

# THICH NHAT HANH'S APPROACH TO GLOBAL EDUCATION IN ETHICS

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## ABSTRACT

*This article critically evaluates Thich Nhat Hanh's approach to global education in ethics. Thich Nhat Hanh and Weare's (2017\*) guide for cultivating mindfulness in education addresses not only students but also their educators, as they are the ones who can change the world. The authors argue the case for their approach: "teachers often focus on others' needs rather than their own" and educators "are first and foremost human beings" (ibid). Their book is not simply about how to bring mindfulness into education but how to heal teachers. They remind educators of the need to skilfully and calmly respond to suffering by embracing difficult emotions with equanimity. How can mindfulness benefit educators, according to Thich Nhat Hanh and Weare (2017)? Firstly, by offsetting the increasing emphasis on educational targets. Secondly, mindfulness nurtures a critical, evaluative and insightful mind, which is central to learning and its higher forms: mindfulness aids reflection on thinking (known as metacognition). Thirdly, mindfulness produces non-dualistic thinking, which is important to developing a community of students: education is not a one-way didactic process but is essentially dialogical. Finally, they argue that mindfulness has direct benefits for students, enabling them to focus, be receptive to learning, handle stress, and reflect deeply. The authors countenance caution with*

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*regard to teaching mindfulness to students: “let go of the urge to teach mindfulness right now” (ibid).*

## INTRODUCTION

Why is mindfulness in education necessary and important? Thich Nhat Hanh and Weare (2017\*) argue for mindfulness in education, as follows. Firstly, educators do not simply generate and disseminate knowledge: their role also includes personal and social development, including the facilitation of happiness. Secondly, young people, their parents, and their teachers suffer: “There is a sort of loneliness, a kind of vacuum in the child, and the child tries to fill up this emptiness with video games, movies, television, food, drugs...” (ibid). Thirdly and ironically, whilst technology has purportedly advanced communications, interpersonal communication skills have declined: it is necessary to understand and communicate deeply with oneself and others, through deep listening and mindful speaking that lead to awareness of suffering and compassion.

This article critically evaluates Thich Nhat Hanh’s approach to global education in ethics. Thich Nhat Hanh and Weare’s (2017) guide for cultivating mindfulness in education addresses not only students but also their educators, as they are the ones who can change the world. The authors argue the case for their approach: “teachers often focus on others’ needs rather than their own” and educators “are first and foremost human beings” (ibid). Their book is not simply about how to bring mindfulness into education but how to heal teachers. They remind educators of the need to skilfully and calmly respond to suffering by embracing difficult emotions with equanimity.

How can mindfulness benefit educators, according to Thich Nhat Hanh and Weare (2017)? Firstly, by offsetting the increasing emphasis on educational targets. Educators need to let go of the stress of attainment: mindfulness offers relief from driven-ness, enabling educators to relate to their experience in a different way, offering them time and space to be in the here-and-now. Bearing in mind that it is educators who change the world, it is imperative that they return to the here-and-now, as that is the only context in

which change actually occurs. The focus becomes present-moment awareness instead of perpetual forward planning (e.g. as with teaching plans). Whereas reaching out to the future increasingly forces the pace of teaching schedules, returning to the here-and-now allows educators to “slow down. Let go. Enjoy” (ibid). Being present for students, educators are thus able to cultivate mindfulness in students. Secondly, mindfulness nurtures a critical, evaluative and insightful mind, which is central to the very nature of learning and its higher forms: mindfulness aids reflection on thinking (known as metacognition). This is because mindfulness helps us to let go of our thinking habits, deep-rooted opinions and the actions that result. Thirdly, mindfulness produces non-dualistic thinking, which is important to developing a community of students. Fourthly, education is not a one-way didactic process but is essentially dialogical. To help teachers engage in that process, mindfulness helps them to engage in “deep listening” (ibid), whereby they can give all of their attention to the students in order to listen to their developing thoughts, giving space for students to express themselves and make themselves heard. Finally, Thich Nhat Hanh and Weare (2017) argue that mindfulness has direct benefits for students, enabling them to focus, to be receptive to learning, to handle stress, and to reflect deeply.

Bearing in mind all of these benefits, it is perhaps surprising that the authors countenance caution with regard to teaching mindfulness to students: “Let go of the urge to teach mindfulness right now” (ibid). Otherwise, it is possible that students will resist and reject this teaching. However, Thich Nhat Hanh and Weare (2017) support their position with reference not only to the student but also to the educator and the special manner in which mindfulness is taught: “...if we want to teach, we should teach from ourselves – the way we speak, the way we listen, the way we carry our life. If we are mindful, it shows” (ibid). In other words, mindfulness is not conveyed by what is taught but the manner in which the teacher is in the here-and-now: “we, the teacher, are always our main teaching aid, and our own embodied practice of mindfulness is the chief gift we give to our students, our colleagues, and ourselves” (ibid). Therefore, educators ought to “wait for a

while before teaching mindfulness: the pause can give us all the more time to focus on our own practice to make sure it is a solid base for all we do” (*ibid*).

### FIVE MINDFULNESS TRAININGS: A GLOBAL ETHIC

Thich Nhat Hanh and Weare (2017) highlight the importance of ethics, criticising the trajectory of modern mindfulness: “As mindfulness meditation has become more popular a concern has arisen not to dismiss the overall ethical system from which it evolved, which was intended to help people live their whole life with compassion and kindness, freed from over-obsession with possessions and achievements” (*ibid*). The aim is not simply to calm the mind to aid learning and work but to instil compassion, equity and sustainability in society.

The Five Mindfulness Trainings “can be considered a kind of global ethic” that “is based on the insight of interbeing” (that everything is interconnected and interdependent): this non-dualistic insight is where “everything is in everything else” (*ibid*). Accordingly, educators have a role in community building with their colleagues, in the interests of students. Right mindfulness includes ethics and is a path of happiness, not an instrumental tool or a means to an end. A global ethic is informed by the Five Mindfulness Trainings – “reverence for life”, “true happiness”, “true love”, “loving speech and deep listening”, and “nourishment and healing” (*ibid*).

### MINDFULNESS OF THE BREATH

Thich Nhat Hanh and Weare (2017) outline several mindfulness practices, the first being mindfulness of the breath. This enhances teaching by helping educators to stay centred during stressful teaching days. For example, the teacher can practise mindful breathing when turning to the overhead projector. We can influence students more by breath awareness than by raising our voices to them. Breathing can also calm students. For example, breath awareness can help dissolve exam stress or even panic attacks. Again, mindful breathing can enable students with attention deficit disorder to focus and concentrate (*ibid*).

## THE BELL OF MINDFULNESS

Inviting the bell can create a moment of stillness and awareness. The bell is an ambassador of mindfulness: “We easily get out of touch with our true feelings, with what our body is telling us, and with what is happening in the real world. The bell can help us to cut through our busy thinking, bringing us back gently, kindly, and with understanding to be in touch with what is happening in the present moment” (*ibid*). We can also adopt surrogate bells of mindfulness, such as traffic lights, a ringing phone, or apps to remind us, help us stop and come back to the here-and-now. Sounding the bell is conducive to learning, reminding and encouraging students to give their best (*ibid*).

## SITTINGS

Sitting meditation aids calmness and stability, connects mind and body, brings us into the here-and-now, builds awareness, and connect us with others. It helps us to be aware that students are also our teachers. Sitting can also be used to build up a sense of community and connection with nature. Mindful sitting and breathing, together with inviting the bell, can form a regular routine in lecture rooms, and be used to open and close lessons, when difficulties or strong emotions occur, and prior to the commencement of challenging tasks (*ibid*).

## WALKING MEDITATION

Mindful walking helps us to “enjoy slowing down and not rushing – practising having ‘nowhere to go and nothing to do’” (*ibid*). Mindful walking conveys one of the most important transmissions from calm and grounded lecturers to students.

## BODY AWARENESS

We are inclined to “live from the neck up” and universities compound this as they involve a sedentary life (*ibid*). Increasing focus on the mind decreases focus on the body. Stress is common in driven and unsettling educational institutions, with few opportunities for rest, whereas deep relaxation can reunite mind and body.

## MINDFUL EATING

Mindful eating enables reflection on being driven and busy. Lecturers work long hours and work through breaks, preparing lessons and undertaking administration while consuming food, which is therefore often unhealthy food that is eaten in an unhealthy rush. Conversely, mindful eating reorients our consumption of food. It enables awareness of consumption on our health, galvanises a search for healthy options, and encourages commitment to weight reduction. It can encourage reduction of overeating and food waste. Institutionally, it can inspire policies and practices that promote healthy consumption (*ibid*).

## TAKING CARE OF EMOTIONS

Enabling awareness and relating to emotions is not a distraction from the curriculum; instead, it provides a necessary foundation: “Stress, anger, anxiety, and other difficult mental states block effective thinking, teaching, and learning. Positive mind states such as calm, joy, engagement, ‘flow’, and feeling safe enable our minds and bodies to operate at an optimal level, in our work and in our learning, and enable us to ‘be the best we can be’” (*ibid*). Practising mindfulness during strong emotions enables responses instead of reactions, and facilitates letting go of wrong views.

## BEING TOGETHER

Educational institutions “are busy and pressured environments, where both teachers and students are constantly being asked to orient to the future, to press on to the next hurdle to help students succeed in an increasingly competitive and materialistic society” (*ibid*). However, universities ought to oppose this trend by encouraging loving kindness, care and cooperation, nurturing skills of deep listening and loving speech.

## CULTIVATING MINDFULNESS ACROSS THE UNIVERSITY

Thich Nhat Hanh and Weare’s (2017) book explains how mindfulness can be introduced to academics, administrators, management, and embedded into the university’s structure, culture and values. The university provides an important second opportunity for the nourishment and cultivation of students who

may not have had a very nourishing childhood. Students who experienced an adverse family life can experience the university as their family. The university can be transformed into a nourishing environment by placing emphasis on enjoying living and learning in the here-and-now, instead of being fastened to the future, in terms of worries about money and future careers. Academics can particularly contribute to this environment by practising mindfulness (while not rushing to teach mindfulness to colleagues and students). The fruits of this mindfulness practice can provide an example to others, who then may become interested and enquire about it. For example, breathing and reflecting before calmly responding in a stressful meeting can impress colleagues. If colleagues do show an interest in mindfulness, it should only be taught in a non-religious way (to avoid alienation) and only taught to those who show an interest. It should not be taught to anyone who is compelled to be there, as this would only compound their aversion and resistance. Managers should be prevented from arranging for mindfulness to be imposed on team members: “mindfulness can only be practiced when the mind and the heart are open to the experiences” (*ibid*). If a group of academics do show an interest, it is advisable to hold regular mindfulness meetings for them in order to support, sustain and share (without this, mindfulness practice can all too easily fall away). Mindfulness can usefully be taught in special sessions initially, although “overtime, it has more long-term impact and credibility when it becomes normalized and integrated within broader frameworks that are routinely used to organize teaching and learning in schools and universities” (*ibid*). Mindfulness could be taught within ‘applied ethics’ curricula to ensure that it is right mindfulness, an ethical mindfulness, instead of one that is abstracted from values.

## CRITICAL CONCLUSIONS

Thich Nhat Hanh and Weare (2017) propose that “with patience we see that we can change the world - one student at a time”: the approach is firstly to practice mindfulness, and then to transform the class into a family, and then to transform the whole educational institution. In this way, they argue, “the ripples spread far and wide. But we always remember, the principle is this: the way

out is in.” Despite Thich Nhat Hanh’s emphasis on ‘interbeing’, his approach represents a subtle but dangerous form of individualism that atomises academic experience of structural violence, an early theme that has almost wholly discontinued in his later writings and teachings. King (2009) argues that Hanh engages with ecological, political, social and economic, problems - but this is not really evident in Thich Nhat Hanh and Weare (2017).

“Hanh’s approach to mindfulness appears to facilitate the secular present-centric appropriations of mindfulness that are criticized by Purser and Milillo (2015). However, Hanh’s understanding of mindful present-centeredness is not ethically vacuous. Rather, Hanh propagates mind cultivation deeply rooted in Buddhist virtue ethics” (Scherer and Waistell, 2017a, p.126).

While Thich Nhat Hanh proposes the cultivation of ethics and empathy, he does not explain how mindfulness translates into organisation (Scherer and Waistell, 2017a). Mindfulness can spread from the individual to the lecture room and across the school – but how can it extend to changing the governmental policies that inhibit and militate against mindfulness in educational institutions? -

“Hanh (1993) recognises the need for systemic change but tends to privilege change at the individual level as a necessary precursor, failing to address sufficiently and directly the range of obstacles to mindfulness and intercorporeal ethicality in workplaces...These obstacles frame and contribute to the suffering Hanh’s mindfulness is trying to alleviate; he could take his approach further by showing how inter-(c)are can influence organisations at a systemic level” (Scherer and Waistell, 2017b, p.18).

Thich Nhat Hanh (1991) propose that mindfulness leads to active engagement. But how can mindfulness engage with the fundamental problems in higher education that aggravate mindfulness in the first place? It is not enough for mindfulness to calm: it must lead to insight and then to action on what causes stress in higher education. The following general observations are a summary observation of global changes in higher education: what



follows is in no way a commentary on any individual university. Universities are driven by global and national league tables that can destroy teaching and research careers by placing teaching programmes or whole universities at risk if they are not well-positioned. Moreover, research league tables encourage academics to focus on research at the expense of teaching. Universities and the employer bodies they belong to, wage war on pay and pensions, and terms and conditions of service. Academic work intensification often means that workload plans do not give sufficient time for teaching, assessment or research. There is increasing casualisation of teaching and research contracts, whereby academics exist from one short-term contract to another, without any prospect of a sustained and sustainable career. Tuition fees are misspent on vanity projects, with glamorous buildings that should only be affordable by the likes of Microsoft and Google. We have seen a loss of academic freedom whereby staff are forced into research areas that have immediate impact on society and industry, leading to the closure of some arts and social sciences faculties. For years, university leaders have enjoyed meteoric salary rises, while academic staff receive below-inflation rises. There has been a loss of academic values with misconceived over-investment in buildings and bureaucracies, with a corresponding decline in focus on research and teaching quality, leading to swathes of redundancies when universities consequently fail to attract sufficient students. As for students, they are burdened with tuition fees that leave them with current and future financial stress. Students are forced to study vocational subjects in order to repay their tuition fees, so that universities effectively mutate into polytechnics and training colleges for industry. Moreover, through marginalising recruitment processes and alienative cultures, universities effectively exclude working class and ethnic minority students who cannot afford to go to university.

These huge pressures on students and staff all erode the possibilities of mindfulness in higher education – and yet Thich Nhat Hanh and Wearé's (2017) book makes no attempt to campaign for change beyond the educational institution. This sows doubt in the minds of their readers, who cannot equate the advice given with the harsh realities of life in higher education. The book neglects to

advise readers to be mindful of these external forces and to build reflection, awareness and motivation to force change at a national, indeed global, level. Any mindfulness that makes no attempt to do this is not right mindfulness: it is an opiate of the pupil that oils the wheels of a corporatised educational industry. As such, it is highly dangerous, making academics and students more resilient – and yet content with their lot, myopic instead of insightful of and motivated towards campaigning for policies that are conducive to mindfulness at a national and international level. Thich Nhat Hanh and Weare (2017) neglect necessary macro-changes that are needed to sustain a reflective and mindful academic community. Without these changes, mindfulness may never be achievable within universities.

Right mindfulness ought to influence the whole educational system. However, Thich Nhat Hanh and Weare's (2017) book needs to explain how it can do so. The book cites a Thich Nhat Hanh Dharma Talk of June 15, 2014, at a 21-Day Retreat in Plum Village, France, where he mentioned that mindfulness can help achieve change "in the wider educational system." However, apart from through mindfulness itself, the text does not explain how, and to that extent it falls short. Arguably, the persistent and almost exclusive emphasis on how mindfulness improves interpersonal relationships (characteristic of Thich Nhat Hanh's more recent tradition) neglects the "global ethic" and the need to act on structural violence. How does right mindfulness actually translate into right action? Unfortunately, the book is silent when it comes to the institution's educative role in social action. However, a 'Buddhist Approach to Global Education in Ethics' must involve collective campaigns at national and global levels, in order to protect and nurture mindfulness in higher educational institutions.

There is a danger that meditation simply oils the wheels of capitalism: where mindfulness becomes merely taking time out from work to unwind, relax and refresh (Wooldridge, 2013). This Westernised meditation enables participation in capitalism whilst staying sane (Žižek, 2001). Such mindfulness simply serves to enhance performance and profitability (Purser and Milillo, 2015). However, this was not the original purpose of Buddhist mindfulness. What mindfulness practices lead to a delusory

nirvana that fosters calmness, which disengages from educational reform? In contrast, what mindfulness practices help us to reduce social suffering and afford insight to structural violence and galvanise social engagement? For example, Thich Nhat Hanh (1988) explains how we should meditate on and thereby become the other person, leading to selflessness and compassion for others: embodying others' suffering impels us to extinguish it. What other methods of meditation can enable us to reduce the suffering of staff and students? It would be interesting for conference participants both to share their experiences and to propose methods for a more Engaged Buddhist mindfulness in Higher Education.

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