets (i.e. Upper Hamlet, Lower Hamlet and New Hamlet) to practise together from after breakfast until afternoon. As shown in the schedules below, New Hamlet had its retreatants travel to the other two hamlets on five of the seven days while hosting other hamlets on the other two days.

Time	Wednesday 1/6	Thursday 2/6	Friday 3/6	Saturday 4/6	Sunday 5/6	Monday 6/6	Tuesday 7/6	Wednesday 8/6	Thursday 9/6	Friday 10/6	Saturday 11/6	
5:00	Arrival day	Wake up				Lazy Day 8:00 Breakfast	Wake up					
5:30		Exercise					Exercise					
6:30		Guided sitting meditation, Sutra reading	Guided sitting meditation, Touching the Earth		Silent sitting meditation, Sutra reading		Guided sitting meditation, Touching the Earth				Five Mindfulness Trainings Transmission Ceremony	
7:15		Breakfast and pack lunch					Breakfast and pack lunch				Breakfast	
9:00		8:00 Breakfast	Travel to LH		Travel to UH		Travel to UH		Prepare to host other hamlets		Working meditation	
10:00		Orientation	Dharma talk				Q & A session	Dharma talk				
12:00		Walking meditation					Walking meditation					
13:00		Picnic lunch	Picnic lunch <i>(return to NH at 14:00)</i>	Formal lunch <i>(return to NH at 15:00)</i>	Picnic lunch		Picnic lunch <i>(return to NH at 14:00)</i>	Picnic lunch				
15:30		Household delights		15:00 Presentation <i>(return to NH at 17:00)</i>	Household delights		15:00 Presentation <i>(return to NH at 17:00)</i>	Household delights		Arrival for Segment B of the retreat		
16:15		Dharma sharing			Working meditation		Working meditation	Five Mindfulness Trainings Presentation	Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings Presentation		Dharma sharing	
18:00	Dinner in families											
19:15	Working meditation 20:00	Working meditation		Total Relaxation, Touching the Earth	Working meditation	Beginning Anew Presentation	Working Meditation				Working meditation	
20:45	Total Relaxation, Short orientation, Dharma family meeting	Walking and sitting meditation on Plum Hill			Silent sitting meditation		Walking and sitting meditation at Lotus Pond		Tea meditation in families	Be-in	20:00 Total Relaxation, Short orientation	
22:30	Lights out and Noble Silence begins											

Figure 6: First segment of the 2016 21-Day Retreat at New Hamlet
(UH: Upper Hamlet, LH: Lower Hamlet, NH: New Hamlet)

Time	Saturday 11/6	Sunday 12/6	Monday 13/6	Tuesday 14/6	Wednesday 15/6	Thursday 16/6	Friday 17/6	Saturday 18/6	Sunday 19/6	Monday 20/6	Tuesday 21/6	
5:00	Wake up						Wake up					
5:30	Exercise						Exercise					
6:30	Five Mindfulness Trainings Transmission Ceremony	Guided sitting meditation, Sutra reading	Guided sitting meditation, Touching the Earth		Silent sitting meditation, Sutra reading	Lazy Day	Silent sitting meditation, Touching the Earth	Guided sitting meditation, Sutra reading	Silent sitting meditation, Touching the Earth	Guided sitting meditation, Sutra reading	Lazy morning	
7:15	Breakfast	8:00 Breakfast	Breakfast and pack lunch				Breakfast and pack lunch					8:00 Breakfast
9:00	Working meditation			Travel to LH	Prepare to host other hamlets		8:00 Breakfast	Travel to LH		Travel to UH		
10:00		Orientation	Dharma talk		Q & A session	Festival		Dharma talk		Q & A session		
12:00		Walking meditation					Walking meditation					
13:00	Picnic lunch		Picnic lunch <i>(return to NH at 14:00)</i>	Picnic lunch			Picnic lunch <i>(return to NH at 14:00)</i>	Picnic lunch	Picnic lunch <i>(return to NH at 14:00)</i>		Picnic lunch	
15:30	Arrival for Segment B of the retreat	Household delights			15:00 Presentation	Household delights		15:00 Presentation <i>(return to NH at 17:00)</i>	Household delights			
16:15		Dharma sharing		Working meditation		Working meditation	Dharma sharing		Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings Presentation	Rest	Hiking meditation	
18:00	Dinner in families											
19:15	Working meditation	Working meditation		Beginning Anew presentation	Working meditation	Total Relaxation, Touching the Earth	Working Meditation	Lazy Evening	Working Meditation		Cleaning the hamlet meditation	
20:45	20:00 Total Relaxation, Short Orientation	Walking and sitting meditation at Lotus Pond			Lazy night		Walking and sitting meditation at Lotus Pond			Tea meditation in families		Be-in
22:30	Lights out and Noble Silence begins											

Figure 7: Second segment of the 2016 21-Day Retreat at New Hamlet
(UH: Upper Hamlet, LH: Lower Hamlet, NH: New Hamlet)

Summer Retreat

The annual festive Summer Retreat, which lasted for four weeks, received the most guests in the year. People could participate in one to all four weeks. At New Hamlet, 210 retreatants on

average attended the retreat in any given week. As there were several hundred people going to the monastery each week, all five hamlets (i.e. New Hamlet, Upper Hamlet, Lower Hamlet, Middle Hamlet and Son Ha Temple) were open to accommodate guests. As mentioned in Chapter 8, programs that were especially designed for children (6-12 years old) and teenagers (13-17 years old) were offered in this retreat. Many young people therefore went to the retreat with their parents.

Dharma talks were conducted in either English or French, with instant translation into various languages, including Dutch, English, French, German, Mandarin, Spanish, and Vietnamese. As in the 21-Day Retreat, retreatants were grouped into different dharma families. At New Hamlet, there were nine families formed around languages and age. Depending on the week of the retreat, there were one or two families for French speakers, with all the other families being made up primarily of English speakers (translation was available for those few who did not understand English). There was also one family for children and one for teenagers. The size of the families varied in different weeks, as increasingly more people arrived in the later weeks. The adult families consisted of 14, 20, 21, and 23 members on average during the first, second, third, and fourth week, respectively.

Again, everyone at Plum Village would gather at one of the three hamlets (i.e. Upper Hamlet, Lower Hamlet and New Hamlet) a few days every week practising together from after breakfast until afternoon. As the schedule of the first week⁵² of the Summer Retreat below show, New Hamlet had its retreatants travel to the other two hamlets three times and hosted other hamlets once each week.

⁵² The schedules of the other three weeks of the Summer Retreat were more or less the same.

Time	Friday 1/7	Saturday 2/7	Sunday 3/7	Monday 4/7	Tuesday 5/7	Wednesday 6/7	Thursday 7/7		
5:00	Arrival day	Wake up	Wake up		Lazy Day 8:00 Breakfast	Wake up	Wake up		
5:30			Exercise			Exercise	6:00 Five Mindfulness Trainings Transmission Ceremony		
6:30			Guided sitting meditation, Touching the Earth	Silent sitting meditation, Sutra reading		Guided sitting meditation, Touching the Earth			
7:15		Guided sitting meditation, Sutra reading	Breakfast and pack lunch			Breakfast and pack lunch			
8:30		Breakfast	Travel to LH	Prepare to host other hamlets		Travel to UH			
9:30		Beginning Anew Presentation	Dharma talk			Q & A session	Dharma talk		
11:30		Personal time	Walking meditation			Walking meditation			
12:30		Picnic lunch	Formal lunch (return to NH at 15:00)	Picnic lunch			Picnic lunch (return to NH at 14:00)		
15:00		Household delights		Household delights					
16:00			Dharma sharing	Working meditation	Five Mindfulness Trainings Presentation	Working meditation			
17:45	Dinner in families								
19:30	Total Relaxation, Orientation, Dharma family meeting	Working meditation	Dharma sharing	Working meditation	Dharma sharing	Total Relaxation, Touching the Earth	Be-in		
21:00		Walking meditation							
21:45		Big bell is invited to start Noble Silence and lights out							

Figure 8: Week one of the 2016 Summer Retreat at New Hamlet
(UH: Upper Hamlet, LH: Lower Hamlet, NH: New Hamlet)

Practices

This section explores how the mindful living practices which characterize the lifestyle at Plum Village help practitioners weave (right) mindfulness into whatever they do in everyday life. Cargile (2011) explains that “when individuals are exposed to stimuli that counter their conditioned responses, their attitudes undergo reconditioning and their habitus begins to change” (p. 16). The practices taught at Plum Village thus aim to recondition our mostly mindless responses that are shaped by social habitus, turning it into mindful habitus which eventually leads to habituslessness.

In keeping with the aims of this study, I will primarily focus on the main practices and activities that happened at the monastery, particularly those that were common across the different retreats I had participated in. In discussing these practices and activities, I will first explain their purpose, how they happened at the monastery, and possible ways that they can

be continued in the daily life of practitioners after they leave the retreats. I will then look at the experiences that the interview participants reported to occur through the practice, investigating whether or not, and how, they incorporated the practice into their everyday life, how successful they were in this, with what effects, and the challenges they encountered. To have a more comprehensive understanding of the impact the practices could have on the practitioners, I will also explore how certain practices may not be helpful for some practitioners to nurture their mindful habitus, thus causing them not to engage with those practices. When it is helpful to highlight the possible impact the practices could have on us, I will also talk about my own experiences of the practices and observations of others.

When I designed the interview questions, my main concerns were how well people had applied the teachings in their daily life and what impact they had on them. The questions were therefore mainly around those topics. However, after staying at Plum Village for about three weeks – around the time after I had just finished my interview with the first participant – I noticed that the retreat experience itself actually had an impact on the retreatants already, particularly for those who went to the monastery for the first time. I then wanted to know how the participants felt about the practices and activities done at the retreat.

Starting from the second participant,⁵³ I therefore added questions about their experiences at the monastery and how they found the practices and activities there. We did not go through all the practices and activities that happened at the monastery one by one, because that would be too much for an interview. I just invited the participants to share whatever they felt like, focusing on practices they mentioned of their own accord. Consequently, there were only some responses collected for each of the practices and activities. While there was limited data

⁵³ I did go back to the first participant for another short interview, focusing just on the newly added questions.

collected on the participants' experiences of the practices, the discussion here can nonetheless offer a glimpse of the effectiveness of Plum Village practices in cultivating mindful habitus.

The sound of the bell

At Plum Village, we could hear the sound of the bell throughout the day.⁵⁴ We would hear the activities bell 10 to 15 minutes before a scheduled activity (e.g. walking meditation, dinner, dharma talks, etc), the bowl bell in the meditation hall when practising breathing and sitting, the chimes of the clock in the dining hall every hour, as well as the rings of the telephone.⁵⁵ During the Summer Retreat, we would also hear the big bell at the Bell Tower every evening after the last activity. When we heard these sounds, we stopped whatever we were doing and returned to our breathing until the sounds finished; for the telephone, we stopped for the first three rings.⁵⁶

While our body is in one place, our mind is often somewhere else. These sounds, which help unify the body and the mind through conscious breathing, are called “bells of mindfulness” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2007a, 2009c). “When we stop to breathe and restore our calm and our peace, we become free, our work becomes more enjoyable, and the friend in front of us becomes more real” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009c, p. 20). For Thích Nhất Hạnh (2002b), this is not just an individual practice, but also a collective one:

⁵⁴ At Plum village, we would say “inviting” the bell to sound instead of “hitting” or “striking” the bell because the bell is considered “an enlightened friend that helps us wake up and guides us home to ourselves” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2014d, p. 28).

⁵⁵ Those were the landlines in the different hamlets, because people were not allowed to use their mobile phones during the retreat.

⁵⁶ Similarly, when practising telephone meditation, we do not answer the phone right away when we hear the phone ring. Instead, we practise mindful breathing until the third ring before we pick up the phone (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009c).

...at that point we improve the quality of the Sangha energy. We know that our brother and our sister, wherever they are, will be stopping, breathing, and coming back to themselves. They will be generating the energy of right mindfulness, the Sangha energy. (pp. 31-32)

This simple practice – stop and breathe – may not be as easy as it sounds, particularly when we are new to it. I learnt about this practice back to 2012 when I went on my first Plum Village retreat at the Asian Institute of Applied Buddhism in Hong Kong. I did fine until the fourth morning on which I woke up late. As I rushed to the toilet to wash and dress, I was too preoccupied to hear the bell sounding until its third sound. But after I had stopped walking, I just impatiently wondered when the bell would stop because “I was in a hurry!” It was not until another three sounds then I remembered to go back to my breathing; I then realized how tense my body and mind were. The sounds of the bell helped break through my habitual rushing tendency. This was another example of how we have been conditioned by our social habitus that pushes us to rush all the time.

While I had some experiences of this practice before going to my fieldwork at Plum Village, it still took me some time before I could get used to it due to a lack of practice at home. One day during my first week at the monastery, the bell sounded while I was talking to a retreatant, but I was not aware of the bell and continued to talk until I noticed that the other person had stopped. I observed that similar situations also happened to some of the newcomers to the monastery.

At times, people talked so loud in the dining hall that they did not even hear the chime of the clock. Whenever this happened, the bell in the dining hall would be sounded by a nun to remind everyone to stop and breathe. Everyone would then quieten down immediately and

return their own breathing. The sounds of the bell appeared to have a great capacity to calm the mind and the body. As Thích Nhất Hạnh (2014d) notes: “Gentleness and nonviolence are characteristics of the sound of the bell. Its sound is gentle but very powerful” (p. 28). With practise, retreatants were generally able to practise well two to three days after they had arrived at the monastery.

For everyday practice at home, apart from the ringing of the telephone, Thích Nhất Hạnh (2009c) suggests things that we may not have thought of as our bells of mindfulness, such as the cry of a baby, the sound of ambulances and a car alarm. Every time we hear these, instead of finding them unpleasant or irritating as conditioned by our social habitus, we see them as a reminder of our practice, stopping what we are doing and taking three breaths to still our body and mind. With mindful habitus, distracting noises can become bells of mindfulness.

Among the three participants who indicated that they would pause and return to their breathing when hearing the first three rings of their telephone, one of them also had a clock at home that chimed regularly:

So we have a clock like here; every 15 minutes it chimes, and we stop and listen to it. And my wife does it. My daughter, when she was home, did it. We all stop, everybody knows. People visit, they know – stop and listen. We do the same thing with the telephone. The telephone rings, everybody stops, listens to the bell for three times. (Jack)

Four participants said that they had a small bell that they used for their practice. While Eliza rang the bell when practising mindful eating during breakfast, Betty did the same when practising mindful sitting. When Amber went to sit in nature, she rang the bell and then just breathed in and out. In addition, she also used the bell for handling her emotions:

...the other way that I use the bell, especially a few years ago when my daughter was younger, is when either one of us would start feeling a lot of tension and getting angry. And, you know, when you ring the bell, it just kind of stops everything...When emotion arises...ring the bell...I come back to myself. It helps me come back to remembering that I'm in the here and now... (Amber)

Hannah used a bell at work so that she would not get lost when things became overwhelming:

I have a bell, the mindfulness bell in my office. So when I start the day when I go to the office, I just ring the bell, just back to my breaths, just like to start off, to clear everything. But when I'm into work that is a different thing. There are emails, things...people come around with questions, with things...It is too much, [if] I want to take some break, I just ring the bell. It is on my desk whenever I need a break.

Three participants spoke about things or situations in their daily life that they regarded as bells of mindfulness, including when waiting at the red traffic light, queuing in a supermarket, and hearing a church bell (in Germany). Apart from these, Hannah explained how traffic jams had become her bell of mindfulness:

...when I'm driving...you have traffic jam. So, what to do? Instead of listening to radio or checking emails, I just come back to my breath. And it is ok, alright, you don't feel I have to be in a rush. It's still there, you have to be there, you can't go anywhere anyway, just come back to it.

Plum Village also offers a free app with bells of mindfulness. Installing a bell of mindfulness on our computer or smartphone helps remind us of our practice so that we would not be drowned by work. When we hear the bell, which sounds at regular intervals (e.g. every 15 minutes), we pause and take three mindful breaths to relax our body and mind before

continuing our work (Plum Village, n.d.-j). Three interview participants mentioned that they had installed a mindfulness bell on their computer. When hearing the sounds of the bell from the computer, as one participant said, “I close my eyes to get away from the screen and breathe in and out three times” (Eliza).

Gāthās and calligraphies

As discussed in Chapter 6, *gāthās* which are “short verses to recite during daily activities to help us return to mindfulness” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1997, p. 13) are an indispensable part of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings. Thích Nhất Hạnh has written numerous *gāthās* to guide our everyday activities. For instance, while practicing walking meditation, he recommends us to recite this: “The mind can go in a thousand directions. But on this beautiful path, I walk in peace. With each step, a gentle wind blows. With each step, a flower blooms” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009c, p. 13).

At Plum village, there were *gāthās* posted in various places (e.g. meditation hall, toilets, dining room) to help bring our mind back to the present moment, so that we could become more aware of what we are doing. For instance, the following *gāthā* was posted above the basin in the toilet in my accommodation there: “Brushing my teeth and rinsing my mouth, I vow to speak purely and lovingly. When my mouth is fragrant with right speech, a flower blooms in the garden of my heart” (figure below). There was also a *gāthā* for retreatants to use at the self-service tea table in the dining room: “This cup of tea in my two hands, mindfulness held perfectly. My mind and body dwell in the very here and now” (figure below).

Thích Nhất Hạnh (2000) explains that: “The use of such *gāthās* encourages clarity and mindfulness, making even the most ordinary tasks sacred. Going to the bathroom, taking out the garbage, and chopping wood become acts infused with poetry and art...” (pp. 130-131). Therefore, even using the toilet, as Thích Nhất Hạnh (2012b) describes, whether defecating or urinating, can be a spiritual act when it is done in mindfulness. *Gāthās* help transform our attitude towards everything we do in daily life; even the routine and tedious actions become significant. In social habitus, we take many things in our day-to-day life for granted. As we cultivate our mindful habitus, we are able to see the extraordinary in the ordinary.

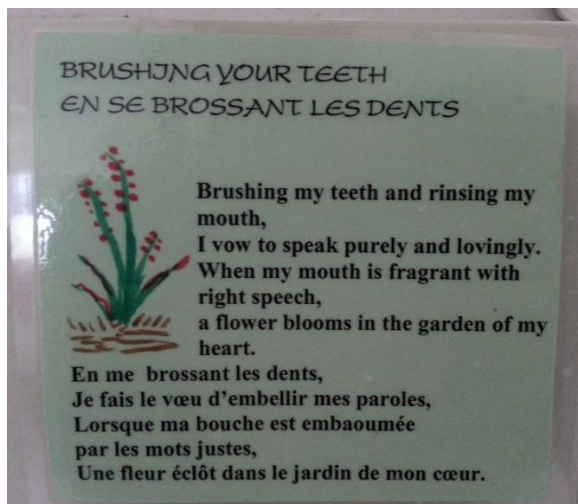


Figure 9.1: *Gāthā* posted in the toilet at Plum Village



Figure 9.2: *Gāthā* posted at the self-service tea table at Plum Village

Figure 9: *Gāthās* posted at Plum Village

Six interview participants reported that they used various *gāthās* throughout their day, such as when they went for a walk, washed dishes, used a bell, woke up in the morning, etc. Two of them also put up *gāthās* to remind them of the practice. As Eliza said: “I have *gāthās* all over my house, my place, that’s part of my practice”. While Thích Nhất Hạnh encourages practitioners to write their own *gāthās*, no participants reported doing so.

In addition to *gāthās*, short phrases that capture the essence of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings could also be seen all around the monastery. These phrases were presented in Thích Nhất Hạnh's own unique style of Zen calligraphy, being written in different languages, including Chinese, English, French and Vietnamese (figure below). These calligraphies are not just pieces of art that help people to return to mindfulness, but creating them is meditation as well. Thích Nhất Hạnh explains:

In my calligraphy, there is ink, tea, breathing, mindfulness and concentration. This is meditation. This is not work. Suppose I write 'breathe'; I am breathing at the same time. To be alive is a miracle and when you breathe in mindfully, you touch the miracle of being alive. (Plum Village, n.d.-d, para. 2)



Figure 10.1: Example of Thích Nhất Hạnh's calligraphy in Chinese



Figure 10.2: Example of Thích Nhất Hạnh's calligraphy in English



Figure 10.3: Example of Thích Nhất Hạnh's calligraphy in French

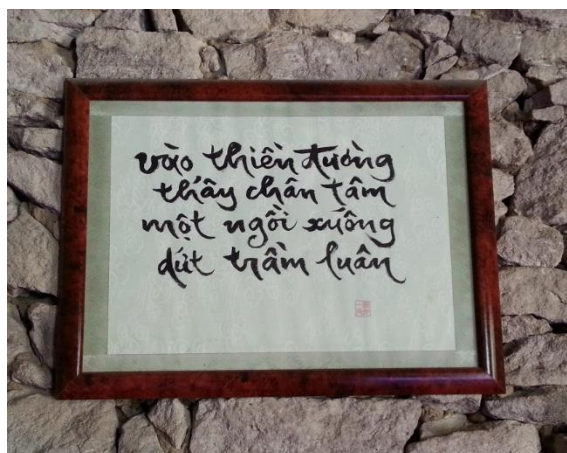


Figure 10.4: Example of Thích Nhất Hạnh's calligraphy in Vietnamese

Figure 10: Examples of Thích Nhất Hạnh's calligraphy

Noble Silence

Noble Silence began after the last scheduled activity in the evening and lasted until after breakfast the next morning. During this period, talking was restricted in order to “allow the silence and the calmness to penetrate your flesh and bones. Allow the energy of the Sangha and its mindfulness to penetrate your body and mind” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009c, p. 101).

The purpose of the practice, however, is not to just create a quiet environment, because silence is not something that happens outside of us, it comes from within. “Silence means that we’re not disturbed inside; there’s no talking inside...When we are silent inside, awareness can penetrate into the soil of our souls” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009c, p. 101). If we cannot stop talking in our own mind, even though we do not make a sound, we are not truly silent. Noble Silence is not about being quiet in the external form, but about being able to maintain our silence within even in the midst of lots of outside noise. In social habitus, our mind could be easily troubled when things do not go our way. Mindful habitus, in contrast, allows us to stay cool and aware of what is going on inside and outside regardless of what situation we are in.

In modern society, which is full of noise within and without, the simple act of being silent in the practice of Noble Silence is not an easy task for many of us, especially when we are new to the practice. I often saw retreatants talking to each other during this period of deep silence, particularly during breakfast time. There was thus a sign in the dining room to remind people to focus on their breathing while waiting to take their food at the serving table (figure below). When people’s talking became too loud, a nun would use the bell to help everyone to remember the practice. Usually, after practising for two to three days, retreatants would become quieter and calmer. In my interview with the participants, no one talked about experiences relating to this practice and/or attempts to incorporate it into everyday life.

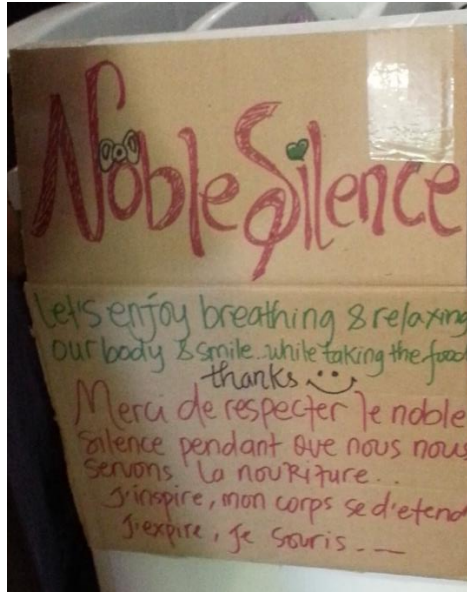


Figure 11: A sign in the dining hall at Plum Village to remind retreatants to practise Noble Silence

Sitting meditation

In sitting meditation, we bring our total awareness to body and mind, being with any thoughts, emotions and experiences that might arise in us – whether they are pleasant (e.g. relaxation, excitement and trust) or not (e.g. strain, sadness and fear) – without the need to push them away, suppress or ignore them. We just observe undisturbed, letting them come, stay and go, not getting involved in them (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009c). For Thích Nhất Hạnh (2002b), sitting meditation has great significance because we practise not just for ourselves, but also everyone else in our sangha and city:

when one person in the city is less angry, is smiling more, the whole city profits. If we practice looking deeply, our understanding of interbeing will grow, and we will see that every smile, every step, every breath is for everybody. It is for our country, for the future, for our ancestors. (p. 32)

When I was at Plum Village, there was a sitting meditation session for about 30 minutes every morning (except on Lazy Day and departure/arrival day). Depending on the retreats and

schedules, there could also be another sitting session in the evening. Not everyone in the retreats found sitting in the meditation hall without doing anything a simple task, particularly those who did not have much experience of the practice. As Natalie shared:

The sitting meditation was kind of hard, because I'm the kind of person who has to move around. I can't sit still for more than 20 minutes...I get distracted really easily...I couldn't concentrate at first, it was really hard. And then by the second week, you know what, just try to do it the whole time, and I don't know if it helped that I had already been here for a week, but I felt like calmer. During the sitting meditation, I didn't have all these thoughts in my head. So, it was easier to concentrate and just sit still and breathe.

On the first few days of a retreat period, I often heard the sound of rubbing clothes throughout the sitting session, which was caused by the adjustment of body postures from the retreatants, throughout the sitting session. People might feel restless or their body might feel uncomfortable keeping the same posture for an extended period of time. As Thích Nhất Hạnh (2009c) observes:

We're used to always doing something. We need some training to be able to sit and enjoy the sitting, to do nothing and enjoy doing nothing. Each of us has the habit energy of always having to be doing something. If we're not doing something, we can't stand it. (p. 11)

Like Natalie, people generally were more able to sit still after some training, and the sitting sessions tended to become quieter from the middle of the retreat periods onwards. Amber described how just sitting mindfully could be very healing:

...when I'm here, I do my sitting meditation in the morning and at night. My mind is so much clearer. And I also am able to release a lot of suffering and sadness. And so often when I am doing sitting meditation, I cry. And I don't even know what it's about. It's just coming out of my eyes, and then I feel better.

The practice helps slow down our tendency to be doing something all the time. which is a result of our social habitus. As we sit still, we learn how to be “non-doing”, which enables us to get in touch with the suffering within, letting it be transformed.

As the retreat schedules above show, some sessions were guided meditation whereas the others were silent sitting. Thích Nhất Hạnh (2009b) offers various exercises for use in guided sitting, and the monastics who led the sessions selected the ones that were suitable for the retreatants at a particular retreat. In the exercises, the in-breath and out-breath were paired with guiding phrases to help maintain our mindful breathing. The sessions usually began with these phrases: “Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out”, which were then shortened to only the keywords – “in, out” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009b, p. 14).

After practising for a number of in- and out-breaths, we then moved to the next guiding phrases, such as these ones: “Breathing in, my breath grows deep. Breathing out, my breath goes slowly” and the keywords were “deep, slow” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009b, p. 14). The guiding phrases of all the other exercises have the same parallel pattern of using the in- and out-breath. Thích Nhất Hạnh (2009b) points out the reason for it:

Conscious breathing is the way into any sort of meditative concentration. Conscious breathing also leads us to the basic realizations of the impermanence, emptiness,

interdependent origination, selflessness, and nonduality of all that is... Thus all the exercises presented here employ the vehicle of conscious breathing. (p. 4)

Moreover, in discussing the effectiveness of using such parallel phrases, Bowen (2011) mentions that “linked pairs of utterances seem to evoke a sense of power and sometimes bring out the desire to participate in a recitation” (p. 144). Adopting roughly equivalent verbal structures also “allows the chanter to make two lines out of one idea” and helps in memorizing texts (p. 145). In other words, meditating using those guiding phrases and texts not only encourages practice, but also enhances its efficacy.

While guided sitting aims to enhance our practice, not everyone found it helpful. One interview participant expressed that she preferred silent sitting because the guidance hindered her from going deeper in her meditation:

...for sitting meditations, sometimes I think I can gain more if I do it alone than being in a guided sitting meditation. Because [when] they say that ‘breathing in, I feel calm,’ I feel it’s kind of like forcing you to. I know it’s like a guided thing, but still when I hear it, I don’t really feel comfortable enough. So, sometimes I just prefer to practise it on my own in the small Buddha hall instead of in the big meditation hall. (Kate)

While Thích Nhất Hạnh (2009b) understands that people do not want the calm and peaceful state of mind that they create during silent sitting to be disturbed, he warns that:

we cannot continue in this state forever. We need the vigor and strength to come out of the meditation hall into life because that is the only way we can hope to change our world. In the practice of guided meditation, we have the opportunity to look deeply into

the mind, to sow wholesome seeds there, to strengthen and cultivate those seeds so that they may become the means for transforming the suffering in us. Finally, we can also be guided in meditation to come face to face with that suffering in order to understand its root causes and be free of its bondage. (pp. 5-6)

There are thus two aspects in sitting meditation: (1) calming the body and mind, and (2) looking deeply. While the first aspect, which can bring us joy, can be achieved in silent meditation, we need guided meditation to help us attain the second aspect (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009b, 2014b). Guided meditation (in addition to silent meditation) is thus indispensable in transforming social habitus into mindful habitus that eventually leads to habituslessness. This is also a reminder that when we experience some fruits of the practice (i.e. feeling calm and relax) as we cultivate our mindful habitus, we should not be content with that and just stay there. Such fruits are simply the foundation for our further practice. We need to practice diligently moving to the direction of habituslessness if we want to eradicate the root causes of our suffering and be liberated from it.

In our everyday lives, we can practice sitting meditation anywhere. We do not need to limit ourselves to quiet places for our mindful sitting. We can practice, for instance, when we take public transport to work. While sitting on the bus or train, we bring our attention to our breathing rather than thinking about our work or other people, so that our body and mind can relax. We can turn the bus or train that we ride to work into a meditation hall (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2014b).

Among the 15 interview participants, who indicated that they practised sitting meditation at home, 12 did so every day or most of the days, while three others did it from time to time. Most of them generally sat for half an hour (or more). One participant expressed that, apart

from formal sitting, she did meditation when sitting on a bus as well. Another participant also used this practice when working on her computer; whenever she felt agitated, “I turn away from my screen and I sit in my chair for five minutes or 10 minutes” (Angel).

Walking meditation

In walking meditation, we walk without a destination or a purpose; we just walk and delight in the walking (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2007a, 2009c). When we walk, we bring our attention to our steps and breath, matching the former to the latter (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009c, 2014c). We can use *gāthās* such as this one for our practice: “I have arrived. / I am home / in the here, / in the now. / I am solid. / I am free. / In the ultimate / I dwell” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2011, p. 35). The *gāthā* should be arranged in a way that its rhythm matches our steps. For instance, if we take two steps with one in-breath, we recite: “I have arrived. I have arrived”. If we take three steps with one out-breath, we recite: “I am home. I am home. I am home” Or we can use a shorten version, saying “arrived, arrived” during each in-breath and “home, home, home” during each out-breath. When we are ready, we can move to the next guiding phrases “here / now” and then “solid / free” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2014c).

As reflected in the *gāthā*, there is no destination in walking meditation because we arrive in each step, which is here and now – the only place where life happens. There is also no purpose in walking meditation because the only thing we want to do is to walk. Our walking itself is a means and an end at the same time. As we are totally engaged in the present moment when walking mindfully, we are stable and free from worries and regrets (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2011). Two interview participants reported having a very positive experience in doing this practice. This is Natalie’s experience:

I really like the walking mediation, it helps me realize that we're on earth, we're here, we're not somewhere else. I don't know how to explain it. It made me feel like I was alive, I'm not somewhere else, I am not doing something else. I'm here, in this moment, appreciating that I can walk. I can actually walk when there's other people who can't, appreciating that my feet can feel the ground, feel the grass, feel the movement; and it's like really calm. And like the sitting mediation and walking mediation, they help me calm down. I don't feel so angry anymore, I don't feel frustrated, they really help. Instead of building up anger or all those emotions, they help me get them out in a positive way.

Mindful walking is thus very different from our usual way of walking, during which our mind is often pushed and pulled by our social habitus. We are lost in thoughts and emotions, being preoccupied with regret over things that happened in the past and anxiety about what might or might not occur in the future. Staying in the present moment, as we cultivate our mindful habitus, can set us free from the past and the future as well as our regret and anxiety. Mindful walking is the signature walking style of someone with mindful habitus.

As one might imagine, walking meditation is not that easy, particularly for a beginner like Donna:

At the beginning, it was kind of hard because everyone just walked mindfully and just did every step: 'I am home. I am home. I have arrived. I have arrived.' It became a little bit boring. But when you tried a lot to get into the practice, there was a time when I felt something very strong, and I felt like: 'Oh, this is being mindful, so I want to be mindful all the time.' So, I decided to continue a little bit...

While Donna struggled with walking meditation at the beginning, she found her mindfulness improved after having had some practice. Stella described how a nun helped her return to mindfulness when she got distracted by her own thoughts while walking with the sangha:

When we did walking meditation, one of the first times that I did it, we went up the hill and I was counting how many times thoughts went into my head and I did really well on the way up, about 15 times I had thoughts coming into my head. And then on the way back, I got so stuck on one thought, it wouldn't go away...And then all of sudden, I felt something touch my hand and it was one of the sisters. She grabbed my hand and then she walked with me in unison down the hill. And I totally forgot about that thought, which wasn't a really nice thought, it was something that someone said to me that hurt me. And I just walked in unison with her step and then got back to my breath. You know, I thought that was really beautiful...so that's a really lovely experience that I can take from here.

Both Natalie and Stella appeared to have a very positive experience of the practice. Sofia and Doris, however, did not enjoy walking with a large group of people. Sofia explained:

Because it's too many people for me. Even when I used to do it regularly, I used to go on the side, not to follow all the people...I will slow down on my own, but not at the pace of the person who is in front of me...The pace is too slow...you have to wait, I'm not in my own breathing anymore. I have to wait for the one in front of me.

Doris also found other practitioners walked too slowly which caused her back to ache. To resolve the situation, Sofia walked on the side of the group while Doris intentionally “was late for the walking meditation and then I can go a little bit slow to catch up with

them; and I just wait very long before I went back”. Their experience suggested that the different walking pace within a group could be an issue for some people.

While group walking meditation was not a practice that Sofia and Doris enjoyed much, they somehow managed to continue their practice during their time at the monastery.

The situation for Roger, on the other hand, was more extreme:

Walking meditation is something I try to avoid, because it’s difficult for me...Somehow, it’s too much for me...it’s like doing two things at the same time – walk and meditate ...Walking meditation is a torture for me...I have a difficulty in explaining, but we were talking about it in the dharma sharing in the sangha. And when I first mentioned the word ‘torture,’ I had many followers, I must tell you.

While I can understand – from my own experience – that bringing all our awareness to each step is not an easy task nor maintaining balance when matching our breathing to our steps, I cannot comprehend how walking meditation could be a “torture” for Roger and others.

Roger’s feedback and the diverse experiences of the interview participants discussed above indicate that walking meditation is a topic worthy of further research.

As shown in the retreat schedules above, there was a walking meditation session for about 45 minutes before lunch every day (except on Lazy Day and departure/arrival day). Depending on the retreats and schedules, there could also be another walking session in the evening.

Apart from participating in these scheduled walking sessions, everyone at the monastery was also expected to walk with mindfulness whenever they were going from one place to another.

People therefore did not talk when they walked. If we wanted to speak, we would stop first before saying anything.

At home, we can practise mindful walking whenever we walk, regardless of the distance. It could be a brief walk from home to take the bus or even just walking within our own house (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009c, 2011, 2014c). When bringing our attention to every step and every breath we take, we feel at home (which is here and now) even walking in the midst of a crowded and busy city (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2011). Eight interview participants, who reported that they did walking meditation at home, appeared to have put the practice into their daily life as advised. They did mindful walking in nature (e.g. park, countryside, etc), at an airport, a train station, or even within their own house (e.g. from the toilet to the living room).

Eating meditation

At Plum Village, we started practising eating meditation when serving our food in the dining hall. While standing in line at the serving table to take our food, we practised noble silence, focusing on our breathing. “Serving ourselves, we realize that many elements, such as the rain, sunshine, earth, and the care taken by the farmers and the cooks, have all come together to form this wonderful meal” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009c, p. 41). After taking our food and sitting down at the table, we continued with our conscious breathing (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2014a).

When everyone was seated, we recited the Five Contemplations, led by a monastic there. This was aimed at helping us look at our food deeply – its sources and values – realizing how everything in the world (i.e. people, animals, plants, and minerals) came together to make our meal possible (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009c, 2014a). We first heard three sounds of the bell and then the Five Contemplations (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2014a, pp. 98-99) were read aloud:

1. This food is a gift of the Earth, the sky, numerous living beings, and much hard and loving work.
2. May we eat with mindfulness and gratitude so as to be worthy to receive this food.
3. May we recognize and transform unwholesome mental formations, especially our greed, and learn to eat with moderation.
4. May we keep our compassion alive by eating in such a way that reduces the suffering of living beings, stops contributing to climate change, and heals and preserves our precious planet.
5. We accept this food so that we may nurture our brotherhood and sisterhood, build our community, and nourish our ideal of serving all living beings.



Figure 12: The Five Contemplations (in Vietnamese, French and English) in Thích Nhất Hạnh's calligraphy, framed in the dining hall at Plum Village

After the recitation, there would be another sound of the bell, we then ate in silence for 20 minutes. While eating, we paid full attention to our food. It was recommended that we chew each mouthful of food at least 30 times to make our digestion easier. Eating mindfully enables us to see that the whole world is contained in every single bite of our meal (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2014a). Thích Nhất Hạnh’s calligraphy “the bread in your hand is the body of the cosmos”, which was framed in the dining hall of Lower Hamlet in the monastery (figure below), reminded us to eat with such an insight. He explains:

Looking into a piece of bread, you can see the whole cosmos – the sky, earth, cloud, and sunshine – everything can be recognized in a piece of bread. It is very spiritual and very scientific at the same time. When you eat a piece of bread with mindfulness you are in touch with the whole cosmos. The cosmos is nourishing you, the cosmos is entrusting itself entirely to you, and you are entrusting yourself entirely to the cosmos. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2002b, p. 11)

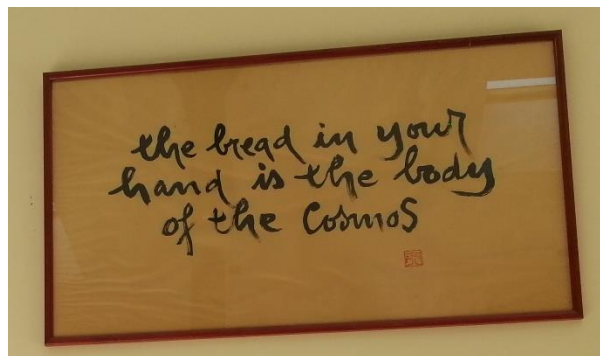


Figure 13: Thích Nhất Hạnh’s calligraphy “the bread in your hand is the body of the cosmos” framed in the dining hall at Plum Village

As we realize that we are putting the whole cosmos in our mouth with every mouthful of food, we see our inextricable connection with the Earth. Our mindful food choices, which avoid doing harm to humankind and other living beings, can bring well-being to our body and mind as well as the Earth. Mindful consumption can relieve our own suffering and that of the

world (such as war, poverty and global warming), making the Earth more sustainable (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2014a).

When the 20-minute silent eating period ended, we heard two sounds of the bell. We could then talk to others or go take more food if we liked. When we finished our food, we reflected on how fortunate we were well-fed with the nutritious food, which provided nourishment for us as we walked on the eightfold path (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2014a).⁵⁷

At the monastery, we all needed to do our own dishes, which was not something many of us wanted to do at home. However, Thích Nhất Hạnh (1991, 2009c, 2014a) says that washing the dishes is just like bathing the baby Buddha when done in mindfulness. This seemingly unpleasant job could therefore be a very spiritual act, helping us to cultivate happiness and peace within and around ourselves. To remind us of the practice, the following *gāthā* was posted in the dishwashing area at New Hamlet: “Washing the dishes / is like bathing a baby Buddha. / The profane is the sacred. / Everyday mind is Buddha’s mind” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009c, p. 48).

Among the eight interview participants who reported having a positive experience in practising eating meditation, two shared how they had struggled with the practice at the beginning.

...back home, I’d eat so fast all the time. I would take five minutes to eat all my food.

And by eating here, you know how they tell you to appreciate what you are eating, really

⁵⁷ Formal lunch was held at least once during each of the three retreats I focused on in this study. According to the monastics at Plum Village, it is a tradition that can be traced back to the time of the Buddha more than 2,500 years ago. After taking our food, everyone walked in noble silence to the meditation hall at Lower Hamlet, where formal lunch took place. The community proceeded and entered the meditation hall in the following order: monastics, members of the Order of Interbeing, aspirants (monastic-to-be) and laypeople. Inside the hall, males and females sat on different sides. As this practice did not seem to have much impact on the daily life of lay practitioners, it is not discussed in this thesis.

taste it and stuff like that...It makes me appreciate the flavours of the food and appreciate that I'm eating. At first, it was hard because I wanted to eat fast...But now, I'm actually looking forward to eating meditation... (Natalie)

Eating meditation? Oh, this is also difficult, because my background is my father always made a competition with me – who will eat faster? I'm the fastest-eating guy in the family. I always finish first. So eating meditation is also a challenge. But I enjoy it, I really do enjoy it. And the torture they apply to you, that you have to pray first and wait until everybody is seated and the bell and this and that...it teaches you so much patience. And your stomach is half full by the moment you start eating...And when you eat slowly, you eat less. (Roger)

The experience of both participants revealed how our fast eating habit, which is part of our social habitus, is shaped by our surrounding environment, such as our family. Mindful eating reverses this unhealthy habit by slowing it down, so that we can look at our food deeply in order to develop insight. Donna's experience demonstrated how this is possible:

There was a fixed moment when I was eating my oatmeal in a morning at the Bell Tower...I just looked at my spoon and my oatmeal and thought: 'Be mindful.' I thanked the oatmeal, the wheat that had been grounded before, I thanked the farmers who took care of this. I began to thank everyone who had been implied in that oatmeal. And after I had done this, I thought about the farmer, who needed to have food before doing this to be alive. So, I began to think about all those people who made it possible, who made his life possible. Then I realized that there is no end and there's this moment – it's not something I can explain with a lot of words. But I just deeply understood that we inter-are because of my oatmeal...

During the retreat periods, the Five Contemplations were not read aloud every time we ate. However, we were encouraged to recite them in our mind. There were still three sounds of the bell before we ate in silence for 20 minutes. The practice of mindful eating, with the intention to avoid causing suffering to other people, animals and the environment, is concerned not only with the way but also the kinds of food we eat. All meals provided at Plum Village were vegan, and non-vegan foods were not allowed there. The monastery also grew their own organic vegetables. Such a food choice aims to cultivate our compassion toward ourselves and other living beings as well as reducing world hunger and environmental crises (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2008c).

Bielo (2015) says that: “Religious communities use food to say things about who they are, who they want to be, what’s wrong with the world, and how the world can change” (p. 58). In this case, the Plum Village community, with the practice of eating meditation, train themselves to be mindful consumers, who intend to bring well-being to themselves, other living beings and the Earth, because they see that the way we eat has caused much suffering to humans, animals and the environment. Through eating mindfully and wholesome food choices, the world can become more peaceful and sustainable.

On a different note in relation to eating meditation at Plum Village, I observed how the equality between laypeople and monastics was embodied in the daily life there. Sometimes, while queuing up for food at the serving table, I (and other retreatants), when seeing a nun approaching, would let her go get food first to show our respect. But very often, they would decline the offer, insisting to stand in the queue themselves. Occasionally, when the laypeople were enthusiastic in showing their regard, the monastics would embrace the offer and join their palms in return as a gesture to show gratitude. These incidents reflected that no

one in the monastery enjoyed privilege; all members were given the same opportunity to practice and they also respected the responsibility of everyone there.⁵⁸

At home, we can practice eating meditation by having a meal in silence once in a while; it can be on our own or with others. We can also recite the Five Contemplations to help us look at our food deeply, recognizing our inextricable link with everything and everyone in the world (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2007a, 2014a). While eating mindfully like this can enhance our practice, Thích Nhất Hạnh (2007a) believes that communicating with others can help connect us with family and friends. He thus does not think it is necessary to have silent meals on a daily basis. But he reminds us to be careful about the topics in our conversations, choosing those that can create understanding and joy rather than conflict. In addition, he encourages us to adopt a plant-based eating style as much as possible to play our part in contributing to the well-being of the environment (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2014a).

Eleven interview participants expressed that they did eating meditation at home. Amber, for instance, described how her eating habit had changed with the practice:

This idea of eating without speaking that we practise at Plum Village, so that we can better concentrate on where the food's coming from. And when I'm at home, I no longer ever read when I eat, or watch TV when I eat, or look at my computer while I eat. Very rarely, I'm not saying ever. Whereas before I would eat, and I would be looking at a paper. And now I like to just eat on its own, and I think it's increased my health.

Two other participants shared the kind of insight they gained through mindful eating:

⁵⁸ Please refer to Chapters 7 and 8 for more details about the equality of every member of the Plum Village community.

I go to my breakfast, unless I'm in a hurry, but if I'm not, I try to be, again, mindful of the fact that I have food...I became aware that we're not just eating, we're actually eating one another. We're consuming the earth and the fruits of the earth, and the people who die and go back into the earth. I mean, it's so real to me now that we're consuming the sun and the stars and the moon and the water and the leaves. (Hailey)

I am a vegan...I do a huge bowl of many cereals, nuts, seeds, fruits and almond milk... I love looking at the seeds, I think about how they grew...due to my politics and my belief in social justice, I try to eat food that's ethically produced and ethically picked, from the places that, as much as possible, can verify they don't use child labour in the fields. So my breakfast was already a very mindful thing. (Angel)

Working meditation

All retreatants, regardless of cultural background, social status, education, profession and income, were required to help with the daily work in the community during the working meditation sessions, which included tasks such as raking leaves, washing pots, chopping vegetables and setting up the meditation hall. We also needed to take turns at doing the cleaning in our own accommodation during the time set aside for household delights every day, which involved tasks such as emptying the garbage, cleaning the toilets and sweeping the floor. Working meditation and household delights were not just about retreatants sharing the workload of the community but also “an important opportunity for them to learn how to be mindful in their daily activities at home” (Chân Không, 2007, p. 242). Working meditation is another example of how everyone in the community enjoys equality, so as to protect and respect everyone's opportunity to practice.

We usually are reluctant to do chores at home, feeling irritated and impatient. We avoid doing them or just finish them as soon as possible because we want to do some other more enjoyable things instead. In working meditation, however, we pay all our attention to the task in hand by following our breathing, not trying to finish it quickly nor thinking about other things that we consider to be more pleasant or important. In whatever work we are undertaking, we are at ease while doing it. An interview participant described what had happened when she was able to do so:

As I am now in the pot-washing team, I can concentrate on what I'm doing. And I find it very like even if I feel tired at the beginning, this tiredness goes away, because what I am doing, instead of taking some energy out of me, it gives me more energy afterwards. Do you understand what I mean? Because I'm here just with what I'm doing. I can feel tired of course, but I enjoy it more and it's not a problem to clean these big pots or to carry them...I don't resist. That's right, I just go with the flow. That's right, I don't need to sleep too much. Thanks to the meditation, I think. (Sofia)

Mindful working helps us conserve energy, as we are not tired out by our resistance to doing the chores. Through bringing our total awareness to the task being undertaken at the moment, any feelings of irritation and impatience dissipate.

Sofia's experience during working meditation also revealed how Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings were embodied in the monastics, who in turn taught retreatants mindfulness by their own example:

...in the pot-washing team, we need to empty the baskets at the end when everybody has finished. And I was waiting for people to finish to clean their plates, and these people

arrived very late, and they kept on having a discussion. They were all talking together, and I was there, and I became impatient. I looked at the sister and told her: ‘They’re still talking, and they don’t wash their plates.’ She just looked at me, and she went to these people and helped them wash their plates. You know, I said: ‘Wow – this was a lesson.’

For Sofia, the nun was attentive and caring, addressing the situation with understanding and in a non-judgemental way. She set an example of how we can apply the teachings in our daily life.

On the eightfold path to awakening – i.e. in the process of cultivating mindful habitus in the direction of habituslessness in the context of my proposed model – undertaking household tasks is no different from other more formal meditation practices (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1991, 2000). “Washing the dishes is meditation. If you cannot wash the dishes in mindfulness, neither can you meditate while sitting in silence” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1991, p. 85). The essence of meditation is to do every single thing in our daily life with mindfulness, not just certain formal practices. Thích Nhất Hạnh (2000) explains:

Only a person who has grasped the art of cooking, washing dishes, sweeping, and chopping wood, someone who is able to laugh at the world’s weapons of money, fame, and power, can hope to descend the mountain as a hero. A hero like that will traverse the waves of success and failure without rising or sinking. In fact, few people will recognize him as a hero at all. (pp. 130-131)

The practice of working mediation and Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings above have important implications for Bourdieu’s concepts of capital and (social) class. Using Bourdieu’s terminology, no matter what class (whether dominant or subordinate social classes) we

belong to and how much capital (whether economic, cultural, symbolic or social capital) we possess, we all need to do those chores during the working meditation sessions. According to Thích Nhất Hạnh, if we want to traverse our suffering, not only do we need to master the art of mindful working, but we also need to see the emptiness of our economic, symbolic and social capital.

As discussed in Chapter 4, in the context of my proposal model, the cultivation of mindful and wisdom capital will have an impact on our attitude to economic, cultural, symbolic and/or social capital. As we enhance our mindfulness through working meditation (and other meditation practices), we would be more able to recognize the interbeing or empty nature of class and capital that many people take so seriously. And when we realize habituslessness, we would be able to laugh at the various forms of capital and the hierarchical social classes in whatever situations we are in. Such a state of being entails capitallessness, which means that we are not caught in all those worldly matters while we are using them in our daily life just as everyone else.

Thích Nhất Hạnh compares someone, who has developed such an insight into the true nature of the world, as a hero who can descend the mountain. However, he points out that only a few people will recognize such a person as a hero. This suggests that there might not be many people who would appreciate those who are cultivating mindful habitus (or even have realized habituslessness). This is because with social habitus, we are conditioned to believe that a very successful person should be someone who belongs to upper class and/or possesses much economic, cultural, symbolic and/or social capital, all of which are considered priorities in life. Social habitus and mindful habitus thus have a very different view on worldly success.

Dharma talk

Listening to a Dharma talk is different from listening to an academic talk. Usually, when we attend an academic talk, we will use our intellectual and critical thinking to understand and evaluate the context of the talk based on our own expertise or what we have learnt before.

Listening to a Dharma talk, on the other hand, requires us to use our analytical mind lightly.

As Thích Nhất Hạnh (2009c) advises:

Listen to the talks with an open mind and a receptive heart. If you listen only with your intellect, comparing and judging what is said to what you already think you know or what you have heard others say, you may miss the chance to truly receive the message that is being transmitted. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009c)

The organization of a Dharma talk is also different from an academic talk (or non-academic talk). There was normally a short sitting meditation before a Dharma talk to help calm our mind and body. During the talk, which lasted for about two hours, the bell sounded once every 20 minutes or so. The speaker then paused for a few moments to let everyone do some mindful breathing and relax. In a dharma talk during the 21-Day Retreat, I observed that the nun who gave the talk stopped a few times to drink her tea slowly and mindfully. When this happened, some of the audience returned to their breathing by closing their eyes for a moment or adjusted their posture to relax their body. So, even though we did not hear the bell, the nun's mindful gesture had the capacity to remind people to go back to their breathing and relax. This suggests that our mindful acts have the potential to positively influence others around us.

A few interview participants expressed that they enjoyed the dharma talks at the retreat.

While Natalie also liked the dharma talks and found them helpful, she thought they were a bit too long:

...those talks have made me realize how to see things differently...I was a big pessimist, never believing. And the dharma talks have helped me see things in more positive way, not so negative. But I still think that they should be a little bit shorter because there are times when I do feel tired. And I admit that I have fallen asleep more than twice, but they've been like interesting actually.

Doris had mixed feelings about the dharma talks, depending on the topics presented in them. She recalled her experiences at a Winter Retreat she attended previously:

Some of the dharma talks in the Winter Retreat was by some of the monks who have some experience with the modern world, it's very interesting. But some of the others who are just talking about their inner suffering and process. I had been to there, done that and finished with it. I am a therapist, I have been working with these issues for ages. So that was the boring part in the winter retreat where I really wanted to go home sometimes.

Since Thích Nhất Hạnh no longer gave dharma talks at retreats, one participant shared her views about that: "Dharma talks, it's different now because Thầy is not giving dharma talks, so I miss that a little bit sometimes. But I think the brothers and sisters are doing a good job, too" (Ruby).

Dharma sharing

Dharma sharing is a session where everyone in the group has a chance to share their experience of mindfulness practices, such as the insight we have cultivated, the difficulties we have encountered or the questions concerning the practice we want to explore. In the retreat, we sat in a circle during the sharing, which was facilitated by a monastic. Everything that was said in the session needed to be kept confidential. When someone in the group was speaking, other people practised conscious breathing, listening attentively with an open heart. Doing so not only enabled us to be nourished by someone's joy and insight of the practice, but also created a supportive environment, which helped relieve those who had encountered difficulties in their practice or life. Our own sharing, in the same way, contributed to the nourishment of the group as well as allowing us to receive support from the group. This practice of being together, listening to and sharing with each other helps us see how we are closely related to each other (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009c).

Two interview participants reported to have benefited from this practice in the ways just described above. This was Natalie's experience of the practice:

The dharma sharing really helped because you hear other peoples' experiences and it helps you realize that you are not alone, you are not the only person feeling this way or thinking this way...there's other people that are feeling the exact same way. Hearing their experience on how they are dealing with it, it made me realize I can do something similar too...it inspires you really to better yourself and realize that you don't have to live with all these negativities...there're other ways to handle it.

Lazy Day

The Lazy Day normally happened once a week during the retreat periods. On that day, there were no scheduled activities until late afternoon. We let the day evolve on its own without

any plans. Breakfast and lunch were provided but optional. In modern society, many of us always keep ourselves occupied with something – work or entertainment – because we cannot stand the boredom of having nothing to do, which makes us feel uneasy. However, it is exactly “when we get bored and become aware that we are seeking entertainment to hide the feelings of loneliness and worthlessness in ourselves that the tension, the depression, the stress begin to dissolve” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009c, pp. 103-104). The Lazy Day is thus a practice that allows us to look deeply at our hectic lifestyle, which is the cause of much our anxiety and distress, so that we can find a way out of our predicament.

Accordingly, Lazy Day is not a day for us to do anything we want. Instead, we do not let our habitual tendencies push us to constantly find something to do in order to avoid facing our unpleasant feelings.

The Lazy Day is a kind of drastic measure against that kind of habit energy... Try to do nothing. It's hard... but you can learn a new way of being... Your time is... for you to be: to be alive, to be peace, to be joy, and to be loving. (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009c, p. 104)

In the context of my proposed model, the Lazy Day aims to disrupt our unwholesome habitual tendencies, shifting our usual pattern of constant doing (i.e. social habitus) to a state of non-doing by just being (i.e. mindful habitus). Thích Nhất Hạnh (2009c) believes that the foundation of our daily actions is our ability to simply be without having anything to do, because only then are we able to be solid and at peace within ourselves.

While at Plum Village, I observed that retreatants spent the Lazy Day differently. Some people went to explore the places in the areas – there was a tea café, a rose garden, an outdoor market and a chateau nearby. Others liked to do some more mindful sitting in the

Buddha hall or yoga in the meditation hall. There were also retreatants who preferred to read a book or just sat under the sun in the monastery. We were encouraged to practise a Lazy Day every week at home. In my interview with the participants, no one commented on their experiences with this practice.

Beginning Anew

The practice of Beginning Anew, which aims to restore and renew our relationships with others through listening deeply and using compassionate speech, consists of four parts: (1) Flower watering – we show our appreciation to the other person; (2) Sharing regrets – we apologize for the unwholesome things that we have done to the other person; (3) Expressing a hurt – we let the other person know about our hurt that resulted from him/her; (4) Sharing a long-term difficulty and asking for support – we share our problems and suffering so that others can understand us more and provide help accordingly. This practice can be done in a group setting or just between two individuals. The person who speaks should not be interrupted until he/she finishes what needs to be said (Plum Village, n.d.-b; Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2003a).

During my time at Plum Village, there was a presentation introducing the practice of Beginning Anew during each retreat period (i.e. usually one presentation every week). At the end of the presentation, one or two pairs of people who knew each other (e.g. two friends, mother and daughter, husband and wife, etc) were invited to try out the practice to demonstrate how it worked. Sometimes, much of what was said between the pair of retreatants was quite touching for the audience. While this practice was taught in a presentation which only a few people had the chance to participate in, it served as an inspiration for retreatants to try it at home. As one interview participant expressed:

Beginning Anew, that one, I actually thought about doing that, practicing that with my parents and my sister and my brother and a few of my close friends. I've been thinking as soon as I get back home, sitting down with them and talking to them and see what they have to say. I've never really sat down with them and talked to them about what we are feeling and what we think about each other. And I think if I do that, it's gonna really help with my relationships with them. I don't know if they are gonna want to do it, but I'm gonna try. I think it'll really help. (Natalie)

Emma mentioned that her family did the first part of the practice (i.e. flower watering in which we show our appreciation to others) from time to time when everyone was at home: "We did some practices together as a family like sitting in a circle, and we say what we like about each other and stuff like that..."

Touching the Earth

Touching the Earth, a prostration practice accompanied by a guiding contemplative text, is often practised after a period of mindful sitting (Plum Village, 2015d). It is a contemporary version of the traditional Buddhist prostration practice created by Thích Nhất Hạnh. As he saw people in the West had hesitation in practising prostration and bowing, he developed the new version of the practice whose emphasis "on touching the earth gave an accessible universal meaning to bowing (prostrations) while being deeply grounded in Buddhist tradition" (Hunt-Perry & Fine, 2000, p. 52). This is an example demonstrating how Thích Nhất Hạnh has wisely adapted an ancient practice to make it not only relevant but also acceptable to modern practitioners.

The practice of Touching the Earth helps us get in touch with our roots, seeing how we are "connected to a whole stream of spiritual and blood ancestors. We touch the Earth to let go of

the idea that we are separate and to remind us that we are the Earth and part of Life” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2009c, p. 107). We touch the Earth by bringing our whole body down to the floor after hearing a guiding text (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2005b). While in this posture, we pay attention to our breathing. In our in-breath, we take in the stability and solidity from the Earth. In our out-breath, we release our pain, distress and anger to the Earth. In this way, the Earth protects and nourishes us by providing us with its positivity and absorbing our negativity. This enables us to transform the suffering and unwholesome aspects within ourselves as well as deepening our understanding and compassion towards ourselves and others (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2005b, 2009c).

Total relaxation

Total relaxation is a practice of looking after our body, letting it rest, relax and let go, to release its stress and pain so that healing can occur. This practice is usually done lying down, but a sitting position is also fine if that suits us better. In the practice, we follow our breaths, paying attention to each part of our body one by one to release the tension there as well as giving our love, tenderness and appreciation to it (Plum Village, n.d.-c; Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2003a, 2009c, 2014d).

We may start the practice by first bringing our awareness to our eyes with this guiding text: “Breathing in, I’m aware of my eyes. Breathing out, I smile to my eyes with gratitude and love” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2014d, p. 115). After that, we move down to the other parts of our body, including our internal organs – ears, nose, mouth, neck, lung, heart, and so on – using the same pattern of guided meditation. Going through all our body parts like this is like doing a body scan with a beam of mindfulness. We can bring the quality of presence and

tranquillity generated from this practice with us for the rest of our day (Plum Village, n.d.-c; Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2003a, 2009c, 2014d).

At Plum Village, I made an interesting observation at the sessions of total relaxation, which usually lasted for about 45 minutes. Every time, about 10 minutes after the session began, I started to hear sounds of snoring from the retreatants around me. It appeared that some people felt so relaxed that they just fell asleep. One or two practitioners even continued their sleep after the session had finished, and everyone was already leaving the meditation hall. They needed others to wake them up by patting their shoulder. This reflects that many of us have a tired body, which results from our social habitus that contributes to our hectic lifestyle (as discussed in the section on the practice of Lazy Day above). Being able to relax and rest our body is conducive to the cultivation of mindful habitus, because a calm and relaxed body will bring a calm and relaxed mind.

Thích Nhất Hạnh encourages us to practice total relaxation at least once daily at home. However, we do not need to do it for the length of the session we did in the retreats. We can adapt the practice – by shortening it to only 10 minutes (or less) or extending it to an hour (or more) – to suit our needs. The key is to maintain our awareness in the practice (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2003a, 2009c). This is what one of the interview participants did in her day: “...after eating, I like to do deep relaxation [on a chair], so I get to do a little bit at my office for 10-15 mins; that helps too” (Hannah).

The Five Mindfulness Trainings Ceremony

As indicated in the retreat schedules above and mentioned in Chapter 7, there is a Five Mindfulness Trainings Transmission Ceremony at the end of a retreat period for people to

receive or renew the trainings formally. As not everyone know about the trainings, there is usually a presentation given by a monastic to introduce the trainings to people in the middle of a retreat period. During the 21-Day Retreat and the Summer Retreat, the presentation sessions included a number of seasoned retreatants, who had already taken the Five Mindfulness Trainings and shared their experience of practising the trainings.

After the presentation, retreatants who wanted to renew or receive the trainings could submit an application to express their intention to receive all or only certain of the five trainings. In the application, they could request a Dharma name to encourage their own practice. As explained in Chapter 7, if the practitioners do not recite the trainings at least trimonthly with their practice community after receiving the trainings, the validity of the transmission will be lost, and they will need to take the trainings again. Some people therefore renewed the trainings in the ceremony because they had received them before but had not recited them regularly as required. The ordinees receive a Five Mindfulness Trainings Certificate after the transmission ceremony.

When I designed the interview questions, my main concerns were how well people had applied the teachings in their daily life and what impact they had on them. Since I had not paid much attention to the significance of receiving the mindfulness trainings formally in a ceremony, I had not included any questions regarding this. However, during my first month at Plum Village, I was surprised to see some retreatants decide to receive the mindfulness trainings just after they learnt about them in their first Plum Village retreat. I then wanted to know more about what made people decide to take (or not to take) the trainings.

Starting from the sixth participant, I therefore added questions about whether they had taken the mindfulness trainings formally; why they decided to do (or not to do) so; if they had taken them, when they had done so, and whether they had taken all five or only certain trainings. While this newly added question was not in my interview with the first five participants, one of them had still provided relevant information in our conversation. Consequently, responses to this question were gathered from 31 participants.

Among the 31 participants who were asked the question, 17 had already received the mindfulness trainings, with nine of them doing so during their first Plum Village retreat. Two participants who had taken the trainings during their first Plum Village retreat, initially took only three and four of the trainings, respectively, but the first of them eventually took all five trainings three years later. Three of these 17 participants had not recited the trainings regularly as required after receiving them; while two retook them years later, the third one was not sure if she would take them again.

Three other participants, who had not taken the trainings, indicated that they would do so at the end of their current retreat, which was the first Plum Village retreat for two of them. It was found that regardless of whether the participants took the trainings during their first Plum Village retreat or in a later one, the major reason that led them to take the teachings was that they believed doing so could enhance their practice. They generally thought that simply making an open declaration of one's commitment and determination to practice these trainings in a ceremony was empowering. As Henry and Jack explained:

Just the fact of going through a ceremony, doing it in front of the community, almost making that promise in front of everyone also makes it a firmer commitment internally. It is something that I can then keep myself accountable to... (Henry)

Well, you're making a statement in front of others that this is your orientation in life, this is your aspiration. So in that sense it empowers you. It's important to have alignment in what you do and what you believe and what your aspiration is. We need to get them into alignment, and so that's what it does. (Jack)

For Donna, the Five Mindfulness Trainings Certificate served as a reminder for her to practise the trainings: "Taking it, it seems to me to have a paper to remind me when I forget". Sofia had a different reason to take the teachings. She did not take them at the beginning because she needed time to read and understand them. A year later, she found that the way she lived was already close to the Five Mindfulness Trainings, she therefore did not think she needed to have a commitment to practise them. The reason she later decided to take them was: "I feel that I was in link more with the sangha. Because after that, I decided to go more regularly to the sangha meetings in my town, and even to create one in my town". Taking the trainings therefore helped Sofia to be more connected with her sangha.

Among the 11 participants who had not taken the trainings, six indicated that they had not heard of the trainings yet and two needed time to learn more about them. For the four remaining participants who decided not to take the trainings, one said that she was not ready to practise them at that stage of her life. The other three expressed that they were already following the trainings in their lives, and they could just practise them themselves without the need of going through a ceremony to remind them to do so.

To sum up, two-thirds of the 31 participants had taken or would take the teachings in a ceremony, with half of these people doing so in their first Plum Village retreat. The main reason that led them to take the trainings was that making an open declaration in a formal ceremony could motivate their practice. Most participants took all the five trainings at the same time and had also only taken them once so far. While taking the trainings was helpful for most participants, a few felt they could just practise them themselves without the need of a formal ceremony to remind them to do so.

Challenges encountered in daily practice

After gaining a glimpse of the ways that retreatants applied what they had learnt from Plum Village in their everyday life, let us now look at some of the challenges they encountered in their daily practice. One main issue that emerged from the participants' responses was the challenge of maintaining the practice on a regular daily basis. While a hectic lifestyle was a common reason for not being able to practise regularly, some participants admitted that the real cause was a lack of self-discipline. As Henry revealed:

...I don't have a regular sitting time. You know, it changes from day to day. I would like to be more regular, and I understand that it's actually my choice. You know, I can choose to prioritise and set aside a regular timeslot every day...

Another issue that arose in respect of daily practice, which may be related to a lack of self-discipline, was our habitual tendencies. For instance, Betty's tendency was "around seeking distraction rather than wanting to sit with and understand any suffering or anything that's going on with me". For Victoria, it was her inclination to say yes to everything:

because I like to please people, I want to do everything...I need to choose what the important things are...I need to choose to make time to have a sitting meditation, even if it's only 20 minutes. I need to make sure that I give myself time to do that, otherwise it doesn't happen...

Our habitual tendencies, such as avoiding facing our suffering, trying to impress people and keeping ourselves busy, which are part of our social habitus, could create obstacles to our practice. Apart from the personal aspect, the outside environment – such as the people around us – appeared to be another critical factor in one's ongoing practice. As Kenneth and Eliza lamented:

...how to come back to the practice when you are with people for the whole day, six or eight hours a day, who do not practise? So this is also a challenge. What do we do?
(Kenneth)

It's easy for me to practice when I'm alone or I'm with others who practice. And it's the hardest I've found to practice while there are people, for example, in an office who don't practice, and to just stick with the practice on my own, to carry it through. (Eliza)

The major challenges that the interview participants encountered in sustaining a regular daily practice – a hectic lifestyle, a lack of self-discipline, our habitual tendencies and the people around us who do not practise – bring us back to the significance of having a sangha to support our practice (as discussed in Chapter 8).

Events

There were a variety of festivals, gatherings or events held during the different retreats at Plum Village. The events usually happened at the end of a retreat period. While each event was under a different theme, the common motif behind all these was the celebration of our togetherness, enhancing the harmonious relationship within the sangha. Below I will give a brief description of the five events I participated in while conducting my research at the monastery. Since none of the participants commented on any of these events, I will provide only my own observations.

Be-In

Be-In is a time for everyone in their own hamlet to celebrate their practising together during a retreat period. Each dharma family would prepare something to offer at that evening; it could be a skit, song, dance or other forms of presentation that could express their experience of the practice. I found that the process of preparing a skit or a song with my own dharma family enabled us to get to know each other more deeply. This in turns allowed us to support each other better in our practice as we became closer to each other. For instance, I felt more comfortable talking about my own experiences during dharma sharing, and I could also understand others' experiences better when I knew them more.

On the three evenings of Be-In that I participated in, the atmosphere was joyful and celebratory in general. At times, people could have so much fun together that the meditation hall (where the event was held) would become quite loud. When this happened, the nun who hosted the evening would sound the bell once. Immediately, everyone stopped talking, laughing and moving, and we returned to our breathing. A moment later, we resumed our activities with a calmer and more mindful state of mind, while enjoying a delightful evening

together. This was one of the numerous occasions at Plum Village, where I witnessed the capacity of the sound of the bell to bring people back to the present moment within seconds, which was also the result of our collective practice.

Festival for the 50th year of the Order of Interbeing

As mentioned above, the year I conducted my fieldwork at Plum Village was the 50th year of the Order of Interbeing. There was thus a festival held at Lower Hamlet during the second segment of the 21-Day Retreat for everyone at the monastery to celebrate this special occasion. The celebration consisted of various performances prepared by both the monastics and lay practitioners, including a play, a skit, songs and music. There was also sharing from the experienced Order of Interbeing members. This was a delightful and moving celebration of the half-century of the Order of Interbeing.

Rose Ceremony

The Rose Ceremony, which is held every year during the Summer Retreat, is an occasion for us to honour and express gratefulness to our parents and those who cared for and looked after us (Plum Village Hong Kong, 2016). It is based on Thích Nhất Hạnh's book *A Rose for Your Pocket*, which praises motherhood (Plum Village, n.d.-1). In the ceremony, which was held at our own hamlet, we were invited to share our reflections on the relationship with our parents and those who took care of us. Some people read a love letter to their parents while others sang a song or read a poem; the two groups of children offered us a play.

We were also invited to pin a pair of small flowers, which represented each of our parents, on our lapel. There were two colours – a red rose meant that the parent was still alive while a white rose meant that the parent was no longer alive. However, it could be possible that our

parents were still alive in our heart even though they had already passed away. A nun in fact expressed that her mother was more alive to her after her passing than when she was still alive. At times, some retreatants and monastics felt so touched that they teared up. A lady sitting near me was in tears from the beginning of the ceremony when a love letter was read. This was a very beautiful and touching occasion that helped us to get in touch with our parents deeply, whether they were still alive or no longer with us anymore.

Full Moon Festival

The Full Moon Festival is held every year during the Summer Retreat. Unlike other events, which were held in the meditation hall, this festival was held outdoors so that we could enjoy the celebration under the full moon. By 8:30pm, everyone in all of the hamlets had gathered in the Buddha Garden at Upper Hamlet. As a tradition, children were invited to bring a lantern, which was lit up and hung around the stage. The festival was full of performances offered by the monastics and lay practitioners.

It was originally planned that the last bus returning to New Hamlet would depart Upper Hamlet at 11pm. However, people were so enthusiastic in participating in the festival that there were more performances than scheduled. The departure time of the bus was thus postponed twice. When I took the second last bus departing Upper Hamlet at around midnight, the festival was still going on with performances. I did not expect that a retreat activity would continue to such a late time. It appeared that the monastery was flexible in making arrangements to suit the situation. While everyone was tired after the festival, it gave people the opportunity to share the delightful evening together, which helped to strengthen bonding within the sangha.

Peace Festival

The Peace Festival – with the theme “Peace in Oneself, Peace in the Universe” – marked the end of the Summer Retreat. The event was held in the meditation hall in our own hamlet, which was decorated by the artwork created by the dharma families. As for other events, dharma families prepared music, songs, dance or skits to share with the sangha.

At the end of the festival, we were invited to hold a candleholder with a burning candle, following two nuns who led us walking slowly from the meditation hall to the Bell Tower, where a few nuns were already there chanting with the big bell. As everyone gradually arrived and the sky was getting dark, the soft light generated by the candles created a sense of serenity. It was a good way to end the Summer Retreat and my last evening at Plum Village.

The silent teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh after his stroke

As mentioned in Chapter 6, Thích Nhất Hạnh has been paralyzed on his right side and unable to speak since his stroke in 2014. However, despite his physical condition, I saw him coming out in a wheelchair to be with the community at least once a week during the retreat periods. What he said eight years before his stroke, in the passage below, could perhaps give us an idea about his intention to continue to teach when he was no longer able to speak:

In Buddhism we see that teaching is done not only by talking, but also by living your own life. Your life is the teaching, is the message. And since I continue to sit, to walk, to eat, to interact with the Sangha and people, I continue to teach...I see myself in my continuation, and I will not retire. I'll continue to teach, if not by Dharma talks then in my way of sitting, eating, smiling, and interacting with the Sangha. I like to be with the Sangha. Even if I don't give a Dharma talk, I like to join walking meditation, sitting meditation, eating in mindfulness and so on. So don't worry. When people are exposed to

the practice, they are inspired. You don't need to talk in order to teach. You need to live your life mindfully and deeply. (Plum Village, 2015a, para. 9)

In this section, based on my observations and responses from the interviews participants, I will discuss how Thích Nhất Hạnh attempted to continue to teach after his stroke and what impact this had on the retreatants.

Before I went for my fieldwork in April 2016, I learnt from the Plum Village website that Thích Nhất Hạnh, after his six-month-long treatment in the United States, had already returned to the monastery in France in January of that year. Since he was still recovering from his stroke, I thought he would rest in his hermitage most of time. So, I did not have much expectation that I would be able to see him in person.

However, much to my surprise, I already had the opportunity to see Thích Nhất Hạnh already on my third day at Plum Village. It was a day during the Spring Retreat when everyone from other hamlets gathered at New Hamlet to practice together for half a day. In this warm sunny afternoon, we walked up Plum Hill practising walking meditation. I stayed at the top of the hill a bit longer than others to enjoy the beautiful view there. When I was ready to walk down, I saw people walking up again and wondered why they did so.

As they approached, I was very surprised to see Thích Nhất Hạnh at the front of the large group of retreatants. I was so touched that tears welled up in my eyes. He was on a wheelchair with a few monks carrying him up to the hill. The monks stopped halfway, communicating with Thích Nhất Hạnh briefly and then resuming the walk. It seemed like that they were considering if they should proceed on the steep grassy path, which could pose a risk to his fragile body. Their continued walking up the hill reflected that Thích Nhất Hạnh

was determined to lead the walking meditation despite the risk of doing so; people followed closely as he moved.

At the top of the hill, people gathered around Thích Nhất Hạnh. He raised and moved his left hand downward to signal people to sit down. A few retreatants tried to sit as close to him as possible. While everyone was sitting there quietly, some calmly looked at the scenery there while others closed their eyes doing sitting meditation; there were also people who just paid attention to Thích Nhất Hạnh the whole time. While Thích Nhất Hạnh's body was weak, he appeared to be keen and sharp, slowly moving his head and looking at the people around attentively. He seemed to be making a connection with the people by looking into the eyes of each of them. After a while, a monk handed Thích Nhất Hạnh a small cup of tea. He held the cup stably with his left hand and drank the tea slowly and mindfully. The atmosphere was calming and moving.

Ten minutes later, Thích Nhất Hạnh moved his left hand to indicate his intention to return to the monastery. The monks who attended him then slowly and carefully moved him down the hill. They needed to do so with extra caution as going down the hill was even more risky for his fragile body. Everyone stood up and followed him closely as he moved until he entered the main building of the monastery down the hill.

Thích Nhất Hạnh led walking meditation like this a few times during my stay at Plum Village, mostly without letting us know in advance. His unexpected appearances were a welcome surprise for many retreatants. As one interview participant recalled her experience of seeing him:

Just how lovely it was today [19 May] to have Thầy here and how we all walked up the hill...I just thought when I was there: ‘How beautiful is it that someone with so much wisdom can offer his presence!’...It was a special moment. (Stella)

While many people were happy to see Thích Nhất Hạnh, there were those who had different feelings about his appearances:

...when Thầy was here and he led all the walking meditations...I just think it’s different because now when Thầy’s coming, everybody is so focussed on him. I don’t like this personally, but that’s nobody’s fault. Everybody wants to see him. Everybody wants to take pictures. But I don’t feel very relaxed when that happens, so I usually then don’t join the walking meditation, because that’s, for me, not relaxing... [In the past,] nobody had to take pictures because he was always there. But now he’s not here, so I understand. The people who are new and who have never seen Thầy. I do understand, but that’s different. (Ruby)



Figure 14.1: Thích Nhất Hạnh leads walking meditation up to the hill



Figure 14.2: Thích Nhất Hạnh with retreatants at the top of the hill

Figure 14: Images of Thích Nhất Hạnh with retreatants

On some other occasions, Thích Nhất Hạnh made surprise appearances in the middle of a dharma talk. When this happened, the speaker stopped the talk, and everyone joined their

palms to greet Thích Nhất Hạnh. A couple of times, people also sang him a Plum Village song. He waved his left hand and nodded his head a few times in response. The atmosphere was warm and touching. Every time Thích Nhất Hạnh appeared, my eyes were full of tears. I noticed that many people were also in tears when they saw him. As usual, he moved his head slowly, looking into the eyes of the people around him one by one. On more than one occasion he and I briefly had direct eye contact. Even now as I am writing about all these precious incidents that happened more than four years ago, I can still remember vividly his state of presence from those brief moments of eye contact.

There were also a couple of times Thích Nhất Hạnh arrived at a dharma talk quietly without attracting much notice. After he entered the meditation hall (where the dharma talk was held), he just stayed at the area right in front of the entrance which was at the back of the meditation hall. In doing so, only those who sat in the back rows had noticed him. I was able to capture these moments because I always liked to sit in the last row, which allowed me to observe the environment in a wider perspective. Thích Nhất Hạnh stayed there for a few minutes, mostly looking at the speaker who was giving the talk, and then left quietly. It seemed that he was observing how things were going at the monastery.

Apart from leading walking meditation and coming to dharma talks, Thích Nhất Hạnh once surprised the community by strolling around at the monastery in his wheelchair. He signalled to his attendants which direction he wanted to go in by moving his left hand. When people saw him, they stood still, joined their palms and bowed to him to show respect. He nodded his head in response. Again, he looked at people around him attentively. Many people followed behind as he moved around. At the end of his appearance, he stopped and interacted

with two children next to him by gently holding one of their hands with a gentle smile on his face. At this moment, everyone there also smiled with joy.

During my stay at Plum Village, Thích Nhất Hạnh's appearance in the community was mostly without prior notice. This was probably because whether he was able to join the community depended on the weather and his physical condition at the time. So, when the weather was good and he felt ready to meet the retreatants, he could be there with us. Every time he appeared, the aura of the environment seemed to have changed. Tears just came out of my eyes and I could not tell exactly why. I simply felt my heart was touched and softened; the suffering within me started to be dissolved. I found that many people, including the monastics, were also in tears when they saw Thích Nhất Hạnh. Some retreatants shared with me afterward how they felt deeply touched seeing him. As one of the interview participants expressed: "...he has some air around him that makes him special...I don't know, I really don't know. It is just that I'm really inspired by him..." (Emma).

The ways that Thích Nhất Hạnh appeared at the monastery demonstrated what he meant when he said "You don't need to talk in order to teach" eight years prior to his stroke (as shown at the beginning of this section). While he was no longer able to give dharma talks in retreats, he continued to teach and inspire through his way of interacting with the sangha. His body was fragile, but he remained very alert, being able to convey a sense of stability and serenity that could touch people deeply. His determination to lead walking meditation even when doing so might pose risk to his body reflected how much he enjoyed being with the sangha. While he was not able to say a word, his silent teachings through his mindful presence remained powerful.

Summary

The ways that Plum Village practices could turn our social habitus into mindful habitus offer further insights into the characteristics of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices (research question 1). In examining the experiences that the interview participants reported as occurring through the practice during retreats and at home, we gain a glimpse of the ways that practitioners applied the teachings and practices in their daily life (research question 5), the impact the teachings and practices had on them (research question 6) and the challenges they faced in the process (research question 9).

The environment, daily schedules, activities and practices of Plum Village are all designed to recondition our habitual pattern of constantly rushing and doing things (i.e. social habitus) to a state of “non-doing” by just being (i.e. mindful habitus). The mindful living at Plum Village helps practitioners weave (right) mindfulness into whatever they do in daily life.

The interview participants generally found the life at Plum Village helpful in slowing down their hectic lifestyle, allowing them to recognize and transform their social habitus. However, some practitioners found certain practices not conducive to nurture their mindful habitus.

Although Thích Nhất Hạnh was no longer able to speak, his way of interacting with the sangha through his mindful presence appeared to still have an impact on the retreatants.

While interview participants came up with different ways of applying the practices at home to enhance their mindfulness, their hectic lifestyle, lack of self-discipline, habitual tendencies and the people around them who were not practitioners, made regular daily practice difficult.

Chapter 11

The Characteristics of Mindful Habitus

Introduction

This chapter explores the key characteristics of mindful habitus using the framework that I developed in accordance with the eight path factors of the Noble Eightfold Path in Chapter 4. In particular, I will investigate the characteristics of mindful habitus in the context of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and the practices taught at Plum Village, which were discussed in the preceding chapters. To understand the experiential implications of these characteristics, I will examine how the interview participants described changes in themselves over time through the practice, focusing on those experiences that represented manifestations of mindful habitus.

The discussion that follows, therefore, relates to the following four research questions: (1) What are the characteristics of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices? (4) What are the philosophical and experiential implications of mindfulness for our understanding of categorical distinctions (e.g. self and other, human and nonhuman)? (5) How do practitioners apply the teachings and practices in their daily life? (6) What impact have the teachings and practices had on their daily lives, social situations and relationships, etc?

As in the last three chapters, I would like to acknowledge that the analysis of the interview data in this chapter is informed by my own experience and understanding of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings, as is a common factor in qualitative research and especially autoethnographic studies such as this one (see Chapter 5).

Mindful habitus

As delineated in Chapter 4, mindful habitus is the embodiment of the Noble Eightfold Path – the fourth of the Four Noble Truths, which Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings are based on, as shown in his Five and Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings.⁵⁹ This means that the eight path factors are the set of dispositions to be cultivated in developing mindful habitus. It is important to reiterate that in the context of mindful habitus, the goal and the means are essentially one, signifying that “[t]he means of the Eightfold Path and the fulfillment of the Eightfold Path are to become the Eightfold Path. So you are practicing the goal in the means” (Fronsdal, 2006, para. 23).

However, the realization of the Eightfold Path (and the Four Noble Truths more generally) is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon. It takes practice to master a mindful way of being, and its “mastery will follow the gradual path of any skill, growing by fits and starts, with setbacks alternating with periods of progress” (Thanissaro, 2011, p. 30). Hence, depending on our practice and circumstances, each one of us would develop various degrees of mindful habitus during different stages of our life. This is why my proposed “social habitus → mindful habitus → habituslessness” model is not a three-stage process, but a continuum that moves us in the direction of habituslessness. The realization of habituslessness (i.e. the full realization of the Eightfold Path) occurs when a person has “developed the eight factors of the path to their consummation”, meaning that he or she “is no longer a practitioner of the path but its living embodiment” (Bodhi, 1999, p. 109).

⁵⁹ In Buddhism, there are alternative ways of presenting the path of awakening that share the same potential to liberate a person’s social habitus as the Eightfold Path that has grounded Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings over the decades. Thích Nhất Hạnh is a Mahāyāna teacher, but in the Mahāyāna tradition, the six perfections (i.e. generosity, ethical conduct, patience, joyful effort, concentration and wisdom) (Karma Lekshe Tsomo, 2015) are actually referred to more often as a form of bodhisattva training than the Eightfold Path. Due to the limited scope of this study, I am unable to investigate how Thích Nhất Hạnh’s emphasis on the Eightfold Path is different from other forms of practice on the bodhisattva path. Future research is thus recommended to examine the similarities and differences between the various ways of organizing the components of the practice in order to better understand Thích Nhất Hạnh’s teachings.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the figure below illustrates the framework I developed for identifying the key characteristics of mindful habitus, which is the focus of this study. The framework is based on the Eightfold Path, with the three trainings and their respective path factors being regarded as the cognitive (wisdom), corporal (morality) and spiritual (meditation) dimension of mindful habitus. I will look at the characteristics of mindful habitus in each of the three dimensions.

Eight path factors	Three trainings	Dimensions of mindful habitus
right view right intention	wisdom	cognition
right speech right action right livelihood	morality	corporality
right effort right mindfulness right concentration	meditation	spirituality

Figure 15 (a repetition of Figure 4): The eight path factors and their corresponding trainings and dimensions of mindful habitus

It is important, however, to keep in mind that the three dimensions of mindful habitus, just like the eight path factors, inter-are with each other. This means that when individuals cultivate one of the dimensions of mindful habitus, the other two dimensions will also develop simultaneously. Looking at these dimensions separately merely facilitates the discussion of each topic.

Cognitive dimension (Wisdom)

In my proposed framework, the cognitive dimension of mindful habitus corresponds to the training of wisdom in the Eightfold Path, which consists of right view and right intention. In essence, what needs to be realized in this dimension of mindful habitus is the insight into the interbeing (non-self / empty) nature of everything in the universe (i.e. right view in the Eightfold Path). Our intention will then go naturally in the direction of this insight (i.e. right intention in the Eightfold Path). This insight, with its corresponding intention, will inform the corporal dimension because “[w]hen we are able to see clearly with insight that specific actions may lead to specific consequences, we may be more willing to act in ways that produce less suffering” (Huxter, 2015, p. 35).

The insight of interbeing is not the same as the knowledge of interbeing. For instance, we may know that our excessive consumption habits have detrimental effects on the environment, but this knowledge often does not lead to actual change in our actions. This happens not because we do not understand the information received, but because it remains an abstract idea as long as it is merely an understanding at the intellectual level. As Thích Nhất Hạnh points out: “Interbeing is not a theory; it is a reality that can be directly experienced by each of us at any moment” (Plum Village, n.d.-f, para.7). This is why the insight of interbeing is regarded as the training of wisdom in the Eightfold Path, for “wisdom cannot be gained by mere learning, by gathering and accumulating a battery of facts” (Bodhi, 1999, p. 10). “Wisdom is understanding, with our whole being (and not merely with our intellect), the oneness and non-duality of everything...” (Mosig, 1989, p. 30). Wisdom is thus about intuitive knowing, not intellectual knowledge. With the intuitive knowing of interbeing, our selfless actions, which are motivated by our authentic connection with all life on earth, arise naturally.

We may acquire the knowledge of interbeing through reading books or attending lecturers. But the insight of interbeing is attained through meditation, which is the third dimension (i.e. spirituality) of mindful habitus. This is possible because:

contemplation of *anattā* [non-self or interbeing] can expose the various types of self-image responsible for identifying with and clinging to one's social position, professional occupation, or personal possessions. Moreover, *anattā* [non-self or interbeing] can be employed to reveal erroneous superimpositions on experience, particularly the sense of an autonomous and independent subject reaching out to acquire or reject discrete substantial objects. (Fisher, 2012, p. 206)

In this study, Roger described how his social habitus started being transformed as his understanding of interbeing was deepened:

It [the teaching of interbeing] was so revolutionary that I'm not a separate self, that I'm inter-related with others, that it completely reversed anything I knew before and was sure of. I had a very strong feeling I'm a separate self and different from others, but when I started to get familiar with it – it was not overnight that I accepted it – but I started looking at it with attention and trying to understand it and apply it. It changed everything. I mean, my relation with people, my relation with nature, my understanding of what is going on and what impact I can have on others, and others on me at the same time. So it opened me a lot, opened my eyes. Basically, I think I made a little step to become a better person, a better human being.

Such a shift in our consciousness could change how we relate to things around us (including economic, cultural, symbolic or social capital), enabling us to act in a way that could create a more just and sustainable world. What Mable said below is an example of how the realization

of the teachings could have an impact on one's attitude towards economic capital, subsequently motivating one to consider doing something about the unwholesome social situation:

the issue now is I studied business; and business is very cold-hearted, and it's about making profit and about also I guess kind of manipulating consumers...It's about understanding people but understanding people in a way so that you can exploit them...my issue now is how to connect mindfulness with business...I feel like the Plum Village teachings [could] really apply to business ethics and corporate social responsibility as well. So that's why I would like to focus on that...

Roger had a more radical change in his attitude towards economic (and perhaps also social) capital:

...I used to be a businessman. And I had a company, quite a big company. And three years ago I sold it, and then I retired. So retired – not that I sit and watch television – but I retired to a more mindful life. I took care of myself. I took care of the family. I took care of the garden. I took care of things that I didn't pay attention to before. So it's maybe with relation with that, maybe without, but somehow this fact alone, that I'm not spending 14 hours at the company and I have all this time for myself and others, changed a lot in my life. So I live a different life now, a much better life...It's a much slower life.

He realized that taking care of himself and those he loved was more important than earning money. His priority in life had thus changed dramatically, preferring to spend his time on more meaningful things. Natalie's experience at the retreat demonstrated how her realization

of the interbeing nature between herself and the environment brought about her altruistic intention to do something for others and the earth:

...it really inspires me to want to go back home and help other people, like open their eyes, realize that our planet is so beautiful and so nice, and we are destroying it and we are not appreciating our lives. We are just going on as if we were robots and taking everything for granted. It made me realize that there were a lot of things that I was missing out on. And I'm really happy that I was given this opportunity to come. I'm really grateful for that and I know that as soon as I get back home, I'm gonna change a lot of things that I was doing wrong.

Amber, similarly, had the intention to avoid doing things that would harm others and the environment. Moreover, she lamented how people's misperception of the situation of the world had caused much suffering to others, particularly the underprivileged ones, pointing out the significance of having more people to realize the interbeing nature of the reality:

...why should we get to have a new phone every three months, for instance, or a new computer or electronic? And people here and the US will say, 'Oh, you know, it's China who's polluting the world now. They have more people than anybody else.' I'm like, 'Yeah, but, you know, they're polluting the world for us to have goods.' And that's what people don't realize...we need people to realize that. I mean, look at the cancer cities in China. It just breaks my heart, and that's why I don't want to have a phone. I mean, I consume. I'm not saying I'm perfect. But the more I keep thinking about this concept, the more I realize, you know, I don't want to get packaging on my food. Because I'm going to recycle, yes, but that takes energy, and that energy pollutes. And, you know, try to do without things or try to reuse things. All of these things then can have a big impact on people who are living in the most horrible, dismal situations...

Donna, as mentioned in Chapter 10, had a moment of insight into interbeing when eating her bowl of oatmeal in the morning at retreat, resulting in her feeling gratitude to everything that made her meal possible.

But when I came back home, it was a little bit harder because...I was the only one to see this. And I tried to explain it to my best friend...He was like: 'You are just strange'. He was my best friend, so I just said nothing and laughed. But I felt a little bit alone...he can't understand...it's something you can't explain to someone...it's just something you can feel.

The experiences of Donna and Amber demonstrated that this characteristic of mindful habitus in the cognitive dimension – the insight into interbeing – is difficult for those with social habitus to comprehend. Once realized, however, this insight will have an impact on oneself and the world.

Corporal dimension (Morality)

The corporal dimension of mindful habitus corresponds to the training of morality in the Eightfold Path, which consists of right speech, right action and right livelihood. As mentioned above and elucidated in Chapter 4, this dimension of mindful habitus, which refers to our bodily actions, is informed by the cognitive dimension. In other words, in mindful habitus, everything we do in our life is simply a manifestation of our intuitive knowing of the real nature of the world, rather than being based on standards derived from society, which usually judges behaviours in terms of right or wrong (i.e. social habitus).

It could be difficult for people who are not on the Eightfold Path (i.e. social habitus) to understand how selfless actions arise naturally when our perception is aligned with reality

(i.e. mindful habitus), without any consideration of rightness and wrongness. As Thích Nhất Hạnh (2000) explicates:

People think it is impossible to establish a system of ethics without referring to good or evil. But clouds float, flowers bloom, and wind blows. What need have they for a distinction between good and evil? There are people who live like clouds, flowers, and wind, who don't think about morals, yet many people point to their actions and words as religious and ethical models, and they praise them as saints. These saints simply smile. If they revealed that they do not know what is good and what is evil, people would think they were crazy...For those who have truly seen, there is no philosophy of action needed. There is no knowledge, attainment, or object of attainment. Life is lived just as the wind blows, clouds drift, and flowers bloom. (p. 105)

Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 10, everything that is done in mindfulness – even the mundane and tedious actions – is itself a spiritual act. For instance, sitting mindfully on public transport is no different from doing sitting meditation in the Buddha hall, for they are both mindfulness practice. This means that, essentially, the corporal dimension of mindful habitus is itself also the spiritual dimension. Doris' experience demonstrated how these two dimensions could happen simultaneously and naturally: "I don't have to think about it or sit down to do it. I don't have to strive to meditate because I can sit in...a bus in the city, and I just go into meditation".

In the same way, Henry and Jack expressed that the practice simply could not be separate from their life. Jack thought that once we have learned the practice, it somehow "enters into everything you do, from how you talk to people, what you're interested in, how you eat, how you breathe". Henry elaborated on this:

...it's become a way of life, a way of living. Sometimes, of course, there will be ups and downs. So there are times when I'm more mindful, other times when I do get forgetful. But...the practices make it much easier, so that any time I reawaken or remember that I have been unmindful then I very immediately can come back to my breathing. So I feel like it's all around me. The practice is really integrated and quite hard to separate from daily life...

The manifestation of the insight into interbeing (i.e. cognitive dimension) can be seen in various ways in our daily actions (i.e. corporal dimension). One manifestation is found in our consumption patterns, such as our food choices (i.e. right action in the Eightfold Path). A few interview participants reported that they had adopted a more plant-based diet. As Daisy shared:

It was after my first stay here, I started to consume less meat. It helped me, actually, the trainings, to understand what was happening in me. Because already I was going to do shopping for food, and I was in the place with all the red meat and looking at it and just being unable to buy any...I still bought some, but I was questioning. And also you have this awareness of how the animals are treated and how they die...And then being here and noticing how good is the food, I understood it was possible really, and that it was important for me also not to encourage this system.

Apart from the change in the kinds of food we consume, some people would also be cautious about the kinds of information that they take in through their eyes. Two interview participants indicated they did not have a television at home. As Stella explained:

I got rid of my TV, my family then told me it wasn't normal not to have a TV, so they actually got me a TV! And that just sits in the living room; and sometimes I turn it on but mainly not, because I got used to not having a TV when I didn't have one and I find it so peaceful...

Again, Stella's experience reflected that it is difficult for non-practitioners (i.e. her family in this case) to understand some of the things that a mindfulness practitioner does. Another manifestation of the insight into interbeing is seen in our career choices (i.e. right livelihood in the Eightfold Path). Jack changed his work from a social scientist to a full-time dharma teacher. He had such a career change

because my heart was drawn to it. Because I enjoy doing that more than I enjoyed writing reports for government agencies... So it's just I enjoy talking with people about suffering and the end of suffering, about their lives. I enjoy that. It's nice. It also helps me learn. In teaching, we learn. So it helped me deepen my practice. It's an outgrowth. They talk about bodhisattva practice; we don't just practise for ourselves. And so, if you're a full-time dharma teacher, you can impact the world in a way that you can't if you just get to do it two nights a week or something.

Similarly, Henry, who originally worked for a technology company, became a trainer teaching people mindfulness and how to apply the practice into their workplace. These are the examples of those who choose a career that allows them to practise the bodhisattva ideal. In the context of my proposal model (i.e. social habitus → mindful habitus → habituslessness), this means they prefer mindful and wisdom capital to economic, cultural, symbolic or social capital. We may recall that the purpose of

increasing our mindful and wisdom capital is to attain the state of capitallessness, not to accumulate other types of capital.

Another manifestation of the insight into interbeing concerns our relationship with others, such as our communication styles (i.e. right speech and right action in the Eightfold Path). Some interview participants reported that the insight had a positive impact on their relationship with other people. For instance, the insight enabled Eliza to understand her family more deeply, which changed the way she interacted with her parents and brother, resulting in their relationship becoming better:

...with my family, through the teachings I learned that we all have our ancestors within us, and we are influenced by them...so I understand my parents better...when I come back home, and I spend time with them. I feel it easier to just let them be as they are and not get in a fight with them...I have one brother that I didn't talk to for like 10 years and now we can have very good conversations, we even can give each other hugs now. So I think that is also because I understand that he also has his troubles, and he also just wants to know that I love him.

Kenneth described how the insight into the interbeing nature between himself and the other person helped him stay cool and resolve a conflict in an aggressive situation through using right speech:

My city is a very busy city and traffic is crazy. We are very unpolite...It's very intense, very aggressive. And so many times, I get angry with a driver, and he plays the horn on you and I play the horn again. What I've been doing is, sometimes instead of blaming him, I see that he is me; I am he in other moments. I am the one who is aggressive with

my own car. I am the one on the horn...So I come back to my breathing, I say: 'Oh, sorry, sorry for that' if I was in his way and he's in such a rush. (Kenneth)

Spiritual dimension (Meditation)

The spiritual dimension of mindful habitus corresponds to the training of meditation in the Eightfold Path, which consists of right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. As mentioned above, the insight of interbeing is attained through meditation. In other words, the spiritual dimension gives rise to the cognitive dimension. As Mosig (1989) explains:

The key ingredient to make this method [the Eightfold Path] work is meditation, for without the disciplining of the mind we will never be free from the dualistic thinking that clouds our experiences and generates the web of dissatisfaction and uneasiness diagnosed as the source of human suffering. (p. 31)

The spiritual dimension is thus indispensable for cultivating mindful habitus. In other words, the spiritual dimension (i.e. meditation) is crucial in transforming social habitus into mindful habitus. As illustrated above and also in Chapter 4, the practice of mindfulness, which gives rise to the insight into interbeing, free us from our attachment to economic, cultural, symbolic and social capital. Consequently, we would not put accumulating capital and dominating social fields as priority in life. This is why Burke (2004) writes that:

the spiritual dimension of life...is the aspect of life that rises above our usual preoccupation with our individual selves, transcending our personal needs and desires. Our outlook on life is spiritual when we look at things from a broader, a less self-centered, a more impartial or universal perspective, where we become detached from our ego and are no longer concerned with our own personal fate... (p. 1)

Because of this, the insight into interbeing or “[e]mptiness is always paired with compassion, skillful means, and the wish to benefit all living beings” (Fisher, 2012, p. 95), which are evident from the experience of Sofia and Mia:

Feeling and sensing that the person in front of me is a human who is suffering also, I’m not the only one who suffers. And seeing this, I pay attention to the way I talk to them, too. And even if someone brings me something very harsh or says something, I have now these nice tools, which help me not to overreact or react even... (Sofia)

...there is something really changed my life. I don’t know how but I feel closer to people...when someone is suffering, I feel really close...and if I can help, I will try my best to help... (Mia)

Apart from having a compassionate state of mind, the insight into interbeing also enables us to view the world from a wider and more unbiased perspective. For instance, as Eliza and Maci realized how a situation occurred as a result of many other causes, they had become more understanding and less judgemental:

I understand more. I’m not so dualistic anymore in my thinking, I can see more the causes and conditions of why people act certain ways and just have more understanding and love. (Eliza)

Before when people did something bad, I couldn’t understand it and I could be angry. Or say someone killed someone or abused someone, I felt only awful. Today I can see why these things can happen. I don’t think it’s less awful...but I got a bigger view to see things, understand things, how one thing lead to another so that it can happen. I can more step into the situation and think how it got in...I think wider. (Maci)

Seeing the world from a wider perspective could also be applied on the way we connect with others, including those who came before us. This was how the insight into interbeing helped Isabel to see that those who had already gone were actually still here with her:

the idea of interbeing really changes the way I see the world. My grandfather passed away this month. But the idea of interbeing really make you feel you are a continuation of all your ancestors and people who came before you, so that idea's really interesting to me. I think about it a lot when I lose people in my life, I feel like they are still part of me.

As “[m]indfulness is the capacity to dwell in the present moment, to know what’s happening in the here and now” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2014d, p. 17), mindful habitus is thus also marked by a state of being present. Two interview participants explained how being present in the moment deepened their connection with those around them:

I live much more in the present than I’ve ever lived before...It’s helped me not think of the future or think of my regrets or the past...I think my mother’s death, when she was dying, I got back into living mindfully, because it was so precious, every moment I had with her... (Amber)

The teachings, I think it allows me to be able to connect more deeply with people. Remembering to be present with someone, I think, has been very important. So I try to give them my full attention. Of course I still slip up sometimes and end up multitasking, but hopefully at least I can be more aware of it and change that. It’s also helped me improve on areas like being less impatient with people. (Henry)

Summary

The eight path factors of the Noble Eightfold Path formed the conceptual basis for developing a framework which I have used to analyze the interview data and identify the key characteristics of mindful habitus. Looking at the ways that Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and the practices taught at Plum Village could help cultivate mindful habitus has revealed more about the uniqueness of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings (research question 1). The changes that happened to the interview participants' through mindfulness and the cultivation of the insight into interbeing (research question 4) have uncovered further details about how they had applied the teachings and practices in their daily life (research question 5) as well as the impact the teachings and practices had on their daily lives, social situations and relationships, etc (research question 6).

The three trainings of the Eightfold Path (wisdom, morality and meditation) are regarded as the three dimensions of mindful habitus (cognition, corporality and spirituality) in my framework. The cognitive dimension is characterized by the insight into interbeing and an altruistic intention towards all life on earth. As the insight into interbeing is to be realized through intuitive awareness rather than through accumulated knowledge, it could be difficult to comprehend for those who have not developed the insight yet.

The corporal dimension concerns our bodily action that is done in mindfulness, which can be reflected in, for instance, our consumption patterns, career choices and communication styles. With the insight into interbeing, our actions naturally tend to be beneficial and non-harmful to all life on earth. As our practice deepens, everything we do in daily life becomes a spiritual act, living our life as practice. The spiritual dimension, which gives rise to the cognitive dimension, is indispensable for cultivating mindful habitus. It is marked by a wide

perspective on the world, a compassionate state of mind, and a state of being present, as we are free from our attachment to worldly matter (such as economic, cultural, symbolic and social capital) and become less self-centered.

Dimensions of mindful habitus	Key characteristics
cognition	the insight into interbeing an altruistic intention
corporality	non-harmful consumption daily life as practice beneficial actions
spirituality	a wide perspective on the world a compassionate state of mind a state of being present

Figure 16: Summary of the characteristics of mindful habitus

While the key characteristics of mindful habitus are grouped under each of the three dimensions, as illustrated, all characteristics are fundamentally a three-in-one affair. For instance, the act of mindful sitting (corporal dimension) is itself also meditation (spiritual dimension) because it is done in mindfulness, which gives rise to the insight into interbeing (cognitive dimension), which then informs our mindful daily actions (corporal dimension), and the Eightfold Path goes on and on. Echoing what Bodhi (1999) says about developing the eight path factors to their consummation (as mentioned earlier in this chapter), the state of habituslessness is attained when we have cultivated the three dimensions of mindful habitus to their full realization, meaning that we are no longer developing the characteristics of mindful habitus but are their very living embodiment.

The key characteristics of mindful habitus outlined above have been identified through examining my interview data in the context of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and the practices taught at Plum Village. Further research, beyond the scope of this thesis, is recommended to investigate whether these characteristics are resonant with some of the literature in fields such as spiritual transformation. Such explorations may reveal additional characteristics that are applicable to mindful habitus.

Chapter 12

Conclusion

This study investigated Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism in depth, exploring how the teachings and practices taught by Thích Nhất Hạnh could affect people's daily life and have an impact on society. Of central importance to this inquiry, which reveals the potentially transformative effects of mindfulness practice in the contemporary world, is the link between the practice of mindfulness, the teaching of interbeing and Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism.

Key findings in relation to the research and interview questions⁶⁰

To examine how Thích Nhất Hạnh has made use of, adapted and transformed the traditional teachings of mindfulness and Buddhist philosophy (first aim of this study), I first looked at Thích Nhất Hạnh's two key teachings of mindfulness and interbeing against the backdrop of the historical context of the practice of mindfulness and the doctrine of dependent origination in the past 2,500 years. Understanding the meanings and implications of these two traditional teachings in different discourses reveals how Thích Nhất Hạnh uses simple language and modern contexts to make the traditional teachings accessible to people in the world today, in order to address the problems of the modern world. His innovative teaching of interbeing, which derives from the doctrine of dependent origination (and also emptiness and non-self), illustrates how we interare with everybody and everything else in the world. Such realization, which can be cultivated through mindfulness, can change the way we live our life,

⁶⁰ The following two interview questions are not mentioned in this section: (10) Do you find anything problematic or challenging about his approach? (14) Are there any other experiences or comments you would like to share? The participants generally did not find anything problematic or challenging about Thích Nhất Hạnh's approach, and any other experiences or comments given by the participants at the end of the interview could be assigned to one of the previous interview questions.

consequently having an impact on both ourselves and others. In relating Thích Nhất Hạnh's interpretation of mindfulness and innovative teaching of interbeing to different historical Buddhist schools of thought, this study addressed the following three research questions: (1) What are the characteristics of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices? (2) What are the differences and similarities between his teachings and the traditional teachings of mindfulness and Buddhist philosophy? (4) What are the philosophical and experiential implications of mindfulness for our understanding of categorical distinctions (e.g. self and other, human and nonhuman)?

This study also looked at Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings in a wider context by examining the formation of his Engaged Buddhism during wartime Vietnam and after the war in Vietnam when he was already settled in France. While the focus of Thích Nhất Hạnh's engaged teachings and practices was on the socio-political issues at the international level during wartime Vietnam, he appeared to present his teachings in relation to the social issues mainly at the personal and community level after his settling down in the West. This further illustrates the ways in which Thích Nhất Hạnh has skillfully adapted the ancient teachings to different circumstances in order to suit the specific needs of the people concerned.

Thích Nhất Hạnh institutionalized his two key teachings of mindfulness and interbeing in the Five Mindfulness Trainings and the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing. These two sets of trainings, which are a contemporary version of the traditional Five Precepts and the 58 Bodhisattva precepts listed in the *Sūtra of the Net of Brahma*, can be undertaken by practitioners of any spiritual and cultural backgrounds in a variety of contexts in daily life, demonstrating the secular and practical nature of Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism. These mindfulness trainings help cultivate our mindfulness and the insight into

the interbeing nature of ourselves and others in modern society. The trainings, which are updated regularly so that they can be more applicable to the constantly changing world, also reflect the flexibility and adaptability of Thích Nhất Hạnh's engaged approach. The examination of the formation and evolution of Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism and key teachings has provided us with more insight about his teachings in relation to research questions 1, 2 and 4 as stated above.

A close look at Plum Village – Thích Nhất Hạnh's first monastery and retreat centre in the West – allowed us to explore his teachings and practices further. Life at Plum Village is structured in ways that are conducive to mindful living, which aims to cultivate our mindfulness and the insight of interbeing in whatever we do, whether daily routine (e.g. taking showers, eating our meals, doing the dishes, etc) or formal practices (e.g. sitting meditation, walking meditation, Touching the Earth, etc). Plum Village, with its practices being designed for the young and the intellectuals, is structured in ways that facilitate the transformation of social habitus into mindful habitus. The Plum Village monastic and lay communities, which consist of members with diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, reflect the wide relevance and appeal of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices to our world today. Investigating how Plum Village and its monastic and lay communities work to help cultivate our mindfulness in daily life has demonstrated another aspect of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings in response to the same three research questions (i.e. research questions 1, 2 and 4) stated above.

The second aim of this study was to investigate the experiential impact of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices on contemporary practitioners, which essentially relates to all research questions listed in Chapter 1, except research question 2. To collect the data needed,

I employed ethnography, which incorporated an autoethnographic approach, participant observation, and ethnographic interviews during my four-month-long fieldwork at Plum Village. Grounded in the newly created habitus transformation model (i.e. social habitus → mindful habitus → habituslessness), thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected. I developed this model by situating mindfulness and interbeing within the context of Pierre Bourdieu's social theory of habitus. The newly created term "mindful habitus" signifies the profound change that mindfulness can bring to our habitus. The state of "habituslessness" is proposed as a sociological way of representing the Buddhist doctrine of non-self and emptiness. The newly developed model has provided new insights into the potentially transformative effects of mindfulness practice in the current world.

The interview participants in this study, which consisted of young people and intellectuals from a variety of cultural and spiritual backgrounds, correspond to the target audience of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings. The background information of those who followed Thích Nhất Hạnh's teaching was obtained through the participants' answers to two interview questions: (11) Do you have any religion? If so, how does your religion fit with what you are learning here? (15) Do you mind telling me your occupation? Age? Where you are from?

This glimpse into Thích Nhất Hạnh's target audience has revealed more about the characteristics of his teachings (research question 1). In doing so, we have also gained an understanding of how practitioners' own spiritual backgrounds could fit with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices (research question 8).

Most of the participants indicated that they had benefited from sangha practice because it could support and sustain their practice (interview question 7). In understanding the significant role of sangha in Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism, we see the kinds of

impact a key characteristic of his teachings had on practitioners (research questions 1 & 7).

In asking how and when the participants first came into contact with Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings and practices (interview question 1), eight circumstances were identified, namely other people, chance, attending Plum Village retreats, listening to Thích Nhất Hạnh's talks, encountering suffering in life, work, taking secular mindfulness classes, and inner guidance. What really attracted them to his teachings, however, was that the teachings could help them deal with difficulties in their lives. This highlights the secular nature, accessibility and practicality of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings. Thích Nhất Hạnh's books, with the simplicity and inspirational qualities of his writing, appeared to be a key inspiration for participants to get involved in Plum Village practices. These qualities are a key characteristic of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings (research question 1) and the ways participants responded to them gives us some idea why people want to engage in the practices (research question 3).

Further information about why people wanted to engage in the practices (research question 3) came from an additional following up question about what led the participants to their first retreat held by Thích Nhất Hạnh and/or his monastics after their first encounter with Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings. Six reasons emerged from the responses: desire to learn more about the practices, suggestion by others, inner guidance, work-related aspirations, going with parents, and intention to enter the monkhood. However, the main motivation for attending a Plum Village retreat was that they wanted to experience the practices directly themselves in order to gain a deeper understanding of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings. Those who wanted to deepen their own practice went for a retreat regularly.

The ways that the environment, daily schedules and practices of Plum Village could facilitate the transformation of our social habitus into mindful habitus (which eventually leads to habituslessness) offered us further insights into the characteristics of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and practices (research question 1). In examining the experiences that the participants reported as occurring through the practice during retreats and at home, we gained a glimpse of the ways that practitioners applied the teachings and practices in their daily life (research question 5 as well as interview questions 2, 3, 8 and the question added later about the participants' experiences of the practices and activities at the retreats).

In sharing what impact the teachings and practices had on their lives (research question 6 as well as interview question 4), the interview participants generally found the life at Plum Village helpful in slowing down their hectic lifestyle, allowing them to recognize and transform their social habitus. While the participants mostly found that the lifestyle at Plum Village enabled them to recognize and transform their social habitus, some of them found certain practices – sangha practice, walking meditation and guided sitting – not helpful for cultivating their mindful habitus.

Although Thích Nhất Hạnh was no longer able to give dharma talks in retreats after his stroke, he continued to inspire the retreatants through his mindful presence and interaction with the community. This is another characteristic of his teachings (research question 1) that was revealed when his physical condition did not allow him to speak. While the participants applied the practices at home according to what they had learnt at Plum Village and as advised by Thích Nhất Hạnh, when being asked about the most important issues or challenges that arose in their daily practice (research question 9 as well as interview question 9), they expressed that they found it difficult to sustain their practice on a daily basis due to their busy

lifestyle, lack of self-discipline, habitual tendencies and the people around them who were not practitioners.

I concluded my study by identifying eight key characteristics of mindful habitus using a conceptual model that I developed in accordance with the eight path factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, which Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings are based on. These characteristics, which were examined in the context of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and Plum Village practices, with reference to the experiences reported by the interview participants, are a reflection of the major characteristics of his teachings (research question 1). They are also related to three other research questions: (4) What are the philosophical and experiential implications of mindfulness for our understanding of categorical distinctions (e.g. self and other, human and nonhuman)? (5) How do practitioners apply the teachings and practices in their daily life? (6) What impact have the teachings and practices had on their daily lives, social situations and relationships, etc?

Mindful habitus, which has cognitive, corporal and spiritual dimensions, is characterised by the insight into interbeing, an altruistic intention, non-harmful consumption, daily life as practice, beneficial actions, a wide perspective on the world, a compassionate state of mind, and a state of being present. These characteristics emerged from the participants' responses to the following interview questions: (4) How has the practice changed the way you live your life? (5) Has it changed the way you see the world? (6) Has it changed the way you are in your relationships with other people? (12) Could you describe what mindfulness means to you? (13) Could you describe what interbeing means to you?

The three dimensions of mindful habitus, like the eight path factors, are of an interbeing nature, with the spiritual dimension being essential for nurturing our mindful habitus. The state of habituslessness is realized when we become the living embodiment of all the characteristics of mindful habitus.

Contributions of this study

Through a qualitative inquiry into Thích Nhất Hạnh's Engaged Buddhism and the experiential impact of his teaching and practices on contemporary practitioners, this study has addressed gaps in the following areas in the current literature in the fields of mindfulness research, Engaged Buddhism and sociology:

Mindfulness research

Much of the research on mindfulness so far has been conducted outside the Buddhist context and has focused on quantitative methods. This study employed the qualitative method of ethnography and investigated the topic from the Buddhist perspective.

Engaged Buddhism

This study has added to the literature in Engaged Buddhism by examining the following three aspects of Thích Nhất Hạnh's work that have not yet been explored or are under-explored: (1) locating Thích Nhất Hạnh's adaptations in the traditional teachings, (2) examining the experiential impact of his teachings and practices on contemporary practitioners, and (3) situating his teachings in the context of a sociological theory.

Sociology

This study has demonstrated the possibility of creating a dialogue between sociology and Buddhism by: (1) developing a theoretical framework that situates the Buddhist teachings of mindfulness and interbeing in the context of Pierre Bourdieu's social theory of habitus, and (2) applying the newly created theoretical framework to Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and the participants' experiences of the practices at Plum Village.

Limitations of this study

While this study has examined Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings and Plum Village practices in depth, there is still much to explore in relation to this topic. As revealed in the findings and the discussion, one doctoral research project is not sufficient to address the diverse aspects of Thích Nhất Hạnh's profound teachings. The major limitations identified in this study concern the following four areas:

Plum Village retreats

There are a variety of retreats held at Plum Village throughout the year. While the key practices are more or less the same in all the retreats, some retreats have a more intensive programme than others, with the various retreats focusing on particular groups of practitioners (e.g. teachers, scientists, young people, etc). Due to time constraints and the limited scope of this study, I attended only four of the retreats, focusing on three of them in this study (because of the reasons explained in Chapter 10). I was thus unable to explore the different characteristics of each of the retreats designed for different groups of retreatants and the potential impact the differences might have on the retreatants.

Plum Village hamlets

There are five hamlets at Plum Village, namely New Hamlet (for nuns and laywomen), Upper Hamlet (for monks and laymen), Lower Hamlet (for nuns and laywomen), Son Ha Temple (for monks and laymen) and Middle Hamlet (only open for the Summer Retreats for practitioners of both genders). Three main differences can be found in the five hamlets: (1) physical environment, (2) daily schedule being slightly varied in each hamlet, and (3) gender of the practitioners. Due to time constraints and the limited scope of this study, my fieldwork was based in New Hamlet only. I was thus unable to investigate if participants in different hamlets experienced the retreats differently, particularly in terms of the impact this had on the cultivation of mindful habitus.

Thích Nhất Hạnh's other monasteries and retreat centres

Apart from Plum Village in France, there are 10 other monasteries and retreat centres established by Thích Nhất Hạnh in different parts of the world, with different cultures and different languages used in the various geographic regions. It was obviously beyond the scope of my study to conduct fieldwork in all of them. Potential differences between these monasteries and retreat centres in presenting the practice are therefore still to be identified.

Issues related to interview participants

A qualitative inquiry does not intend to generalize, yet more comprehensive findings could be obtained through collecting data from more interview participants. I had only interviewed 35 participants due to the limited time I had at Plum Village. Moreover, I was able to recruit only a few male participants, as my fieldwork was based in New Hamlet, which was for nuns and laywomen.

Future research on the topic

The limitations outlined above could be addressed in future research. For instance, studies could be conducted in different hamlets at Plum Village over a prolonged period of time (e.g. one year or longer). In doing so, researchers would be able to participate in various retreats as well as making observations at different hamlets. Researchers would also have more opportunities to recruit a larger number of interview participants of both genders to gain a more comprehensive overview of those who follow Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings, in terms of their age, education, professions, cultural and spiritual backgrounds. Similar studies could be conducted in Thích Nhất Hạnh's other monasteries and retreat centres, to explore how his teachings are presented in different areas of the world and what effect this has on the practitioners there. Another area worthy of investigation is the experience of child and teen practitioners, who play an important role at Plum Village and have their own programs during the Summer Retreat.

As pointed out in the various chapters in this thesis, several aspects of Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings appear worth exploring more in future research. Since some interview participants found certain Plum Village practices unhelpful in cultivating their mindful habitus, future research is recommended to understand the potentially unhelpful elements of the practices and the likely impact on practitioners. We have only looked at the participants' experiences with the Five Mindfulness Trainings in this thesis. Future research into the reasons why people decided to take the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings (i.e. to be ordained as members of the Order of Interbeing) is recommended.

The current study concerns mainly the cultivation of mindful habitus. Research that recruits experienced practitioners (e.g. senior dharma teachers, Zen masters, etc) is encouraged to

discover more about the state of habituslessness. As discussed in Chapter 11, the key characteristics of mindful habitus that were identified in this study could also be examined in more depth to see whether they are resonant with some of the literature in fields such as spiritual transformation. This could allow us to develop those characteristics further.

Final thoughts

The findings of this study have illustrated how Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings can affect practitioners' daily lives and make an impact on the people and environment around them, thus revealing the potential for personal transformation to create a more inclusive, compassionate and sustainable world. It is my hope that in demonstrating the potential that each of us has to create change in the world, this study will motivate readers to engage in the practice to experience the transformation for themselves. I believe that, through mindfulness, we can work together towards a better world. This is the magic of mindfulness!

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Appendices

Appendix A – The Five Mindfulness Trainings (Plum Village, n.d.-e)

Reverence For Life

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating the insight of interbeing and compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, or in my way of life. Seeing that harmful actions arise from anger, fear, greed, and intolerance, which in turn come from dualistic and discriminative thinking, I will cultivate openness, non-discrimination, and non-attachment to views in order to transform violence, fanaticism, and dogmatism in myself and in the world.

True Happiness

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I am committed to practicing generosity in my thinking, speaking, and acting. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others; and I will share my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need. I will practice looking deeply to see that the happiness and suffering of others are not separate from my own happiness and suffering; that true happiness is not possible without understanding and compassion; and that running after wealth, fame, power and sensual pleasures can bring much suffering and despair. I am aware that happiness depends on my mental attitude and not on external conditions, and that I can live happily in the present moment simply by remembering that I already have more than enough conditions to be happy. I am committed to practicing Right

Livelihood so that I can help reduce the suffering of living beings on Earth and stop contributing to climate change.

True Love

Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I am committed to cultivating responsibility and learning ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society. Knowing that sexual desire is not love, and that sexual activity motivated by craving always harms myself as well as others, I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without true love and a deep, long-term commitment made known to my family and friends. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct. Seeing that body and mind are one, I am committed to learning appropriate ways to take care of my sexual energy and cultivating loving kindness, compassion, joy and inclusiveness – which are the four basic elements of true love – for my greater happiness and the greater happiness of others. Practicing true love, we know that we will continue beautifully into the future.

Loving Speech and Deep Listening

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and compassionate listening in order to relieve suffering and to promote reconciliation and peace in myself and among other people, ethnic and religious groups, and nations. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am committed to speaking truthfully using words that inspire confidence, joy, and hope. When anger is manifesting in me, I am determined not to speak. I will practice mindful breathing and walking in order to recognize and to look deeply into my anger. I know that the roots of anger can be found in my wrong perceptions and lack of understanding of the

suffering in myself and in the other person. I will speak and listen in a way that can help myself and the other person to transform suffering and see the way out of difficult situations. I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to utter words that can cause division or discord. I will practice Right Diligence to nourish my capacity for understanding, love, joy, and inclusiveness, and gradually transform anger, violence, and fear that lie deep in my consciousness.

Nourishment and Healing

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I am committed to cultivating good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming. I will practice looking deeply into how I consume the Four Kinds of Nutriment, namely edible foods, sense impressions, volition, and consciousness. I am determined not to gamble, or to use alcohol, drugs, or any other products which contain toxins, such as certain websites, electronic games, TV programs, films, magazines, books, and conversations. I will practice coming back to the present moment to be in touch with the refreshing, healing and nourishing elements in me and around me, not letting regrets and sorrow drag me back into the past nor letting anxieties, fear, or craving pull me out of the present moment. I am determined not to try to cover up loneliness, anxiety, or other suffering by losing myself in consumption. I will contemplate interbeing and consume in a way that preserves peace, joy, and well-being in my body and consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family, my society and the Earth.

Appendix B – The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings (Plum Village, n.d.-f)

The First Mindfulness Training: Openness

Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. We are committed to seeing the Buddhist teachings as a guiding means that help us learn to look deeply and develop understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill, or die for. We understand that fanaticism in its many forms is the result of perceiving things in a dualistic or discriminative manner. We will train ourselves to look at everything with openness and the insight of interbeing in order to transform dogmatism and violence in ourselves and the world.

The Second Mindfulness Training: Non-Attachment to Views

Aware of the suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions, we are determined to avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. We are committed to learning and practicing non-attachment to views and being open to others' experiences and insights in order to benefit from the collective wisdom. We are aware that the knowledge we presently possess is not changeless, absolute truth. Insight is revealed through the practice of compassionate listening, deep looking, and letting go of notions rather than through the accumulation of intellectual knowledge. Truth is found in life, and we will observe life within and around us in every moment, ready to learn throughout our lives.

The Third Mindfulness Training: Freedom of Thought

Aware of the suffering brought about when we impose our views on others, we are determined not to force others, even our children, by any means whatsoever — such as authority, threat, money, propaganda, or indoctrination — to adopt our views. We are

committed to respecting the right of others to be different, to choose what to believe and how to decide. We will, however, learn to help others let go of and transform fanaticism and narrowness through loving speech and compassionate dialogue.

The Fourth Mindfulness Training: Awareness of Suffering

Aware that looking deeply at the nature of suffering can help us develop understanding and compassion, we are determined to come home to ourselves, to recognise, accept, embrace and listen to suffering with the energy of mindfulness. We will do our best not to run away from our suffering or cover it up through consumption, but practice conscious breathing and walking to look deeply into the roots of our suffering. We know we can realise the path leading to the transformation of suffering only when we understand deeply the roots of suffering. Once we have understood our own suffering, we will be able to understand the suffering of others. We are committed to finding ways, including personal contact and using telephone, electronic, audiovisual, and other means, to be with those who suffer, so we can help them transform their suffering into compassion, peace, and joy.

The Fifth Mindfulness Training: Compassionate, Healthy Living

Aware that true happiness is rooted in peace, solidity, freedom, and compassion, we are determined not to accumulate wealth while millions are hungry and dying nor to take as the aim of our life fame, power, wealth, or sensual pleasure, which can bring much suffering and despair. We will practice looking deeply into how we nourish our body and mind with edible foods, sense impressions, volition, and consciousness. We are committed not to gamble or to use alcohol, drugs or any other products which bring toxins into our own and the collective body and consciousness such as certain websites, electronic games, music, TV programs, films, magazines, books and conversations. We will consume in a way that preserves

compassion, wellbeing, and joy in our bodies and consciousness and in the collective body and consciousness of our families, our society, and the earth.

The Sixth Mindfulness Training: Taking Care of Anger

Aware that anger blocks communication and creates suffering, we are committed to taking care of the energy of anger when it arises, and to recognising and transforming the seeds of anger that lie deep in our consciousness. When anger manifests, we are determined not to do or say anything, but to practice mindful breathing or mindful walking to acknowledge, embrace, and look deeply into our anger. We know that the roots of anger are not outside of ourselves but can be found in our wrong perceptions and lack of understanding of the suffering in ourselves and others. By contemplating impermanence, we will be able to look with the eyes of compassion at ourselves and at those we think are the cause of our anger, and to recognise the preciousness of our relationships. We will practice Right Diligence in order to nourish our capacity of understanding, love, joy and inclusiveness, gradually transforming our anger, violence and fear, and helping others do the same.

The Seventh Mindfulness Training: Dwelling Happily in the Present Moment

Aware that life is available only in the present moment, we are committed to training ourselves to live deeply each moment of daily life. We will try not to lose ourselves in dispersion or be carried away by regrets about the past, worries about the future, or craving, anger, or jealousy in the present. We will practice mindful breathing to be aware of what is happening in the here and the now. We are determined to learn the art of mindful living by touching the wondrous, refreshing, and healing elements that are inside and around us, in all situations. In this way, we will be able to cultivate seeds of joy, peace, love, and understanding in ourselves, thus facilitating the work of transformation and healing in our

consciousness. We are aware that real happiness depends primarily on our mental attitude and not on external conditions, and that we can live happily in the present moment simply by remembering that we already have more than enough conditions to be happy.

The Eighth Mindfulness Training: True Community and Communication

Aware that lack of communication always brings separation and suffering, we are committed to training ourselves in the practice of compassionate listening and loving speech. Knowing that true community is rooted in inclusiveness and in the concrete practice of the harmony of views, thinking and speech, we will practice to share our understanding and experiences with members in our community in order to arrive at collective insight.

We are determined to learn to listen deeply without judging or reacting, and refrain from uttering words that can create discord or cause the community to break. Whenever difficulties arise, we will remain in our Sangha and practice looking deeply into ourselves and others to recognise all the causes and conditions, including our own habit energies, that have brought about the difficulties. We will take responsibility for all the ways we may have contributed to the conflict and keep communication open. We will not behave as a victim but be active in finding ways to reconcile and resolve all conflicts however small.

The Ninth Mindfulness Training: Truthful and Loving Speech

Aware that words can create happiness or suffering, we are committed to learning to speak truthfully, lovingly and constructively. We will use only words that inspire joy, confidence and hope as well as promote reconciliation and peace in ourselves and among other people. We will speak and listen in a way that can help ourselves and others to transform suffering and see the way out of difficult situations. We are determined not to say untruthful things for the sake of personal interest or to impress people, nor to utter words that might cause division

or hatred. We will protect the happiness and harmony of our Sangha by refraining from speaking about the faults of other persons in their absence and always ask ourselves whether our perceptions are correct. We will speak only with the intention to understand and help transform the situation. We will not spread rumours nor criticise or condemn things of which we are not sure. We will do our best to speak out about situations of injustice, even when doing so may make difficulties for us or threaten our safety.

The Tenth Mindfulness Training: Protecting and Nourishing the Sangha

Aware that the essence and aim of a Sangha is the practice of understanding and compassion, we are determined not to use the Buddhist community for personal power or profit, or transform our community into a political instrument. As members of a spiritual community, we should nonetheless take a clear stand against oppression and injustice. We should strive to change the situation, without taking sides in a conflict. We are committed to learning to look with the eyes of interbeing and to see ourselves and others as cells in one Sangha body. As a true cell in the Sangha body, generating mindfulness, concentration, and insight to nourish ourselves and the whole community, each of us is at the same time a cell in the Buddha body. We will actively build brotherhood and sisterhood, flow as a river, and practice to develop the three real powers – understanding, love, and cutting through afflictions – to realise collective awakening.

The Eleventh Mindfulness Training: Right Livelihood

Aware that great violence and injustice have been done to our environment and society, we are committed not to live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. We will do our best to select a livelihood that contributes to the wellbeing of all species on earth and helps realise our ideal of understanding and compassion. Aware of economic, political, and

social realities around the world, as well as our interrelationship with the ecosystem, we are determined to behave responsibly as consumers and as citizens. We will not invest in or purchase from companies that contribute to the depletion of natural resources, harm the earth, or deprive others of their chance to live.

The Twelfth Mindfulness Training: Reverence for Life

Aware that much suffering is caused by war and conflict, we are determined to cultivate nonviolence, compassion, and the insight of interbeing in our daily lives and promote peace education, mindful mediation, and reconciliation within families, communities, ethnic and religious groups, nations, and in the world. We are committed not to kill and not to let others kill. We will not support any act of killing in the world, in our thinking, or in our way of life. We will diligently practice deep looking with our Sangha to discover better ways to protect life, prevent war, and build peace.

The Thirteenth Mindfulness Training: Generosity

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, we are committed to cultivating generosity in our way of thinking, speaking, and acting. We will practice loving kindness by working for the happiness of people, animals, plants, and minerals, and sharing our time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need. We are determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. We will respect the property of others, but will try to prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other beings.

The Fourteenth Mindfulness Training: True Love

[For lay members]: Aware that sexual desire is not love and that sexual relations motivated by craving cannot dissipate the feeling of loneliness but will create more suffering, frustration, and isolation, we are determined not to engage in sexual relations without mutual understanding, love, and a deep long-term commitment made known to our family and friends. Seeing that body and mind are not separate from each other, we are committed to learning appropriate ways to take care of our sexual energy and to cultivating loving kindness, compassion, joy and inclusiveness for our own happiness and the happiness of others. We must be aware of future suffering that may be caused by sexual relations. We know that to preserve the happiness of ourselves and others, we must respect the rights and commitments of ourselves and others. We will do everything in our power to protect children from sexual abuse and to protect couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct. We will treat our bodies with compassion and respect. We are determined to look deeply into the Four Nutriments and learn ways to preserve and channel our vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realization of our bodhisattva ideal. We will be fully aware of the responsibility of bringing new lives into the world, and will regularly meditate upon their future environment.

[For monastic members]: Aware that the deep aspiration of a monk or a nun can only be realized when he or she wholly leaves behind the bonds of sensual love, we are committed to practicing chastity and to helping others protect themselves. We are aware that loneliness and suffering cannot be alleviated through a sexual relationship, but through practicing loving kindness, compassion, joy and inclusiveness. We know that a sexual relationship will destroy our monastic life, will prevent us from realizing our ideal of serving living beings, and will harm others. We will learn appropriate ways to take care of our sexual energy. We are

determined not to suppress or mistreat our body, or look upon our body as only an instrument, but will learn to handle our body with compassion and respect. We will look deeply into the Four Nutriment in order to preserve and channel our vital energies (sexual, breath, spirit) for the realization of our bodhisattva ideal.

Appendix C – Note to Plum Village Retreatants

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Email: ching.lam@pg.canterbury.ac.nz



Note to Plum Village Retreatants

Mindfulness and the Engaged Buddhism of Thich Nhat Hanh

Dear Plum Village Retreatants

My name is Yuen Ching Lam (please just call me “Ching”). I am an anthropology PhD student at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. My research is about Thay’s teachings. The working title of my thesis is “Mindfulness and the Engaged Buddhism of Thich Nhat Hanh”. Through fieldwork, this project explores how Thay’s teachings could affect people’s daily life, providing new insight into the potentially transformative effects of mindfulness practice in the contemporary world.

At the current stage of my studies, I am conducting participant observation in Plum Village. This means that I will write notes about observing mindfulness practitioners here. But you may be assured that no individual observed will be identified in the publication or presentation of this project. I will also take photos from time to time. The photos taken will involve the physical environment of the monastery and people participating in group activities. There will not be any close-up photos of the retreatants. Both the observation notes and photos are for data analysis only.

I am also recruiting retreatants to participate in a one-to-one, 60-minute interview, which seeks to understand how Thay’s teachings could have an impact on contemporary practitioners’ daily life. Your input will be of great value to this research. If you are interested in taking part in the interview, please come to me directly. There is an Information Sheet for Interview Participants, which you can keep, and a consent form for you to sign before the interview begins. You can obtain these two documents from the registration office or from me if you would like to have a look at them before making a decision. The results of the project may be published, but you may be assured of the complete confidentiality of data gathered in this investigation: your identity will not be made public without your prior consent.

This project is under the supervision of Dr Anne Scott (a.scott@canterbury.ac.nz), who will be pleased to discuss any concerns you may have about the project. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, and you can address any complaints to The Chair, Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

If you would like to know more about the project or have any concern, please feel free to talk to me.

Thank you.

Yuen Ching Lam

Appendix D – Information Sheet for Interview Participants

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02 April 2016



Mindfulness and the Engaged Buddhism of Thich Nhat Hanh

Information Sheet for Interview Participants

I am an anthropology PhD student at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. This PhD research project explores the Engaged Buddhism developed by Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, who is known for his teachings on integrating mindfulness practice into everyday life for creating peace in oneself and the world. He has transformed and adapted Buddhism in a way that links meditative practice with social engagement and this engagement has made a significant impact on Buddhist practice in the West. Through fieldwork and interviews, this project seeks to uncover how Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings could affect people's daily life, providing new insight into the potentially transformative effects of mindfulness practice in the contemporary world.

If you choose to take part in this study, your involvement in this project will be to participate in a one-to-one, semi-structured interview, which is expected to last about 60 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded. The recording will be used for transcribing the interviews, which is for data analysis only.

On the consent form, you will be asked to provide your email address, so I can send you the interview transcript for review. I may also contact you should I need clarification or further information on the topics discussed in the interview.

Participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. You may ask for your raw data to be returned to you or destroyed at any point. If you withdraw, I will remove information relating to you. However, once analysis of raw data starts on 8 August 2016, it will become increasingly difficult to remove the influence of your data on the results.

The results of the project may be published, but you may be assured of the complete confidentiality of data gathered in this investigation: your identity will not be made public without your prior consent. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, a code, which will be assigned to each participant on the consent form, will be used for the recording and interview transcripts. Both the recording and interview transcripts will be stored separately from the consent forms. All data collected for the study will be kept in locked and secure facilities and/or in password protected electronic form and will be destroyed after ten years. The data will be accessible only to the research team. A thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC Library.

Please indicate on the consent form if you would like to receive a copy of the summary of results of the project.

The project is being carried out as part of PhD research by Yuen Ching Lam under the supervision of Dr Anne Scott, who can be contacted at a.scott@canterbury.ac.nz. She will be pleased to discuss any concerns you may have about participation in the project.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, and participants should address any complaints to The Chair, Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz).

If you agree to participate in the study, please complete the consent form and return the completed form to me.

Thank you for your participation.

Yuen Ching Lam

Appendix E – Interview Question Sheet for Interview Participants

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Mindfulness and the Engaged Buddhism of Thich Nhat Hanh

Interview Questions

- (1) How and when did you first come into contact with Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings and practices?
- (2) Do you have a daily or regular practice? If so, how do you manage it?
- (3) Could you describe a way that you have incorporated mindfulness into your daily activities?
- (4) How has the practice changed the way you live your life?
- (5) Has it changed the way you see the world?
- (6) Has it changed the way you are in your relationships with other people?
- (7) Do you practice alone or with a sangha/group? Why?
- (8) Who or what most supports you in your practice?
- (9) What are the most important issues or challenges that arise in your daily practice?
- (10) Do you find anything problematic or challenging about his approach?
- (11) Do you have any religion? If so, how does your religion fit with what you are learning here?
- (12) Could you describe what mindfulness means to you?
- (13) Could you describe what interbeing means to you?
- (14) Are there any other experiences or comments you would like to share?
- (15) Do you mind telling me your occupation? Age? Where you are from?

Appendix F – Consent Form for Interview Participants



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Consent Form for Interview Participants

Mindfulness and the Engaged Buddhism of Thich Nhat Hanh

- ☐ I have been given a full explanation of this project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- ☐ I understand what is required of me if I agree to take part in the research.
- ☐ I understand that participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time without penalty. Withdrawal of participation will also include the withdrawal of any information I have provided should this remain practically achievable.
- ☐ I understand that any information or opinions I provide will be kept confidential to the research team and that any published or reported results will not identify the participants. I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC Library.
- ☐ I understand that all data collected for the study will be kept in locked and secure facilities and/or in password protected electronic form and will be destroyed after ten years.
- ☐ I understand that I am able to receive a report on the findings of the study by contacting the researcher at the conclusion of the project.
- ☐ I agree to provide my email address for transcript review, and for follow-up communication regarding the topics discussed in the interview, if needed.
- ☐ I understand that I can contact the researcher (Yuen Ching Lam: +64 21 225 4058 / ching.lam@pg.canterbury.ac.nz) or supervisor (Dr Anne Scott: +64-3-364-2987 ext 3801 / a.scott@canterbury.ac.nz) for further information. If I have any complaints, I can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch (human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)
- ☐ I would like a summary of the results of the project.
- ☐ By signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name: _____ Signed: _____ Date: _____

Email address (*for follow-up communication and/or report of findings, if applicable*): _____

Please return the completed form to me.

Thank you for your participation.

Yuen Ching Lam