MEETING LIFE IN PLUM VILLAGE

ENGAGING WITH PRECARITY AND PROGRESS IN A MEDITATION CENTER

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ABSTRACT

With increasingly pressing and widespread ecological, social and personal crises, the forward march of progress has come to a dead end, and this time is ripe for sensing precarity, as Tsing (2015) announces. A sense of precarity is prevalent among practitioners in the Plum Village meditation center. In a case study, I join practitioners to encounter opportunities for engaging with the challenges of precarity and new possibilities for progress. With these experiences I point out the relevance of the Plum Village tradition in our earthwide precarious predicament.

My aim in this thesis is to speak to the possibility of changing with mindfulness practice the dualist worldview that is at the root of widespread unsustainable progress practices. The devastating consequences of the forward march toward limitless growth demand a change of direction. My commitment to sustainable, inclusive living leads me to assess to what extent wholesome directions emerge for people and our planet in the other-than-modern views and practices that are taught in the Plum Village tradition.

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DISTRACTED

At a quarter-past five in the morning, the low, vibrating "goooong" of the large bell resounds throughout the Hamlet. Then, at six o'clock sharp, practitioners are gathered in the meditation hall. Brown, square-shaped mats, each with a brown meditation cushion, are arranged neatly, in ten straight rows. We move slowly and each sit down on a cushion, our legs crossed in front of us, facing the walls to either side of the hall, with the monks in the middle rows. One monk sits at the far end by the altar, and begins to speak through a microphone: 'Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out. In, out…'

I notice the air filling my lungs, in… then, out… Belly rising, belly falling. Then, a thought: I should talk to that man again today. Ask him why he came here… Then the monk speaks again with the next instruction – oh! The breath! I realize about five minutes have gone by and I had only counted two rounds of breath. Ok, pay attention, I think to myself.

'Breathing in,' the monk begins, 'I calm my body. Breathing out, I smile to my body. Calm, smiling…' I lightly curl up the corners of my mouth, relax my hands on my knees, and try to let all of my weight move down into the cushion and floor. It feels good to consciously calm my body. Would be nice to relax more often, I consider. I often get so tense in my hands, my face… – then I hear the monk. Ah! Thinking again…

The next instruction: 'breathing in, I am aware of my head. Breathing out, I smile to my head.' I make a deliberate resolution to pay attention now. I notice the sensations on various parts of my head with the breath in, and draw up the corners of my mouth again. I count the rounds of breath: one… two… a thought – ok, let that go, aware of sensations on my head – three… four…

Then I probably thought something, because the monk's voice catches me by surprise again: 'breathing in, abdomen rising. Breathing out, abdomen falling.' I realize I must be thinking about things all the time. Actually quite interesting to become aware of it. What if such thoughts are also distracting my attention when I am doing research? Do such distractions reduce the quality of my findings? Certainly, my thinking was just keeping me from being aware of breathing, and… Ah! Gotcha! Right, I am in the meditation hall and not paying attention to my breath… again… Ok, begin again, one round… two…

The monk gives the final instruction: 'breathing in, I am aware of the tranquility in the hall. Breathing out, I smile.' This is the first time in the session that I actually notice the people around me. The people I am doing research with. Are we all experiencing these distractions? I

should write some fieldnotes about this! Ok, but I can't just pull the notebook out right here. I have to remember… Then I notice my thoughts, and I smile – to my busy mind.

The low "gong" of a large bell ends the guided meditation. With a high-pitched "cling" from a small bell we all stand up and turn to face the middle of the hall. With a second "cling" we bow to each other, then make a quarter turn and with a third "cling" we bow toward an altar and a white statue of a seated Buddha, with a light smile on its face. All practitioners then proceed to slowly walk out of the hall. Outside, the 'activity bell' now sounds: "ding dong, ding dong." Time for breakfast.

1. INTRODUCTION – FREEDOM, PROGRESS AND OUR WORLD

After my stay in the Plum Village meditation center in France, I continued sitting down for meditation regularly – though not the twice daily 40-minute sessions as in the center, and I did not wake up to meditate at six in the morning. Sometimes I practiced with the online Plum Village App[1], which provides meditation instructions similar to those of the monk I described on the previous page. One evening in early January I was at home in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, listening to a guided meditation recording on the App, sitting quietly on a cushion, my legs crossed, lights dimmed. Then, once more, I got distracted. Thoughts of research began zipping through my head when the voice recording declared: 'this is a practice of freedom.'

What does it mean to be free? Perhaps a timeless human question that may be understood as spiritual. It is also a political question; it has consequences for our world. The freedom that is taught in 'the Plum Village tradition' is not what is known in the Western tradition of Enlightenment thought. Its meaning thus differs from current widespread political and economic notions of individual freedom and rational choice. Indeed, this different kind of freedom provides possibilities to change the course of current political and economic realities, and the state of our world.

The 'practice of freedom' that is taught as 'mindfulness' in 'the Plum Village tradition,' works as an activist response to widespread ecological, social and personal crises. Crises that, arguably[2], spring forth from the cultural notion of individualism. With mindfulness practices, I find, the Plum Village tradition offers innovative ways for people to negotiate the devastating consequences of individualistic freedom, and may lead us toward a more wholesome kind of freedom. But a caveat: this way is not straightforward, and holds no guarantees.

When I differentiate between "devastating" and "wholesome" kinds of freedom – what am I speaking of? The former spring forth from the currently widespread 'modern articulation,' as Tim Ingold phrases it, whereby:

> [freedom] has taken on the character of a right, or entitlement, to be exercised by individuals – whether individually or collectively – in the defence of their interests. […] [This] freedom can be configured for some only against the ground of captivity for others (2017, p. 79).

[1] The mobile application contains audio and video files for guided meditation practices and teachings on mindfulness. See: https://plumvillage.app/. The recording I mention was retrieved on this Plum Village App, under the heading 'Thich Nhat Hanh' and file name 'Calm – Ease (medium)' (latest accessed on 18/06/2020)
[2] Escobar (2018), Ingold (2017) and Tsing (2015) argue this, as I discuss in what follows.

The individual-oriented notion of modern freedom, for Ingold, is of a possessive kind, and based on views that separate people. This freedom is exercised in competition over interests.

In a similar vein, Arturo Escobar (2018) points out that a 'dualist[3] ontology of separation, control and appropriation' (p.19) is generative of 'modernist unsustainable and defuturing practices' (p.15). In such a dualist ontology, the world is seen as comprised of separate entities that each strive for individual gain. This world view, Escobar argues, is at the root of 'neoliberal globalization and its vacuous notion of *progress'* (p.xxi; my emphasis). The modern notion of progress is vacuous in the sense of being committed to *limitless growth*, expecting only *singular improvement* – going "up" in a ceaseless *linear direction*. When Escobar argues that this notion of progress leads to defuturing practices, he borrows from Fry (2020), who uses the term to describe our current global crisis condition and the consequential need to change course toward sustainable views and practices.

Indeed, the currently dominant economic and political commitment to limitless growth, with its expectations of improvement within linear progress frames, seems unable to create a livable world for many today, let alone livable futures in the long run. A change of direction beckons urgently. The current economy is fueled by such large scale extractive practices as deforestation, fresh water harvesting, mining, oil and gas rigging and life-degrading agriculture. Such practices lead to rampant ecosystem destruction as well as aggressive community intrusion and displacement; an unsustainable course of action for people and the planet.

Jeopardized lives are not the predicament of the unfortunate few. A climate crisis looms over us all. Moreover, even if we can currently steer clear from forced displacement or ecosystem collapse, many people are not faring well with the way things are today. Particularly in "developed," "high income" countries, the World Health Organization indicates serious health threats due to stress and mental illness[4]. The United Nations has now placed mental well-being firmly on the agenda for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (WHO, 2018). But while the SDGs remain far out of sight, what hope should we invest in this approach to development? Such concerns, as well as the experienced consequences of our crises, are prevalent among mindfulness practitioners in Plum Village.

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[3] Escobar mentions a few examples of dualisms 'mind/body, self/other, subject/object' (p.3) that are crucial in our current crises, and relevant in relation to mindfulness practice in Plum Village, as I will show in subsequent chapters.

[4] With depression projected to become the number one disease burden worldwide in 2030 (WHO, 2004)

The concerns of practitioners reflect what Anna Tsing (2015) describes as our earthwide predicament of *living with precarity*, that is: 'life without the promise of stability [once provided by] dreams of modernization and progress' (p. 2). In our predicament, 'we can't rely on the status quo; everything is in flux, including our ability to survive' (p.20). The dawning realizations of 'precarity,' for Tsing, amount to 'a state of acknowledgement of our vulnerability to others' (p.29). The question arises what to do with these realizations. Unsure where to go, Tsing suggests we look around for allies on the same boat – our earth, that is – and embrace unexpected collaborations.

This is a move that brings many people to Plum Village, including myself. Might we find fruitful collaborations in this meditation center? Could mindfulness practices be part of an effective approach in our predicaments, such as to improve well-being, as the science suggests[5]? Cook (2015) shows with ethnographic research that mindfulness practitioners in British national health clinics find ways to heal depression, and may potentially engage in new ethical relationships with the world.

Mindfulness approaches are increasingly receiving public praise and are applied in the policies[6] of national governments and multinational businesses. Yet there is a critically concerned undercurrent that questions whether such approaches contribute to any fundamental societal change. 'Mindful meditation may be the enemy of activism,' (Purser, 2019b) suggests[7] in the British newspaper The Guardian. Because mindfulness can help people to cope with issues like stress, Purser is concerned that mindfulness could work to perpetuate 'the capitalist system that is inherently problematic.' In such a case, with an increased capacity to cope with stress, people would keep at work while maintaining the structure of an unwholesome status quo. This raises the question of what kind of change happens with mindfulness practitioners in practice – this question, as I elaborate below, drives my work in the Plum Village meditation center.

To summarize so far, Plum Village provides a case to discuss an ontological and practical alternative to the unsustainable progress practices that spring forth from a dualist ontology and its idea of separation. The modern notion of freedom as an individual entitlement to competition is problematic, and indeed a key causal factor in our predicament. The ontological basis of duality is geared for unsustainable practices in pursuit of limitless growth.

[5] See for example Baer (2003) Kuyken et al. (2008) and Lutz et al. (2007)
[6] The United Kingdom National Health Service widely promotes mindfulness as 'a cheap and effective treatment for depression' (Cook, 2015, p. 223). Mindfulness practices also appear in job packages at major corporations like Google (see McMahan, 2017).
[7] Purser further expands on this suggestion in his book titled McMindfulness (Purser, 2019a)

It is the assumption of duality that leads people to act as imagined separate entities and to place the prospect of a better life on an endless linear path of improvement into the future. To various extents of extremity, the dualist ontology leads people to move forward despite the personal, social and ecological devastations that we witness today. Our predicament, then, constitutes the sensed realization that this crisis is indeed a threat to us all, and that the status quo seems unable to provide solutions.

In various forms and expressions, I find these concerns prevalent for many practitioners in Plum Village, as I show in this thesis, and particularly in chapter 3. This leads me to wonder, with Escobar, and in similar veins with Ingold, Tsing, and fellow practitioners in Plum Village: 'will there still be "modern solutions to modern problems"? Or […] [is it] necessary to look elsewhere, in other-than-modern world-making possibilities?' (Escobar, 2018, p.19). The Plum Village meditation center provides a case study for me, as indeed for fellow practitioners, to inquire into the latter possibility. I aim to contribute to the academic understanding of ontological and practical alternatives to the devastating consequences of widespread dualism and its commitments to limitless growth in economic, political and personal practices.

What, then, of the possibilities for more sustainable progress? Can a more wholesome approach to freedom enable us to pave new ways for sustainable living? During my stay in the meditation center, I found myself among people who actively negotiated the possibility of living with an ontology that teachers referred to as 'interbeing[8].' This is a holistic rather than dualistic worldview that emphasizes relationality rather than separateness. As a way of being-in-connection with the world, interbeing is the foundation of the freedom that teachers in Plum Village claim to be accessible through mindfulness practice.

I see reason to believe that the freedom of interbeing offers steps out of the modern, individually entitled freedom that Ingold describes above, and toward a more wholesome, sustainable alternative, such as he proposes. 'Real freedom,' as Ingold would have it:

> …is not a property but a mode of existence – a way of being that is fundamentally open to others and to the world rather than hemmed in by aims and objectives. […] [I]t is a form of exposure (2017, p. 79).

[8]The notion of interbeing, as well as the supposed effects that I quote, are further elaborated on the home page of Plum Village. See particularly: https://plumvillage.org/mindfulness-practice/the-5-mindfulness-trainings/.

In chapter 4 I further discuss the freedom of interbeing and mindfulness as 'a practice of' it. Suffice it to say for now that I call the ontology of interbeing wholesome in reference to its concerns with the sustainable relationality and well-being of the whole world.

Can the freedom of interbeing bring forth wholesome progress practices and lead to new sustainable directions in our predicament? According to Plum Village teachers, mindful action is supposed to lead to 'healing, transformation, and happiness for ourselves and for the world' (Plum Village, 2020). Whether these claims amount to any significance in practice, I will discuss in chapter 5 and the conclusion. The central question, then, that I am concerned with in this thesis is:

To what extent do wholesome directions emerge in Plum Village as practitioners learn about its tradition of mindfulness practice?

More specifically, I will discuss:

- What motivations and meanings do practitioners and teachers respectively have in mind in relation to being in the meditation center?
- How are mindfulness practice and the freedom of interbeing taught and learned?
- What directions emerge from this learning process in terms of personal, social and ecological change?

I cover each of these three questions respectively in chapter 3, 4 and 5.

Now, for the purpose of providing necessary background on the case study, I come back to where I began – to the 'practice of freedom.' In the following section I trace the history of the Plum Village tradition, and how its notion of interbeing and mindfulness practice have been applied in the world.

1.1 BACKGROUND – THE PLUM VILLAGE TRADITION

That evening in January I was at home listening to mindfulness instructions in a tradition of Thien[9] Buddhism, a Vietnamese branch of the popularly known Japanese Zen tradition. The voice on the recording was of Thich Nhat Hanh, who is considered the leading founder and teacher in the Plum Village tradition. Nhat Hanh coined the term interbeing[10] with its related

[9] To be more precise, the "Thien" tradition is generally considered the Vietnamese branch of Chinese "Chan" Buddhism, whereas the "Zen" tradition is the Japanese branch of Chan (Wang, 2017).
[10] With fellow mindfulness practitioners, Nhat Hanh established the Order of Interbeing in his Linji Thiền (or Zen) Buddhist lineage. To reflect what they thought of as the original Buddhist community (sangha), the order

principles of activism, or what he called Engaged Buddhism. Mindfulness practices are at the heart of this tradition and its engagements.

What does mindfulness have to do with activism? The recorded instructions of Nhat Hanh provide some further clues: 'Breathing in, I smile. Nothing is as important as my peace, my joy. I smile to everything. Even to my suffering, to my difficulties. Breathing out, I release, I let go.' While such an exercise may appear as the height of passivity in light of our predicament, this approach does have a record of active engagement.

Mindfulness practice, for Nhat Hanh, means 'to be aware,' and this is for him essential in activism: 'we have to be aware of what is going on in our body, our feelings, our emotions, and our environment. That is Engaged Buddhism […] the kind of Buddhism that responds to what is happening in the here and the now' (2008, p. 31). Nhat Hanh directly relates this response to the various crises in our lives and world. But what do 'my peace' and 'my joy' have to do with it?

'Our world is something like a small boat,' Nhat Hanh (1987) writes, 'many of us worry about the world situation. […] If we panic, things will only become worse. We need to remain calm, to see clearly. Mediation is to be aware, and to try to help' (p.21). Nhat Hanh (age 93 and living in Vietnam as I write), has a long history of being involved in social and environmental activism, or what he calls 'peace work' (p.14). One of the pioneers[11] of Engaged Buddhism, Nhat Hanh lived as a monk in Vietnam since age sixteen. His engagements first took shape as a political response when the United States came to war in Vietnam.

In the 1960s, Nhat Hanh initiated grass-roots efforts with monks, nuns and students to rebuild bombed villages and set up schools and medical centres. This was for him an active manifestation of interbeing; to work for peace without taking sides, seeing that there is no inherent basis for separation between people, leading to compassion for all (Nhat Hanh, 1987). The work continued for Nhat Hanh when he traveled to the United States in 1966 on invitation to speak for reconciliation[12] at universities and with Secretary of Defense McNamara and Senators Fullbright and Kennedy (Nhat Hanh, 1991, p. xii). With the war still raging, government officials in Vietnam contested his work, and exiled Nhat Hanh, who continued to

included monks, nuns, and lay practitioners – an unusual composition in contemporary Buddhism. The charter states that the Order 'seeks to realize the spirit of the Dharma in early Buddhism' (Order of Interbeing, 2011).

[11] Under the banner of Engaged Buddhism, loosely connected movements act upon social issues worldwide such as with the Buddhist civil rights movement in India, the Free Tibet Movement, the Zen Peacemaker Order and the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (Queen, 2000).

[12] 'Reconciliation,' for Nhat Hanh, is 'to understand both sides' and 'working to help people' (1987, pp. 72–73).

travel and speak in the United States and Europe. In 1967, he was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize[13] by Martin Luther King, Jr.

In 1982, Nhat Hanh gathered with fellow mindfulness practitioners to settle down in Southern France. The group – mostly Vietnamese and Westerners – built the Plum Village meditation center and formed a community to settle there. So it happened that people from various walks of life first came together to create the collective way of life that is Plum Village. In his pursuit of freedom with mindfulness practice, Nhat Hanh, who was still exiled, found what would be his place to settle for more than thirty years to come.

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Practices of freedom can figure as 'livelihood strategies,' I learn from the anthropological research of Tsing (2015, p. 102). She encountered such strategies in the forests, or 'ruins,' of Oregon (US), which, having been clear-cut by loggers, are desolated save for seasonal pickers and traders of delicacy mushrooms. In these ruins of linear progress practices (those of logging companies, in the case of the forests), the mushroomers (multicultural communities, and often (war) refugees) materialized unconventional ways of generating income while seeking to be free from experiences of violence and constraints of rent and wage labor in the broader society.

Mindfulness practice figured as a livelihood strategy for Nhat Hanh. In Vietnam, he first attempted to live, with mindfulness, in the ruins of the progressive ideology that sought to liberate the world from communism through war practices (primarily those of the American and French governments). Then, as a refugee in France, mindfulness provided connections and financial income as Nhat Hanh created a livelihood with fellow practitioners in Plum Village. The community grew to nine more meditation centers internationally, and spread the word on mindfulness worldwide through books[14], magazines[15], television[16] and online[17]. In this story

[13] The official nomination is listed in the Nomination Archive. See: https://www.nobelprize.org/nomination/archive/show.php?id=19510. For the nomination letter by Martin Luther King, Jr., see: http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/45a/025.html (latest accessed on 27/07/2020)
[14] Many of which are self-published by the Plum Village community through publishing company Parallax Press.
[15] The Mindfulness Bell is a magazine published by the Plum Village community, and is available online. See: https://www.mindfulnessbell.org/. Time Magazine also featured an article that described Nhat Nanh as 'the father of mindfulness.' See: https://time.com/5511729/monk-mindfulness-art-of-dying/ (latest accessed 27/07/2020)
[16] A popular interview with Oprah Winfrey in 2010 was viewed more than 5.6 million times on the video-sharing platform YouTube. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NJ9UtuWfs3U (latest accessed on 27/06/2020)
[17] The official home page: www.plumvillage.org

of ruin, displacement, and new life-making, mindfulness figures as a strategy to get by while also building community, and engage in activism to help in 'our world situation.'

This strategy continues in today, as the original center in Southern France opens its doors to more than ten thousand practitioners each year. Opportunities to stay in the meditation center are provided with affordable retreats on a sliding scale to be accessible for those with low incomes. Monks and nuns live, like guests, in dormitory accommodations and all share collective meals. Aside from the income of retreats and book sales, Plum Village relies financially on donations. The Plum Village community thus figures as an accessible platform for collaborations on contemporary widespread personal, social and ecological issues. My writing here is based on my experiences among fellow practitioners while staying three months in the meditation center.

Since my stay, the community has been adapting to global precarious developments. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, all ten meditation centers have been closed as teaching continues online with additional paid and free online resources[18]. Moreover, in response to the police killing of George Floyd, one of the senior teachers addressed a video message[19] to 'all people of color who haven't been able to breathe for a very long time.' He stated:

> You don't need us as allies to speak *for* you. […] I choose to walk *with* you this time and I promise to do my work. I promise to do my best to help society to do its work so that you can breathe.

My purpose in this thesis involves understanding what this 'work' is about, and learning with fellow practitioners about how we might apply its meanings and practices.

In a broader sense, as I have stated in the first part of this introduction, I am concerned with the process whereby practitioners learn about the freedom of interbeing and mindfulness practice in Plum Village. As I will show, this process holds no guaranteed success, and can throw up its own problems in practice. Crucially, I will argue, it is because (not despite) of this challenging and uncertain work that wholesome new directions can emerge for practitioners, and our world.

[18] On the official home page. See: https://plumvillage.org/articles/news/temporary-closure-in-response-to-coronavirus-covid-19/ (latest accessed 27/07/2020)
[19] The message is available on YouTube. See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfkTW9rfDao (latest accessed 27/07/2020)

2. PRACTICING GLOBAL ANTHROPOLOGY

For this thesis I carry out anthropological research practices with the purpose of learning about other-than-modern world-making possibilities for a sustainable and more livable world. I have argued that our current earthwide predicament demands new directions for progress as alternatives to the devastating practices that spring forth from commitments to limitless growth.

In search for alternative approaches to progress, anthropological work can help to inquire into the lived realities of people who create tangible alternatives. The Plum Village tradition provides opportunities for such inquiry. By examining how people teach and learn mindfulness practices in the Plum Village meditation center, I learn how people engage with possibilities for personal, social and ecological change. The discussions in this thesis also include my own journey of learning to practice mindfulness together with critical research practices outside of linear progress frames.

In this chapter I detail the research approach, methods and theories with which I work. Tsing (2015) has adequately described what is at stake as researchers learn to take critical distance from commitments to limitless growth:

> As long as authoritative analysis requires assumptions of growth, experts don't see the heterogeneity of space and time even where it is obvious to ordinary participants and observers. Yet theories of heterogeneity are still in their infancy. To appreciate the patchy unpredictability associated with our current condition, we need to reopen our imaginations (pp. 4-5).

Conducting research among practitioners in the Plum Village tradition challenges me precisely with these tasks: to *see* heterogeneous (non-linear, multi directional) perspectives, to *appreciate* unpredictable negotiations, and to *open* my imagination of what the world could be(come). Even while I am challenged, the same people I researched with also offered gifts and guidance for carrying out my tasks. While learning about mindfulness practice, I became more able to see, appreciate, and open to the world unfolding. In chapter 7 I further discuss the connections I experienced between the practices of mindfulness and research.

In the first section of this chapter I consider what it means to see beyond linear progress, in multiple directions, and I describe my research commitments. Next, I discuss the methods with which I have carried out analysis and fieldwork. In the third section I discuss the terms and theories with which I learn about the "Buddhist traditions" and, by extension, the Plum Village tradition.

2.1 RESEARCHING CRITICALLY, IN MULTIPLE DIRECTIONS

'Progress is a forward march,' Tsing (2015, p.21) observes as she examines what the world looks like in linear progress frames. When we commit to particular expectations of improvement, we assume a timeline that leads to a particular destination. We have a specific aim, to get or do something. This focus on one particular future has the effect of putting blinders on. Tsing points out that linear growth models lose sight of (and indeed often lead to the degradation of) the innumerable varied rhythms and patterns in time (seasonal growths, regenerative cycles) and space (diversity, interconnections) that are continuously growing the world around and within us.

Wholesome growth, conversely, stimulates diversity rather than degrades it. This happens only in multiple, unexpected directions. Wholesome growth happens without separating or capturing things (because relationality is its lively foundation), and without strictly controlling the course of things (because we cannot predict everything that is beneficial). We can readily witness this in species-rich forests, or lively social interactions, where exchanges lead to uncontrolled creativity.

This growth is what Tsing calls 'nonscalable,' because it cannot happen outside of its diverse relationships (2015, p.42). 'Nonscalable projects,' however, 'can be terrible or benign,' as Tsing points out (ibid). Growth can only be sustainable when it does not rely solely on extraction. Sustainable growth fosters relationality and inclusivity (as Ingold also indicates, see below) with mutually supportive bonds. Multiple sustainable directions are already at display around us, and may indeed be 'obvious to ordinary participants and observers,' as Tsing mentions above. This does require taking off the blinders of linear progress. These same blinders with which economic activities bulldoze through diversity, also keep many research efforts from looking into wholesome solutions.

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'The contemporary conjuncture of widespread ecological and social devastation summons critical thought,' summarizes Escobar (2018, p. 19). In this context, he remarks, to think critically is 'to think actively about significant cultural transitions […] [out of] the dualist ontology of separation, control, and appropriation that has progressively become dominant' (pp. 19-20). To research critically in our predicament, then, involves taking off the blinders of linear progress, and taking a deliberate stance in a commitment to learning about more

wholesome ontologies and practices. (I discuss further aspects of critical research in sections 2 and 3 of this chapter.)

I thus take my stance with Escobar, Tsing, and with Ingold (2017), who places a commitment to 'sustainable living' at the center of anthropological practice: 'a form of sustainability that […] has a place for everyone and everything' (p.58). Moreover, this 'anthropology is *critical* because we cannot be content with the way things are […] [with] the world on the brink of catastrophe. In finding ways to carry one, we need all the help we can get' (ibid).

With Ingold, I take the purpose of anthropological research to be primarily educational – a process of learning, with people, about ways to live sustainably together. In this view, anthropological work includes – but is not limited to – ethnographic research (the process of gathering data among people, which I discuss in the next section). During and after ethnographic research, our work is primarily about learning and personally applying what is learned. Anthropological representation, then, involves not only representing multiple voices – it is also a matter of speaking with 'a voice of our own,' by way of answering to the people that I, as anthropologist, do research with (Ingold in Ergül, 2017, p.11).

'While we have studied with others, we have learned for ourselves,' Ingold emphasizes:

> …it is with this learning that we can and must contribute to the great debates of our time: about how we should live, how we should relate to our environment, how we should conduct ourselves politically, and so on (ibid).

This task of *correspondence,* Ingold points out, is an inseparable and ongoing aspect of research.

During ethnographic fieldwork I expressed my commitment to sustainability, which led the people I researched with to answer in turn. Thus we found out together what is important to us, and the world. What I have to say in this thesis is 'an offering,' as Ingold puts it, and part of my 'relations with those to whom we owe our education in the ways of the world' (in MacDougall, 2016).

To learn, then, with people, about possibilities for sustainable living, and to contribute to the debate on new directions for life to continue, I have to take off the blinders of linear progress. What does this mean practically for this research? It involves, in the first place, to cease expecting any particular outcomes, because I do not yet know what is truly sustainable in practice. At best, I can initially recognize sustainability by the patterns of wholesome growth that I have described above, and by contrast with the patterns of linear growth. Eventually, by

systematically and open-endedly experimenting, recording findings and reflecting by myself and with people, I can begin to make educated guesses.

Inquiring without expectations turns out easier said than done. I find that, rather than a one-off decisive act, to cease expecting particular outcomes is a journey of learning gradually to see and appreciate the world with an open imagination. I found a way, so far, with the aid of various guides. I take inspiration from the recent work of anthropologists who have learned about unconventional ways of seeing and being in the world (such as Cadena, 2015; Kahn, 2019; Kohn, 2013). In learning about different cultures and traditions, each of these authors worked to see beyond conventionally recognized categories and concepts, and to open up to the unexpected.

In a similar vein, Tsing calls her research approach "curiosity" – a readiness to learn and collaborate in sometimes unexpected encounters. For Tsing, notions of time are crucial; curiosity means to stop assuming that time ticks progressively toward a linearly determined future, and instead to embrace 'indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time' (p. 20). Rather than working with a set plan toward specific outcomes, Tsing shows that research results emerge as *stories* of how 'we change through our collaborations […] across difference' (p. 29).

In this thesis I offer such stories – my own as well as those of the people I researched with. As Tsing (2015) points out, stories can help us learn about the plans and effects of 'world-making:' how the practical activities of living alter the world (p. 21-22). The perspective of world-making involves the recognition that any action produces effects in the world. As conscious humans, we therefore have choices to make. No human (or nonhuman) is a passive bystander in the world. Anything we do matters, and that is why it is crucial now to gain inspiration for projects that do not march endlessly forward despite anything. As Tsing points out, 'world-making projects […] show that other worlds are possible,' (p.292).

In the third section I discuss how I critically research the "Buddhist tradition" of Plum Village. First, however, I must account for the methods I use to examine the world-making possibilities of the Plum Village tradition, and the methods with which I study "the field" where these possibilities emerge.

2.2 RESEARCH METHODS

To see the world-making possibilities that people create and envision with the Plum Village tradition, I analyze what Tsing (2000, p. 329) calls 'projects:' specific plans and strategies for acting in the world. Specifically, in this research I analyze how people employ the Plum Village tradition, with its ontology of interbeing and mindfulness practices, in various plans and

strategies for living. This enables me to see, appreciate and open up to the multi-directional negotiations and collaborations that take place in the Plum Village meditation center.

Following Tsing, to analyze projects I attend to (1) the culturally specific *commitments* (views and meanings) with which people engage with projects, (2) the *work* (friction) that happens, often unexpectedly, in the world as people present and negotiate projects, and (3) the *directions* (visions and changes) that emerge as experiences and prescriptions of how projects can change the world. With this approach, world-making projects can be analyzed both ontologically (in terms of commitments and visions) and practically (in terms of work). In the case of the Plum Village tradition, I apply this approach to the ontology of interbeing and mindfulness practices.

My analysis of the Plum Village tradition as a world-making project is the backbone for the structure of this thesis. Following my research questions, in chapter 3 I look at the commitments that practitioners and teachers have in mind in relation to being in the meditation center. In chapter 4 I examine how teachers and practitioners work with interbeing and mindfulness practice through presentations and negotiations. I follow the outcomes of this work to emerging directions for personal, social and ecological change in chapter 5. With this analysis I show how the Plum Village tradition may be helpful in our earthwide precarious predicament to negotiate a shift in commitments (from limitless growth to wholesome growth), actions (from extractive to sustainable) and ontology (from dualistic to a holistic).

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The work of the Plum Village tradition extends beyond the apparent physical boundaries of the meditation center in Southern France. Presentations and negotiations happen in independently run local meditation groups called 'sanghas'[20], in cities around the world, and online such as with regularly uploaded videos of teachings, and the mobile Plum Village App that I mentioned in the Introduction chapter.

The Plum Village meditation center operates as a main hub of transit, residence and learning. Its physical grounds are a shared space with a constantly fluctuating population. As practitioners come, stay, interact, and travel on, emerging directions reach out across a wide network of routes.

[20] The official Plum Village website contains a world map that exhibits a directory of sanghas around the world: www.plumvillage.org/about/international-sangha-directory/
The independently run website www.sanghabuild.org provides advice and connections for 'Sanghabuilders' who intend to set up a local chapter or mindfulness practice center in the tradition of Plum Village.

James Clifford's writing on "routes" (1997) helps me to see the multiple directions that emerge as different people negotiate with the Plum Village tradition. In the meditation center in France, I find myself among entangled commitments. People came and stayed at the meditation center with various views and meanings already in mind. Each of us brought different personal experiences, cultural traditions, and sometimes contrasting commitments. While everyone spoke about a 'tradition' that was held in common, each one of us negotiated it in unique ways, with varying outcomes.

Negotiations are central to the work that occurs with world-making projects (Tsing, 2000; 2015). It is through acts of negotiation (discussing, questioning, experimenting, contesting, collaborating) that projects effect changes in the world, ranging from slight to drastic. Clifford helps me to see negotiations as *exchanges*: people negotiating common ground across difference. With this perspective, I can regard the Plum Village meditation center as a site of exchanges, where different commitments are negotiated, and may change, leading to new directions.

Thus, I want to see what happens as people exchange without assuming any particular direction. Consequently I do not assume that the Plum Village tradition is "transmitted" in a one-way fashion from teachers to students. By doing so I take critical distance from a linear approach (common in recent history) that sought to identify a cultural "essence" in traditions. (I elaborate on this point in the third section, where I describe the definition of the term "tradition" that I work with in this research.) An open-ended approach to exchanges helps me to appreciate the unexpected ways in which the Plum Village tradition is negotiated, across difference.

In university I received guidance on learning about global connections in local places with the research practices of *global ethnography*. This approach involves being with people in a particular place – a community, a village, a work site, a neighborhood – while looking beyond assumed boundaries that dualistically separate a local place from the rest of the world. These methods allow me to collect data through fieldwork, in order to examine the world-making possibilities of the Plum Village tradition. Carrying out global ethnographic fieldwork enables me to see exchanges between people and cultures locally while also considering global effects.

To examine exchanges, I have participated and observed with people in the Plum Village meditation center in France, and have learned about lives beyond the apparent boundaries of the center. Thus I work to represent not just life in the meditation center, but *whole lives*, which extend over time and space with the travel routes and histories through

which people came, stayed and moved on from this local place. This work also carries on at the "home" and "university" of the researcher, and such locations therefore also become part of the field of research.

Fieldwork, as I have practiced it, involves both systematic and intuitive elements for carrying out observations, interviews, inquiries, analyses and writing ethnographic fieldnotes (Emerson et al., 2014). I have devoted myself to using these tools in nuanced, reflexive ways. This involves remaining critical of assumptions, both of my own, those of authors in the literature I have used, and those of the people with whom I carried out research. To work reflexively is a circular learning process that involves experimenting with practices and ideas – genuinely and openly engaging in new experiences – and to then critically check and adjust interpretations through self-reflection and in connection with the people involved in the research.

Such reflexive learning is realized methodically by continually gathering data and revising ideas as the project moves along. From my position of residing for three months on the grounds of the meditation center, I have collected data by observing and participating in experiences of everyday life, including scheduled events such as collective meditations, ceremonies, rituals and celebrations. My work as an anthropologist, as I understand it based on Emerson et al. (2014), involves three intertwined activities: (1) joining people in experiences, (2) interpreting these experiences, and (3) writing interpretations as narratives. The resulting narratives (such as those in subsequent chapters) are directed to an audience who may not be familiar with the context where the experiences took place.

The work in each of the three activities of research consists of varying degrees of communication and collaboration with people around me. Moreover, each activity is performed with varying degrees of intensity at different moments in the research process. Thus, the first activity is more or less evenly prominent throughout fieldwork, in continual experiencing. The second and third become more prominent toward the end of fieldwork and after that, in analysis and writing. Yet each activity was going on to some extent throughout the whole research, each reflexively feeding into the work of the whole.

The outcome of this reflexive, circular research process is *grounded theory*. The aim is for such theory to grow out of data, rather than to test pre-conceived theories. A grounded researcher attunes oneself to intuitively sense how people experience the world, and dedicates oneself to systematically record meanings (Emerson et al., 2014). Data is thus collected directly from social experiences, or what Pollner & Emerson (2001) call 'the ceaseless, ever-unfolding

transactions through which members engage one another and the objects, topics and concerns that they find relevant' (p.120).

The resulting data is what Geertz (1983, p. 57) calls 'experience-near.' This means that I work to represent interpretations and meanings that are near to the experiences and stories that emerge as relevant while spending time with people. In the case of Plum Village, relevant stories and experiences extend globally across a wide network of routes beyond the grounds of the meditation center, as I have pointed out earlier.

To realize experience-near interpretations I have collected data through ethnographic writing while participating and observing in the meditation center and online by engaging with the Plum Village App and video-recorded lectures. The fieldnotes I have written during participant observation, document the process of my work and are the basis of this thesis. Throughout my fieldwork, I have regularly written 'jottings,' capturing the terms, phrases and stories that people (often spontaneously) express (Emerson et al., 2014, p. 29). My fieldnotes also include inscriptions of events and practices, transcriptions of conversations and fully elaborated descriptions (also see Emerson et al., 2014). Because I consider the writing of fieldnotes to always involve interpretation, I work to establish critical distance by checking and adjusting assumptions and interpretations reflexively. The data in my fieldnotes thus feed into the circular learning process I have described above: joining people experimentally in new experiences, and critically reflecting by myself and with people around me.

To summarize thus far, I examine the Plum Village tradition as a world-making project. In doing so I take inspiration from the curiosity of Tsing and anthropologists who are similarly curious about alternatives to limitless growth commitments. This involves *seeing* beyond prevailing assumptions (in my case linear progress, and "tradition" as one-way transmission), *appreciating* the unexpected turns, twists and diffusions in social life, and *opening* my imagination to the range of directions in which people emerge from negotiations in social exchanges.

The findings and theories in this thesis have emerged from experiences with people, and have evolved throughout the research process. My research work is spread across different places – between university classrooms, libraries, Plum Village's teahouses and meditation halls, and back again in university and my home. Grounded theories were nourished as I dwelled in each of those places, interacting with people (fellow practitioners, co-students in university, professors), and taking in experiences, to cultivate a perspective near to experiences and concerns that appear relevant to the practitioners I met in Plum Village.

In the meditation center, stories and experiences meet and become entangled in exchanges, leading to new directions in our precarious predicament. To learn and share about these emerging, experimental, directions is increasingly relevant as the march of linear progress seems to be meeting a dead end. This is where practicing global ethnography can help: to inquire into potential viable alternatives by learning about whole lives – people and cultures making lives in various directions, in relation to histories, local and global experiences, and undetermined commitments to the future.

In this work I am informed by what is written and said about the histories and future plans of people in the Plum Village tradition. However, for my purposes I primarily want to know what happens "here," right when exchanges take place, and people and cultures are moved to change, abruptly or gradually, drastically or slightly. How does this apply to my case study in the meditation center and learning about the Plum Village tradition?

2.3 On learning about a "Buddhist tradition"

Expectations and assumptions of linear improvement are ubiquitous throughout the world, and particularly in Western societies and academics, as Escobar (2018), Ingold (2017) and Tsing (2015) point out. The reflexive research process I describe above helps me to work with critical distance from such expectations and assumptions, and to research with curiosity (to see multiple directions, appreciate the unexpected and open my imagination).

Throughout this research I have found it crucial to make 'critical breaks' (Pels, 2014) with linear progress frames. Critical reflection helps me remain attentive of falling back into my own habits and assumptions. While studying different ways of seeing and being, I am confronted with the fact of having long been surrounded and schooled in linear thinking models throughout my life. Reflection has been crucial to research heterogeneously.

I apply the aforementioned approach and methods to a case study among people who collectively refer to 'the Plum Village tradition.' This tradition is generally associated with 'Engaged Buddhism' – a movement that is committed to working for 'peace' by spreading 'Buddhist' teachings (Queen, 2000). To study the Plum Village tradition, I draw inspiration from literature that has similarly addressed the phenomenon of "Buddhist tradition."

In recent decades, the anthropology of Buddhism has made critical moves away from modernization frames. In such frames, the term "tradition" was used to categorize supposedly "true" (unchanging, original) forms of Buddhism, while "modern" Buddhism was thought of as diluted (Gellner, 2003). As McMahan (2017) points out, research frames that assume a 'linear modernization (and recovery) of Buddhism' have made way for research that looks at

'heterogeneous, geographically differentiated process' (p.113). The latter approach, in other words, examines diversity without assuming linear development.

This opens up perspectives that are useful for my purpose to see different directions emerging in Plum Village. I want to examine how terms like "religious," "modern" and "traditional" become employed by different people and cultures as socio-political categories, as McMahan suggests. This involves seeing how people use such terms in 'demarcating certain modalities of thought, practice, and social engagement' (2017, p. 115).

This perspective helps me to reflect critically on my use of the term tradition. I want to use this term as a fluid concept; that is, to see how people use the phrase 'Plum Village tradition' to demarcate thoughts, practices and engagements, without labeling these meanings as "old" or "new" on a linear timescale. Therefore, in using the term tradition, I draw from its definition as 'delivery,' (Williams, 2002, pp. 268–269). Here, tradition is a verb referring to *exchange* between people, in *present-tense*. Tradition, as I use the term, is not a relic of the past brought into the future; rather, tradition involves exchanges of thoughts, practices and engagements, between people, always in present time.

Concerning the term Buddhism, I follow De Silva (2006) 'to leave Buddhists to say what Buddhism is' (p.169) and look at 'the kinds of social and political projects into which the figures of the Buddhist tradition get mobilized' (p.169). This corresponds with the analysis of projects that I borrow from Tsing. This helps me see how the Plum Village tradition is variously employed for different purposes by different people.

However, I want to add another critical reflection on using the category "Buddhist." For my purposes, I am interested in how people apply this term, or not, in negotiating projects. At a public gathering I attended in Plum Village, a practitioner in his forties expressed having 'profound doubts. Am I Buddhist? What does it mean to be Buddhist?' The man told of 'negative experiences' in Nepal where 'Buddhists placed themselves above regular citizens.' The man expressed not wanting to identify with 'these Buddhists' and at the public gathering he asked a nun how she thinks of this.

The nun replied: 'people have the tendency to put labels. Buddhism is used as a label for people. But anyone is always more than that. Words can be limiting in describing reality.' The nun recommended the practitioners not to get concerned about words: 'when you walk a spiritual path, you can ask whether the real importance is really in words, or rather in experiences, transformation, growing love. That is to me what is important.'

'Categories are unstable,' as Tsing points out, and therefore 'we must watch [categories] emerge' in encounters and exchanges between people (2015, p. 29). In this way I

can see how terms like “Buddhist” and “tradition” are negotiated by people for particular purposes. Thus, while examining the Plum Village tradition as a world-making project, I take critical distance from labels and assumptions, and rather watch what emerges as people negotiate life and its challenges.

As I move on to the ethnographic body of this thesis, I shall briefly point out the foregoing discussion relates to the concerns of practitioners, and my aims and commitments. In Plum Village I find terms like ‘Buddhist,’ ‘traditional,’ ‘modern’ and ‘scientific,’ being exchanged in conversations on what it means to constructively deal with issues on personal, social and ecological scales. While carrying out research, I was struck that such collaborations take a central role in life at the meditation center.

Through the Plum Village tradition, then, people collaborated to find new directions in challenges times, ranging from personal to earthwide predicaments. With these findings I became compelled to research the directions that emerge in exchanges. I take inspiration from a similar intentional shift toward collaboration in the broader field of anthropology. The shift away from “unveiling” a cultural “essence,” Clifford points out, has made way for researchers to work with this collaborative question: ‘what can we do for one another in the present conjuncture?’ (1997, p. 87).

This involves a consequential shift in the very core of anthropological work: ‘what was previously understood in terms of rapport – a kind of achieved friendship, kinship, empathy – now appears as something closer to *alliance building’* (ibid). In the meditation center I find people actively building alliances to find new directions in our predicaments, and I join this work. As Ingold (2017) points out, the core purpose of anthropology is education, and in this case study with the Plum Village community I learn about new ways to relate to our environment, and to conduct ourselves – personally, politically, economically – in the world.

Like Tsing (2015), who followed a mushroom, I follow meditation instructions and find, in fact multiple, ‘gift[s] – and […] guide[s] – when the controlled world we thought we had fails’ (p.2). Gifts, guides and alliances form the foundation of the stories I tell in the three chapters that now follow.

3. ARRIVALS

On a sunny afternoon early in April 2019, a public bus rolled into the town center of Sainte Foy la Grande. I got up from my seat as the bus came to a halt. The rumble of its motor ceased, leaving the town quiet save for birdsong. About 40 passengers stepped onto the curb, our hands and backs loaded with luggage. A little further down the parking lot stood eight minivans with eight people to meet us. Three had cleanly shaven heads and were dressed in brown robes. The rest of the welcoming party dressed in t-shirts and jeans, and were not bald. We all mingled, shook hands and chatted. Having loaded the luggage in the back of the minivans, we had a 15-minute drive ahead of us to Plum Village's Upper Hamlet.

I sat in the front with the driver who had introduced himself as Filippo. He wore denim jeans and a loose green shirt with short sleeves. He smiled warmly when we introduced ourselves. His face, with a rough and sun-browned skin, immediately struck me as friendly. 'Such a nice sunny day in Spring,' Filippo said in English, 'with the grass all green and the trees blossoming so beautifully!' He told me he was Italian and that he had initially come to the meditation center for a two-week retreat. That was four years ago – Filippo had stayed on in his caravan and never left, except for periodical visits to family in Italy.

I would soon meet more people who stayed on for a year or longer – a group of about 30 people who were collectively referred to in the community as 'long terms.' This group was distinct from 'short-terms' – the five men with us in the van, for instance, who would be staying for a week's retreat. Groups of short-terms changed with each retreat, totaling over 10,000 people passing through Plum Village each year. About 300 'monks' and 'nuns,' or, taken together, 'monastics,' had ceremonially ordained in the Plum Village tradition after having renounced personal possessions like bank accounts and property. Generally, everyone in the community was referred to as a 'practitioner.' Long-terms and short-terms were 'lay' practitioners, as distinct from monastics, who dressed in brown robes and kept hair on the head shaved. 'Aspirants' were dressed in grey-blue robes and were not to shave on the head until completing a year trial period to become monastics. While aspirants (several men and several women while I was in Plum Village) were instructed to remain in the meditation center throughout the year, monastics, to my surprise, often traveled internationally.

As the van approached our destination, my eyes were drawn to the window and I watched the verdant green landscape of France's Dordogne – a rural region characterized by rolling hills and fields lined with neat rows of grapevines for wine production. Filippo made

conversation while I listened and nodded occasionally. 'Many monastics are away these days,' he remarked at one point. He spotted my sudden spike of interest and added: 'they travel a lot! The monks and nuns are in high demand and have to choose carefully how they spend their time.' Filippo explained that 'monastic teachers' were regularly away from Plum Village to lead retreats elsewhere, answering the demand for mindfulness teachings on each of the five continents.

I was surprised to hear about all these travels. Having read about the meditation center, I was already expecting to be joining an international crowd for retreats in France's Dordogne. Yet until my arrival I had been unaware of the travels of monks and nuns, who I had assumed were mostly sedentary residents. I soon learned that most monastics actually "resided" periodically in any of ten affiliated meditation centers worldwide[21]. Moreover, those who were appointed 'teachers' (mostly senior monastics) were often called upon to lead retreats elsewhere, such as at request of various public and private organizations.

Thus 'lay' practitioners (whom I will refer to as 'practitioners' from here) come together with monks and nuns (whom I also consider among practitioners, and in specific cases refer to as 'monastics'). In the meditation center, each of us arrives with motivations and meanings in mind. We bring commitments (Tsing, 2000) to engage with the Plum Village tradition. Our specific purposes reflect the earthwide predicament of precarity (Tsing, 2015).

As I will show in this chapter, practitioners come to Plum Village from the contexts of ruin that spring forth from the dominant dualist ontology with its unsustainable practices of linear progress. We are looking for ways to deal with our concerns. Once arrived, practitioners mingle with monastics, engage in lively exchanges (Clifford, 1997), learn together and negotiate the possibilities of new ways to be in the world. This is the world-making work (Tsing, 2015) of the Plum Village tradition. I examine the work and outcomes of this process in chapters 5 and 6 respectively.

First, in this chapter, I show *what* is exchanged in terms of commitments. Why did we all travel to the meditation center, and what does it mean for us to stay? In the first section I examine what is at stake in our decisions to come. In the second section I show how we encounter an uncommon perspective of space and time, and a different possibility to commit to progress. In the third section I further examine this different commitment in terms of its perspective of 'home,' 'place' and what it means to 'arrive.'

[21] Two centers are near the capital city Paris, three in the United States and one each in Germany, Thailand, Hong Kong and Australia. A directory of these center is available at www.plumvillage.org

3.1 ON RETREAT

About 300 new arrivals gather near the entrance of 'Upper Hamlet,' the residence for monks that owes its name to its location on a hill. Downhill, about a 30-minute walk away is Lower Hamlet, and at 45 minutes by car New Hamlet, both of which are residences for nuns.

Our group of lay practitioners consists of single men and couples – we are meant to stay with the monks in Upper Hamlet. In a leisurely way, we all trickle in and out 'the registration office' – one of the smaller meditation halls that temporarily serves for 'office' purposes. Outside, the air is sweet with the scents of flowers and blossoming trees. Lively chatter arises from the various little groups of people scattered on the lawns and brick paths among rustic farm buildings.

After dinner, we gather again for our first 'exercise' – 'deep relaxation.' We walk into the 'big meditation hall' – a long, single-story building that is the largest structure in the Hamlet. Inside, the woody fragrance of the walls, roof and floor blends with a light trace of incense. At the back of the hall a monk sits calmly, smiling broadly. Speaking through a microphone, he guides us towards the neatly laid out mats to lie down on our backs, side by side. The monk instructs to pay attention to the physical sensations of breathing in our bodies. Everyone lies down, and the concerted sounds of breath become gradually slower and deeper. After several minutes, I hear practitioners from various sides snoring.

I too was glad to rest. I had gone through busy months in the city, mixing studies and work with orientation on my future career and what I might contribute to a world where economic, political and environmental situations feel precarious. The trip had been tiring too, spending the night in a bus from Amsterdam to Paris, then on two trains, a second bus and finally the minivan with Filippo. It felt good to relax my slightly sore back on the floor. When we all walked out of the hall forty minutes later, I felt less tense, less sore, and rested, as if I had taken a nap. Still, I was ready for a good night's sleep.

Considering the snoring, I was not the only one who appreciated the relaxation that evening. As I found over the months to come, it was not just from traveling that practitioners felt a need to rest. Common reasons to come to the meditation center involved 'stress,' 'exhaustion,' 'burn-out' and 'anxiety.' Practitioners spoke about minor and major experiences of 'worries' and 'crisis.'

Many expressed wanting to 'take a break' from 'busy life,' having been navigating various aspects of life with 'working hard' at jobs. 'I hope to learn some ways to deal with my

stress and busy life,' one practitioner said, echoing a common motivation. He explained his situation:

> I came because of stress from work and just generally being very busy, having two young children. My friend recommended to go here. I try to meditate at home but it doesn't really work for me. I need to get some training.

Aside from navigating busy lives, practitioners also experienced concerns more broadly with issues in the world. A woman in her late forties expressed having 'a lot of anger and worry about the world we are leaving to our children. With pollution, damaging the climate, and such.' A man in his late sixties spoke about having recently retired from working as a financial analyst at the European Central Bank. He expressed now feeling anxious about 'what is happening in the world and with the economy. I'm afraid what will happen in the future, with all this social change.' He wondered: 'will I get my pension from the government?' In Plum Village he sought an opportunity 'to calm down and rest.' However, 'relaxing' was 'hard,' he found: 'I can't sit still. It's impossible to meditate.'

Many practitioners were committed to relieving or solving experienced troubles, while some expressed more broad interests in finding out how the Plum Village tradition might be of use in life. A man in his late twenties expressed concerns for 'the environmental situation' and 'where society is going.' He worked as an engineer for the oil and gas industry, he explained, and felt it was not the right place for him to work. These concerns made him feel 'overwhelmed' and 'not sure what to do.' He noted that 'if you look at history, all attempts at changing society for the better have failed so far.' When his manager gave him a book on meditation, he started delving into the topic and found Plum Village. He said he might find some solutions in the meditation center, at least to deal with the 'stress' he felt.

With each our unique stories, we often shared common experiences of what I have described as the personal, social and ecological ruins of linear progress. We sensed precarity, and in navigating our various predicaments, each of us saw a reason to think the Plum Village tradition might help. To further understand how the Plum Village tradition became relevant to us, I have to consider in more detail what we encountered in the meditation center.

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Retreats in Plum Village usually involved a deep relaxation exercise on the day of arrival. A standard one-week retreat involved various collective activities as part of 'the regular schedule.' A typical day in Plum Village starts when at quarter-past five in the morning, the

low, ringing sound of a large iron bell, accompanied by chanting, signals wake up-time. Then, at six o'clock, practitioners silently gather at the main hall for collective sitting meditation – lasting typically around 40 minutes. The morning silence is lifted after breakfast, giving way to social activities. A typical day would proceed with a lecture, or 'Dharma Talk,' as it was generally called. Collective activities such as meditations and Dharma Talks normally took place in one of the big meditation halls that stood in each of the three Hamlets. On weekly 'Open Days,' additional practitioners arrived, which could get busy on days when more than 800 people gathered in one Hamlet for collective activities.

As part of mindfulness practice, the schedule involved a collective lunch (the first 20 minutes in silence), followed by a 30 minutes 'walking meditation,' or 'slow walking,' together in the gardens or surrounding forest (or, in case of rain, in the big meditation hall). During 'sharing' sessions in the afternoon, practitioners were invited to speak about personal experiences and concerns, relating to mindfulness practice or life in general. Varying per day, there would be an additional lecture, a ceremony or a celebration. The schedule is interspersed with 'free time' and ends with 40 minutes collective sitting meditation at 8 PM, after which silence is held until breakfast the next morning.

This schedule is relevant in light of its contrast with the 'mass meditation movement' that is associated with the term "vipassana" – a meditation style that has spread out from Burma (Jordt, 2007). With hundreds of centers worldwide, Vipassana[22] meditation retreats are the most popular in the world today. These retreats typically involve spending ten days in silence with each day 16 hours of sitting and walking meditation, interspersed with breaks for sleep, meals and instructions (Cassaniti, 2018; Cook, 2010).

Like Vipassana centers, Plum Village is part of a global meditation "scene," in which "Tibetan monasteries," located throughout the world, also take a prominent place. Those who come to Plum Village may experience various traditions and ascribe meanings comparatively. I encountered such comparisons both among "newcomers," who came to Plum Village for the first time, as well as those who had come multiple times. While certainly not all practitioner had experiences in different traditions, most had made deliberate choices of where to go on retreat. Why choose specifically to go to Plum Village?

Practitioners often described Plum Village comparatively as a 'more free' tradition, with a relatively loose schedule and few formalities. What did this freedom mean in light of

[22] The spread of Vipassana centers was mainly initiated by Satya Narayan Goenka and Mahāsī Sayādaw U Sobhana. Both were born in Burma and learned Vipassana meditation there. Information and counts of affiliated centers are from www.dhamma.org and bmimc.org.au (retrieved on 16/06/2020)

the motivations of practitioners, and what was the perspective of teachers in Plum Village, who organize the center and its schedule? As I show in the next section, the schedule reflects an approach to mindfulness that differs from common approaches and expectations. The difference can be understood as a matter of time and space.

3.2 A MATTER OF TIME AND SPACE

One day just after a communal lunch I happened upon a comparative discussion of meditation centers. The dining hall at Upper Hamlet had been silent for 20 minutes until the ceremonial bell was struck to indicate the end of silent mindful eating practice. Like a beehive stirred with a sudden strike, people started walking around and the dining hall filled with sounds of chatter and clatter.

I remained seated with three men in their thirties, who began to discuss about Vipassana and Tibetan meditation traditions. The men related personal experiences from retreats in Spain, Brazil and Thailand. The men were quick to agree about Vipassana: long, hard days of silence[23]. This resonated how many more practitioners described Vipassana retreats – a struggle with seemingly endless time. Having 'done one' (or more) was considered a victory of sorts. When describing experiences in Tibetan monasteries, the men at our table said that 'a lot of time and importance is given to rituals, honoring deities, and dressing in particular ways,' and described 'spending a lot of time being very intellectual.'

In many cases, practitioners spoke about mindfulness and meditation practice in relation to notions of *time*. On a different occasion, a woman in her fifties described her experience of staying in a monastery in Tibet: 'you have to read and study a lot and then meditate for long periods of time. It is very difficult to get it… and very formal… it is disconnected from daily life.' In contrast, the same practitioner described the teachings of Nhat Hanh as 'more integrated and applicable to daily life. I don't have to go into my head and can just take myself, my body into the practice. I can really feel it here, you know.'

In Plum Village, time was not spent in silent retreat, nor was there any prescribed reading or study. While most appeared to be content with the way retreats were structured, on days with a particularly 'free' schedule, practitioners also wished for more 'structure' and 'formal meditation' sessions. In these cases, practitioners expressed feeling relaxed but also

[23] Descriptions of different meditation traditions here are, of course, brief generalizations for the purpose of adding some extra context to what practitioners say about Plum Village. I refer to more nuanced and in-depth descriptions of Vipassana that have informed my understandings (Cassaniti, 2018; Cook, 2010; Jordt, 2007).

lax – indicating that there was 'too much free time' and too little opportunity for 'more practice.'

Monastic teachers, however, spoke differently about mindfulness in relation to time. A teacher once addressed the matter to a group of about forty short-terms who had arrived the day before. 'Some people say: "in Plum Village there's only a few meditations a day, there's not a lot of practice,"' the teacher observed. 'In fact,' the monk continued, drawing a cheerful smile: 'there's 17 hours a day to practice! In everything you do!' Mindfulness, he explained, can be practiced in all waking hours, and in any situation.

This approach to mindfulness differed from common approaches and expectations among practitioners. As I will show, this difference is key to what practitioners learned in the meditation center.

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It was common among practitioners to think of mindfulness practice as requiring *making time*. 'Often,' a monk observed, 'I have the tendency to divide my day in boxes.' In such cases, he explained, he managed his time strategically 'with time for [mindfulness] practice, and time for doing other things,' contrary to his intention to practice mindfulness 'in everything' he did.

In this approach to mindfulness, the act of making time figures as a requirement for practice. In this understanding, practicing mindfulness is a matter of first making time and then spending it specifically on moments of practice in order to achieve a desired result (such as relieving or solving stress and worries). In such stories, mindfulness practice involves particular expectations. As one practitioner put it, '…normal life has not much space for practice. This week I really have the time.'

This mirrors commonly observed patterns of approaches to mindfulness in "modern" Western contexts that McMahan (2017) calls result-oriented and Cook (2015) calls self-work. Such patterns of 'modern' thought, as Tsing (2000) points out, comprise a linear way of thinking whereby 'activities can be situated in relation to stories of progress' (p.329). Based partly on this literature, before arriving in Plum Village I speculated that mindfulness may be understood as 'a practice of improvement.'

However, with many fellow practitioners in Plum Village, I encountered an unexpected approach to mindfulness, and by extension of improvement, in the way teachers spoke about these. In considering the difference between approaches, I do not mean to classify what is the "right" way in a moral sense. Here I am interested in the unconventional perspective on

improvement that teachers propose, and which is key to how practitioners learn in the meditation center, as I also show in the next chapter.

'We practice without any objective,' a monastic teacher said to an audience at the start of a retreat. 'Can you imagine? No objective, no goal. You came here and now this monk is saying there is no objective.' He smiled broadly and suggested: 'if anyone wants, you can leave right now.' The audience laughed, somewhat hesitatingly, in anticipation of what was to come. 'Yeah, no aim,' the monk continued,

> just enjoying the marvel of being alive! What has been going on for millions of years, throughout the universe. This energy of life has been transmitted for us to enjoy. Because of habit energies we forget about the wonder. So by stopping we come back to it. Marvel at the present moment.

The way teachers approach it, mindfulness is about relating differently to time and space, as I elaborate in the next section. This approach is not about objectives, goals or aims as these are understood in modern thought. In terms of world-making, and as I mentioned in the Introduction chapter, the commitment of teachers in the Plum Village tradition is 'other-than-modern' (see Escobar, 2018, p.19).

Consider, for instance, what teachers propose to do in 'free time' between scheduled activities, and on a 'Lazy Day,' with no scheduled activities taking place (usually one day in the week of a retreat). 'Being lazy,' a teacher explained, is 'an opportunity to practice doing nothing. Having no plans, not chasing after goals.' This was considered important: 'the art of laziness is to not be productive in order to discover fruitfulness.' He said 'the challenge is to wake up in the morning and not get engaged with projects,' and suggested, for example, to go on a walk without any destination – 'practicing being in the moment, with the breath, with the steps.'

Teachers in Plum Village are not committing to progress in a linear sense. The knowledge and experience that are offered in the mediation center, then, diverge from common expectations. This divergence, as I show in subsequent chapters, is key to the learning process that takes place in Plum Village, and the directions that emerge as practitioners negotiate this divergence. 'The experience [of travel] offers no guaranteed result,' I find with Clifford and fellow practitioners in Plum Village: 'often, getting away lets uncontrollable, unexpected things happen' (1997, p. 91).

What, then, do teachers commit to? As I show in the next section, teachers do express objectives. The way teachers approach it, mindfulness practice is supposed to enable a kind of progress whereby one becomes free from expectations.

3.3 ARRIVING

I came to Plum Village to learn about its Engaged Buddhism. How did people in this tradition become engaged in the world? I was looking for directions: where were people going? During my first days in the meditation center, I found some tentative directions on signposts.

As I walked around in the gardens and forest at Upper Hamlet I encountered little wooden signs, hand-painted with calligraphies in black ink. One stood along a path in the forest: 'are you here?' it inquired. Further on my walk I saw a second sign: 'I have arrived, I am home.' While gesturing to my initial questions, the signs caused me to question further: why had people placed these signs, and what did it mean to these people to have arrived and be home?

Later during my stay I came across a poem, written by Thich Nhat Hanh[24], in which the words of one of the signs appeared again: 'I have arrived / I am home / In the here and in the now / I am solid / I am free / In the ultimate I dwell.' These lines, I later found, were often sung collectively in Plum Village, and teachers said such songs served 'to help us cultivate joy and remember to be mindful.' This particular poem by Nhat Hanh relates to what teachers called 'the practice of arriving.'

'Arriving,' in this sense, means 'to stop,' when 'we are constantly running to the future, or dwelling in our thoughts about the past,' a teacher explained. 'The practice of arriving, or stopping,' he said, 'helps us to take a break […] and to return home to the present moment.' In this description the notion of practicing without an objective is reflected: 'marvel at the present moment,' as the teacher described above. 'You do it to be really there,' a teacher explained, 'you can practice everywhere, not just in a practice center.'

In this understanding, "home" takes on a meaning not as a place that we leave, but as a state of mind that we can 'return' to regardless of where, or when, we are. The practice of arriving is based on a perspective of 'nonduality' (Nhat Hanh, 1987, p. 45) wherein one can practice mindfulness in any moment, without making time or going anywhere. In contrast, the

[24] This song was considered a "classic," and I heard being performed at every retreat. Lyrics and recordings of several "Plum Village songs" are available through https://plumvillage.org/series/songs/ (latest accessed on 19/06/2020)

idea of making time and getting away from busy lives in order to practice mindfulness is a dual view, because it imagines a separation between time for practice and time for "other" activities.

'We arrive in the here and now,' a teacher explained, 'and we enjoy being at home with our breath.' Breathing is central to mindfulness practice in Plum Village, as I will elaborate on the role of breathing in the next chapter (also see the meditation instructions that I described in the opening Vignette to this thesis; chapter 0). Here I am concerned with the commitment behind 'enjoying' and 'being' with the 'breath' without an objective.

This is not the 'forward march' of progress whereby one commits to a specific aim, to get or do something, while assuming a timeline that leads to a particular destination (see Tsing, 2015, p. 21). Instead of going forward in a straight line, arriving involves connecting to the cyclical rhythm of the breath. Rather than setting a specific aim, one connects to the experience of being in the present. What is this commitment to 'being present' supposed to do?

In the Introduction chapter I quoted Nhat Hanh to say that 'nothing is as important as my peace, my joy.' In the Engaged Buddhism of the Plum Village tradition, mindfulness practice is the basis of peace work. 'It is with our capacity of smiling, breathing, being peace that we make peace,' writes Nhat Hanh (1987, p. 18). Thus, this kind of engagement springs forth from a capacity to experience joy and peace.

The connection between being and making peace is founded in the ontology of 'interbeing' – a nondual, or holistic, view of connections between oneself, fellow human beings, and the world. Also in the Introduction to this thesis, Nhat Hanh says that in 'our world situation' of various crises, it is essential 'to see clearly.' Therefore, he says, 'perception is very important for our well-being, for our peace' (p.48). With experiencing joy and peace, an important aspect of arriving is to perceive holistically.

'We stop to look deeper,' a teacher explained, and provided an example:

> …you are sitting here at Plum Village, in a room with people around you. You are also in France. If you look more deeply, you see Vietnam is also here. […] The architect who built this hall is from France, his father from Vietnam. When you understand all those things, you see deeper and realize many places are coming together here. We are also sitting on planet earth.'

Thus, to stop, or arrive, with mindfulness practice, is considered the basis of seeing interbeing. This is considered to be of crucial importance for making peace, as Nhat Hanh points out: 'we have to perceive our political and economic systems correctly in order to see what is going wrong' (1987, p. 48).

With its commitment to 'being' and 'seeing,' this approach to mindfulness aims to make a better world; it is about a kind of progress, which, crucially, is different from linear progress and singular expectations of improvement. With this approach, mindfulness practice is about becoming free from expectations and dual thinking, in order to work for progress through the freedom of interbeing. This freedom can be understood as what Ingold (2017) calls 'exposure,' as it involves 'a different relation to the present, one that calls […] for our undivided, unmediated, unqualified attention,' leading 'out into the world' (ibid).

The 'aim,' of mindfulness practice, a teacher explained, is 'an intention,' which, he pointed out, is not the same as 'an expectation.' He was welcoming a crowd of recent arrivals at the start of a retreat, and continued: 'I hope during your week here you touch a mind that feels open, loving, peaceful and curious […] that [state of mind] becomes your reference point.' He illustrated: 'My intention right now is to sit peacefully. It might not go in that direction. Am I willing to explore this present moment? With openness, with love, with kindness, with curiosity?'

Rather than pursuing an aim as a particular expectation, here an aim is understood as an *intention* that is worked towards while meeting anything that one might come across along the way. Mindfulness, then, is about 'meeting life,' said the teacher, who goes by the name of brother Hue Truc. To meet life is the commitment with which teachers work to present mindfulness practice in the Plum Village tradition. In the next chapter I discuss *how* the tradition works, as teachers present the method and functions of mindfulness and practitioners negotiate these, in practice.

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With the phrase *meeting life*, Hue Truc simply and accurately captured the meanings contained in the commitment that I call an alternative to linear progress. To meet life may seem paradoxical: it is to act intentionally without expecting a particular outcome. It is an act of arriving in the present moment by approaching this moment with openness, love, kindness and curiosity, and letting go of expectations. The *commitment to meeting life* involves both the intention of working for peace with mindfulness practice, and the underlying non-dual, or holistic, ontology of interbeing.

In this chapter I have discussed how monastic and lay practitioners commit to the Plum Village tradition. Practitioners are often committed to finding relief or solutions for particular personal, social and ecological concerns, or more broadly to finding out how the Plum Village

tradition might be of use in life. Our approach to mindfulness commonly involved managing time strategically, by making time and spending it in particular ways.

Yet we are met with a different approach as teachers commit to meeting life, whereby mindfulness practice is approached through the perspective of interbeing. Rather than requiring making time or going anywhere, teachers say mindfulness can be practiced throughout all waking hours, in everything we do, without what is commonly understood as an objective. This is the commitment to meeting life: to get connected with what is in front of us in any moment, with the intention to establish peace.

In the Introduction chapter I have discussed Nhat Hanh's peace work: seeing that there are no divisions between oneself and others in the world, this work is done for everyone, without taking sides. The commitment to meeting life is the basis of this peace work. How does this work take shape in practice, as it is taught and learned in Plum Village? In the next chapter I examine how mindfulness, according to teachers, might help us live with precarity, and how practitioners negotiate teachings with the reality of everyday life.

4. MEETING LIFE

Outside, the wooden veranda is strewn with shoes and sandals. A humming sound of many low, whispering voices reverberates inside the 'big' meditation hall at Lower Hamlet. The glass walls on each side are opened, allowing a breeze to pass through the wooden structure. Chairs and meditation cushions are neatly set in rows facing away from the entrance, and nearly all seats are filled for the 'Dharma Talk'[25] about to begin.

A large iron bell is struck three times and, as the ringing sounds reverberate, all the chatter fades into silence. At the far end of the hall, sister Lang Nghiem is seated on a cushion, her brown robes draped loosely over the floor. The nun is wearing square glasses on a round face with friendly, deep-brown eyes. Holding a microphone in between the palms of her hands, she bows to the audience and smiles. 'In our society,' Lang Nghiem says with an American accent:

> we have so many things that want to catch our attention. […] There are moments where there will be a lot of chaos. How can we calm ourselves, how can we center ourselves in the midst of this chaos?

In the previous chapter I have discussed the commitment to meeting life, whereby teachers approach the Plum Village tradition and its mindfulness practice with the nondual worldview of interbeing. What happens as teachers present this approach and perspective in the meditation center? Like sister Lang Nghiem above, teachers often related situations in society and the world to personal mindfulness practice. To calm ourselves in the midst of chaos, she explains:

> The easiest step is simply to come back to the inbreath and outbreath, and just feel it coming in and out of your body. And immediately, all of your thinking, judgement, angst about the chaos has a chance to calm down.

Having thus attended to the breath, Lang Nghiem explains, the practitioner can 'naturally' expand awareness outward to 'family,' 'society,' 'the environment' and 'the earth.' This outgoing effect of mindfulness practice, as teachers explain it, is key to understanding its importance in the Plum Village tradition. Lang Nghiem points out the key sites where mindfulness is considered to have effects: the physical body, social relations and the world as

[25] The lecture is available online via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxSqjqjHWgE (latest accessed on 03/07/2020)

a whole. In this and the next chapter, I look into each of these sites to see the world-making work that happens with the Plum Village tradition.

As Tsing (2000) points out, people produce effects with world-making projects through the more or less planned work of presentations as well as through unplanned negotiations. In this chapter I therefore look at how teachers explained the methods and functions of mindfulness practice, as well as at how these teachings are negotiated by practitioners. In the first section I show how teachers present the 'basic' method of mindfulness practice from the perspective of interbeing. In the second section I discuss the process of 'transformation' that teachers say is the function of mindfulness practice. In the third section I examine how both lay and monastic practitioners negotiate these teachings through exchanges and mishaps.

4.1 A MIND FULL: THE BASIC METHOD OF PRACTICE

'What means full and what means empty? In what sense can the mind be full? Full of what?' A teacher posed these questions demonstratively with a jesting manner to an audience at the start of a retreat. He giggled at his own inquiries, and answered himself.

An 'empty' mind, he said, is acting 'on automatic pilot.' Such a mind is prone to 'forgetting what we are doing and why', and 'causing suffering to our body by getting stressed.' Instead, he explained, with a mind 'full of awareness […] we are able to pay attention to what we are doing.' Paying attention is a way of 'becoming free,' he said. 'Free from what?' he asked rhetorically and, drawing a broad smile, again answered the question himself: 'free from being automatic.'

Teachers explained the freedom of interbeing as having a mind full of awareness, meaning to 'be aware' of 'what we are doing.' A teacher that I quoted in the previous chapter referred to awareness as 'enjoying the marvel of being alive.' To establish awareness is the foundation for the commitment to meeting life. Awareness is what is meant with arriving and with coming home, and it is established without particular expectations of gain. How is such awareness supposed to be established?

To understand the basic method of mindfulness practice as it is taught in the Plum Village tradition, I return to sister Lang Nghiem, with whom I opened this chapter. The 'basic training,' Lang Nghiem explained, is 'simply to be aware of your inbreath and outbreath. Just mere recognition […] it's not like you are thinking [about breathing…] you *are* your inbreath and outbreath. All you have to do is feel.' This is what teachers said the experience of 'becoming aware' is about: 'becoming one with' the object of awareness.

The basic method, Lang Nghiem pointed out, is derived from the Ānāpānasati Sutra[26], a text that is generally considered to be orally delivered by the Buddha. Lang Nghiem said that the text delivers instructions 'on the full awareness of breathing.' More specifically, she explained that awareness of breathing means to pay attention to the *bodily sensations* of breathing.

This is what teachers generally instructed: to sense the movement of air through the nose and the expansion and release of the belly and chest areas. Instructions would usually follow to 'smile' with the intention of becoming 'calm' and 'peaceful.' To do so was said to be conducive for awareness, to 'see clearly.'

Having thus established awareness with the breath, Lang Nghiem explained, awareness can then be moved outward. 'The breath,' she said, is 'a vehicle' to 'become aware of the body' (existing as a human being) as well as 'feelings,' (physical and emotional), 'mind,' (thoughts and mental states) and 'objects of mind[27]' (consciousness, or views and occupations in the world). The same basic instructions of attending to the physical body are considered to apply to any of these sites, each time to smile to the object of awareness, intending to become calm and peaceful, so as to become one with what is attended to.

This is how the freedom of interbeing, as cultivated through mindfulness practice, is said to lead out, to expose us to the world. 'The world inside is not other than the world outside,' Lang Nghiem says. The basic method of mindfulness practice is said to work for a gradually inclusive, outward movement of awareness. With it, teachers presented a practical way to 'break through imagined boundaries' and 'realize' the perspective of interbeing; to experience connection with objects of awareness. This is what is meant by practicing arriving and coming home to the present moment. It is to meet life with the intention to be calm, joyful and peaceful.

This can have important effects, teachers said. To understand how teachers explain the importance of meeting life, and how to make it work 'in everyday life,' I need to consider 'transformation.'

[26] Thich Nhat Hanh has translated this and more "sutras," or classic meditation instructions, to English (Nhat Hanh, 2012)

[27] She referred these 'four areas' to the Discourse on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness, or Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, which has been translated to English by Nhat Hanh (2006)

4.2 EXERCISING TRANSFORMATION

The basic method of mindfulness practice – breathing, calming and smiling – is said to work for what teachers call ‘transformation.’ This is a process of change that is set in motion with awareness both ‘inside’ of the body and ‘outside,’ beyond the seeming physical boundary of the skin. Teachers explained that transformation is for ‘difficulties’ to become ‘beneficial energies.’

In this understanding, difficulties comprise experiences of physical and emotional issues, mental issues, and issues in the world. These may include ‘pain,’ ‘stress,’ ‘anxiety,’ ‘trauma,’ ‘harmful habits,’ and ‘harmful views.’ Such difficulties can be transformed with awareness, teachers said, by ‘directing awareness to what is going on while letting go of distractions.’

As an example, one teacher pointed out that the emotion of anger can be ‘very helpful’ when transformed. Anger, he explained, ‘is an energy’ and potentially ‘a creative force’ that can be ‘used to get you moving and engaging productively with the things you care about.’ So too, teachers explained that all forms of difficulties, or ‘suffering,’ are in fact ‘helpful’ for transformation.

In this understanding, difficulties can be transformed, with awareness, into beneficial, creative forces. This is how mindfulness practice would lead to new ‘engagements’ and to ‘heal‘ and ‘change’ issues in the physical body and beyond. With this approach, practitioners were taught to engage with the issues we were concerned about. Concerns ranged from stress and tensions to burn-out and anxiety about socio-political and environmental situations, of which I discussed several examples in the previous chapter. Yet, transforming difficulties is a gradual process, a teacher remarked, and different difficulties may ‘come up’ one after the next over time, throughout the course of life. There was no promise of immediate, guaranteed success.

The process of transformation as presented in Plum Village holds parallels with the ‘re-engagement’ process that Cook (2015) has described. In her ethnographic account on mindfulness therapy for depression in British healthcare clinics, Cook found that practitioners ‘heal’ by ‘detaching’ from ruminative thought patterns and ‘engaging’ anew with the present moment (p.221). Teachers in Plum Village similarly describe movements of awareness, with ‘letting go’ and ‘directing’ it. Presentations of these processes, however, work differently.

In the health clinics, Cook found presentations of mindfulness alike to Foucault’s theory of *self-cultivation*. She observed that mindfulness was instructed in terms of European

Enlightenment ideals of improving an individual "self" through disciplined work. In contrast, as I have discussed above, teachers in Plum Village present mindfulness as an expansion of awareness towards the world.

Teachers explained the intention is for difficulties to transform into beneficial energies, both within and beyond the physical body. This transformation process thus works both inside and outside Foucauldian and European Enlightenment frames. As sister Lang Nghiem said, 'the world inside is not other than the world outside.' This is a holistic perspective on change.

Transformation applies to society, brother Hue Truc pointed out: '[in our society] we learn to distract ourselves and not to go into difficult emotions. Our society is built like that,' he explained:

> Not knowing how to deal with difficult emotions, people feel vulnerable and trapped. The first reaction is running away from it. By distracting the mind, watching TV or other kinds of entertainment. When you know how to take care of yourself, you don't need to run away. This is done by breathing, becoming aware of the body, experiencing the feelings as they are now. All human beings have this capacity to cope. Realizing this brings trust and freedom.

As in this example, mindfulness was often presented as the "unlearning" of personal and social patterns. Transformation was thus presented as a process for personal change within the broader context of the world. Realizing this capacity is said to lead to the freedom of interbeing – a state of being wherein one faces difficulties and thereby expands awareness to the world, as per the outward movement of the basic method of practice.

The meditation center, teachers said, serves the purpose of providing opportunities to learn to practice, in order for practitioners to apply practices after leaving the center. For this purpose, teachers provided instructions and exercises for 'mindfulness practice in daily life.'

In learning about mindfulness, 'one of the most important things to recognize,' a teacher explained, 'is the quality of the mind that makes an activity into a meditation.' This, as I have shown, is to be aware, in a curious, open way, of the body, feelings, mind and the world. 'We don't do very special things here [in Plum Village],' the teacher emphasized, 'we do pretty ordinary things. But we try to do them as meditation.'

For example, in an exercise for learning to see 'with the eyes of interbeing' a teacher explained about eating a carrot: 'notice the non-carrot elements; the sun, the rain, the earth.' He explained all these elements are needed for the carrot to grow in the soil. 'This is very

scientific,' he said, 'but we don't always pay attention to it. So we just eat out of habit, but it can be a profound meditation on interbeing. It is a wonder.'

Teachers provided such exercises, or reflections, as ways to practically implement theoretical insights and principles, such as awareness and interbeing. In this way, teachers worked to transform dualistic views where an "object" like a carrot would be seen as a self-contained, separate entity. This view was addressed practically, by becoming aware of 'habit.' What teachers also described as 'habit energies,' were suggested to be transformed through mindfulness exercises if a practitioner finds a particular habit to not be conducive to well-being.

In similar ways, teachers also worked to address the habits of what I have described in this thesis as commitments to linear progress, as in the following exercise. As an 'eating meditation,' a teacher explained that during a meal, practitioners could try to take a spoonful, then put the spoon down on the table and concentrate on the food in the mouth while chewing mindfully. He emphasized to practice chewing without preparing the next spoonful, while observing any tendencies to prepare the next bite before the current one is finished: 'this is the tendency to progress, to move forward,' he pointed out. The practice, then, is to be aware of anything that is happening in the moment, and to concentrate on sensations like touch and taste.

In addition to the various applied exercises, practitioners were always instructed about the 'bells.' Whenever a bell was rung in the meditation center, practitioners were meant to cease any activity, stand or sit silently and 'come back to the breath,' meaning following the in-out movement of breathing. This applied to pot-shaped iron bells as well as any of the smaller bells that were rung to indicate the start of collective activities. Also included were the high-pitched tones that resounded from clocks throughout the hamlet with the passing of every full and half hour. These continual nudges served as 'reminders' to be aware.

Thus, through explanations, instructions, exercises and nudges, practitioners were taught to practice mindfulness 'in everything we do.' Whether this can indeed lead to transformation, in terms of healing, new engagements, and change, I will discuss in the next chapter. Now, in the final section of this chapter I show how the learning process unfolds as practitioners negotiate the method, perspective and exercises I have so far discussed.

4.3 LEARNING

One morning I was in the kitchen with two monks to prepare breakfast for about 100 people. We had started a bit later than planned. I was loading a cart with boxes of nuts when the bell on the clock sounded: seven o'clock, meaning seven bell sounds. The monk beside me and I stopped our activities, as was the custom in the center. Then a door banged open and in charged the second monk, rushing with an empty cart. When he saw us his eyes opened wide as he seemed suddenly to realize he had not stopped while the bell sounded. Abruptly he halted. He stood, gaze down, for five more sounds of the clock. Then, avoiding eye contact, he continued his way, now at a slower pace.

As I found with many fellow practitioners, mindfulness practice is a process of constant learning. Even those who had ordained as monks, and had been practicing for many years, still rushed through bells for reasons such as being late to prepare breakfast. While clocks and bells nudged us throughout the day to remember being aware of breathing and not to rush, our learning happened through mistakes. Social feedback played an important role in the learning process, as the example of the rushing monk shows. While the sounds of the clock had passed him by, he did become aware of the situation when he encountered us standing still.

This is an example of practicing during what was called 'service meditation' (or 'working meditation') in which all practitioners are called to participate. This involves activities like maintaining gardens, washing dishes and cleaning indoor spaces. Teachers instructed the same principles I described in the previous section: becoming aware through the breath, smiling, and acknowledging difficulties if any arise. 'Service meditation is very interesting,' a monk in his late 20s reflected:

> because it is most close to normal life outside the monastery. It is an opportunity to observe your habit energies. For example, we often have the habit of rushing through work that we do not like in order to finish it quickly. We focus on the result, getting it out of the way.

Here the monk captures the intended learning process: to observe and transform habit energies. Service meditation was said to be an opportunity to 'bring up' habit energies, making it 'easier' to become aware of one's habits and associated feeling and emotions.

Observing habits, and learning socially became everyday matters for me throughout my three-month stay. Upon my arrival I was asked to join the cooking and dishwashing team. On my first cooking shift I was cutting bell peppers down one end of a 5-meter long counter in the

middle of the kitchen when our team coordinator brother Hue Truc walked up in front of me, opposite the counter. ‘May I?’ He pointed at the bowl with vegetables standing between us. ‘Yes, thank you,’ I said, and he started chopping on the opposite side of the counter. I struck up a casual conversation about food in the Netherlands. When I asked the monk a question about Italian food, Hue Truc responded: ‘actually, in the kitchen we do a kind of meditation. We try not to talk too much. We focus the mind, which tends to go many places. We try not to feed it with talk.’

‘Aah…’ I exhaled, and pulled up my eyebrows to grimace in apology. Then, gesturing down to the chopping board, I checked: ‘we just focus on the work then?’

‘Well, actually it’s about paying attention to the breath, our body, the environment, as we work.’ Hue Truc clarified. ‘We can learn to enjoy whatever we do while we do it.’ He smiled, I nodded, and we continued chopping in silence.

The social learning process in Plum Village often worked through continuous repetition of the basic method, which appeared hard to grasp in practice to me and many fellow practitioners. Over weeks of working together in the kitchen I learned both by repeated practice and by example of the monks I was working with. Filling silences by talking was not a very strong habit for me, yet not speaking helped me to remain more aware. The clocks helped me to realize how often I forgot to be aware of breathing. I was often distracted by thoughts, and consequently forgot about what was going on around me. I spoke about this with fellow practitioners, who invariably agreed: we very often got distracted. However, many expressed it was ‘nice’ and ‘helpful’ to ‘go with the flow’ of a group and expressed appreciating ‘working with everybody’ and ‘practicing together.’

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While many of us seemed to become gradually more comfortable with practicing in the meditation center, the most prevalent concerns that practitioners expressed were in relation to applying practices in daily life. As I have shown in the previous chapter, concerns often reflected personal, social and ecological issues that spring forth from unsustainable practices in society. During our time in the meditation center, many of us negotiated ‘going out’ to live our lives in the various contexts we would depart to. Negotiating this prospect was often done through discussions with teachers, who then provided advice. The opportunity for such exchanges held an important place in retreats at Plum Village. There was never a shortage of questions, and the discussions were popularly attended – the majority of attendees only listened.

In one such case, speaking publicly[28] in the big hall, a practitioner asked for advice on how to remain concentrated while being busy at his jobs. 'I work as a psychiatrist, as a therapist and as a researcher,' he said, 'sometimes I find myself running from the clinic to a therapy session, to the research institute.' While being busy, he said, 'I find myself falling behind on my deadlines and my projects. It affects my personal life. I am spending my home time on work as well. […] I feel like I am trying to catch up all the time.'

'I think what helps for things to fall into place is to consider concentration, and meditation, not as a thing, but to consider it as an ecosystem,' a teacher responded, illustrating: 'how I wake up, meditate, interact with brothers, are very intimately connected.' Conversely, 'to look at things as if they are separate,' he said:

> is creating a lot of trouble on our planet. Not just on a personal level in which we divide our life and we struggle to realize what we are aiming to. But also on a global level where we're doing a lot of damage to our planet, to our society, to our environment.

This example shows a practitioner negotiating how to cope with a busy life, which he personally experiences as problematic. The case is relevant in light of the critical view that mindfulness might work only to cope with the issues of a problematic capitalist system while perpetuating its underlying dysfunctions (see Purser, 2019b). Rather than recommending coping, the teacher proposes to see the matter in the holistic perspective of interbeing. This perspective, he indicates, reveals the 'trouble' that conventional ways of life cause on multiple scales.

Having thus suggested a shift in perspective, the teacher recommended practically to 'look more globally at your life. What kind of ecosystem, environment you are part of. What you do, what you surround yourself with. Ask yourself "what is my environment?" […] This is a contemplation,' the teacher concluded. His recommendations reflect the importance that Nhat Hanh ascribes to mindfulness in the perspective of interbeing:

> Our daily lives, the way we drink, what we eat, has to do with the world's political situation. Meditation is to see deeply into things, to see how we can change, how we can transform our situation. (p. 74).

[28] As part of a Questions & Answers session, where practitioners are invited to publicly ask questions to teachers. These sessions are published online (for this particular session, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Wq7KFXRBKM)

These are the meanings behind the practices that teachers work to bring across through presentations and exchanges; that any act is important in a holistic perspective, and that acting with awareness can help transform difficulties on personal, social and ecological scales.

However, many practitioners questioned the efficacy of this perspective. In one case a practitioner addressed a teacher saying ‘I am very engaged in movements for climate and social justice,’ and that he wondered what mindfulness practice could do for these movements. ‘Sometimes people come to Plum Village and ask why we're not protesting,’ the teacher remarked, then formulating this question: ‘what does mindfulness here have to do with what's going on out there, in the world?’ He explained:

> …we must not underestimate a person, a moment, a retreat. Every act of reconciliation contributes to peace. There's not a big thing out there and a small thing here. When you're eating your lunch mindfully, you never know who might be watching and thinking “wow, I wish I could eat like that!” And starts to eat like that. And eats like that at home. Don't think you have to do just important things. Be lazy and enjoy life. Sometimes we're forgetting why we're doing engagement work. It's to enjoy life. So, we can already do that. The main reason why we're in this crisis is because people don't know how to enjoy life. That drives our consumption habits.

Teachers often spoke in such ways about the perspective of interbeing and the principles of cultivating awareness and joy to address difficulties in the world. Practitioners often questioned such modes of engagement, and were skeptical about its applicability in daily life.

The following case illustrates this. ‘I’m not sure,’ a practitioner remarked to a teacher, ‘when people really directly experience [interbeing], do they literally see the earth and the sky in the food?’ He was referring to ‘eating meditation,’ as it was taught in the exercise with the carrot that I described in the previous section. With his question, the practitioner grappled with the perspective of interbeing, which he had heard explained, but wondered what it was like to experience.

A teacher responded that one time while mindfully eating porridge she suddenly realized that the grain was soft enough to eat due to thousands of years of cultivation. ‘I felt I was eating the gift of many generations,’ she said, ‘it wasn’t just my bowl of porridge.’ She added: ‘I cannot say that with every bowl of porridge I have been in touch with that insight.’ Moreover, she said:

> each one of us will have different insights about the food […] This is really important, because we practice mindfulness not just to be mindful in that moment. But to sustain our mindfulness with concentration so that we get an insight that liberates us.

With these remarks, the teacher indicated that particular outcomes manifest uniquely for each practitioner. This corresponds with the way teachers generally spoke about the outcomes of the practice. The cultivation of awareness, then, is understood as a process that leads gradually to insights and the freedom of interbeing.

As I have shown in chapter 3, the ontology of interbeing, with its commitment to meeting life, diverges from common expectations of progress. In this chapter I have shown how the Plum Village tradition works in practice through presentations and negotiations. As I found among practitioners in the meditation center, immediate ontological shifts were not readily apparent. Mindfulness practice often led to new challenges and issues for practitioners to deal with. Moments of distraction were frequent, even for monastic practitioners who had lived in Plum Village for years. Paying attention proved easier said than done as we negotiated applying the practices in our daily activities.

Our negotiations involved exchanges with teachers who in various forms repeatedly presented the perspective of interbeing and how it can be cultivated through the basic method of mindfulness practice. This method involves first becoming aware of the breath, and then extending this awareness to sensations in the physical body, feelings, emotions, mental states and outwardly to the world. Directing awareness to each of these sites, is supposed to transform difficulties that may be encountered, such as physical and emotional pain and habitual patterns. Transformation is aimed at "unlearning" personal and social patterns, thereby realizing a capacity to cope with difficulties, and the freedom of interbeing that leads out into the world.

While teachers thus instructed to cultivate awareness and meet life holistically, many practitioners negotiated the efficacy or applicability of such an approach in light of experienced realities. Far from being straightforwardly applied to actual life, teachings were constantly negotiated in practice. In the learning process, practitioners often encountered new concerns and issues. Yet, sometimes unexpected possibilities, and new directions also emerge, as I show in the next chapter.

5. DIRECTIONS

Three monks and about 40 long-terms gather one evening in one of the small meditation halls. I take a seat in one of the rows of meditation cushions that are set up in half-circles, theater style, flanked by two further rows of chairs. All seats are now occupied with people silently facing a projector screen on the wall. Tonight we are watching an interview with Joanna Macy – a scholar of Buddhism and a leading activist for peace and environmentalism in the "deep ecology" movement[29]. Deep ecology advocates for an ecological world view (emphasizing interconnection) 'to replace the […] modernist worldview' (Sessions, 2014, p. 106).

The screening is organized by three long-terms, who introduce the interview by explaining its context as part of a recent[30] online conference held by the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), a network of intentional communities for sustainable living. The topic of the conference, and by extension the interview, is "The Power of Community" in 'facing today's climate crisis.'

Macy (born in 1929) speaks about her 'Despair and Empowerment Work' (also known[31] as 'The Work that Reconnects') – an approach to activism that is based on what she calls 'spiritual practice' and community action. With such spiritual practices as meditation, Macy explains, we can embrace the despair that comes with our crises, cultivate a holistic worldview, and empower ourselves to take collective sustainable action. The work of cultivating 'the insight of interconnectedness' and 'building communities' is to lead to 'the Great Turn' – the emergence of a 'global compassionate society' and to reverse environmental breakdown.

Our audience this evening in the Transformation Hall receives Macy's words as an important plea. One of the monks points out that Joanna Macy's vision resonates with that of Thich Nhat Hanh and the Plum Village tradition, and everyone in the group responds with affirmative nods. In the interview, Macy addressed a need for personal, social and ecological change; her commitment resonates with the commitment to meeting life whereby the Plum Village tradition is presented as a project for holistic change. In both cases, the work is founded on meditation practices, which would lead to an ontological shift from dualism to holism, and consequently to sustainable action.

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[29] The deep ecology movement seeks environmental solutions by addressing personal and social purposes and values. The movement is associated with Carson's popular book Silent Spring, in which she 'demanded "a new way of thinking about the world"' (Sessions, 2014, p. 106).

[30] The conference was held online in February 2019. The interview with Macy is available through the official website of the conference. (see: https://summit2019.ecovillage.org/slp/joanna-macy/)

[31] Macy's home page provides a more elaborate description (see: https://www.joannamacy.net/main)

Do such promises of ontological shifts and sustainable actions take shape in practice? In this chapter I examine if, and in what ways, the world-making work of presentations and negotiations with the Plum Village tradition leads to new directions among practitioners. As (Tsing, 2000) points out, to see what emerges out of world-making projects, requires examining how people experience 'questions and dilemmas' and formulate visions. Through such experiences and formulations, I find direction to take shape in open-ended concerns, further negotiations, and changes.

Because the meditation center is a site of active exchanges, directions often emerge in collaborations. Collaborations may involve shared concerns, visions, values and practices for directions in our predicaments, as in the case above where practitioners encountered figures like Macy, or movements like deep ecology and GEN, beyond grounds of Plum Village. Taking from Tsing (2000, 2015), collaborations, as I use the term here, involve unexpected encounters.

In discussing emerging directions in this chapter I do not mean to imply that the Plum Village tradition or its meditation center is the only factor that contributes to the directions that practitioners find. Indeed, often unexpected collaborations both within and outside of the meditation center, are an important part of the work that happens for practitioners. By coming together, we also work together, exchanging experiences that we have accumulated throughout our whole lives.

In the first section I address what is at stake in the directions and changes that might flow out from mindfulness practice. I discuss critical concerns in relation to the story and vision of the current abbot of Plum Village. In the second section I discuss directions that emerge for practitioners who experience changes of mind. In the third section I discuss the stories of practitioners whose minds are not (yet) made up.

5.1 COPING STRATEGY, OR MORE?

In considering the relevance of emerging directions, it is useful to consider how indeed 'mindful meditation may be the enemy of activism,' as (Purser, 2019b) suggests in his article in the British newspaper the Guardian, and his book titled McMindfulness (Purser, 2019a).

Purser expresses the concern that mindfulness practices may perpetuate the harmful consequences of capitalist economics by helping people cope with these consequences. This view questions the possibility that mindfulness practices could lead to any fundamental social change. As I carried out this research, acquaintances expressed to me similar concerns and questions. Can the Plum Village tradition provide solutions, or might its practices lead only to

coping with problems while perpetuating our predicament? Such considerations provide useful pointers while examining what happens in practice, as I do in the following sections.

To better understand the position of Plum Village teachers in light of the general critique on the global phenomenon of mindfulness, I brought up Purser's article in a private conversation with the principal abbot of Plum Village, brother Phap Huu. A monk in the Plum Village tradition since age thirteen, Phap Huu is a short, youthful looking man in his early 30s. When I brought up the article, he responded: 'ah, yes! McMindfulness!' Familiar with the article and author, he reflected there are now many forms of mindfulness, with an increasing amount of teachers. 'If it's real mindfulness they offer, it allows people to explore deeper,' Phap Huu said.

I asked what he thought about the idea that mindfulness might be taught in a way that it leads to coping without fundamental change. 'Whatever people offer is great,' Phap Huu responded, 'every section of society is playing its part.' There is however 'a risk,' he remarked: '…becoming a leader without a community is very dangerous. It can corrupt your mind. Don't be the only teacher. And if you really want to teach mindfulness, offer it from the heart. Not for money, fame or power.'

This response came as a surprise to me. I had not considered how the global spread of mindfulness practices might affect teachers. I asked what drives Phap Huu to work as a teacher and abbot in Plum Village. 'The foundation,' he said:

> is to be a free person, in order to be a refuge for others. I wanted to be a monk to take care of my family, who suffered. Then I found Thay [Thich Nhat Hanh] and was touched deeply by how he is caring for the world. I want to take care of many people, so I have to become free.

I asked what he means by caring for people and the world. 'We have to take care of community,' Phap Huu said, then emphasizing: '…no one person can do that.' I remembered an earlier Dharma Talk, when he had said 'we have a lot of work for the future,' referring to the climate crisis and working for peace in the world. 'We need not just monks,' he said, 'happy teachers, happy couples, happy parents, happy politicians, happy farmers will change the world!'

I asked Phap Huu what he would suggest people do for the world. 'The most important thing to do,' he said, is 'the most basic practice,' referring to what is taught in Plum Village. This, he said, is 'essential to take on the challenges of the future. For practitioners to start creating peace and happiness for themselves.'

Phap Huu says that he is motivated to attain a kind of freedom that allows him to care for people and the world. As I have shown in the previous chapter, teachers in Plum Village work to present mindfulness as a practice to cultivate such freedom.

As a practice of freedom, mindfulness can be understood as what Tsing (2015) calls a livelihood strategy. In the Background section of the Introduction I have described how Nhat Hanh and fellow practitioners established the Plum Village meditation center. Having grown up in the meditation center since age thirteen, for Phap Huu mindfulness worked to become concerned about people and the world. He now furthers the strategy as abbot and teacher to build community and present mindfulness practices as an approach to activism. What more directions emerge, and whether practitioners in Plum Village find coping strategies or more, I discuss in the remainder of this chapter.

5.2 CHANGES OF MIND

The story of Tim is directly relevant in light of the questions raised in the previous section about what kinds of changes might happen among practitioners in Plum Village. Born in Germany and now in his late 20s, Tim says he is 'not really living anywhere now.' He has been traveling around Europe and India for a few years, since he quit his job. Tim mostly volunteers on ecological [32] farms (that work with principles of ecological balance) to learn about sustainable farming practices, and receives food and accommodation in exchange for his work.

I ask how he ended up in Plum Village. 'It's not my first time here,' Tim says, 'I first found a book by Thich Nhat Hanh when I was looking for a way to deal with stress.' Tim completed a master in Finance and Business and then started working at an investment fund. 'At work I was stressed,' he says, 'I had this tight feeling like when you're only breathing in the chest. I realized something's wrong.' Tim started practicing mindfulness and went for a retreat in Plum Village. 'It helped with the stress,' he says, 'when I got back to the office I felt much more at ease with things. It wasn't as bad as before.' I nod, then inquire: '…and you quit later, you said?' Tim now laughs out loud, reflecting:

> …right! Yeah I did. I guess I felt a bit better, but then I stared seeing the whole purpose of the work. Getting people to consume more. The company was just going for the

[32] Tim used the term "permaculture" – a holistic design system that is most popularly applied as a sustainable model to grow food. The principles of permaculture are meant by its founders to serve the ultimate aim of designing societies based on the regenerative patterns found in ecosystems (Mollison, 1988).

> money, you know. I couldn't be part of that anymore. I don't believe anymore in just making money.

Tim found a new purpose in ecological farming, meditation practices, and the relation between 'spirituality and ecology.' In light of questions about fundamental change, for Tim, coping was a first experience, making him feel 'more at ease with things' at work. Soon after, however, he 'started seeing the whole purpose of the work' in a bigger picture. He felt uncomfortable, which led him to change his mind, and quit.

The story suggests that practitioners in Plum Village may experience various effects at various points in time, and new directions may emerge gradually and consecutively. Tim's case also shows how the practice can work on feelings and emotions as well as broader views in relation to the world. In the process, his occupation in Business and Finance made way for spirituality and ecology, and a wish for sustainable action emerged, albeit indeterminately.

While Tim engages with new, wholesome directions, this does not mean he has definitively found his way. He wants to 'stop traveling for a while and find an occupation,' but is unsure what to do. Meanwhile, more new directions emerge. In our conversation Tim remarked that he has recently been 'applying the practice to be conscious of eating, dealing with my tendency to over-eat.' Having come back to stay in Plum Village for five weeks this time, he remarks that 'being in a community here really helps me to be moderate, not sticking out by over-eating.' This is a new avenue where Tim is negotiating a personal issue in collaboration with the community.

Mindfulness practice itself figured importantly as part of new professional directions among those who worked as "coaches," "trainers," "consultants," and "teachers." How do these "mindfulness professionals" negotiate directions, and with what apparent outcomes? Clara, who is in her late 30s when we meet, says mindfulness practices are central to her work as 'innovation consultant.' She tells me mindfulness takes shape in her 'leadership' approach of 'being humble, serving others and empowering them.' Practically, she says this involves 'being able to hold the space and transmit that energy to the team.'

This is the practice working as exposure: Clara speaks about cultivating an ability, or energy, of being present and to 'transmit that' outwardly, to the people she works with. This is suggestive of the pattern of 'outward moving awareness' from 'the physical body' to 'the world,' as teachers explain it (in the previous chapter).

Moreover, mindfulness figured importantly, Clara says, in making the shift to her current career by 'giving up a life that didn't make me happy.' Through mindfulness practices, she learned about 'listening to myself' and 'putting happiness first in every decision.' By doing so, Clara started 'seeing,' for instance:

> what was present in me after watching tv-shows. There were more fearful thoughts, some nightmares, and I wanted to watch the next one and the next one. I could see that so I decided to be more careful with what I watch.

Then, Clara began to gradually examine 'everything I do,' and 'finding a way to be more aware and compassionate.' By thus cultivating an ability to see and respond to feelings, emotions and habits, she found a new way to act in the world, and perhaps more 'freedom' as Plum Village teachers put it. Clara created a livelihood as an innovation consultant to apply these same principles of mindfulness outwardly in the world.

Her example shows 'mindfulness in daily life,' as it is encouraged in Plum Village, working gradually to include more aspects of life. Further along that process, Clara says she learned to act with 'awareness' and 'compassion' outwardly by 'showing that [action] to other people. Because they might not know how to or just hadn't had a chance to become aware.'

As a recommendation, she remarked: 'see if you can water good seeds, also for yourself.' In her consultant work, Clara communicates this approach to life: 'enjoy the journey, work on yourself, hold the vision and trust in yourself.' Her recommendations reflect the approach that teachers in Plum Village communicate, namely to hold the intention of peace and compassion, and working towards that in the world as an extension of cultivating 'my peace' and 'my joy.'

As in the cases of Clara and Tim, negotiations with directions often stretched over many years, evolving gradually over time. Such ongoing patterns of change not only become apparent in stories of changing professional occupations; monastics also told stories of gradually changing directions. One afternoon I walk around Upper Hamlet with a monk in his late 30s when he told me about the time when he decided to end his academic career in Germany and ordain in Plum Village.

A few years before he was working as a PHD candidate in computer science. Meanwhile, he practiced meditation and made visits to Plum Village, until finally deciding to make the change. 'I am finally relieved of all those worries for making money and creating a life on my own, finding out what to do with my life,' he says:

> In society we have all these ideas about choice. That you can choose anything, any life you want. So there is all this pressure. You have to make choices, it's all up to you. And you always have to attain something.

In his case, the monk connects experiences of worry and pressure to a social analysis; seeing a society where notions of individuality, rational choice and linear progress prevail. Critical of such notions, the monk found a new direction in Plum Village. What, then, is this new direction about?

The implications of the change only became apparent to the monk gradually, and are in his experience still taking shape: '…more and more it's becoming very clear to me that this [living as a monk] is what I have to do.' We stop walking as the monk is now speaking enthusiastically:

> In Plum Village I have come to realize that it's really not all about me. Yes, I choose to be here, to be a monk. But there are many conditions that have led me to this. The seeds have been sown long ago, by my parents, my ancestors. I am really acting through what has gone before me. With that I don't mean to say I can just be passive and everything will happen by itself. No, I can be active and engage, and it matters. But I'm not doing it alone. It's not just me, the hero, who is doing everything. I am part of something much bigger.

The story illustrates an ontological shift. The view of oneself as an individual rational actor makes way for seeing oneself as part of a larger whole – as the notion of interbeing signifies.

The monk also points out what this means for his personal actions – that 'it matters' as 'part of something much bigger.' He explains what this entails for him practically:

> I have become very grateful, actually. I am not taking the blame, guilt or pride just for my own actions. I realize all the conditions that have contributed. Realizing that, I can utilize all that energy to go in a direction. I take refuge in the sangha [community], in my ancestors. Then the whole illusion of choice falls away. I just have to do the practice. If I do that, I am on the right path.

The matter of negotiating a direction, here, happens both in a personal and a more expansive view. Whereas the choices to quit a career, become a monk, and practice mindfulness matter on a personal level, in a more expansive sense these choices and actions happen as part of a communal and ancestral direction where many 'conditions' contribute to what happens in the

world. This corresponds with how teachers explain action from the perspective of interbeing; that personal agency is not excluded from, but rather part of larger wholes.

I conclude this section with the story of Femke – an example of important change that can occur as we negotiate a shift away from dualist thinking, and actions that neglect inherent connections in life. Femke is in her late 20s and tells me she works in a PHD position at the university medical center in Leiden, a city the Netherlands – the same university where I am enrolled. We speak Dutch. Femke researches the connections between psychic disorders and physical issues. She says connections between the physical body and the mind are often ignored in the field of medical science.

I ask what brings her to Plum Village. Femke explains she first came to Plum Village in her early 20s, as she was searching for ways to address personal issues with trauma and depression. She had been experiencing rheumatic pain throughout her body since she was 12 years old. 'Never knew what it was, what to do,' Femke says, 'doctors didn't know either. They said it was "between the ears." Then I started meditating and when I came to Plum Village I really started to heal.'

I ask how the healing became apparent to her. Femke says after years of trying various treatments, she experienced decreasing pains since her first visit to Plum Village, and continuing since then. 'The practice, the community, the acceptance of my situation and the pain, all helped a lot,' Femke says, 'it's the total package that has very beneficial effects. And I am not the only one. There are many stories.'

Femke thinks her trauma and depression are connected with her rheumatic pain. In her experience since she was 12, for years she and her parents did not know why she had these issues, nor what to do. Doctors concluded Femke could not be treated because her issues were "between the ears." Indeed, it seems to Femke now that her mind has been involved with her physical pain. In Plum Village she found both a practice and a community that acknowledged the connection between body and mind, offering her a practical path for holistic action, as well as 'acceptance.' What specifically caused her pain to decrease? For Femke, this ceases to be a relevant question, as she sees the connections and attributes 'beneficial effects' to 'the total package.'

In her PHD research, Femke is studying similar cases, with issues that are related to those she has been experiencing herself. Her research involves gathering large volumes of data from primary care doctors and health clinics all over the country. She collaborates with data scientists to process information on mental and physical health issues, and to evaluate the

connections. ‘The connections may be crucial,’ Femke speculates, speaking from her own experiences. ‘I feel I want to do something for all the people who are confused, like I was, and who don’t know what to do.’

So far, for Femke, experiences of healing in Plum Village inspired a livelihood, merging mindfulness with an academic career. With her research work, Femke brings a holistic perspective to the medical sciences, and reaches out to people with personal findings from within her own body and mind.

What further actions and effects will lead out from this work, remains to be seen. In each of the cases I have discussed in this section, new directions are open-ended. Yet these stories reflect ontological shifts whereby practitioners begin to perceive and live in the world more holistically. Moreover, motivations for wholesome, sustainable actions emerge, and to various extents already take shape.

However, stories of viable (albeit open-ended) new directions are exceptions rather than the rule as far as I found among practitioners in Plum Village. More commonly, negotiations were unresolved, leaving practitioners faced with challenges and concerns. Even in such cases, relevant directions emerged in the forms of speculative visions and undecided paths of action.

5.3 MINDS NOT MADE UP

I have so far examined examples of practitioners who to various extents experienced changes of mind. This led to more expansive worldviews, and actions for engaging with social and ecological concerns. While indeed many practitioners negotiated such concerns, most remained unsure about what to do or where to go next. In the stories below I discuss cases of practitioners whose minds were not made up. These stories are important to understand the work that happens with mindfulness practice in Plum Village, and its relevance in our predicaments.

‘Going back out there’ to ‘normal’ and ‘busy life,’ ‘outside’ of Plum Village were prevalent concerns, and topics of active discussion, among short-terms and long-terms alike. These practitioners often wished to live ‘simpler’, less ‘stressful’ and more ‘ecological’ lives. But how? Many thought this would be a challenge.

After one of the retreats on ‘departure day,’ I speak with Ben, who is in his late 20s and, having stayed for eight consecutive weeks, is now about to return to Belgium. ‘Here it’s all nice, peaceful, kind of a bubble,’ Ben observed, ‘…out there it’s harder. I hope I can keep this peace when I’m going back.’

In this case, negotiating the intention of peace turns out to be problematic in practice. In his negotiation, Ben is concerned with the challenges that he may meet by moving to a familiar environment. He explains his dilemma about which path to follow next: 'I've tried to have a nine-to-five job but it didn't really work, this normal lifestyle. In Plum Village I see there is an alternative, of being in a community, close to nature. But I'm afraid not to follow the norms of society. I don't want to be alienated from society.'

Ben does find new potential directions in peaceful, communal living 'close to nature.' However, these findings for now result only in throwing up new concerns with being 'alienated.' This leaves Ben unsure at present, not knowing what lies ahead, nor whether the negotiations that emerged in Plum Village will be of any help in life.

Similarly undecided about her path is Eva, who is in her late 30s and came to Plum Village 'to relax. I am very tired from my job, she sighs:

> not even sure if I want to do it anymore. In fact I'm thinking to quit. It's very stressful, you know. And not very meaningful anymore. And living in the city… I'm thinking to move out of my apartment. Get a little house outside of Barcelona. I'm in kind of a midlife crisis, haha! So yeah, I came here to calm down, reflect on my life, what I want to do.

Eva had not yet decided about her job, which is in a hospital. In her case, Plum Village serves the purpose of relaxation and reflection.

Eva is seeing issues of stress and a lack of meaning in relation to her work and life in the city. She tries to negotiate a decision by staying in Plum Village. She envisions a potential new direction away from her current career, toward an ecological occupation, and a less stressful life: 'perhaps I'll become a gardener,' Eva ponders, 'I've got this great CV you know, good education, a PHD. But I really feel like I just want to grow some plants.'

Ecological ambitions also merged with mindfulness for John. When we speak, John is in his mid-30s and 'running a welding firm in London.' It is his first time in the meditation center, and I speak to him a few days into his stay.

'Because of this mindfulness thing,' he observes, 'I'm thinking the welding is not what I want to keep doing.' I ask about his thoughts, and John says he is now thinking to start 'building tiny houses to rent out. Because that's sort of the eco way we should go. You know, simple living, out in nature.' His eyes light up as he gestures with both hands in the air as if he

is showing me the inside of his imagined houses: 'then I'd put some books in there about mindfulness, from different authors. To spread the word, you know. More people should know about this stuff!'

For John, thoughts of a new direction emerged early in his stay at Plum Village, because of mindfulness, he says. By strategizing a change of livelihood, John imagines using his construction skills to new purposes. In his vision, his contributions would shift from industrial work to an occupation that enables 'eco' living and spreading the word on mindfulness. His tentative strategy involves reaching out, to inspire more people in the world.

'Funny to think I almost didn't go [to Plum Village] at first,' John remarks. I ask how so. He was having doubts before leaving his home and business; neither he nor any of his friends 'had ever done something like a retreat.' His girlfriend eventually convinced John to 'just go and find out.' Now, with three days more to stay in the center, John is 'really inspired. I want to learn more, stay longer.' Thus his negotiations with Plum Village had already started before deciding to go. While going on retreat was uncommon in his social circle, John was moved when he read a book by Thich Nhat Hanh, and wanted to 'experience the real thing first hand.' The initial negotiation led to the next, while he stayed in Plum Village, and new potential directions emerged for his personal life and to inspire more people with the 'way we should go.'

A sense of undecidedness about directions was prevalent among practitioners, as I pointed out. Often in these cases, practitioners expressed confusion and anxiety in the broader context of world affairs, as for Fritz, who tells me 'global politics and economics are going to drastically change.' Fritz is concerned about what this might mean for his job and future life. He says he wants to learn about mindfulness 'to become flexible' and 'to prepare,' and considers how he might incorporate the practice in daily life and work.

Fritz works for a Swiss pension fund, managing investments. Rather tall and in his 50s, he wears a checkered shirt that he tucks into his pants, and his short, black-grey hair stands upright. Fritz speaks enthusiastically, often laughing amicably between his sentences. This is his first time in Plum Village, and he is staying for a week at the end of a three-month sabbatical during which he traveled in Germany and Thailand to visit 'Buddhist monasteries,' which 'intrigue' him. Next week on Monday he is going 'back to work.'

A few days later, I see Fritz in the morning after breakfast, sitting in a chair outside on the sunny lawn. He waves to me and gestures at the empty chair beside him, where I join him. This time he is not smiling nor laughing, and, frowning, looks a bit concerned. When I ask how

he is doing he leans over and tells about a dream he had last night. 'It was very weird,' he starts, 'I was at work with my colleagues. I had come back from my sabbatical and I greeted everyone, but there was no response.'

He leans in a bit further towards me and crunches his eyebrows. 'Nobody said anything to me, like they didn't even see me. I said "hi! How are you!" but nobody answered. They just looked through me, like I'm a ghost. This is weird, huh?' Fritz laughs nervously but cannot quite draw the corners of his mouth to a smile. 'Then I went to my boss. He seemed to see me, but called me by the wrong name… So strange, right?'

After a few seconds of silence I ask what he thinks this dream means. 'This mindfulness is great,' he replies, 'it can be very helpful. With family and friends, I think, but not at work…' I ask if he can explain. 'They'll think it's weird, they'll ask questions, think I'm brain-washed or something!' He laughs aloud, then concludes: 'but I like it. I like the practices.'

For Fritz, concerns with global political and economic affairs led to an interest in mindfulness as a potential strategy to cope with changes. In Plum Village he found the practices can be 'helpful.' However, preliminary negotiations to incorporate mindfulness at work resulted in worries, which became apparent in a dream. Like Ben above, Fritz worries about the influence of mindfulness in social relations, and being excluded.

His negotiations seemed to have evolved somewhat that same day when in the evening I hear Fritz laughing aloud and see him in the teahouse chatting with a man named Roger, who is in his 30s. I join the conversation as Fritz speaks about 'the modern world' and 'how fast things have been changing over the last decades, with technological advances.' Roger nods and agrees that 'life is going really fast now, with instantaneous global communication and 24/7 economic activity.' The men discuss whether 'all this rapid change is going in a positive direction,' and express feeling 'a constant high level of pressure and stress at work.'

How to 'translate the [mindfulness] practice to daily life and work?' the men wonder, and agree this is going to be a challenge for 'coming back' after this week. Fritz suggests that it would be great if at work it would become standard to have 'short moments of sitting meditation, even just at the desk.' He proclaims 'it should become normal for people to meditate at work!' and that he thinks this will happen in the next ten years. Roger nods enthusiastically in agreement.

In the morning I had encountered Fritz in a concerned state, shortly after his dream. He expressed worries about returning to his job and negotiating it with what he learned in Plum Village. In the evening he spoke more broadly about concerns in relation to 'the modern world' with Roger. The men, who had just become acquainted that week, found mutual concerns and

engaged in collaboration to question whether the modern 'fast pace' is 'going in a positive direction.' Fritz and Roger both expressed experiencing 'stress,' and negotiated possibilities for incorporating mindfulness at work.

In each of the stories I have shown in this section, practitioners hold unresolved concerns about what direction to take after leaving the meditation center. For these practitioners, negotiations with mindfulness practices often brought up new concerns and challenges. Fritz and Roger recognized the challenges that would be involved in applying mindfulness in the contexts of work environments. While these negotiations remained inconclusive, the men did come to recognize and discuss concerns together in Plum Village.

Collaboratively, Fritz and Roger engaged with experiences of stress and worries about the direction of society. This awareness of concerns may be a first step toward change, as it was in the case of Tim, who eventually decided to change direction in life. It is such awareness of oneself and the wider world that may be the crucial work of change, as teachers in Plum Village suggest.

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Beside what I have shown in this chapter, many more cases show that the harmful consequences of linear progress are recognized, and discussed, among practitioners in Plum Village. This, I would say, is helpful progress in our predicament, because it leads to a better understanding of our current issues and directions, and to exploring alternatives. As I have shown through various stories, to understand a problem is often the first step in acting to change the situation. For practitioners to imagine and experiment with new practices and directions is at the center of the work that happens through exchanges in Plum Village.

This may, or may not (yet) lead to action for fundamental, sustainable change. Considering the case of Fritz and Roger, meditating at work might very well lead to coping, and perpetuating underlying issues. Yet, based on experiences I have discussed in the previous section, there is also reason to suspect that more drastic changes might flow out from negotiations with mindfulness practice in Plum Village.

This is no evidence of fundamental system change as Purser (2019b) would have it. Yet the stories in this chapter do show that practitioners are concerned with, and can find, more than coping strategies. With the shift in values and perspective that occurred in the case of Tim (the first story in the second section), he could no longer be part of a 'company that was just going for the money.' With Tim, many practitioners expressed new ambitions for ecologically, socially and personally sustainable occupations. This suggests that practicing mindfulness, as

well as collaborating with fellow practitioners in Plum Village, may indeed lead to lasting change in the shape of ontological shifts and sustainable action.

6. TOWARDS RESPONSE-ABLE ANTHROPOLOGY

'If there's one thing I want you to learn in this course, it's that you have a lot of things to pay attention to.' With these words our university professor opened the beginning of the semester.

She was introducing a course on 'ethnographic research.' As we learned throughout the semester, the 'things to pay attention to' involve the connections between people on local and global scales, and the consequences of these connections: that anything, anywhere in the world, exists in an expansive web of relationships and exchanges. In chapter 2 I have elaborated on research approaches and methods that helped me study exchanges in Plum Village. Here, I address the additional help that I found as I participated in the daily routines in the meditation center. As it turned out, mindfulness practices proved helpful to keep track of the many things I had to pay attention to, while maintaining "curiosity" (Tsing, 2015) and becoming more able to respond. In this chapter I share from my experiences a view of how the Plum Village tradition can inspire the practices and ethics of research.

Anthropologists want to understand the complexities of social worlds. To do this, we do ethnographic work – to participate and observe in ways of life, and learn what is important to the people we spend time with (Emerson et al., 2014). Because our research primarily involves spending time in "the field" to learn what *emerges* as important to people, Liisa Malkki points out that anthropology 'involves less a subject matter […] than a *sensibility*.' (in Cerwonka & Malkki, 2008, pp. 162-163; my emphasis). For this reason, I propose, mindfulness practices are particularly relevant for anthropological researchers. Before I address this relevance, I will highlight some key aspects of what this anthropological sensibility is about.

To interpret social worlds, we get close to the people we want to learn about in order to do ethnographic work. Our interactive presence in the field enables us to gauge what is going on around us. To do so, Emerson et al. (2014) point out, 'the ethnographer needs to become sensitive to and perceptive about how she is seen and treated' and about what seems to be important to people (p.4). With this 'ethnographic attention,' the ethnographer is able to learn about social life through her own 'impressions' and 'reactions' (p.29). Therefore 'it is important to become aware' of one's own feelings, emotions and judgements in the situations we encounter, and to subsequently reflect on these, Emerson et al. conclude (p. 25). Awareness and reflection are what enable 'a sensitive ethnographer' to learn in social life (p.29).

Because sensitivity is so crucial in our research activities, the production of anthropological knowledge may be understood to take place in the entire body of the researcher. In this vein, Cerwonka & Malkki propose to regard 'affect and the body as

resources,' in addition to intellectual activity, for 'critical reason as a mode of analysis' (2008, p. 36). As researchers in the middle of social life, our bodies respond to and register what happens around us. Our work, then, is primarily improvisational, Cerwonka & Malkki, argue, as it unfolds in 'real time,' through 'a set of continually adjusted practices' (p.37).

Anthropological work thus relies importantly on improvisation, sensitivity and awareness of what the body registers in real time. A capacity for awareness and reflection contributes to developing understanding. To cultivate such a capacity, I found mindfulness practices in the Plum Village tradition to be useful. With these practices I learned to connect to my body and surroundings in real time, or the present moment. This is done by becoming aware of sensations in the physical body as well as feelings, emotions, thoughts, mental states and outward objects of attention, as I describe more elaborately in chapter 4. These are the sites where anthropological research work takes place.

Being thus aware helped me to recognize habits such as impatience, or rushing, that might have led me to miss out on what was happening around me. As an example of this I have shown a case of a monk, who became aware of rushing, in chapter 4. I too learned about my tendency to rush in the meditation center, as the following anecdote illustrates.

One morning after breakfast I stood while still chewing on my last bite. I had an appointment, before which I still wanted to catch up on writing out fieldnotes from the previous days. I got up, went straight for the dishwash tubs, grabbed a sponge to wipe the bowl and – ding dong – the bell on the clock rang eight o'clock. That meant I had to stop for eight bell sounds. Reluctantly I drew my eyes away from my "work" in the tub of water and looked up. 'Let's not rush to try and gain an extra minute,' I said to myself. Then I let go of the sponge and took a few deep, even breaths. When the clock stopped ringing, I gave the bowl a last careful wipe and put it in the drying rack. I looked up and my eyes met with those of a fellow practitioner. He smiled and, having apparently observed my impatience, nodded understandingly. I returned the nod and walked leisurely over to my computer to get to work on those fieldnotes.

In this case I became aware of my tendency to rush in order to get work done. This also led me to notice a fellow practitioner, resulting in an interaction. In many similar cases, getting nudged or remembering to be aware led me to notice my environment. Moreover, daily awareness exercises in the meditation center may well have contributed to my research by means of what Emerson et al., (2014) describe as to 'focus one's thoughts and energies on the taxing work of reviewing, remembering, and writing' (p. 49).

Beside such practical benefits, the mindfulness practices I speak of may have an important contribution to make to the ethical aspects of anthropological research. Because we are always situated in social life that for the most part we cannot control, Malki says anthropologists 'must take on the risk and responsibility of improvisation' (in Cerwonka & Malkki, 2008, pp. 180–181). This responsibility involves being aware of our personal position, and responding to what happens in the present moment for our knowledge to be adequately and critically informed.

Tim Ingold remarks that there can be 'no responsibility without "response-ability." To be answerable, one must be able to answer. And to be able to answer, one must be present' (2017, p. 27). The mindfulness practices I have discussed in this thesis can help with cultivating an ability to be present, and thereby to be responsible, with what Ingold calls response-ability. Responsibility, for Ingold, is about caring for the world by being present for those around us. This 'ethical dimension of attention,' he says, falls to all of us, and involves responding to those around us 'by way of our words' (ibid).

Today, as we are challenged to live with precarity and reopen our imaginations to new directions, the ethical task of being able to respond is as relevant as ever. This task seems to become increasingly broadly sensed among anthropologists. "Truth and Responsibility" would have been the theme this year for the American Anthropological Association's Annual Meeting[33]. With the meeting was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Association carried over the theme to 2021, all the while issuing 'a call,' its homepage states:

> …to reimagine anthropology to meet the demands of the present moment. The imperative to bear witness, take action, and be held accountable to the truths we write and circulate invites us to reflect on our responsibility in reckoning with disciplinary histories, harms, and possibilities.

My purpose in this chapter has been to speak to our disciplinary possibilities for meeting the demands of our precarious time, in the present moment.

The Plum Village tradition offers an other-than-modern perspective and practical approach to being in the world, as I have shown in this thesis. Its mindfulness practices can help with "being there" – enabling anthropologists to be aware in the midst of social life, and to be response-able for those around us, particularly as we embrace precarity in these times. I imagine such help to be useful, to 'meet the demands of the present moment.'

[33] As stated on the official home page (see: https://www.americananthro.org/AM_Theme)

7. CONCLUSION

Among mindfulness practitioners in the Plum Village meditation center, I encountered a prevalent sense of precarity. Stress from busy lives, anxiety about economic or political situations and worries about the climate and children's futures on this planet were common experiences. We each sought strategies to deal with our various concerns.

In this thesis I relate these concerns and experiences to the earthwide predicament of precarity (Tsing, 2015). In this predicament, people feel vulnerable in the face of personal, social and ecological crises that are the consequences of current widespread political and economic commitments to limitless, linear progress. By relating this global context to life in the Plum Village meditation center, I work to deeply understand the concerns I share with fellow practitioners, and to identify how the Plum Village tradition becomes relevant in our unique and shared concerns.

In the meditation center I found this relevance take shape as practitioners negotiated the possibility of a holistic way of being in the world. Thus, to engage with the Plum Village tradition was an opportunity for practitioners to learn about living with precarity and reconsider what progress means. Such opportunity was provided in the Plum Village meditation center by teachers who presented mindfulness practice as a way of cultivating awareness in oneself and in the world.

In this approach, mindfulness is about meeting life: to be aware of what occurs in and around us, in the present moment, and to respond with the intention of creating peace. Teachers worked in Plum Village to present mindfulness practices for cultivating awareness within and beyond the physical body, outward into the world. Mindfulness is then a means of exposure, of being-in-connection with the world and responding to apparent issues without particular expectations. With the commitment to meeting life, teachers present a promise of progress in terms of peace and well-being for the world as a whole.

Practitioners and monastic members of the Plum Village tradition negotiate promises and practices in daily life at the meditation center. This is often a messy process, involving challenges, mishaps, experimentations and collaborations. From this process new concerns and ambivalent considerations emerge, as well as tentative opportunities to change and move in new, open-ended directions. Stories of unexpected and personally unique experiences provide a basis to suggest that mindfulness practice in Plum Village may lead to more than coping strategies for our personal and collective issues.

These directions are by no means conclusive solutions to any one issue, and do not provide evidence for what Purser (2019) calls fundamental systemic changes. What does emerge are engagements with the personal, social and ecological concerns that practitioners bring or that arise in Plum Village. These engagements reflect the functions of awareness that teachers ascribe to mindfulness practice. This suggests that practitioners might have indeed become more aware and responsive to issues in oneself and the world.

In some cases, new directions involve shifts to more holistic worldviews and wholesome actions for personal, social and ecological purposes. Most often, negotiations with mindfulness lead to engagements with further concerns in the wider social and ecological contexts that practitioners are embedded in. In each case, the work that happens in such engagements indicates gradual exposure to the wider world. This is suggestive of gradual shifts to what teachers describe as the freedom of interbeing.

Engagements with precarious, unresolved issues show potential approaches to wholesome progress taking shape as alternatives to linear progress frames. This open-ended and uncertain work is important in our predicament. Awareness of our challenges may well be a substantial first step to change, as the stories of changing minds already show. These stories also show that negotiations and directions can gradually evolve over the course of years. Even in these cases, directions are by no means conclusive, and what courses lives will take remains to be seen. Further research could trace such stories more longitudinally in the meditation center and beyond, following where practitioners may travel and reside next.

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