

Mindfulness for Educators,

A Retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh, by Lisa Fancott

In August 2013, Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh and monastics from Plum Village came to Brock University in St. Catharines Ontario, to lead a retreat for teachers and educators. I attended as a member of Thay's Order of Interbeing and as someone who has been working with government, business and civil society leaders to reduce discrimination, for many years.

The first retreat I attended with this beautiful Sangha was at Blue Cliff Monastery in New York, when I took the fourteen mindfulness trainings with Thay. The ceremony was in the presence of a retinue of sixty or so fully ordained monks and nuns, with perhaps a hundred lay ordained men and women flanking us on either side. To take the precepts – or the mindfulness trainings as they are expressed in the Order of Interbeing, in the presence of a full community, with monks and nuns on equal footing, elderly and young, and many races, and lay practitioners who have stepped forward to make a deeper commitment - awakens the heart to its highest potential, to a profound solidity and sense of harmony in brotherhood and sisterhood. It feels authentic and balanced, an honouring, witnessing and receiving of the full transmission of the Buddha's teaching. It was a powerful, transformational experience again in August, to be on retreat in the presence of a full Fourfold Sangha.

Giving us the opportunity to practice in the presence of a Fourfold Sangha is one of the important ways in which Thay bridges theory and practice. Thay himself embodies the teachings, as does the community he brings together.

Like the Buddha, Thay teaches in metaphors, bringing very abstract and difficult concepts, like emptiness, to life. In his use of language, like the word "interbeing," and practices, such as looking deeply, our obsession with identity is gradually released. In Thay's way of teaching, a good practitioner knows that dukkha and nibbana inter-are. A practitioner does not have to wait until future lives, to experience nibbana, when we can touch nibbana in every moment. In a small suffering, we can still free ourselves and generate a feeling of joy. In a big suffering, the likes of which Thich Nhat Hanh has himself lived through, we can still generate love, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

"With every step, I kiss Mother Earth with my feet," are Thay's words which I remember when I walk in daily life, because they bring the mind quickly into the feet and into contact with the earth. With every step, they inspire an understanding of our interdependence with the planet in a softened and intimate way, rather than the distant or alarmist way we may hear every day in the news. It also invites the long-banished feminine back into the spiritual psyche and living practice, as does his recent book, "Love Letter to the Earth."

At 87 years old, Thay travels a gruelling schedule across continents, catches the coughs and colds, which practitioners generously bring along with them and still teaches with the freshness of a spring flower. On some days, Thay moves vigorously, on others, he moves gingerly, never outpacing his breath. During this particular retreat, rather than count steps and follow my in and out breath, I tried to model what I observed in Thay. I decided to learn how to move, and speak, and eat, and sit, in such a way, that I never disconnect from the breath. When our breath stops, it is a signal from the nervous system that we are outpacing the breath; we are stressing the mind or body. In fact, we stop breathing all the time. It happens when we move too quickly, we are anxious, distracted, or we think it is more important to finish a sentence than to breathe. As soon as I disconnected from the breath, I stopped whatever I was doing until my breath became natural again,

and resumed activity in such a way, that I did not disconnect from it. I had to slow down many times!

Slowing down was the focus of the discussions and presentations of the retreat, which brought together many educators from across Canada and the United States. There were presentations on the ways in which mindfulness is being integrated into educational programmes across North America and Europe. There were teachers, principals and leaders from school boards, including Catholic ones. What struck me the most about the discussions, was the crossroads at which dedicated educators seemed to find themselves. Downward pressures on the education sector, especially in the United States, leading to job losses, lower wages, job insecurity and an unrealistic work burden are making it almost impossible for educators to slow down and many teachers were suffering from burnout.

Besides teaching mindfulness in schools, it became apparent that mindfulness practice was crucial for educators themselves to simply survive the mounting stresses of their profession. Many asked, “How can we be mindful in a world that is making mindfulness more difficult? Do we have to quit our jobs? Or do we have to engage in social action at some point, to help society restore the balance?” So the conference theme enabled educators to look deeply at whether mindfulness and right livelihood may require us at some stage to step into social action. As individuals, each person could quit his or her job, but they would fall on hard times, and they would abandon the system, and the students, at a time when their support is needed more than ever.

The most poignant moment for me during the retreat came when the lay Order members were invited on stage to participate in the final chanting, at the end of the retreat. During the retreat, Thay had told us of a dream he had that he was about to meet and perform for a great teacher. In that dream, he was chosen, while another boy was not chosen. That boy was his old self. In the dream, when Thay is about to finally perform for the teacher, he wakes up just before.

As I walked up to the stage, to sing with the monastics, it was almost a mirror of the story. Because, on walking up to the stage, Thay was facing me, and mind was so still, that I did not bow my head or raise my hands in prayer. My eyes met the eyes of the teacher and there was complete stillness. I respected Thay’s spaciousness, and the moment of stillness, and moved towards the front of the stage to sing with the monastics. However, when the retreat ended, my old self reminded me, that I just met the Teacher, and I did not bow! In the moment, there was oneness with the teacher. However, in the recollection of the moment, there was shame for not bowing, and regret that this was probably the only moment I would ever have to do so! More than anything, in the moment, I saw Thay’s humanity, his gentleness and fragility, and the little child in me so regretted not taking the hand of the little boy, to ask him to come along and chant with us. Instead, I passed him by, and left him alone. Oh what suffering!

As Thay teaches, in true love, the willingness to love is not enough. We need the capacity to love, which requires an understanding, an understanding of what the other person needs, what makes him or her happy. So maybe the first instinct, to respect Thay's spaciousness was the right thing to do. To rest in the beautiful stillness, a oneness, without bowing, was the realization that Lover and Beloved are not separate. Seeing the little boy in Thay, I understood that the teacher is a human being first, who still suffers. We should love that person as a human being first, and not get lost in reverence, because this can be self-centered and have nothing whatsoever to do with true love.

And so, the precious retreat passed, providing infinite nutriment for the spiritual garden of transformation.