

## Overview of Mindfulness Meditation and the Tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh Quiet Harbor Sangha

### Introduction

The Quiet Harbor Sangha is a community of practice in the Buddhist tradition of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, affectionately known as “Thầy,” meaning “Teacher” in Vietnamese. Thay is one of the best known and most respected Buddhist masters in the world today. He helped found the engaged Buddhism movement and was active in trying to bring peace and reconciliation in Vietnam from the 1950s onwards. Because he refused to take sides in the war, but insisted on peace, he was exiled from Vietnam. His work moved Martin Luther King, Jr. to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967.

### Mindfulness

One key teaching in this tradition is the importance of mindfulness (dwelling in and awareness of the present moment in a nonjudgmental way) to truly develop peace, both in one's self and in the world. It is through the practice of mindfulness that we are able “to *be* in the present moment, to be aware that we are here and now, and that the only moment to be alive is the present moment.” [from Being Peace] “Many of us, although alive, are not really alive, because we are not able to touch life in the present moment.” [from Touching Peace] “We rush about, but we are not one with what we are doing; we are not at peace. Our body is here, but our mind is somewhere else – in the past or the future, possessed by anger, frustration, hopes, or dreams.” [from Touching Peace] “To return to the present is to be in contact with life because “the past no longer is” and “the future has yet to come.” [from Our Appointment with Life] We can act mindfully as we move through each day consciously trying to be alive in each moment; present in each moment.

### Mindfulness Meditation

An important part of strengthening mindfulness is to practice mindfulness meditation. Practicing this form of meditation is not an escape from life. As paradoxical as it may seem, practicing mindfulness meditation is a way to be more fully alive, with a clearer view of reality, a view that is less distorted by our habits and judgments. Clarity and understanding, leads to compassion and love, which leads to deeper understanding, in a continually deepening cycle. The result is calmness and more solidity with less of a tendency to be swayed by external “weather”. Two forms of formal mindfulness meditation are sitting meditation and walking meditation.

### A Guide to Sitting Meditation

Sit on the floor, a meditation bench or on a chair with a dignified, erect posture, but not rigid or stiff. Your hands can be cupped and resting in your lap or resting on your thighs, palms up or down. Allow any muscle tension to relax. Turn your attention to your breath, following each breath in and out. Do not try to control your breath; just observe it. Focusing on the breath is the heart of the practice. Because we can only breathe in the present moment, the breath can be an anchor to help us to be in the present moment. Your mind will wander. That’s what our minds do, because we are alive. When you notice your mind has wandered, as it will repeatedly, notice the wandering, smile, and bring your attention back to your breath, softly and without reproach.

Different techniques can be helpful. Counting the breaths can be helpful for focus: count 1 quietly in your mind as you breathe in and 1 as you breathe out. Breathe in count 2; breathe out count 2. Continue until you reach 10 and then start over again. Without mindfulness, you lose count. When you do, simply and non-judgmentally return to count 1. Keep doing this until you feel comfortable trying to maintain focus on your breath without the aid of counting.

Guided meditations, focusing on a word with the in and out breath can also be helpful. For example, “Breathing in I know that I am breathing in” and “Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out” and then using the words “in” and “out” with the in and out breath. If you feel comfortable doing so, focus on the breath without using these aids.

During meditation, various thoughts and feelings will arise. Do not chase away them away or hold onto them or get caught up in them or judge them. Instead acknowledge their presence and recognize them for what they are: thoughts and feelings. Simply welcome each as it arises regardless of whether its energy is positive, negative or neither. Observe it and then gently let go of it and bring your focus back to your breath.

For meditation to be fruitful it must be practiced regularly. One might say that meditation is like building up the mindfulness muscle. If the muscle is not developed and exercised regularly through meditation, the benefits of mindfulness will be much less. Practicing mindfulness meditation at least six days a week for at least fifteen minutes is recommended.

### A Guide to Walking Meditation

A walking meditation is another way to develop mindfulness. It can be a good alternative to sitting meditation if you are feeling restless or agitated. In formal walking meditation as one walks he focuses both on the breath and on the walking itself. To begin, adopt an erect and dignified posture and let your arms hang loosely by your sides. While walking, feel the foot making contact with the ground, the body shifting as it moves forward and then the other foot making contact and so on. When first practicing walking meditation it is best to walk slowly and with short steps. Breathe in with one step and breathe out with the other. With the walking meditation one does not have a destination to get to. One may walk either back and forth or in a loop and either inside or outside. As with a sitting meditation, thoughts and feelings will arise. Each time one does, acknowledge it, observe it and then gently and without reproach, bring your attention back to your footsteps and your breath. You may find that it can feel challenging to focus on your breath and your footsteps at the same time. This will become more natural if you continue to practice walking meditation.

### Resources

Mindfulness and mindfulness meditation are essential elements of Buddhism. Thay has written many wonderful and helpful books. Two books helpful for one wanting to understand his key teachings: Thich Nhat Hahn – Essential Writings and Peace is Every Step. They resides in Plum Village Sangha in France. Its website, [plumvillage.org](http://plumvillage.org), offers much to learn. It includes audios and videos of Thay giving Dharma talks (teachings). Blue Cliff Monastery in the Hudson Valley is a branch of Plum Village and is located about an hour away in Pine Cliff, NY. Anyone may attend their weekly mindfulness days or stay for a retreat. Details may be found at [bluecliffmonastery.org](http://bluecliffmonastery.org).

### The Sangha

Many people find it helpful to practice together with others as a way to support and deepen their meditation practice. The Quiet Harbor Sangha meets from 7:30 pm to 9:00 pm on Thursday evenings at the Wainwright House in Rye, N.Y. If you would like to come to a session, please arrive not later than 7:30 pm. If you have any questions, you may contact David Gritz at [david.gritz@yahoo.com](mailto:david.gritz@yahoo.com) or Greg Hill at [greggstephenhill@yahoo.com](mailto:greggstephenhill@yahoo.com) who are members of Quiet Harbor Sangha. You may also contact Diane Negvesky of Wainwright House at [dnegvesky@wainwright.org](mailto:dnegvesky@wainwright.org) or 914-967-6080 ext.102..