

# Christian Mindfulness: Towards a Common Commitment to Compassionate Living

Peter King

*'He is more my brother than many who are nearer to me by race and nationality, because he and I see things exactly the same way. He and I deplore the war that is ravaging his country. We deplore it for exactly the same reasons: human reasons, reasons of sanity, justice and love. We deplore the needless destruction, the fantastic and callous ravaging of human life, the rape of the culture and spirit of an exhausted people.'*

Thomas Merton, *Nhat Hanh is My Brother* (1966)

## Introduction

### An Experiment with Truth

In a world in which both intra- and inter-religious differences are for many becoming more and more emotive, and in which religious traditions in general find themselves increasingly seduced by power, the 'Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings' (MT) of the Order of Interbeing offer a manifesto for compassionate living with which no person of good will could surely disagree.

The Order of Interbeing was founded by Vietnamese Buddhist monk and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh in Saigon in 1964 and the first six members were ordained in February 1966. Later that year Thich Nhat Hanh met Thomas Merton for the first and only time. Today the Order has some 1,000 lay practitioners and 250 monastic practitioners outside of Vietnam, together with more recent members in Vietnam itself following Thich Nhat Hanh's visit there in 2006. At the centre

of the Order are the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, and these are accessible online at the Order's website<sup>1</sup> or in Thich Nhat Hanh's book *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*.<sup>2</sup>

My purpose in this article is to present the 'Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings' to the Christian community as both in the spirit of its founder Jesus and also as a sign of our shared values with the followers of the Buddha. In order to do so I will explore the trainings either individually or grouped together where they share a common concern. There is a sense in which Christian reflection on the Mindfulness Trainings represents (to adopt and adapt Ghandi's phrase) an 'experiment with truth'—the outcome of which will be discerned as women and men come together across religious boundaries to affirm that '(s)he and I see things in exactly the same way', and to

put that conviction into practise in shared action for a better and more human world.

## Belief

### Openness - Non-attachment to Views - Freedom of Thought

#### MT I-3

The first three Mindfulness Trainings are concerned with belief. The first states quite categorically that:

*Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, I am determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist teachings are guiding means to help me learn to look deeply and to develop my understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill or die for.*

Despite Christianity's long and persistent history of persecution, execution and colonisation, and its frequent valorisation of martyrdom, the way of Jesus points toward a lifestyle centred on love for the neighbour rather than adherence to an ideology. One needs only to recollect the many occasions where the gospels present Jesus at odds with the religious system of his time where it put the requirements of doctrine before human flourishing to acknowledge that this is the case.

I would suggest, further, that Christians too can affirm that the teachings of their tradition are not ends in themselves but means to the living of a life characterised by love and compassion. After all, more of Jesus' parables seem concerned with right living than with right belief, and it is

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clear that he would not wish his followers to kill in his name and debatable whether he would wish them to die in his name unless it were for the sake of the good of other human beings.

The second MT acknowledges that:

*I am aware that the knowledge I presently possess is not changeless, absolute truth.*

This is an affirmation that the articulation of belief is provisional, tentative, perhaps even relative. Postmodernism at its best reminds us that doctrinal formulations are contextual constructs, rooted in the time and place of their framers, and therefore bound to take different forms in other times and places. The mystics too remind us that the one we call 'God' is always beyond our grasp and that to claim to have captured the divine in our words is in fact a form of idolatry.

How many of us can deny that our understanding of God and the world have not changed through our lives—and how many of us would that it had not? Change is part of life. We live in an evolving world in the midst of which we are better described not as human 'being' but as human 'becoming'.

*I will learn and practise non-attachment from views in order to be open to others' insights and experiences.*

Finally, the third MT addresses the human tendency to impose our views on others—even our own children—and affirms the right of the other to their own views.

*I will respect the right of others to be different and to choose what to believe and how to decide.*

There are a variety of views within Christianity about the appropriateness or otherwise of seeking to 'convert' people. What this MT reminds us is that the difference of others is not a threat but something to be celebrated and from which we can all benefit.

'We need the stranger more than the stranger needs us'—Maxwell Craig.

#### Suffering Awareness of Suffering MT 4

*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.*

Although Christians and Buddhists may offer different interpretations of the cause and meaning of suffering, we share the experience of suffering both in ourselves and others. This fourth MT reminds us of the importance of facing the suffering of others and, indeed, of finding ways of expressing our solidarity with them in their suffering.

At the heart of the Christian approach to suffering is an acknowledgement that in some way Jesus both discloses to us God's solidarity with us in suffering and calls us to solidarity with those who suffer. Whatever we believe about divine companionship in suffering, Christians and Buddhists together can share in that human solidarity in suffering which is the visible reality of compassionate living.

#### Simplicity Simple, Healthy Living MT 5

It was probably Gandhi who coined the phrase 'live simply that others may simply live', but it has been widely adopted by Christians and others as a slogan summing up the imperative of living a sustainable lifestyle. The fifth MT is concerned with simplicity, and with what it very helpfully terms the practise of 'mindful consuming':

*I am determined not to take as the aim of my life fame, profit, wealth or sensual pleasure, nor to accumulate wealth while millions are hungry and dying. I am committed to living simply and sharing my time, energy and material resources with those in real need.*

Although Christians (and others) differ in their attitudes towards alcohol and other stimulants, the call to 'mindful consuming' reminds us that our lifestyle choices impact upon both ourselves and others and that our choices do matter and do make a difference both to ourselves and to the wider world.

#### The Roots of Violence Dealing with Anger MT 6

*Aware that anger blocks communication and creates suffering, I am determined to take care of the energy of anger when it arises and to recognise and transform the seeds of anger that lie deep in my consciousness. ...I will learn to look with the eyes of*

*compassion on those I think are the cause of my anger.*

We are all familiar with anger even if our reactions to it are different. For some of us, the strategy of the sixth mindfulness training is how we seek to deal with the anger in ourselves:

*When anger comes up, I am determined not to do or say anything, but to practise mindful breathing or mindful walking and acknowledge, embrace and look deeply into my anger.*

For others of us, however, anger is something to be cultivated and channelled, a force inside ourselves which can inspire and motivate us to work for change in the world. However we deal with the anger we find inside ourselves, the conclusion of the MT reminds us that we are to 'look with ... Compassion' on those who are the cause of our anger.

#### Contentment Dwelling Happily in the Present Moment MT 7

Although it is often easier spoken of than put into practise, at the centre of the Christian worldview is an invitation to let go of the past and to live with an openness to the future. As Paul Tillich put it, 'accept that you are accepted'. Jesus' teaching on forgiveness and trust in God would seem to reflect the concerns of this MT and to focus us on living a life of compassion and mindfulness in the here and now.

*Aware that life is available only in the present moment and that it is*

*possible to live happily in the here and now, I am committed to training myself to live deeply each moment of daily life. I will try not to lose myself in dispersion or be carried away by regrets about the past, worries about the future, or craving, anger or jealousy in the present.*

#### Speaking & Listening Community and Communication - Truthful and Loving Speech MT 8, 9

The eighth and ninth MTs invite us to reflect on our speaking and listening and remind us that community is based on truthful and loving speech. The call to 'learn to listen deeply without judging or reacting' brings to mind Jesus' concern in the gospels that we not judge others lest we ourselves be judged by the same standard. The power of our words is recognised too, together with our responsibility to use words in ways that are constructive and compassionate. Furthermore, just as it is imperative that we speak out against injustice it is also important that we do not speak unless and until we are sure of our facts.

*I will make every effort to keep communications open and to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.*

#### The Meaning of Religious Community Protecting the Sangha [Assembly] MT 10

*Aware that the essence and aim of a Sangha is the practise of understanding and compassion, I am determined not to use the*

*Buddhist community for personal gain or profit or transform our community into a political instrument. A spiritual community should, however, take a clear stand against oppression and injustice and should strive to change the situation without engaging in partisan conflicts.*

It is widely acknowledged that institutions (including religious institutions) take on something of a life of their own, and that this can lead to dehumanising attitudes and practises. This MT invites us to reflect on the ways in which our church/religious community both practises the love and compassion of Jesus and also inspires and enables its members to do the same.

#### Living Consistently Right Livelihood MT 11

*Aware that great violence and injustice have been done to the environment and society, I am committed not to live with a vocation that is harmful to humans and nature. I will do my best to select a livelihood that helps realize my ideal of understanding and compassion. Aware of global economic, political and social realities, I will behave responsibly as a consumer and as a citizen, not investing in companies that deprive others of their chance to live.*

Whatever their differences, the world's religions share a sense that religious belief is essentially about the formation of

persons, and this MT invites us to reflect on how consistently our lives reflect our core beliefs and values. This would seem to be what Jesus is referring to in the gospels (Matthew 15) when he speaks of it not being what we take into ourselves which defiles us but rather what comes out from us. This is a recognition that our actions and lifestyle reflect our true beliefs whatever we might claim in words.

#### Nonviolence & Peacemaking Reverence for Life MT 12

Although at least since the early church there has never been a universal Christian consensus on pacifism and nonviolence, it is difficult not to see the words of the twelfth MT as central to the Christian, indeed the human, calling:

*Aware that much suffering is caused by war and conflict, I am determined to cultivate non-violence, understanding and compassion in my daily life, to promote peace education, mindful mediation and reconciliation, within families, communities, nations and in the world. I am determined not to kill and not to let others kill. I will diligently practice deep looking with my Sangha to discover better ways to protect life and prevent war.*

#### Beloved Community Generosity MT 13

'We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality'  
—Martin Luther King, Jr.

From the Hebrew Bible's creation stories through to the vision of Jubilee to Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, at the roots of Christian faith and practice is a recognition of the interconnectedness of creation and a concern for the wellbeing of all. Often obscured both in scripture and Christian tradition by a dualism of 'God' and 'world' or 'us' and 'them' we are nevertheless called to share with all people of good will in what the Jewish tradition refers to as the work of *tikkun olam*—'mending the world', building what Martin Luther King described as the 'beloved community'.

*Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing and oppression, I am committed to cultivating loving kindness and learning ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants and minerals. I will practice generosity by sharing my time, energy and material resources with those who are in need. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, but will try to prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other beings.*

#### Sexuality & Relationships Right Conduct MT 14

This is the only MT where there are two different versions—one for lay and one for religious. I will confine my attention to the lay version. Central to the fourteenth MT is the cultivation of a sense of responsibility—towards the

other, towards other's relationships and towards the unborn.

*Aware that sexual relations motivated by craving cannot dissipate the feeling of loneliness, but will create more suffering, frustration and isolation, I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without mutual understanding, love and a long-term commitment. ...I know that to preserve the happiness of myself and others, I must respect the rights and commitments of myself and others. ...I will be fully aware of the responsibility for bringing new lives in the world, and will meditate on the world into which we are bringing new beings.*

#### Conclusion

##### 'He and I see things exactly the same way'

It was not until I had nearly finished this article that I read Merton's short piece, 'Nhat Hanh is My Brother', written after his meeting with Thich Nhat Hanh, and it was then that the words quoted above seemed to be exactly right to describe both what I was seeking to do here and also my own reaction to the Mindfulness Trainings when I first discovered them. To emphasise these words is not to deny that there were continuing differences of faith and practice between the Trappist and the Buddhist but rather to acknowledge that the ultimate result of following their separate spiritual paths was in fact to bring the two men closer together not further apart, so that Merton could indeed affirm that 'Nhat Hanh is my Brother'.

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Insofar as the Mindfulness Trainings bring others together across religious boundaries and enable women and men to say of one another that '(s)he and I see things in exactly the same way' and work together to build a better and more human world, then the experiment with truth will have proved a success.

### Notes

1. [www.orderofinterbeing.org/14e.html](http://www.orderofinterbeing.org/14e.html)

2. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism* (Parallax Press, Third Edition 1998)

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