



Thich Nhat Hanh

SPEAKING TRUTH

Watershed Moments
in Global Leadership

High School Curriculum for Young Leaders



The teacher, writer and peace activist, Thich Nhat Hanh was born in 1926 in Thura Thien, Central Vietnam. Thich Nhat Hanh, entered the Zen monastery of Tu Hieu in Vietnam at the age of sixteen. He became a Buddhist monk in 1949 while attending the Baó Quoc Buddhist Institute. ¹

Soon after his ordination he decided to leave his monastery in order to support those touched by the Vietnam Conflict. *“The essence of nonviolence is love. Out of love and the willingness to act selflessly, strategies, tactics, and techniques for a nonviolent struggle arise naturally... Nonviolent action, born of the awareness of suffering and nurtured by love, is the most effective way to confront adversity.”* ²



Leaving the monastery allowed Nhat Hanh to express his ideas against the war. After leaving his monastery he settled a deserted temple in Saigon in order to help the others suffering from the war while pursuing his religious practices and meditation.³ This gave rise to his Engaged Buddhism movement, which in collaboration with Christian groups around the world set the goal to overcome violence and war.⁴

The 1960's brought Thich Nhat Hanh to Princeton University to study comparative religion.⁵ Following his time at Princeton, Nhat Hanh founded the Buddhist University of Van Hanh and the School of Youth for Social Service (affiliated with the University of Hanh). The intended goal of these

¹ Taylor, Philip. *Modernity and Re-enchantment: Religion in Post-revolutionary Vietnam*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007. Print.

² Thich Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley, CA.: Parallax Press, 1993) [originally 1969], p. 39.

³ Queen, Christopher S., and Sallie B. King. *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. Albany: State U of New York, 1996. Print, p.322.

⁴ Hạng, Nhật, and Arnold Kotler. *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*. New York, NY: Bantam, 1991. Print, p.10.

⁵ Hạng, Nhật, and Arnold Kotler. *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*. New York, NY: Bantam, 1991. Print, p.10.

Background

institutions was to inspire individuals to fight violence through Buddhist principles.
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“Should we continue to practice in our monasteries, or should we leave the meditation halls in order to help the people who were suffering under the bombs? After careful reflection, we decided to do both – to go out and help people and to do so in mindfulness. We called it Engaged Buddhism.”⁷

⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh. “Plum Village.” Web. 18 May 2016.

⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), p. 91.

Thich Nhat Hanh returned to Vietnam to join a group of monks determined to bring an end to war after the fall of the Diem regime.⁸ This non-violent resistance movement was inspired by Gandhi and Buddhist religious practices. Nhat Hanh's group developed a range of non-violent forms of struggle, including fasting and using literature and the arts as ways to challenge oppression.⁹

In 1965 Nhat Hanh founded the Tiep Hien Order based on Engaged Buddhism principles in order to address the sufferings experienced by the Vietnamese during the war.¹⁰

Role of Faith

“Engaged Buddhism” teaches a cyclical process. By understanding the true nature of self, we better understand the true nature of society; then we use that enhanced understanding to gain an even deeper understanding of self, which leads to deeper understanding of society, and so on. Ultimately, we understand that self and society have no separate existence.

Awareness of interdependence makes it immediately evident that each of us shares responsibility for all that happens and will happen: “There is no phenomenon in the universe that does not immediately concern us.” As soon as we recognize that responsibility, we are moved to act to improve the situation... We are all part of the same human process, all driven by the same processes. Changing that process means changing both situation and self: “Meditation is to see deeply into things, to see how we can change, how we can transform our situation. To transform our situation is also to transform our minds. To transform our minds is also to transform our situation, because the situation is mind, and mind is situation.”

Since the individual and society “inter-are,” each must nourish the other, or both will wither. (<http://spot.colorado.edu/~chernus/NonviolenceBook/ThichNhatHanh.htm>)

⁸ Hanh, Nhất, and Arnold Kotler. *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*. New York, NY: Bantam, 1991. Print.

⁹ Excerpted from http://joannefriday.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/08_Thich_Nhat_Hanh__MLK1.pdf

¹⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Commentaries on the Tiep Hien Precepts* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1987), p. 5.

The Tiep Hien Order gained notoriety when several Buddhist monks practiced self-immolation (set themselves on fire).¹¹ This dramatic action was misunderstood in the West as a rash act of suicide that could not possibly bring about change, or promote neutrality and peace. Thich Nhat Hanh decided to write an open letter to Martin Luther King Jr. to explain the essence of self-immolation and within the letter, he asked Martin Luther King Jr. to speak publicly against the US-Vietnam war.

The Vietnamese monk, by burning himself, say with all his strength [sic] and determination that he can endure the greatest of sufferings to protect his people. But why does he have to burn himself to death? The difference between burning oneself and burning oneself to death is only a difference in degree, not in nature. A man who burns himself too much must die. What he really aims at is the expression of his will and determination, not death. In the Buddhist belief, life is not confined to a period of 60 or 80 or 100 years: life is eternal. Life is not confined to this body: life is universal. To express will by burning oneself, therefore, is not to commit an act of destruction but to perform an act of construction, i.e., to suffer and to die for the sake of one's people. This is not suicide.

(http://www.aavw.org/special_features/letters_thich_abstract02.html, http://www.aavw.org/special_features/letters_thich_abstract02.html)

Martin Luther King Jr. referred to Nhat Hanh as "...an apostle of peace and nonviolence."¹² He was so inspired by him that in 1967 King nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize. By following Buddhist practices, Nhat Hanh was able to find strength and calmness in order to fight for what he thought was right, nonviolence.

¹¹ Worth, Robert F. "How a Single Match Can Ignite a Revolution." The New York Times. The New York Times, 2011. Web. 23 May 2016.

¹² "Thich Nhat Hanh and Martin Luther King's Dream Comes True in Mississippi." PlumVillage.

The nonviolent peace movement of Vietnamese monks against the Vietnam War became a movement of global dimensions. Thich Nhat Hanh travelled to the West to preach and convince people that the war was immoral. He was inspired by the philosophy of non-violence of Gandhi and the African-American Civil Rights Movement. In kind Martin Luther King Jr. was inspired by Nhat Hanh's approach to non-violence.

Role Model

Because of his position against the war in Vietnam he was forbidden to return to his country. Thich Nhat Hanh settled in France in the early seventies and founded Plum Village in 1982. Plum Village is a Buddhist meditation center where all people are welcome. Plum Village was created to provide a place for people to connect with themselves, each other and the environment. Mindfulness is a foundational practice at Plum Village. Thich Nhat Hanh believes that, "...we can learn to live happily in the present moment—the only way to truly develop peace, both in one's self and in the world." ¹³

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Content Objectives

Students will examine the experiences in their lives that have shaped their faith.

Students will create visuals of their faith journeys and share their “maps” with the class.

Materials

Paper (11x14)

Colored pencils, crayons, markers



Synopsis of Lesson

Begin by asking students to reflect on their experiences with religion and faith. Perhaps have them sit back, close their eyes and think about their earliest memories to present ones about the role of religion, belief in their lives. Then have students get up and put themselves in a line one end representing those who believe in a God concept and consider themselves religious, the other end for those who consider themselves atheists or humanists (making sure they understand the terms). Explain that this is a spectrum and they should put themselves in the location that best represents their beliefs.

Ask students to explain why they have placed themselves where they have in the line.

After the discussion is over students should return to their seats. They will now be creating Spiritual Maps. You will be asking them to capture those moments that have shaped what they believe in the form of a map (journey). I introduce this activity by sharing with students the map that I drew to capture my spiritual journey.

Their journeys will all begin with their births and they end in this moment. Ask students to consider what the path looks like that they are on, is it a road, river, mountain, what stops have there been along the way, what people and places have been part of their journey.

Once students have completed their maps have each member of the class share their journey with their peers.

One of the fundamental teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh is **mindfulness**.

“Many people are alive but don't touch the miracle of being alive.”

“Only this actual moment is life.”

(<https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/105847-the-miracle-of-mindfulness-a-manual-on-meditation>)

The following exercises can be used to introduce the concept of mindfulness.



Autopilot

Begin by asking students to make a list of all the things they do, without really thinking about doing them. For example: brushing our teeth, eating, walking to class. All of these activities are being done on autopilot. Then pass out chocolate (white chocolate and raisins can be used as well for the next activity). Move on to Explore Mindfulness.

Explore Mindfulness

Pass out small pieces of chocolate to each participant. (I use Hershey kisses). Have each person unwrap the chocolate and place it on the desk in front of him/her. Check in, asking participants to sit back in their chairs, place their feet flat on the ground and begin to focus on their breathing. Once the group is ready have individuals pick up their chocolate, place it in their mouths and close their eyes. Remind them to focus on the act of eating the chocolate, notice the texture, smell, and flavor of the experience. When an individual finishes his/her chocolate he/she should open their eyes. Once everyone's eyes are open ask the group what they noticed about the experience.



An Introduction to Mindful Meditation (The Science)

Just 10 minutes a day devoted to mindfulness can be transformative. Think about that 10 minutes; that is less time than most people spend on their hair.

The science behind the impact of meditation:

Meditative mindfulness practices have been shown to positively alter the structure and neural patterns in the brain and strengthen the brain regions associated with heightened sensory processing and empathetic response.

A study performed at Stanford found that an 8-week mindfulness course reduced the reactivity of the amygdala and increased activity in areas of the prefrontal cortex that help regulate emotions, subsequently reducing stress. Similarly, researchers from Harvard University discovered corresponding changes in the physical structure of the brain with a similar meditation course; there was a lower density of neurons in the amygdala and greater density of neurons in areas involved in emotional control - evidence that meditation served as a realistic and maintainable stress management technique. (<https://nau.edu/research/feature-stories/mindfulness-training-has-positive-health-benefits/>)

Ted Talk

The following Ted Talk by Andy Puddicombe is an excellent introduction to mindful meditation. https://www.ted.com/talks/andy_puddicombe_all_it_takes_is_10_mindful_minutes?language=en

Mindfulness expert Andy Puddicombe describes the transformative power of doing just that: Refreshing your mind for 10 minutes a day, simply by being mindful and experiencing the present moment.

5 Mindfulness Exercises You Can Try Today

Pocket Mindfulness by Alfred James

Most of us don't have five minutes to sit down and relax, let alone 30 minutes or more for a meditation session, but it's essential for our wellbeing to take a few minutes each day to cultivate mental spaciousness and achieve a positive mind-body balance.

Try using these simple, practical mindfulness exercises to empty your mind and find some much-needed calm amidst the madness of a hectic day.

1. **One-Minute Breathing** This exercise can be done anywhere at any time, standing up or sitting down. All you have to do is focus on your breath for just one minute. Start by breathing in and out slowly, holding your breath for a count of six once you've inhaled. Then breathe out slowly, letting the breath flow effortlessly out back into the atmosphere.

Naturally your mind will try and wander, simply notice these thoughts, let them be as they are and return to watching your breath.

Purposefully watch your breath as it enters and exits the body. Spend one minute being fully present with your breathe.

2. **Mindful Observation** This exercise is simple but incredibly powerful. It is designed to connect us with the beauty of the natural environment, which is easily missed when we're rushing around in the car or hopping on and off trains on the way to work.

Pick something from nature within your immediate environment and focus on watching it for a minute or two. This could be a flower or an insect, or the clouds or the moon.

Don't do anything except notice the thing you are looking at. But really notice it. Look at it as if you are seeing it for the first time.

Visually explore every aspect of this glorious gift of the natural world. Allow yourself to be consumed by its presence and possibilities. Allow yourself to connect with its role and purpose in the world.

3. **Touch Points** This exercise is designed to make us appreciate our lives by slowing the pace. This opens the gate to purer awareness and the ability to truly rest in the moment for a while.

Think of something that happens every day more than once. Something you take for granted, like opening a door for example. At the very moment you touch the doorknob to open the door, allow yourself to be completely mindful of where you are, how you feel and what you are doing. Similarly, the moment you open your computer to start work, take a moment to appreciate the hands that let you do this, and the brain that will help you use the computer.

The cues don't have to be physical ones. It could be that every time you think something negative you take a mindful moment to release the negative thought, or it could be that every time you smell food you take a mindful moment to rest in the appreciation of having food to eat.

Choose a touch point that resonates with you today. Instead of going through the motions on autopilot, stop and stay in the moment for a while and rest in the awareness of this blessed daily activity.

4. **Fully Experience a Regular Routine** The intention of this exercise is to cultivate contentedness in the moment, rather than finding yourself caught up in that familiar feeling of wanting something to end so that you can get on to doing something else. It might even make you enjoy some of those boring daily chores too!

Take a regular routine that you find yourself “just doing” without really noticing your actions. For example, when cleaning your house, pay attention to every detail of the activity.

Rather than treat this as a regular chore, create an entirely new experience by noticing every aspect of your actions. Feel and become the motion of sweeping the floor, notice the muscles you use when scrubbing the dishes, observe the formation of dirt on the windows and see if you can create a more efficient way of removing it. Be creative and find new experiences within this familiar routine.

5. **A Game of Fives** In this mindfulness exercise, all you have to do is notice five things in your day that usually go unnoticed and unappreciated. These can be things you hear, smell, feel or see.

For example, you might see the walls of your front room every day, you might hear the birds in the tree outside in the morning, you might feel the chill in the air on a winter morning, but are you truly appreciating these things and the connections they have with your life and the world at large?

Let your creative mind explore the wonder, impact and possibilities these usually unnoticed things have on your life. Allow yourself to fall awake into the world for a while and fully experience the environment that encapsulates your daily routine.