

# Mindfulness Meditation and Praxis

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## **Introduction**

Praxis is “where the theoretical is not separated from practice, but instead what is encouraged is the interplay of experience and reflection which becomes focused on concrete situations” (Carr, 2000, p.217). Whereas traditional theory formalizes thought, separating it from action, critical theory is concerned with praxis (Carr, 2000), which can be described as “a synthetic product of the dialectic between theory and practice” (Heilman, 2003, p.274). Similarly, Buddhism removes conceptual overlays and connects with direct experience, dispensing with the localization of the mind in one part of the body that makes it partial and frozen (Suzuki, 1959). Zen emphasizes the concrete, factual and existential (Suzuki, 1963) and material reality (Blyth, 1981). Non-dualism suggests that ideas must be tested by their practical application (Suzuki, 1949).

There is no independent self in Buddhism. The notion that all things are empty does not imply that they do not exist but it does mean that they are not self-existing (Batchelor and Brown, 1992). The inner and outer are both empty and so cannot be distinguished (Suzuki, 1953). Suffering results from constructing a self that is independent from others and objects, resulting in alienation from them, the resolution of which is fallaciously attempted through clinging to other people, objects or conditions, in order to bolster this sense of self. The self attaches to that which appears to secure it and averts itself from that which it perceives as threatening. Dualistic thought about self versus others/things leads to other distinctions, such as that between ‘us’ and ‘them’. In Buddhism, dualism is reversed in two related ways; by not clinging to the people and things that are perceived to be outside the self, and through meditation, which gradually erodes the distinction between self and not-self. Awakening to the nature of reality is realized through the self’s reunification with it, resulting in the demise of clinging; “since there is no self which does the possessing, there simply cannot be any possession” (Puligandla and Puhakka, 1970, p.346). Liberation consists of entering a non-egotistical state and experiencing the interdependent nature of all beings (Mishra, 2004). There is no independent self, in which the search for individual enlightenment ceases, and the focus moves to helping others (Shen-yen, in Brazier, 2002). The preoccupation is no longer private liberation from suffering but the “nirvana of society” (Dalai Lama, in Brazier, 2002, p.97). Collapsing dualism addresses the underlying causes of selfishness, merging the self with other people, and thereby informing relationships with them. Reunification with others leads to compassion and the focus of liberation becomes not the self but all beings. When we are freed from egocentricity, we experience unity and are at one with their suffering. So the notion of self-liberation becomes delusive because there is no longer a separate self from which to be liberated; liberation becomes freedom of all beings from suffering (Jones, 1989). Letting go of the illusion of a separate self extends self-interest to all beings (King, 2005). Buddhism’s notion of interdependence requires active engagement in social care and action.

Accordingly, mindfulness meditation involves becoming aware of the here-and-now through awareness of the breath and body. It is a visceral, not a cerebral exercise (King, 1993). This connection with reality potentiates meditation for praxis; “once there is seeing, there must be acting”, argues Thich Nhat Hanh (1995, p.91), who reinterprets the Five Precepts as the ‘Five Mindfulness Trainings’, with changed emphases from prohibition to constructive action, and from individual to broader levels of analysis (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1987a; [interbeing.org.uk](http://interbeing.org.uk)).

Having introduced the principle of non-duality in Buddhism, the remainder of the paper will analyze Thich Nhat Hanh’s texts (in chronological order to see how his thinking developed), focusing on those that elaborate the relationship between meditation and praxis. The paper will close with conclusions and recommendations for meditation, praxis, and further research in this field.

### **Discourse Analysis of Thich Nhat Hanh's Texts**

The first text analyzed was 'The Miracle of Mindfulness'. Here, Thich Nhat Hanh (1975), emphasizes breathing, with breath as a bridge connecting life and consciousness, uniting body and thoughts; mastering the breath is to control body and mind. Mindfulness is regarded as a miracle that restores us and calls back our dispersed mind; just as a magician who has cut up his body and placed the parts in different places and then works magic to reassemble all of the parts back into one whole.

Meditation and praxis are inextricably intertwined. No longer is religion separable from life; instead, every act in daily life can become a ceremony or rite that can enhance mindfulness. To strengthen this relationship, Thich Nhat Hanh advocates a day of mindfulness, which can then penetrate and affect the other days of the week, so that they all become mindful. He suggests contemplating on interdependency, impermanency and compassion. The contemplation on interdependency involves considering the five aggregates of physical forms, feelings, perceptions, mental functionings, and consciousness – to see that they are only aggregates, that everything is one and not many different things. Contemplating interdependence involves looking into the aggregates to see that there is one indivisible reality. Physical form is intimately connected with the world outside that form. For example, the existence of a table relies on a carpenter, screws, forest, and indeed the sun, soil and rain that allowed the forest to grow. Equally, meditating on the five aggregates in oneself enables insight that life in oneself and the universe are one. Meditating on interdependence should take place in the context of ordinary tasks (through mindfulness of the body's positions, while making tea, washing dishes and clothes, cleaning the house, or bathing), events (which are inter-originated and interdependent) and social relationships (I am the other person; the other person is me). Contemplating on compassion can be practiced by meditating on the suffering of those who are suffering the most.

These themes are developed by Thich Nhat Hanh (1988), in 'The Sun My Heart', wherein he argues that meditating on interbeing and interpenetration of reality destroys concepts, in order to arrive at a direct experience of reality. One exercise to understand interbeing is to meditate on and become the person you most hate, becoming one with that person, their worries, and their suffering. No longer two people with separate selves but being that person leads to insight, compassion, tolerance, happiness, and letting go. It is possible to let go, as it is unnecessary to keep anything for oneself because one is no longer a fragile 'self' that must be preserved. The other's happiness is also your happiness, so that there is no jealousy or selfishness, only tolerance and compassion. One suffers the other's sufferings and so seeks to relieve these sufferings. These four virtues (known as the Four Immeasurables) – loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and non-attachment – are metaphorized as the 'fruits' of the meditation on the interdependent co-arising of things.

A virtuous circle develops, in that awareness of others' suffering means that meditation can no longer simply involve withdrawing to a forest or a room to sit in meditation. Peace is not a personal possession but an inner peace where we are one with those who suffer. Understanding and non-discrimination lead to peace and compassion. With compassion, we can look at all of living reality at once and see ourselves in every being. Understanding allows us to view reality from many viewpoints, to overcome all viewpoints, and act compassionately. Thus reconciliation is not ambitious and does not take sides in conflicts. Thich Nhat Hanh uses the metaphor of a mother hen who embraces all her chicks, with two fully spread wings, to explain that love and understanding should displace taking sides, embracing the whole of reality.

Meditating on interdependent co-arising enables this realization which, once attained, dispels discrimination and reality is no longer sliced by the "sword of conceptualization"; "we have to continue practicing until... the hunger and pain in the bodies of all living species are our own. Then we will have realized non-discrimination, real love" (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1988, p.129). Koans can be used to shatter concepts and conceptualizing.

Thich Nhat Hanh conveys the image of a jug of settling apple juice to mediate the process of meditation as gaining clarity through sitting still. Such clarity refreshes us and our surroundings. Thus the experience of seeing differently in meditation is mediated by seeing differently through metaphor. Awareness is metaphorized as sunlight that dispels the boundary

between the sacred and the profane, making each action sacred; for example, doing the dishes becomes a mindful activity. It is necessary to realize this, otherwise it will never be possible to live in the present moment, always being transported into the future. Mindfulness involves being in the here and now, so it is important to take care of the body in a nonviolent way, as it is not just a means to practice the Way, it is the Way. The body is not only the temple but is also the sage.

In 'The Diamond that Cuts through Illusion', Thich Nhat Hanh (1992) reinforces the notion of our interdependence with each other and with the environment, deploying various metaphors. He argues that we are not an island and therefore we need to help all living beings, without distinguishing between the helper and those helped. Interbeing and mutual interdependence is conveyed with the metaphor of the left and right hand, one helping the other in a formless way that does not distinguish between the hands; "our right hand puts a band aid on our left hand, without discrimination" (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1992, p.38). Interbeing and mutual interdependence also applies to our relationship with the environment; polluting and destroying nature is to pollute and destroy ourselves. Discriminating between human and non-human leads to our destruction, as in climate change, so to protect ourselves, we must also protect the non-human. How is this to be achieved? Through meditation. Whereas we normally use our conceptual knowledge to grasp reality, meditation breaks through conceptual limitations so that we can move freely in what is metaphorized as "the boundless ocean of reality" (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1992, p.61).

Commenting on Buddhism's Five Precepts, in 'For a Future to be Possible', Thich Nhat Hanh (1993a, p.185) refers to "the lamp of mindfulness" and then explains the practice with a more extended metaphor of crossing the ocean on a boat and getting caught in a storm. In this situation, it is important to stay calm and not panic. This is to be achieved through focusing on the breath. Being calm, we will know what actions to take and which to avoid. Otherwise, the boat may capsize. Mindfulness allows us to see things more clearly and know what to do to improve a situation. Mindfulness produces concentration, which brings about insight and wisdom. Thich Nhat Hanh (1993a, p.186) extends the metaphor to explain how mindfulness also reduces fear; "...the waves are impermanent and without a self. But if we look more deeply, we see that the waves are also water. The moment the wave realizes that it is water, all fear of death, impermanence, and non-self will disappear." Thich Nhat Hanh (1987b) further develops the metaphor in 'Being Peace' by explaining that our world is a very small boat in the cosmos and our situation is as vulnerable as this boat in the sea, with the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Humankind has become a dangerous species and the answer is for people to meditate and to be peace.

Commenting on the Sutra on the four establishments of mindfulness, in 'Transformation and Healing', Thich Nhat Hanh (1993b) explicates several methods of meditation practice. It is essential to mindfully observe the body and to engage in conscious breathing, following the breath, in order to return to ourselves, become calm, and regain contact with life, here and now. Through conscious breathing, we harmonize and unify body and mind. Awareness of body actions, positions, and parts leads to contact with the body, awareness of body and universe interdependence leads to interdependence of self and non-self, while awareness of body as impermanent (noticing the ageing or decomposition of the body) produces an understanding of transience. All of these exercises realize impermanence, selflessness and interdependent origination, leading to freedom from clinging and suffering. Mindfulness can heal thoughts and feelings in the following ways. Emotional wounds can be healed with awareness of joy. We should identify our feelings and go further to identify the 'roots' of feelings. Deep reflection makes it possible to see the relative nature of feelings, that (un)happiness can come from the same thing as happiness. Therefore, happiness is unconditional. Observing the desiring mind leads to the cessation of suffering, while observing anger provides the basis for love and compassion. Anger can be displaced by meditating on love. Finally, this text offers key principles for practicing meditation: recognizing that mind and mind objects are one, observing is being one with object of observation, following the way of no conflict (with others or indeed with ourselves), and remembering that observation is not indoctrination,

Thich Nhat Hanh's (1995) 'Peace is Every Step' is subtitled 'The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life', clearly highlighting that meditation is confined neither to monastics nor to the

meditation hall; instead, meditation is practiced within daily life, both in order that the benefits of meditation are maintained, and also so that meditation translates into action. Thus, Thich Nhat Hanh says that we can breathe anywhere, in an airport for example, “breathing mindfully in any position at any time can help you recover yourself” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1995, p.16). Meditation is not for avoiding problems; indeed, such an approach will mean that the problems will just return. Instead, meditation is to be practiced throughout daily life and including our everyday problems, and this will enable communion with life. Everyday experience in Europe includes the sound of church bells which, like temple bells, can be used as a reminder to be aware of the here and now. Indeed, any sound or any light (e.g. a sun ray) can serve as a reminder for mindfulness. Instead of seeing daily life as a distraction from meditation, all of our activities, such as eating, washing dishes, walking, phoning, and driving are all advocated as meditation exercises. No longer is life to be decompartmentalized with barriers between practice and non-practice; instead, meditation is to be brought out of the meditation hall and into the kitchen and office, so that it penetrates daily life and affects social concerns.

Just as there is to be no division between the meditation hall and daily life, mind and body are also connected in mindfulness meditation. Accordingly, a mindful person treats her body as a musician looks after her instrument, in a nonviolent way. The metaphor illustrates the importance of respecting the body and reflects how Zen privileges the here-and-now (instead of a disembodied and abstract spirituality). Accordingly, mindfulness involves “wishlessness” or “aimlessness” – “do not put something in front of you and run after it, because everything is already here, in yourself...we do not try to arrive anywhere” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1995, p.37).

Mindfulness meditation connects one with others. To think of ourselves as separate is a conceptualization and a false one at that. Thich Nhat Hanh argues that we must be careful not to imprison ourselves in such concepts; everything contains everything else, so that we cannot just be, we are interbeing and, as such, we hold responsibility for everything that happens.

Thich Nhat Hanh employs various metaphors to mediate this. He argues that we are all interconnected like leaves on a tree. Interbeing is metaphorized in terms of a sheet of paper that is interdependent with clouds, rain, trees, and loggers, which are all needed for paper to exist. The rose and garbage also depend on each other and are equal, such that the garbage is as precious as the rose. Everything and everyone has suchness, an essential true nature, and we must recognize the flower and the garbage aspects of a person if we are to live in peace and happiness with them. If we do not do so, internal formations will arise – metaphorized as fetters or knots; a knot is tied when we do not effectively communicate with and understand one another. Suchness is also explained with metaphors of gas and electricity, which have suchness; both are dangerous but can be used for our benefit, providing that we use them mindfully – so we must be mindful in all situations.

Most of the metaphors used by Thich Nhat Hanh relate to organic growth in nature, reflecting his caring, nurturing and humanistic Buddhism. For example, he refers to planting good seeds of mindfulness, which act like antibodies on a virus, dispelling the negative seeds. Mindfulness nourishes our tree of understanding and love. Thich Nhat Hanh likens the process of mindfulness to when we boil potatoes in a pot of water; the fire is mindfulness, breathing and focusing on anger, the lid is concentration (the lid prevents heat/anger escaping), and with cooking, anger is transformed into understanding and compassion. He uses the metaphor of a lettuce to explain how mindfulness affects our relationships; if the lettuce does not grow, we do not blame it - but we do blame our friends or family when things go wrong. Instead, we need to take care of them, just like when we grow a lettuce (which we nurture by giving it access to water, sun, and fertilizer). Blame, reasoning and argument have no positive effect - only love and understanding changes the situation. We are one with others and the environment because we have interbeing; a notion metaphorized with the idea that the sun is our second heart, one that is shared by all living things. Equally, all earth is part of our body; we must be interdependent with it in order to survive. We must be the forest or the river, so that we do not pollute it. Clarity, determination and patience in social and environmental action are the fruits of meditation, while the roots of war are in our industries, societies and consumerism.

Similar metaphors of organic growth in nature can be found in the title and text of Thich Nhat Hanh’s (1996) ‘Cultivating the Mind of Love’. Meditation cultivates the *garden*, wherein

*seeds* of love, understanding, enlightenment and happiness are already present. Just as a pregnant woman experiences transformation and peace, meditation is giving a baby Buddha inside us a chance to be nourished and born. We need to trust this meditation process, just as a woman trusts her body to nourish her baby.

Thich Nhat Hanh's (1998a) book 'Interbeing' is subtitled 'Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism', which provide 'Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings', only a few of which are selected for discussion below. We should nurture a mindful approach to anger so that we transform the 'seeds' of anger by practicing mindful breathing or walking and acknowledge, embrace, and look deeply into our anger. Mixed metaphors extend this teaching; the seeds of anger and hatred can be tackled with the 'preventative medicine' of meditation; the light of awareness can be shone on our unpleasant feelings to identify their roots. Instead of feeling angry, we can learn to be compassionate to ourselves and others. Thich Nhat Hanh (1998a, p.34) explains with this metaphor; "when we grow a lemon tree, we want it to be vigorous and beautiful. But if it isn't vigorous and beautiful, we don't blame the tree. We observe it in order to understand why it isn't growing well." Similarly, we should not blame human beings when they are not growing well. The message of this metaphor is that people, like lemon trees, will grow properly if we take good care of them. Blaming is unhelpful whereas love and understanding helps people change. Caring for people is rewarded by their pleasantness, just as caring for a lemon tree rewards us. Meditation's purpose is to see, hear and understand others. Thich Nhat Hanh explains his teaching with the metaphor of a pirate; if he had been born and raised in a pirate's social conditions, then he would have become a pirate. Various interdependent causes have created the pirate's existence, so it is not the pirate's responsibility but also that of society; we all share the responsibility for piracy; "meditating on dependent origination and looking with compassionate eyes helps us see our duty and responsibility to suffering beings" (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1998a, p.35).

Life is only available in the here and now, so it is imperative to live deeply each moment of daily life, instead of losing ourselves in dispersion or getting carried away by regrets, worries, craving, anger, or jealousy. Mindful breathing allows the meditator to come back to what is happening in the present moment. This mindfulness training is emphasized when it is metaphorically compared to the 'kernel of a peach', at the 'heart' of our lives.

Thich Nhat Hanh (1998b), in 'Fragrant Palm Leaves', argues that sitting is just one part of Zen—we dwell in the present moment while performing daily tasks, which Zen can infuse with mindfulness. Otherwise, reality is only seen through the 'dark curtains' of our selfish desires and narrow views.

In 'The Blooming of a Lotus', Thich Nhat Hanh (2009) provides a 'Guided Meditation for Achieving the Miracle of Mindfulness'. Here it is argued that meditation's function is that of healing and transforming, through being mindful of what is within and without, producing insight and wisdom that liberates us from suffering and causing suffering to others. It helps us to bring about change and to help others to be free.

Meditation can be practiced anywhere, in any daily activity. Conscious breathing leads to realizations of "impermanence, emptiness, interdependent origination, selflessness, and non-duality of all that is" (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2009, p.4). It puts us in touch with the body and loving our own body enables us to love others. Mindfulness instructs us what kinds of sense contact to foster or avoid, so that we can exercise wise discretion when choosing films, music, books, conversations, and what thoughts to nurture. Many people are always in a restless hurry and do not know how to care for their bodies and minds, bartering their health away to obtain material comforts, but in doing so they destroy body and mind; pointing to the need for awareness of body and mind.

Meditating on impermanence can help dispel the despair of environmentalists and develop an acceptance of impermanency, which brings peace and wisdom in how to reverse global warming. Meditating on the impermanence of someone, who caused us to suffer and hate them, can dissolve anger and foster love and compassion for that person and for ourselves. Looking deeply at there being no birth and no death, we realize that nothing comes and is born, and nothing dies and goes. There is no existence and no non-existence. We realize interdependence, interpenetration, and interbeing, that there is no separate self, and that "all is one

and one is all” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2009, p.94). Birth and death are both illusory, and reality is birthless and deathless; realising this can liberate us from our fears and sorrows. How can this be achieved? Through seeing, smiling, and breathing, comments (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2009, p.96);

“Seeing the deathless nature of my  
consciousness, I breathe in.  
Smiling to the deathless nature of my  
consciousness, I breathe out.”

Looking deeply at self as a collection of aggregates, rooted in everything (e.g. water), it can be seen that the view of self as a separate entity is erroneous. Thich Nhat Hanh comments on the Diamond Sutra, whose purpose he says is to overturn habitual patterns of thought that the self, our species, and other species are separately existing entities, or that a life span begins with birth and ends with death. Instead, all species are interconnected and interdependent – and a human life is present before birth and after death in many different forms, such as in elements, descendants, and culture. Birth and death are only apparently so, when in fact they do not exist. Such a realization enhances our love and respect for other species.

### **Conclusion:**

This article examined mindfulness meditation, as presented in the literature of Zen, focusing on the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh, whilst also making reference to other Engaged Buddhist authors. It explored the relationship between Buddhist philosophy (especially non-dualism) and praxis, enquiring how meditation effects transformation. The key finding is that Thich Nhat Hanh emphasizes non-duality in mindfulness meditation and thereby is able to relate it to praxis. He does this in two ways; firstly, through emphasizing the non-duality of mind/body, self/other, and self/environment, and secondly, through explaining his teaching through metaphors that mediate these non-dualities. Most of the metaphors used by Thich Nhat Hanh relate to organic growth in nature, reflecting his caring, nurturing and humanistic Buddhism. Engaged Buddhism requires this kind of meditation as well as this approach to communicating it. Zen has traditionally privileged meditation over and above other aspects of Buddhist tradition and practice. Thich Nhat Hanh is in line with this tradition but by explaining how mindfulness is to be understood and practiced within daily life and in relation to others and our environment, meditation is no longer seen as a narrow focus but as universally applicable. Accordingly, Thich Nhat Hanh (1987a; [interbeing.org.uk](http://interbeing.org.uk)) reinterprets and renames the Five Precepts of Buddhism as the ‘Five Mindfulness Trainings’, with changed emphases from prohibition to constructive action, and from individual to broader levels of analysis. It is concluded that Thich Nhat Hanh’s particular privileging of non-dual meditation enables the relationship between meditation and praxis – and that metaphorical discourse is crucial for our understanding of this relationship, and to ensure that meditation leads to social and environmental action.

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