

PROPOSAL FOR A COURSE IN MINDFULNESS AND APPLIED ETHICS FOR EDUCATORS

“You cannot transmit wisdom and insight to another person. The seed is already there.

A good teacher touches the seed, allowing it to wake up, to sprout, and to grow.”

— Thich Nhat Hanh

This course is offered to educators who wish to cultivate peace and wellbeing in their own lives and contribute to creating a saner and more compassionate classroom and school environment.

Abstract

In order for a bright future to be possible we must provide young people with an ethical foundation, promote an atmosphere of concentration and social-emotional learning in schools, and support teachers' wellbeing. Nowadays this task is especially challenging because the conditions of social and cognitive development for children and teenagers are changing radically. Aggression and bullying are an increasing problem while students' attention spans are decreasing. Growing numbers of teachers find that their jobs are becoming more difficult.

Many schools have begun initiatives and programs to counteract this trend. Although administrators, teachers and students want to improve the situation in our schools, it is often difficult to put these ideas into practice so that they lead to lasting change in behaviour and true happiness at school.

The practice of mindfulness has been proven to make a very valuable and efficient contribution to the problems so many of us face in our schools. Mindfulness means to be truly there, body and mind together in the present moment. When we are able to come back to ourselves, to our emotions, and to those around us we can recognize our habitual behaviour, discover new options and make better choices. We can truly get in touch with ourselves, other people and with life, thus greatly benefitting our relationships. Compassion arises quite naturally, as does a sense of inner peace, joy and vitality. It is our experience that especially children and young people appreciate this opportunity to increase their personal freedom and to choose an ethical direction for their lives.

Moreover, these mindfulness practices offer teachers and students systematic relaxation techniques and concrete ways to let go of recurrent worries, reducing stress and its physical effects. The health benefits of mindfulness have been widely acknowledged by scientists for a number of years. Although these exercises have a Buddhist background, they are non-religious and non-sectarian, thus everyone can profit from them.

For teachers to effectively transmit mindfulness to their students, they must learn to apply it first in their own daily lives.

Course Overview

Stage I: Taking Care of the Teacher

- Cultivating awareness of breathing to help unite body and mind, and develop concentration
- Caring for our body to reduce stress and pain
- Learning to cultivate feelings of joy and happiness, and appreciate what we already have
- Learning to simplify our lives so that we have more time to relax and enjoy life
- Learning to listen to and embrace our strong emotions, such as fear, anger, anxiety and despair
- Learning to use loving speech and compassionate listening to care for our relationships
- Exploring non-sectarian, ethical guidelines for our own health and happiness, and that of our families, schools, communities, societies, and the world
- Looking deeply into our consumption and production, as individuals and as a society

Stage II: Teaching Mindfulness and Applied Ethics to Students

- Learning to guide sessions of relaxation for students
- Learning to help students recognize and handle strong emotions
- Learning the art of building community so that our classroom and our school can become a loving family environment
- Learning to creatively resolve conflicts in the classroom
- Helping students develop compassion by understanding their own suffering and that of their peers
- Introduction to an age-appropriate mindfulness curriculum, with multi-media teaching materials, that can be applied in the classroom

Course Format

This course is offered in two stages, with each stage being one week long, held in one of our residential centers or at your academic campus. The week course format is organized as a residential retreat, with participants staying overnight and training in mindfulness all day long. Each stage can also be divided up into smaller units of time depending on the need (3 weekends or 7 day-long segments spread out over time). Stage I is a prerequisite for Stage II.

Who We Are

Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and the Plum Village Community of monastic and lay members have over 30 years of experience practicing and teaching mindfulness, and developing a path of ethical living for modern society. We have shared these practices with thousands of people, including teachers, parents, children, social workers, therapists, police officers, health care workers, politicians, businesspeople, and artists, many of whom have become teachers of mindfulness and community-builders in their own right. In particular, we have led hundreds of retreats for families with children and teens programs, as well as retreats for educators and students, in which we have developed and refined a rich and effective range of practices for transmitting mindfulness to young people.

Vision

We are now reaching out to those working in the fields of education policy, development, and training at both local and national levels. We wish to collaborate in order offer regular courses to educators interested in the teaching and practice of mindfulness and applied ethics. We are identifying partners ready to put these courses into practice right away. Initiatives and preliminary explorations are underway with educators and policy makers in several countries in Asia, Europe and North America.

Aim

This course aims to address the root causes of the suffering and division in our society and in our own hearts. As teachers, many of us see that this is a time of great challenge for young people, who often lack a direction or tools to handle the pressures and stresses life presents them. Parents and other caregivers do not get the support they need to provide the essential guidance required for young people to grow up happily and contribute positively to society. Furthermore, many of our institutions struggle to provide a good example of integrity, cooperation, or responsible behaviour that cares for the good of the whole.

The essence of the course in applied ethics is mindfulness, the energy of being aware of and awake to what is happening inside and around us in the present moment. With this deep awareness we know what to do and what not to do in each moment to relieve suffering and increase well-being. The methods that we offer in this applied ethics course help us to understand our own bodies, minds, feelings and perceptions, so we can then help others to do the same. We learn the art of caring for and transforming our suffering, and nourishing our joy. Out of this, compassion and a living understanding of our interconnection with our family and society naturally arise.

Secular Foundation

This course is built upon the teachings of the Buddha, but it is non-religious and non-sectarian. Its foundation relies on the insights and concrete practices of Buddhism, including the awareness of the interconnection of all things, and the insight that only by understanding our suffering can we arrive at real happiness. Scientific evidence has demonstrated that methods arising from the Buddhist tradition are effective, and that they can be applied successfully in an educational and secular context, without reference to Buddhism. However, if appropriate to the institution or community, the course can be taught from a Buddhist or spiritual perspective.

Community Environment

The course takes place in the unique context of a residential community of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen practicing mindfulness 24 hours a day. The strength and harmony of the community is grounded upon a shared vision of ethical conduct arising naturally from the practice of mindfulness. The community provides a support and creates a safe environment in which we can look afresh at our lives. Living and working together we generate a powerful collective energy which has the capacity to heal and transform our bodies and minds.

In the course, mindfulness is offered in such a way that we can apply it right away in our daily lives. The residents offer participants their understanding and experience not just through their teaching, but through their embodied practice of mindful speaking, walking, eating, working and relating. The most supportive environment for our transformation and healing is a harmonious and joyful community. Our 30 years of experience have taught us that community is essential for change to be deep and lasting. Living and practicing as a community, we find trust in the human family and we return to our lives refreshed and enthusiastic. The residential practice environment allows us to open up and rediscover our innate goodness and bring meaning and direction to our lives.