

[Sign into the Guardian using your Facebook account](#)

theguardian

Search

Guardian Sustainable Business

Ideas and insights for progressive business leaders



Thich Nhat Hanh: is mindfulness being corrupted by business and finance?

The Zen master discusses his advice for Google and other tech giants on being a force for good in the world

Jo Confino

theguardian.com, Friday 28 March 2014 20:26 GMT



Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh has guided CEOs of some of the world's biggest technology companies in the art of mindfulness. Photograph: AP

Mindfulness has become an increasingly popular topic among business leaders, with several key executives speaking publicly in recent months about how it helps them improve the bottom line.

Intermix CEO Khajak Keledjian last week shared his secrets to inner peace with The Wall Street Journal. Arianna Huffington, editor in chief of the Huffington Post, discussed mindfulness in Thrive, her new book released this week. Other business leaders who meditate include Aetna CEO Mark Bertolini, Salesforce.com CEO Marc Benioff and Zappos.com CEO Tony Hsieh, to name just a few.

In a blog post last month, Huffington wrote that "there's nothing touchy-feely about increased profits. This is a tough economy. ... Stress-reduction and mindfulness don't just make us happier and healthier, they're a proven competitive advantage for any business that wants one."

But by focusing on the bottom-line benefits of mindfulness, are business leaders corrupting the core Buddhist practice?

Thich Nhat Hanh, the 87-year-old Zen master considered by many to be the father of

mindfulness in the west, says as long as business leaders practice "true" mindfulness, it does not matter if the original intention is triggered by wanting to be more effective at work or to make bigger profits. That is because the practice will fundamentally change their perspective on life as it naturally opens hearts to greater compassion and develops the desire to end the suffering of others.

Sitting in a lotus position on the floor of his monastery at [Plum Village](#) near Bordeaux, France, Thay tells the Guardian: "If you know how to practice mindfulness you can generate peace and joy right here, right now. And you'll appreciate that and it will change you. In the beginning, you believe that if you cannot become number one, you cannot be happy, but if you practice mindfulness you will readily release that kind of idea. We need not fear that mindfulness might become only a means and not an end because in mindfulness the means and the end are the same thing. There is no way to happiness; happiness is the way."

But Thay, as the Zen master is known to his hundreds of thousands of followers around the world, points out that if executives are in the practice for selfish reasons, then they are experiencing a mere pale shadow of mindfulness.

"If you consider mindfulness as a means of having a lot of money, then you have not touched its true purpose," he says. "It may look like the practise of mindfulness but inside there's no peace, no joy, no happiness produced. It's just an imitation. If you don't feel the energy of brotherhood, of sisterhood, radiating from your work, that is not mindfulness."

As he puts it: "If you're happy, you cannot be a victim of your happiness. But if you're successful, you can be a victim of your success."

The risk of ridicule

Even though mindfulness is moving into the mainstream, there remains a great deal of nervousness within many organisations about being ridiculed by associating directly with an ancient Buddhist practice.

Thay was recently invited by the [World Bank president Jim Yong Kim](#), whose favorite book is Thay's [The Miracle of Mindfulness](#) and who praises the Zen monk's practice for being "deeply passionate and compassionate toward those who are suffering," to the organization's Washington headquarters for an event that was hugely popular with staff.

This did not prevent some senior colleagues, who were nervous about how such a visit would be seen to the outside world, from criticizing the move before the event. [The Economist did, in fact, publish a critical article.](#)

But Kim remains resolute. He tells the Guardian he fended off criticism by pointing to multiple scientific studies showcasing the benefits of mindfulness.

The intersection of mindfulness and tech

Perhaps the most interesting intersection in the business world is between mindfulness and [technology](#), as they appear to pull in opposite directions. The practice is all about slowing down and emptying the mind, while the digital revolution is speeding up our lives and filling our heads with vast quantities of information.

Despite this, they have a long history together. [Apple CEO Steve Jobs](#) was fascinated by Zen Buddhism, for one thing, and mindfulness has been linked for decades to the

Californian lifestyle, where many technology companies are based.

So it is no great surprise that Thay, who has sold more than 2m books in the US, was invited to Silicon Valley by Google and was also asked to lead [a private day of mindfulness for CEOs of 15 of the world's most powerful technology companies](#).

Thay's core message to the tech leaders he met was to use their global influence to focus on how they can contribute to making the world a better place, rather than on making as much money as possible.

He and a group of monastics spent a day at Google's headquarters, spending time with the senior management as well as leading around 700 employees through mindfulness discussions and sitting and walking meditation. So many staff wanted to take part that the company had to open up two additional locations to live stream his lecture.

Thay speaks of the sharp contrast between the normal frenetic pace of work at the technology giant and the sense of peace that came from sitting in silence during his day of mindfulness on the Googleplex campus. "The atmosphere was totally different," he says. "There's a silence, there's a peace that comes from doing nothing. And in that space, they can realise the preciousness of time."

Advice for the tech industry

During his visit, which was themed "intention, innovation, insight", Thay met a number of senior Google engineers to discuss how the company can use technology to be more compassionate and effective in bringing positive change to the world, rather than increasing people's stress and isolation, both from each other and from nature.

When they create electronic devices, they can reflect on whether that new product will take people away from themselves, their family and nature," he says. "Instead they can create the kind of devices and software that can help them to go back to themselves, to take care of their feelings. By doing that, they will feel good because they're doing something good for society.

At the day-long retreat with the CEOs, Thay led a silent meditation and offered a Zen tea ceremony before talking to the group of largely billionaires about how important it is that they, as individuals, resist being consumed by work at the expense of time with their families: "Time is not money," he told them. "Time is life, time is love."

Back at his Plum Village monastery, near Bordeaux, Thay says of his trip: "In all the visits, I told them they have to conduct business in such a way that happiness should be possible for everyone in the company. What is the use of having more money if you suffer more? They also should understand that if they have a good aspiration, they become happier because helping society to change gives life a meaning."

The trip was just the beginning, he adds. "I think we planted a number of seeds and it will take time for the seeds to mature," he says. "If they begin to practise mindfulness, they'll experience joy, happiness, transformation, and they can fix for themselves another kind of aspiration. Fame and power and money cannot really bring true happiness compared to when you have a way of life that can take care of your body and your feelings."

