



Thay: Thich Nhat Hanh

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Thich Nhat Hanh was a true follower of the Buddha and a teacher who offered teachings of the Buddha—the *dhamma* in the most applicable way, which was mindfulness and to live in the present moment. It reflects that when you are mindful in the present moment you are connected to the entire existence and become a part of it. He suggests this conscious approach helps one to not be hurtful to anyone and be in a peaceful state of mind all the time.

Hanh articulated the discerning philosophy of the Buddha not only through his verses but also his brush. For him calligraphy was not only a process of creation but an approach towards mindful meditation. He says, “when I write the word ‘breathe’ I am breathing and is aware of being alive at the same time and it’s a miracle of life..... to be alive.”

Thich Nhat Hanh, lovingly called Thay (Vietnamese for teacher), left this mortal world at the age of ninety-six on 22nd January 2022, in a temple in Hue, Vietnam. It is the same temple in which he was ordained at the age of sixteen with his teacher. After almost four decades of exile (mostly in France) from his native land of Vietnam (1966 to 2005), in 2018 he expressed his wish to spend his remaining days at this temple. This is how he valued the lineage of the *dhamma* to which he belonged and how deep rooted is the connection of the teacher-disciple in the Sangha tradition of the Buddha which is the flowing stream of wisdom (*pañña*) and compassion (*karunā*).

Thay is mostly known to the world for his teachings on mindfulness meditation, but little do any of us—the simpletons know that this deep penetrative teaching of mindfulness or *sati* connects us to the entire world

of reality. He is also called father of mindfulness. His following is all over the world and his books are very popular among the students and teachers of mindfulness. Therefore, by teaching mindfulness this sensitive poet and spiritual writer, through his innumerable writings brought in forefront the deep ancient wisdom of the Buddha to the modern western world, in a language they would understand. Through the simple daily activities that we perform regularly, he brought to our minds that each of these moments hold in them a chance, which takes us towards an understanding of ourself by just being mindful of that moment.

The book *Miracle of Mindfulness* is a beginner's guide in which Thay teaches how to be awake and be aware of yourself and your surroundings by being mindful. We all are alive so we breathe, but not mindfully cherishing each present moment. In fact, we are never in the present moment, as the mind always likes to be in the past or the future, running away from the present reality. To be aware of our breath is to be in the present, which is the only moment in which we can be with ourselves, delve deep, heal from within and come out of our suffering. Being a true Zen master, Thay showed different ways of being mindful, like mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful cooking, mindful washing, mindful brushing teeth and so on, as the opportunities to breathe mindfully

in our daily life and be established in mindfulness to take the benefit of it.

In the Anapanasati Sutta: (Mindfulness of Breathing), the Buddha asks the monks

“kathaṃ bhāvitā ca, bhikkhave,
ānāpānassati kathaṃ bahulīkatā cattāro
satipaṭṭhāne paripūreti?

"Now how is mindfulness of in-and-out breathing developed and pursued so as to be of great fruit, of great benefit?

Thay explained the sutta in simple words like breathing mindfully helps us calm down when we are angry, fearful, anxious or painful by facing our strong emotions there and then. Doing that in the 'present moment' we are creating new moments of happiness in our daily life moment to moment, day by day. This energy of mindfulness cultivated by everyone in their daily lives not only brings peacefulness but sustains the world we live in, by eliminating suffering.

One of the most important contributions of Thay in his teaching and writings is that

Everything co-exists (paṭiccasammupāda). He emphasized that humans are dependent and interconnected to each other and to the world we live in. To explain this co-relation of ours with our environment Thay coined a new word 'interbeing' through which

he tried to explain the age-old law of nature as taught by the Buddha – the law of interdependence or law of co-existence

(Imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti)
when this exists, this naturally exists;
(Imassuppādā idaṃ uppajjati)
due to the arising of this, this
consequently arises;
(Imasmiṃ asati idaṃ na hoti)
when this does not exist, this naturally
does not exist;
(Imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati.)
due to the quenching of this, this
consequently quenches.

This insight and knowledge of 'interbeing' (a term he started using since 1980's) makes you see beyond what is apparent and see the cause of its existence, like the sheet of paper, cannot exist without the clouds, forest and rain. When you see the paper, you should be able to see the clouds, forest and rain because everything co-exists. "To co-exist is to be inter-be" – he taught to his students and made them apply this law to every sphere of life problems which also includes ecology. This came to be known as 'Engaged Buddhism' which Thay called 'Applied Buddhism'.

Thay was a great teacher and his teachings are easy to apply in daily life. Mindfulness teaching Thay became sought after popular all around the world. We all know it is not easy to be mindful in this worldly life for a common person. Even Thay knew that, thus he

gave the teachings step by step in the form of first sīla: the development of virtues or morality, which becomes the base or foundation of the samādhi: the collectedness of the mind, which needs the mindfulness (sati) and efforts (vāyāma).

Therefore, it is not surprising to see how the five precepts (pañcasīla) are emphasised by Thay in the book 'The Mindfulness' referring to them as 'the survival kit'. The five essential practices – not to kill (pāṇātipātā veramani), steal (adinnadānā veramani), not commit adultery (kāmesu micchācārā veramani), not to lie (musāvādā veramani), and not to take intoxicants (surāmerayamajja pamādaṭṭhānā veramani)—are the basic tenets of ethics and morality in the teachings of the Buddha. He offers them as a kit for sustaining and healthy way of living, thus contributing to a mindful society.

As a social activist and a true environmentalist, Thay applied anicca (Impermanence) and anatta (No-Self) as a solution to the crisis faced by the earth and subsequently by us in the future and called it 'deep ecology'. In 'The World We Have' Thay fearlessly points towards 'the end of our civilization' hammering at us – the growing environmental crisis, but gives a solution referring to the Diamond Sutra, and explains "no-self" in the light of ecology and believes one cannot separate human beings from environment as both are integral part. Thay had a firm belief and communicated in his

teaching that if ecology and planet need to be saved every human being needs to be invited to love earth and environment. He says, it is like falling in love with yourself because when we look at the earth as an environment we are separated from the earth. But when we see the Earth is us, the Earth is inside of us and we are already on the Earth, this teaches us how to nourish and heal ourselves. So, in his lifetime he teaches and transforming dhamma into a living practice which is a true home coming.

As the followers of the “father of mindfulness” we should live in the present moment and stay peaceful leaving the chaos of inner and outer world. Being in a state of peace is the mediation we need to practice in these unprecedented times.

