

Mindfulness and Modern Life

HCOL 40023-655

Spring 2020

Socially-Engaged Mindfulness paper



This assignment asks you to explore the connection between your personal mindfulness practice and awareness of wider human suffering by drawing from your experience with the Buddhist precepts exercises. As we discussed, those five precepts serve as the foundation of Buddhist ethical teachings, which are elaborated in the tradition's teachings to include other precepts, such as not eating after midday, handling money, and sleeping on luxurious beds. We explained that the precepts represent one of three parts of Buddhism's eightfold path (the last of the Four Noble Truths): ethics (right speech, action, and livelihood), mental cultivation (right effort, mindfulness, and meditation), and wisdom (right view and intention).

We have also discussed mindfulness in relation to the Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, an author, poet, and peace activist who founded the modern Socially-engaged Buddhist movement that has attracted many to its path. That path is based on the ubiquity of human suffering, the first Noble Truth, and how a compassionate mind cannot "turn away" from that suffering, however it manifests in each of our lives. As a teacher of Buddhist forms of mindfulness, he highlights how these practices of mental cultivation are linked inextricably to the alleviation of suffering. We have also discussed in class the legitimate and persuasive criticism that mindfulness practices as taught by many in American society often remove these ethical teachings.

Insights from the precepts could focus, for instance, on the notion of interdependence, non-harming, or truthful speech, among many other possibilities. We ask you to examine how you might draw from those principles, and insights gleaned from them, to gain a deeper understanding of some particular form of suffering (you're welcome to focus on any form of sentient life) in contemporary society by engaging with it mindfully, viewing it, as Thich Nhat Hahn often says, through the eyes of compassion. You can use your deep listening skills to *contemplate* their stories and experience, and you might hold an imagine of those who are suffering, or the suffering itself, in your daily meditation for

some time and see what insights arise—that is, what percolates up from the deepest levels of your mind. You might jot down some notes as you do so.

The specific sort of suffering you address is wide open and will naturally depend on your own background, identity, and so on. For instance, Andy has dedicated himself to alleviating human suffering by helping to feed the hungry through his work in various leadership positions on the Tarrant County Food Bank, including his current tenure as President of the Board. Mark has done so by teaching students about otherness and its attendant human suffering that we witness abroad in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Burma, but also, in our society, through gun violence, white supremacy, anti-immigrant sentiment, Islamophobia, and many other social ills. He and Andy have also worked with Amnesty International to bring attention to these sorts of issues.

Since this is the first time we've tried this exercise, please try your best and don't overthink it. Don't fret over what you think we want you to discover. We have no preconceived notions.