

Thich Nhat Hanh's Concept of Practice: Its Origins, Meaning, and Function in Engaged Buddhism and Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

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Abstract

This paper explores Thich Nhat Hanh's concept of "practice" as a possible key to understanding the relationship between his wartime Engaged Buddhism, later mindfulness teaching, and Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Through a literature-based analysis in intellectual history, it examines his peace appeals during the Vietnam War, his reflections on mindfulness, and Living Buddha, Living Christ. The paper focuses on how Nhat Hanh repeatedly uses practice not simply as the application of doctrine, but as an embodied way of returning to the living source of religion. In wartime Vietnam, this orientation appeared in relief work, peace activism, and interreligious cooperation. In his later writings, it was further developed through his interpretation of the living Buddha, the living Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Rather than presenting a final conclusion, this paper offers a preliminary framework for further research. It suggests that a fuller understanding of Nhat Hanh's concept of practice requires closer examination of his own writings, Vietnamese Buddhist terminology and context, and the development of his postwar activities in exile.

Keywords: Thich Nhat Hanh, practice, Buddhist-Christian dialogue, Holy Spirit, Engaged Buddhism

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Introduction: Research Question and Method

Thich Nhat Hanh (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 1926–2022), a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist, is widely known for his religious and social activities, such as his peace work during the Vietnam War, Engaged Buddhism, and his teachings on mindfulness. Throughout his long life, he worked worldwide, and during the Vietnam War, his influential activities were partly supported and fostered by interreligious relations, especially with American Christianity (Deer Park Monastery, n.d.; Plum Village, n.d.).

This paper revisits the thought of Thich Nhat Hanh by focusing on one key concept: practice. It aims to show how his peace activities during the Vietnam War, his later mindfulness teaching, and his interreligious writings form a coherent whole, rather than separate phases. For Thich Nhat Hanh, practice is a methodological principle for understanding religion itself. This perspective develops from concrete social practice into an interreligious theoretical framework. Rooted in the context of the Vietnam War, his understanding of practice emerged from his concrete actions for peace and his firsthand experience of social suffering.

This paper addresses two questions. First, what does “practice” mean in Thich Nhat Hanh’s thought? Second, how did it develop from wartime Engaged Buddhism to Buddhist-Christian dialogue? To answer these questions, this paper examines his wartime activities, his postwar mindfulness practice, and his later work *Living Buddha, Living Christ*.

The research method is a literature-based analysis in the field of intellectual history. This paper mainly examines his appeals for peace during the Vietnam War, his postwar mindfulness practice, and his later writings on Christianity.

Previous Studies and the Focus on Practice

Thich Nhat Hanh is widely known for Engaged Buddhism, the anti-war movement during the Vietnam War, peace work, and mindfulness. This section reviews selected studies related to these topics. These previous studies can be grouped into four perspectives: the historical definition of Engaged Buddhism, the wartime formation of Nhat Hanh’s practice, its transnational and interreligious expansion, and its later or contemporary applications.

Regarding Engaged Buddhism, Sallie King names Nhat Hanh as one of the representative figures of this movement (S. B. King, 2009, p. 2). According to Christopher Queen, Engaged Buddhism emerged as a modern Buddhist movement in the 1950s and 1960s, when Buddhist activists in Asia began to address social suffering and social change. Queen identifies its distinctive features in its connection with modern notions such as human rights, social justice, nonviolent protest, peacemaking, institutional reform, and systemic social change. In this context, Thich Nhat Hanh is regarded as one of the representative figures of Engaged Buddhism (Queen, 2023, pp. 71, 73–74). Queen also notes that the term “engaged Buddhism” was first used by Thich Nhat Hanh to describe the nonviolent anti-war movement led by monastics in Vietnam in the 1960s (Queen, 2023, p. 77).

Other studies focus more directly on the wartime formation and wider reach of Nhat Hanh’s practice. Victor Thasiah also interprets Thich Nhat Hanh’s wartime Buddhist practice through the idea of “ecological humanism.” He argues that Nhat Hanh’s identification with nature was not merely a source of personal healing, but also part of the spiritual basis that sustained his

humanitarian service and nonviolent resistance during the Vietnam War (Thasiah, 2022, pp. 41–43).

Sharon Luk reads the encounter between Thich Nhat Hanh and Martin Luther King Jr. as an intersection between Engaged Buddhism and Black liberation thought in the United States from 1965 to 1968. She argues that Hanh's *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* and his dialogue with King helped shape King's turn toward a broader anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist critique, especially in his 1967 speech "Beyond Vietnam." Hanh's encounter with King further globalized this framework, helping King connect the Vietnam War, U.S. imperialism, capitalist exploitation, Third World suffering, and social and economic injustice within the United States. This article shows that Hanh's practice was not only Buddhist social action, but also part of a wider interreligious and transnational formation of peace thought (Luk, 2018).

Sallie B. King's article further shows that Engaged Buddhism also reached other religious peace traditions in the United States. King's article shows that Engaged Buddhism, initiated by Thich Nhat Hanh, was not confined to Vietnamese Buddhism during the Vietnam War but also influenced Quakers in the United States. King examines the cases of the Buddhist Nhất Chi Mai, who carried out self-immolation in protest against the Vietnam War in 1967, and the Quaker Norman Morrison, who did so in 1965, and compares how these acts can be understood religiously and ethically. With regard to Nhất Chi Mai, King confirms that she was a lay disciple of Thich Nhat Hanh and a member of the Order of Interbeing, which he founded. King also refers to Thich Nhat Hanh's Buddhist interpretation of Thích Quảng Đức's self-immolation (S. B. King, 2000).

A different approach is found in Robert H. King's monograph, which connects Nhat Hanh's Engaged Buddhism with Christian monastic spirituality and Buddhist-Christian dialogue. King connects Thich Nhat Hanh with the Catholic monk Thomas Merton, who met him in 1966 and helped introduce his thought and activities within the context of Christian intellectual circles and the peace movement in the United States, from the perspective of "engaged spirituality." In doing so, King discusses the development of Buddhist-Christian dialogue through the intellectual trajectories of these two figures. King conceptualizes Engaged Buddhism as a continuous development extending from social practice during the Vietnam War to Nhat Hanh's later mindfulness practices and community formation. In this respect, King's study shows that "practice" in Nhat Hanh's thought is an underlying concept that runs through social engagement, everyday mindfulness, and interreligious dialogue (R. H. King, 2001).

Recent studies have also applied Nhat Hanh's thought to contemporary practical and ethical contexts. Yetunde's study is an attempt to apply Thich Nhat Hanh's thought to spiritual care for transgender patients provided by chaplains and religious care providers in medical settings in the United States. The distinctive feature of this study lies in its effort to identify the necessity and practical path of spiritual care for transgender patients, who tend to be overlooked within the legal and political context of religious freedom in the United States, from the perspectives of Buddhism, Christianity, and womanist theology. In particular, Thich Nhat Hanh's thought is used as a spiritual and ethical framework for supporting spiritual care for transgender patients. However, this study only indicates the possibility of the contemporary application of Nhat Hanh's thought; it does not discuss the formation process or intellectual-historical development of his concept of "practice" (Yetunde, 2020).

Taken together, these studies have clarified Nhat Hanh's importance in Engaged Buddhism, wartime peace activism, interreligious and transnational peace thought, Buddhist-Christian

dialogue, and contemporary applications of his thought. At this stage, the previous studies still need to be examined more carefully. However, this paper begins from the working assumption that the concept of practice itself has not yet been sufficiently analyzed as a central concept connecting his wartime social engagement, postwar mindfulness, and Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

What Does “Practice” Mean?

For Thich Nhat Hanh, practice means returning to the living source of religion through embodied imitation of the Buddha or Jesus. Here, “living” does not mean symbolic or metaphorical. It means that the Buddha and Jesus are encountered where their way is embodied in practice.

In *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Thich Nhat Hanh emphasizes that authentic fidelity to Jesus or the Buddha lies in practice rather than abstract ideas. He writes, “We must practice living deeply, loving, and acting with charity” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2007, p. 56). To honor Jesus is to live deeply, to love, and to act with charity. True teaching is not static or reducible to words; it is the reality of life. Doctrines or concepts without this grounding remain disconnected from real life.

From this perspective, he highlights a fundamental convergence between Buddhism and Christianity. When one practices the life and teachings of the Buddha or of Jesus, one enters the presence of the living Buddha and the living Christ. Both figures represent not remote ideals but living realities encountered through practice. What matters is touching this reality and embodying it in life (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2007, pp. 21, 37).

This idea also extends to daily life. Thich Nhat Hanh writes that “mindfulness must be practiced throughout the day” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2007, p. 174). He interprets monastic life not as withdrawal from the world, but as continuous mindfulness in ordinary activities, such as putting on a robe, washing a bowl, walking, or splitting wood. In this sense, practice is not limited to meditation or doctrine; it is embodied in concrete acts of daily life.

During the Vietnam War, this understanding became the basis of Engaged Buddhism. Monks and nuns practiced mindfulness while caring for refugees, orphans, and the wounded. When bombs were falling, it was impossible simply to sit in meditation. Instead, meditation was carried into every act of service. To help the sick was to serve a Buddha or a bodhisattva. Thus, practice became both daily mindfulness and concrete compassion in the midst of social suffering (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2007, pp. 168–169, 173–176).

At the same time, the meaning of “practice” needs further clarification. In English, the term is broad. In the Vietnamese and Buddhist contexts, it may be related to words such as *thực tập*, *thực hành*, *tu tập*, *hành trì*, and *Đạo Bụt Dấn Thân*. This linguistic and doctrinal background remains an important task for future research.

Practice During the Vietnam War

To understand why practice became central for Thich Nhat Hanh, it is important to look at the Vietnam War context. Society was marked by massive suffering for peasants. In this situation, religion functioned as one of the few remaining moral forces. A key text from this period is *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, his first major work written in English. It offers a sober analysis

of Vietnamese society and proposes concrete responses to violence and social breakdown. It is in this context that Engaged Buddhism emerges—not as a theoretical idea, but as a practical necessity for peace.

In his open letter *In Search of the Enemy of Man* (June 1, 1965), addressed to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Thich Nhat Hanh sought to clarify Buddhist perspectives on the self-immolations by Vietnamese monks, which had shocked Western audiences. He explained that while self-destruction is considered a grave crime in Buddhism, the monks who burned themselves were neither hopeless nor despairing. Rather, they acted out of courage and compassion, aspiring to call attention to the suffering of the Vietnamese people. Drawing on the Jataka tale of the Buddha offering himself to a starving lioness, he interpreted the acts as expressions of the highest form of compassion.

I believe with all my heart that the monks who burned themselves did not aim at the death of the oppressors but only at a change in their policy. Their enemies are not man. They are intolerance, fanaticism, dictatorship, cupidity, hatred and discrimination which lie within the heart of man. I also believe with all my being that the struggle for equality and freedom you lead in Birmingham, Alabama... is not aimed at the whites but only at intolerance, hatred and discrimination. These are real enemies of man — not man himself. (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1965)

Nhat Hanh then appealed directly to King, insisting that one engaged in the struggle for equality and human rights could not remain silent before the suffering of Vietnam. To reinforce this plea, he cited prominent Christian voices. He invoked Karl Barth's expression "God in action," as well as Albert Schweitzer's teaching of reverence for life and Paul Tillich's emphasis on the courage to be. By recalling these Christian exemplars, Nhat Hanh sought to situate his Buddhist appeal for peace within a shared ethical and spiritual horizon, urging King to join in raising his voice against the war. His appeal to King reflects his sincere devotion to peace and relief activities in Vietnam, expressed by the concept of "engaged Buddhism." This concept demonstrates his reformist character and also embraces his interreligious perspective (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1967, pp. 102–103).

Nhat Hanh claimed peace on the basis of a serious analysis of the situation of Vietnamese peasants. Most villagers, whether Buddhist or Catholic, suffered directly from bombs and battles and were primarily concerned that the war should end, rather than taking sides with either the Saigon government or the communist Front. According to his analysis, almost none supported the Saigon regime, and only a minority supported the Front, seeing it mainly as an alternative to the U.S.–South Vietnamese alliance (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1967, pp. 102–103).

On this basis, Nhat Hanh emphasized that peace required a non-Communist democratic force, independent of power blocs, where liberties and freedoms were respected and where Communists and non-Communists could cooperate to build a progressive society. Central to this vision was religious cooperation. Buddhists were willing to work with other groups—Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and especially Catholics—for peace and reconstruction. Although Catholic leaders in the cities often displayed strong anti-Communist sentiment, younger priests and laymen, like younger Buddhists, sought solutions in peace and social reconstruction rather than in military confrontation. When Catholic priests publicly raised their voices for peace, it strengthened Buddhist confidence in the possibility of cooperation (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1967, pp. 87, 93).

At the same time, Nhat Hanh stressed that in a war-torn and divided Vietnam, religion was the only institution left that could inspire unity and social responsibility. Since official religious hierarchies were often reluctant to act, he and his companions resolved to rely on their own resources and to work directly among the people. For him, the essence of Engaged Buddhism was not to remain isolated in the monastery, but to practice Buddhism's essence among those who were suffering—to embody Zen in the act of helping. In making this claim, he consciously became confident in advancing it within a Buddhist framework, in relation to Christian theology, yet not dependent on it. Just as Christianity emphasizes active witness in the world, Nhat Hanh proposed a Buddhist path that enters society as a force for relief and renewal.

Vietnam has become divided. The war has destroyed trust, hope, and all the constructive efforts of the past. People are suspicious of every act of goodwill and every promise made. Religion is the only institution left that can inspire unity and social responsibility. We must use the resources of our spiritual traditions to bring about great change. Buddhism has much to contribute to this work, but we cannot wait for the religious hierarchy to act. They are reluctant to bring about change, and they've repeatedly rejected our efforts to create an engaged Buddhism. (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2020, p. 137)

Thus, Nhat Hanh articulated a peace perspective that did not align with either North or South but was grounded in interreligious cooperation and in the socially engaged practice of Buddhism. In his view, Buddhism's task was to step into society for the sake of reconstruction and reconciliation, uniting spiritual practice with concrete action in the midst of human suffering. In the wartime context, practice took concrete social form. It meant relief work, education, medical aid, reconstruction, peace activism, and interreligious cooperation.

Practice as a Method of Buddhist-Christian Dialogue: Living Buddha, Living Christ, and the Holy Spirit

After the Vietnam War, Thich Nhat Hanh was unable to return to Vietnam and entered a long period of exile. In France, he continued peace work for Vietnamese people, including refugees, while also developing new places of practice such as the Sweet Potatoes meditation center and, later, Plum Village. His activity therefore did not simply move from war to peace. Rather, it seems to have shifted from emergency-oriented social engagement toward community life, refugee support, mindfulness, and daily practice.

This historical transition still requires further research. However, it is important for understanding his later writings on Christianity. His later Buddhist-Christian reflections should not be read as a sudden departure from social engagement. They can be read, at least provisionally, as an extension of the same practical orientation: religion becomes real when it is embodied in daily life and practiced in response to suffering.

Nhat Hanh's later reflections on Christianity were expressed more systematically in *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, first published in 1995 and cited here in the 2007 twentieth-anniversary edition. This work should be read in continuity with his earlier wartime practice and his later community life in exile. It was not a sudden shift in his thought, but a theoretical articulation of decades of practice.

In *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Nhat Hanh identifies a common ground between Buddhism and Christianity in the Holy Spirit and practice, even though the two traditions remain distinct.

He interprets the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus as the sign that Jesus was already “in touch with the reality of life,” the source of mindfulness, wisdom, and understanding. In parallel, he recalls that when the Buddha sat beneath the Bodhi tree, the holy seeds within him blossomed forth. Both Jesus and the Buddha were human, yet each became an expression of the highest spirit of humanity. In this perspective, the Holy Spirit is not treated mainly as an abstract metaphysical doctrine. Rather, Nhat Hanh understands it as a lived and transformative reality connected with understanding, love, mindfulness, and compassion. This interpretation allows him to read Jesus and the Buddha not as remote objects of belief, but as living realities encountered through practice.

Nhat Hanh emphasizes that authentic fidelity to Jesus or the Buddha lies in practice rather than abstract ideas. To honor Jesus is to live deeply, to love, and to act with charity. True teaching is not static or reducible to words; it is the reality of life. Doctrines or concepts without this grounding remain disconnected from real life. From this perspective, he highlights a fundamental convergence between Buddhism and Christianity. When one practices the life and teachings of the Buddha or of Jesus, one enters the presence of the living Buddha and the living Christ. Both figures represent not remote ideals but living realities encountered through practice. What matters is touching this reality and embodying it in life (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2007, pp. 21, 37).

For Nhat Hanh, Buddhist-Christian dialogue is therefore not primarily a comparison of doctrines. It is a shared return to living practice. The living Buddha, the living Christ, and the Holy Spirit become meaningful where compassion, mindfulness, love, and understanding are embodied in daily life. This point also connects with his understanding of Engaged Buddhism. In the midst of war, contemplation and action could not be separated. Nhat Hanh proposed Engaged Buddhism as a way to preserve contemplative depth while helping others. For him, contemplation and engagement do not exclude one another; rather, they belong together in the practice of real life (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2007, pp. 56, 60–61).

Both Buddhism and Christianity point to the same task: to go beyond accumulated concepts and return to the original sources—back to the living Buddha and the living Christ. What matters is not the preservation of doctrinal systems but the recovery of direct experience of reality (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2007, pp. 154, 167). For Nhat Hanh, the true body of Jesus is his teaching. Christ is most present not in abstract dogma but in the lived practice of his message. Whenever and wherever his teaching is enacted, the living Christ manifests itself. In this way, both Christianity and Buddhism converge in pointing to a reality that transcends conceptual forms, a reality accessible only through practice (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2007, p. 194).

Thus, Living Buddha, Living Christ shows how Nhat Hanh’s concept of practice became a method of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Religion is not realized only in doctrine, institution, or belief. It becomes real when the teachings of the Buddha or Jesus are embodied in life. This is why practice functions as the bridge between Engaged Buddhism, mindfulness, and Buddhist-Christian dialogue, although this non-doctrinal reading of Jesus does not fit neatly within traditional Christian theology. In this sense, wartime relief practice and daily mindfulness practice are not separate themes, but different forms of the same practical orientation.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated Nhat Hanh’s concept of practice by reviewing both his historical path and his central concepts. In conclusion, practice can be understood as a central concept

that connects Thich Nhat Hanh's wartime Engaged Buddhism, postwar mindfulness, and Buddhist-Christian dialogue. His originality lies in maintaining both the social and spiritual dimensions of practice. Through this concept, religion becomes not only a doctrine to be believed, but a way of living, responding to suffering, and encountering others.

Several tasks remain for future research. It will be necessary to examine the historical development of his exile period and refugee support more carefully, to clarify the Vietnamese and Buddhist terms corresponding to "practice," and to situate his understanding of the Holy Spirit more precisely in relation to Christian theology and twentieth-century interreligious dialogue.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly and ChatGPT were used as AI-assisted tools during the writing process of this manuscript. Grammarly was used for proofreading and refining the language of the manuscript. ChatGPT was used for English-language editing, translation support, and rephrasing statements to improve accuracy, clarity, coherence, and readability. The use of these tools was limited to improving the language and readability of the manuscript. The author further declares that these tools were not used to generate the research topic, research design, selection and interpretation of sources, arguments, analyses, discussion, or conclusions. All AI-assisted language suggestions were carefully reviewed, revised, and verified by the author. The ideas, design, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from the author's own sustained research and scholarly judgment. The author takes full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

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