



# In the Symphony of the Storm: Four Phases of Engaged Buddhism in Thich Nhat Hanh's Life

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*"Even as a young boy, I was always enchanted by storms...In the symphony of the storm, I heard a call from the heart of the cosmos. I wanted to turn into an areca tree or become a branch bending in the wind. I wanted to be a bird testing the strengths of its wings against the wind. I wanted to run outside in the rain and scream, dance, whirl around, laugh and cry. But I didn't dare... So instead I sang for all I was worth..."*

*I still respond to the call of cosmos [today], although the way I do has changed. The call is as clear and compelling as it was those many years ago. When I hear it now, I pause, and with all my body, with every atom of my life, every vein, gland and nerve, I listen with awe and passion."*

—Thich Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves: Journals, 1962-1966*<sup>1</sup>

**T**HICH NHAT HANH'S articulation and practice of Engaged Buddhism has been an incredible gift to our world. If we look at the trajectory of Thay's life, we see that his understanding and application of Engaged Buddhism grew and evolved over time. In what follows, I break down this evolution of Engaged Buddhism into four distinct phases, and connect them to the context and environment of Thay's life during each time period. Exploring the development of Thay's relationship to Engaged Buddhism is an invitation to all of us to innovate and engage responsively to the particularities of our times.

I am especially interested in the teaching Thay offered during a dharma talk around 2000 when I was a young novice nun. He shared then that there will always be conservative and progressive forces in the sangha and that both are needed, that the tension between them is necessary.<sup>2</sup> I am interested in

exploring this tension in the trajectory of Thay's life and teachings, and how this non-dual wisdom can inform us, as practitioners and communities, in our own life and practice.

As a mirroring of this larger level change, I will also track this evolution in the microcosm of the fourth mindfulness training of the Order of Interbeing in particular, from its earlier emphasis exclusively on awareness of suffering in the world to Thay's later emphasis on the awareness of suffering in ourselves.

Many wonderful articles and histories have been written about the history of Engaged Buddhism in Vietnam and in Thay's life and teaching. A comprehensive and historically helpful one from 2000 is Patricia Hunt-Perry and Lyn Fine's "All Buddhism is Engaged: Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing."<sup>3</sup> Building on the excellent layout in this and other related materials, I outline four key phases that shaped how Thay articulated Engaged Buddhism over time:<sup>4</sup>

- Phase 1 (1950s-1966): A cell in the larger body of monastic and lay resistance to the war in Vietnam
- Phase 2 (1966-1982): Exile, building a new community and working with refugees fleeing Vietnam
- Phase 3 (1982-1988): Nurturing the practice center of Plum Village in its early years, with a focus on lay practice
- Phase 4 (1988-Present): Growing the monastic community as the heart of the larger many-fold community of practitioners<sup>5</sup>

For Thay, each of these moments required a different understanding of what engagement meant, as I explore in the following sections.

## Phase 1 (1950s-1966): A Cell in the Larger Body

Thich Nhat Hanh was a revolutionary monk who, even in his youth, challenged many of the rules and customs of his time. Yet, he has always maintained that Engaged Buddhism is just Buddhism, that the wisdom of taking action to address injustice in the world has always been integral to Buddhism, and certainly Vietnamese Buddhism, throughout history. He never claimed to have invented it, though he did coin the term. We could say there is both an ancient and a more contemporary form of Engaged Buddhism.

As a young monk, he and his monastic colleagues challenged the Buddhist hierarchy and reinterpreted what the purpose of Buddhist practice was—believing that it should speak to the needs of the time and be more inclusive of other wisdoms, like philosophy, literature and history, not only Buddhist

sutras. He also challenged the monastic focus of traditional Buddhism, setting up the rural *Phuong Boi* practice community during the war in Vietnam, which welcomed lay practitioners, like writers and artists, alongside monastics to take part in communal life. He spoke of setting up sanghas, spiritual communities, and living as a “cell in a larger body of the community,” with his friends and colleagues who worked dedicatedly alongside him.<sup>6</sup>

Based on the insight that Buddhism could speak to the suffering of the current moment, in 1963, Thay set up the School of Youth for Social Service, which trained thousands of young people as social workers to serve in rural communities, rebuilding bombed villages, and offering concrete support in areas such as agriculture, education, and health. He ran a humanitarian organization as a monk; he was then a key leader in the peace movement to end the war.

In 1966, he started the *Tiep Hien* Order, the Order of Interbeing, with six founding members—three women and three men—who all vowed to live by the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings. According to its charter, the aim of the order was to actualize Buddhism by “studying, experimenting with, and applying Buddhism in modern life, with a special emphasis on the bodhisattva ideal.”<sup>7</sup> In the first phase, Thay’s youthful energy to bring about change was, in part, a reaction against a more parochial practice that was somewhat stuck in outdated traditions, and yet, it was this container that gave rise to a reemergence of modern Engaged Buddhism.

## Phase 2 (1966-1982): Building a New Community

Because of his work to bring about peace and end the war, Thay was exiled, and his life would have been threatened if he were to return to Vietnam. Upon finding himself unable to return, he described himself as ejected from the body of the sangha. His first priority was to build a new community, often saying that a single cell cannot survive for long outside the body. He set up an office in Paris, led the Vietnamese Buddhist Delegation in the Paris Peace Talks, and worked with others to support refugees fleeing Vietnam, connecting donors in the West with over 10,000 war orphans in Vietnam, who they supported with food, medicine and clothing, as well as providing care packages to those in forced labor and reeducation camps.

This phase was one of direct service and engagement with suffering in the world, in all the aftermath of a long and devastating war. Yet, meditation and contemplative practice was always an integral part of that service. Thay continued to live and share mindfulness practices with those activists coming to work with him in Paris. For example, Jim Forest tells a beautiful story of visit-

ing Thay in his cramped apartment in Paris, explaining how Thay taught him to just wash the dishes for the sake of washing the dishes, mindfully, without rushing to finish, thinking something else was more important.<sup>8</sup> This phase also included the setting up of the Sweet Potato Farm Community 150 km south of Paris so that those working in the peace movement, as well as Vietnamese refugees getting resettled in Europe, could practice mindfulness in each moment to rest, restore, and heal themselves.

### Phase 3 (1982-1988): The Early Years of Plum Village

As the war wound down and Thay entered his middle-aged years, he moved on to establish a residential community—Plum Village—in the southwest of France in 1982. This was a different moment in his life, socially, culturally, economically and vocationally. He was concerned about the refugee community in exile, how to preserve Vietnamese culture, and also how to grow a living community of practice in the West. At this point, Thay's Engaged Buddhism began to look very different. The practice was no longer about resisting the war or challenging the Buddhist hierarchy; it now focused on putting down roots and developing a new practice, deeply grounded in the roots of Vietnamese Buddhism, but with new branches and expressions growing in the West.

From the 1960s until the late 1980s, Thay was not interested in having students of his own, and he did not ordain monastic disciples. However, as more students came to study with him, he saw the importance of cultivating a more formal student-teacher relationship and began to shift his perspective. In 1990 he wrote:

In the past, I was not very fond of ordaining people or having disciples. I tried to avoid that, especially when I saw that there were many other teachers. But during my visit to the US last year I changed my idea. We have to support each other, and the practice of the precepts is very important to help us... We do not practice meditation alone. We practice with a teacher and friends. When you have a good *sangha*, your practice is easy, because you are supported by the *sangha*.<sup>9</sup>

From 1982-1988, Plum Village grew and focused on developing lay practitioners and lay leadership of the various hamlets, or small residential practice centers, with a lay abbot and abbess.

## Phase 4 (1988–Present): Growing the Community

The fourth phase is a continuation of the third phase and is distinguished by its more intentional focus on cultivating the monastic community. In the early years of Plum Village, Thay did not ordain monastics, but focused his teaching on lay people (when he set up the Order of Interbeing in the 1960s, he was the only monk). A growing number of his students wanted to commit themselves to a monastic path, so in 1988 he ordained his first three monastic disciples, all nuns. In the subsequent years of his life the number of nuns and monks he ordained grew exponentially, and today there are more than 700 monastics in the Plum Village tradition worldwide. There are also thousands of lay sanghas that meet weekly in person or online, and millions of people who have been touched by his teachings through books, online talks, and his monastic and lay disciples.

With disciples coming to dedicate their whole lives to the practice, new structures had to be created. For each of these newly ordained monastics—many were quite young, in their 20s and 30s—the monastery became all at once a job, a family, financial security, social life, cultural repository, and a place of study. The new community had to create a whole world for people who were younger, middle aged, and older, from both the East and the West. These structures thus became a much larger focus of Thay’s energy and teaching. As a testament to his success, the International Plum Village community, now spanning some 11 monasteries across Asia, Australia, North America and Europe, is still the largest monastic community in the West. Continuing his lifelong interest in innovation and creating an appropriate response to the times, this phase also involved creating new and hybrid forms of practice, like the five-year monastic program, as an alternative to ordaining for life, which has traditionally been the only option if one wishes to become a monastic.

In this phase, Thay’s Engaged Buddhism continued to evolve in the world outside the monastery as well. This evolution has included retreats for Palestinians and Israelis, Vietnam veterans, law enforcement officers, businesspeople, congresspeople, actors and filmmakers, physicians and nurses, educators, peace activists, as well as mindfulness days at Google, the World Bank, Salesforce, talks at the Parliament of India, the U.K. House of Lords, and the U.S. Congress. Other forms of outreach include visits to prisons and continued social service projects for poor children and families in 17 countries, including Vietnam. In addition, Plum Village’s *Understanding and Love Program* in Vietnam provides “aid for flood victims, helping the poor by offering instruction in technical trades, building bridges, digging wells, opening basic schools for children living in remote areas and providing lunch for them, and paying the

salaries of thousands of teachers and childcare workers.”<sup>10</sup> Deer Park Monastery in Southern California is entirely run on solar energy, and all the monastic communities practice mindful consumption by eating a vegan diet.

With a large and growing monastic and lay community alike, the emphasis needed to shift towards growth, preservation, and continuity, which was a completely different energy from the 1960s and 1970s. They wanted to build a tradition, a community that could last. Some kind of bureaucracy was necessary to run monasteries; a complex structure must exist to support, train and nourish so many people on so many levels. Growing a monastic community is challenging, and to preserve it, both conservative and progressive approaches are needed.

That said, in this later period, Thay certainly didn't stop courageously shaking up the status quo in places like Vietnam, where he was finally able to return in 2005. There, he still spoke out about the religious repression of the Communist government, with its religious police controlling what Buddhist monasteries could and could not do, as well as criticizing other policies of the government. In 2008, the Plum Village monastic community in Vietnam was harshly punished for this, and some 400 monastics were violently evicted from the Bát Nhã monastery Thay set up in Bao Loc, Vietnam.

You could say Thay's practice was more informal and experimental when he was a younger monk, without disciples, and that as he began to ordain his own disciples, his practice became more formal and systematized. The informality reflected his experimentation with pushing against the rigidity and strictness of his traditional Buddhist education. The shift to formality reflected his role as a guide and teacher to many, and that involved transmitting a structure and a clear path they could follow. Of course each student needs to find their own unique expression within that path. I observed that Thay was always quite free within this more formal expression, and not caught by his role as Zen master, but I suspect he needed to embody and demonstrate this formality more for his later students, in contrast to when he was a younger monk and more of a free agent.

A symbol of this shift can be seen in the change in Thay's appearance over the decades. In the early days when Thay had just come to the West, he let his hair grow a bit longer and he often wore only the short robe of a monastic (the shirt and pants traditionally worn under the long robe), taking a more relaxed and informal approach, much like Catholic orders that deemphasized habits that set them apart from lay people after Vatican II. As he started to grow the community around him, one that needed to be trained in the codified forms of monastic life, he kept his hair more closely shaved and always wore the longer outer robe, with a more formal and somber appearance.

It is important to honor these different moments and expressions of Engaged Buddhism over time. There needs to be a balance between these conservative and the progressive wings. They are like two wings of a bird. Like right and left, they need each other. As Thay often taught, if you try to get rid of the left, you get rid of the right at the same time because they only exist in dependence on the other. Like two sides of the same coin, they arise together.

Given Thay's stroke in 2014 that left him unable to walk and talk, and his passing away in 2022, we might say the Plum Village International community is now in a fifth phase of articulating Engaged Buddhism as his continuation. For example, in his 2021 book, *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*, his student, Sister Dedication, writes a reflection of her own in each chapter to introduce and contextualize his teachings, a new publishing practice.

## Inner Work and Outer Work

When I was a nun living in Deer Park, I recall a time when Thay was with us on a teaching tour around the U.S. A young monk from the U.S. asked Thay if we could start or join a project to serve homeless people. He was critical of the sangha, arguing that we were not doing enough to relieve the suffering in society. Thay responded to him saying that our role as monastics is to stay in the monastery so that activists and social workers (who may themselves work with the homeless) can come and refresh themselves. As a young man, Thay's emphasis was on rebuilding bombed villages in Vietnam, the equivalent to "serving the homeless" in his day, but that was a different reality. In those days, they were on the front lines, trying to end a war and resisting a rigid hierarchical system. There are many different conditions that shape our response. The new monastic and lay forms Thay helped give rise to in the West still manifest Engaged Buddhism, now with different ways of responding to diverse manifestations of suffering.

One of the key shifts that has happened can be traced to the evolution of the mindfulness trainings, central to the the Order of Interbeing which Thay encouraged us to update every decade. Here is an earlier version of fourth of the 14 Mindfulness Training of the Order of Interbeing:

### *The Fourth Mindfulness Training: Awareness of Suffering*

Aware that looking deeply at the nature of suffering can help me develop compassion and find ways out of suffering, I am determined not to avoid or close my eyes before suffering. I am committed to finding ways, including personal contact, images and sounds, to be



with those who suffer, so I can understand their situation deeply and help them transform their suffering into compassion, peace and joy.<sup>11</sup>

Thay invited us to help revise the 14 Mindfulness trainings in 2012. The new version of the fourth Mindfulness Training of the Order of Interbeing now reads:

*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 recognize, 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 realize 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.<sup>12</sup>

In the revised version we see a much greater emphasis on recognizing, being with and caring for our own suffering as a precondition for addressing the suffering around us. This evolution reflects the shifting focus of Thay's practice and the deepening of his understanding as well.

Thay was a fierce activist as a young person. Whatever the suffering, he tried to respond to it, as a collective, as a community. He was always a committed practitioner throughout his life. While this activism never ceased as he aged, when he set up the Plum Village community, particularly the monastic sangha, his focus was different. It was no longer concerned with ending a war, which for decades was a clear imperative to end the suffering in society. In his middle and more senior years it focused in new ways on how to help people deeply internalize the practice of peace and insight to transform their suffering. You could say this was a way of addressing the roots of the war inside each of us.

This movement was present in his own life as, after he was exiled from Vietnam and the war ended, he faced intense grief from all the violence and injustice he witnessed. This included losing a number of his young students who had been assassinated during the war and several close fellow monastics or lay students who immolated themselves. He faced constant threats and several attempts on his life, until finally he was exiled and completely cut off from his



country and culture. At a certain point, he experienced such intense suffering that he spent some time in a hospital in Japan for depression. He said it was the daily practice of walking meditation that brought him through that challenging time. Intense engagement with the suffering of the world led him back to care for and heal the overwhelming suffering inside him.

This shift towards caring for our own suffering was also a response to living in community, where personal suffering as well as joy can easily arise. Thay offered many practices to support communal life, like deep listening and loving speech to enable true communication, practices of reconciliation, watering the seeds of joy, and offering each other feedback through Shining Light<sup>13</sup> to make community life more harmonious and transformative.

Thay was also concerned with offering retreats that had a transformative impact on lay and monastic participants alike. Thus, his teaching and focus shifted to consider how his students could take care of their unique, personal suffering; to become clear channels for the dharma and social justice to come through them, both as individuals and as a collective. There was a movement from external to internal, which was reflected in many communities and traditions at that time. After the intense focus on external, societal change in the 1960s and 70s, many spiritual communities and activist groups turned to the awareness that it was also very important to deal with our own internal suffering in the 1980s and 90s. The rise in therapy and the popularization of healing modalities from Western psychology and neuroscience, often focused on resolving trauma from childhood, paralleled the growing popularity of meditation, yoga, tai chi, indigenous wisdom, and other contemplative practices that emphasized self-knowledge and healing, as well as reconnecting with ancestors.

In the last few decades, there has been a kind of cultural shift in which growing numbers of people and systems in society are opening to the need for the healing of individual wounds so that we can be freer to bring about meaningful change and healing in our world. The need for this deeper healing is also connected to the challenges and dangers of our increasingly erratic climate, polluted air, water and soil, as well as species loss and destruction of the natural world. Not to mention the growing numbers of climate refugees, the rise of (fossil fuel) fascism, extreme wealth inequality, racism, and the crisis of leadership.

The updated version of the fourth training, when compared to the original version, tells us that inner work *is* a way to do outer work, and that they are absolutely interconnected. They are not separate. When we understand the roots of suffering in ourselves, we can be skillful at responding to suffering around us. There was a deepening of Thay's and the community's understanding of that. One of Thay's aims with the practice centers was to provide a place for

activists to come and heal. To be at our best when we serve and work in the world, we must have a regular practice of coming home to ourselves to take care of our own suffering. When we just focus on the suffering around us, we can get stuck there. Conversely, if we just focus on the suffering inside, we can become too self-absorbed. In numerous teachings, Thay offered service and engagement with suffering in the world around us as an antidote to being caught in and consumed by our own individual problems. We simultaneously engage in each aspect of the path with integrity and energy.

## Conclusion

Through these 4 phases and as we continue on into a 5th phase, we can see the macro evolution of Thay's expression of Engaged Buddhism throughout his life reflected in the micro. The shift in the wording and practice of the fourth mindfulness training demonstrates this evolution perfectly. Together, these point to the general and specific ways Thay was courageously committed to openness and non-attachment to views, staying rooted in the radical intention to avoid dogmatism, intolerance, and discrimination, and to allow and encourage change as both a natural and necessary process for keeping the dharma alive.

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## NOTES

1. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves: Journals, 1962-1966* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2020), 27-28.
2. Thay's use of the words "conservative" and "progressive" can be seen on a spectrum of maintaining traditions in the midst of change on the one hand and the need for innovation and growth in general on the other rather than ideological approaches or party politics as is common in public discourse today.
3. Patricia Hunt-Perry and Lyn Fine, "All Buddhism is Engaged: Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing," in *Engaged Buddhism in the West*, ed. Christopher S. Queen (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 35-66.
4. While I write about them as distinct phases with clear beginnings and ending, there is overlap between. Like all phenomena, they inter-are.
5. The term used in the sutras is the "four-fold sangha," meaning the community of nuns, monks, laywomen and laymen. However, I appreciate the term "many-fold sangha" as it does not perpetuate the gender binary and instead expresses solidarity with those who are gender expansive and gender nonconforming.
6. Thich Nhat Hanh often used a variation of the phrase "cell in a larger body of the community." See, for example, Thich Nhat Hanh, "Beloved Community," September 9, 2011, <https://plumvillage.org/library/dharma-talks/beloved-community/>.
7. "Structure and Organization: The Charter of the Order of Interbeing," Order of Interbeing / *Tiep Hien*, accessed March 2023, <https://orderofinterbeing.org/about/our-charter/>.
8. Jim Forest, *Eyes of Compassion: Living with Thich Nhat Hanh* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), 1.
9. Patricia Hunt-Perry and Lyn Fine, "All Buddhism is Engaged," 49.
10. Thich Nhat Hanh, "A Young Monastic's Dream," Plum Village, accessed March 2023, <https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/letters/a-young-monastics-dream/>.
11. "Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings," True Peace Toronto: A Meditation Community in the Tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, accessed March 2023, <https://www.truepeace.ca/fourteen-mindfulness-trainings>.
12. "The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings," Deer Park Monastery, accessed March 2023, <https://deerparkmonastery.org/the-path-of-happiness/#14MT>.
13. Shining Light is a collective practice of offering each other our compassionate feedback on the strengths and weaknesses in our mindfulness practice. In Plum Village, during the 3-month rains retreat each year, monastic and lay practitioners gather each week to "shine light" on each other, and the whole community shines light on each individual at a time, naming what they are doing well and where they can improve and grow.