



Beloved Community Circles

A Mindful Action Form within the Plum Village Tradition of Engaged Buddhism

(This document, like the Beloved Community Circles, is an organic, emerging work in progress)

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"We need another dimension, the action dimension...the realm of the bodhisattva, the kind of energy that helps us bring the ultimate dimension into the historical so we can live our life of action in a relaxing and joyful way, free from fear, free from stress, free from despair." - Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh in *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*

Overview. A Beloved Community Circle (BCC) is a small group of 3-8 people, geographically local to each other, who engage in spiritual practice together, care for each other's well-being, and participate in mindful action of the group's choosing. Individual Beloved Community Circles are supported through trainings, resources, and being networked together to learn, inform, and encourage each other. A Beloved Community Circle provides an intimate, personalized, and collective way to engage in applying mindful practices to relieve suffering in the world. It is envisioned as a form that supports members of ARISE, Earth Holder Community, Wake Up, EMBRACE, other Plum Village initiatives, and other sanghas who wish to organize themselves toward the Action Dimension.

A Lotus in a Sea Of Fire. Many Plum Village practitioners are doing amazing and beautiful things to relieve suffering in the world, from caring for an aging parent, to working to end racial injustice, to providing pivotal leadership for the Paris Climate Accords. It is also true that many practitioners are wanting to further engage in more direct mindful action, but don't know how or don't want to do it alone.

In the midst of the war in Vietnam, Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh (respectfully and affectionately called Thay by his students) spoke of "a lotus in a sea of fire." Thay used this phrase to describe the cauldron of suffering that is war, and the essence of our Buddha nature that sits unharmed and upright in the midst of the flames. We are in our own sea of fire. The climate is hot. Racial turmoil in the U.S. is deep. The pandemic is deadly. Democracy is imperiled. Capitalist economy is contributing to severe inequity and lack of opportunity for many, especially people of color. In those war years in Vietnam, Thay told his followers that it was not enough to sit in the temple cultivating peace when the world around them was in flames. That mindful action to relieve suffering was also needed. He said, "When I was in Vietnam, so many of our villages were being bombed. Along with my monastic brothers and sisters, I had to decide what to do. Should we continue to practice in our monasteries, or should we leave the meditation halls in order to help the people who were suffering under the bombs? After careful reflection, we decided to do both – to go out and help people and to do so in mindfulness. We call it engaged Buddhism."

Mindfulness must be engaged. Once there is seeing, there must be acting. Otherwise what is the use of seeing?”

He developed the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS) which engaged tens of thousands of young practitioners in education, health care, and agriculture in local villages. Likewise today, we are called to respond to our suffering world, and respond with compassion, courage, and mindfulness. Beloved Community Circles is one way to answer this call.

Plum Village Tradition and the Beloved Community. The Beloved Community is a global vision often associated with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who advocated for “an achievable society, one in which problems and conflicts exist, but are resolved peacefully and without bitterness... The Beloved Community is a state of heart and mind, a spirit of hope and goodwill, that transcends all boundaries and barriers and embraces all creation.”

The term, “Beloved Community” is credited to a Christian peace activist, Josiah Royce, in the early 1900s, when he founded and directed the U.S. peace organization, Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). A series of successive FOR directors carried the name forward, including A.J. Muste and Howard Thurman. Thurman shared the idea with Dr. King, who embraced it and made it a cornerstone of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. King introduced Thay to the term, who upon hearing of King’s death, made a vow to try his best to continue building the Beloved Community.¹

Many people mistakenly think that the Beloved Community is made up of folks like themselves – “our” kind, “our” people. This definition is too narrow. Dr. King, Thay, and many others who have contributed to the modern idea of the Beloved Community, grounded in their respective spiritual traditions, envisioned it as the manifestation of Love, God, the Divine, or Buddha-nature in the material world. On a spiritual level, the Beloved Community is the “Kingdom of God on Earth.” In Buddhism, Thay might say that the Beloved Community is alive and whole in the ultimate dimension. It’s the deeper truth of our interconnectedness. Thay coined the term “interbeing” as one expression of Beloved Community.

Because this primal ground of our being is often obscured by the three poisons of greed, aversion, and ignorance, we often forget our essential connectedness. In this historical dimension where we live and breathe, the Beloved Community is an aspiration. We imagine a community that lives in harmony, is based in love and compassion, and that excludes no one and sees no human enemies. We imagine peaceful conflict resolution, where trauma and hurt are quickly healed, where there is a shared commitment to the common good, where the sacred and vast unknown are honored. As an aspiration, the Beloved Community is “the more

¹ Many thanks to Bishop Marc Andrus for this brief history, from his *Brothers in the Beloved Community*.

beautiful world our hearts know is possible,” to use the phrasing of writer Charles Eisenstein. Our commitment is to realize this community in its fullness.

Given this understanding of the Beloved Community as both a hidden reality of our relatedness and a deep aspiration to manifest this reality, Thay and the Plum Village tradition sit squarely in a long lineage. Thay’s vow to build the Beloved Community has evolved into a world-wide community of a dozen or so practice centers supporting thousands of local sanghas that serve tens of thousands of practitioners. Beloved Community Circles is one collective form of mindful action to help nurture and grow this Beloved Community.

What is a Beloved Community Circle?

In brief, a Beloved Community Circle (BCC) is a specific action form aimed at helping people organize themselves toward manifesting the Beloved Community. It has these features...

- A small, intimate, local group of 3-8 practitioners; located in North America/Turtle Island²
- Three commitments: to practice mindfulness, care for one another, engage in action
- Self-directed - actions are chosen by the group
- An initial six-month (renewable) commitment to nurture consistency and trust
- A commitment of members to explore and heal their own internalized racism and oppression
- Each BCC is supported with trainings, a handbook, and resources
- Local BCCs are networked together virtually for inspiration, learning, and support

In more detail...

Small and personal and local. 3-8 local practitioners who live near one another gather together to form a Beloved Community Circle. It is intended to be a small, intimate group, not too small and not too large, who can go deep with one another, forge strong bonds of love and support with one another, train together, and become a dependable, reliable, courageous cohort for mindful action and socially engaged practice to meet the challenges of the day.

Threefold purpose.

- **Mindfulness Practice.** A BCC uses basic mindfulness practice including sitting, walking, and eating meditation; Dharma-sharing, the teachings of impermanence and interbeing, and regular recitation and reflection on the Five Mindfulness Trainings.
- **Circle liberation.** Members of a BCC intentionally build their group’s culture and ways that embody beloved community, through sharing life stories, caring for each other’s well-being, becoming aware of patterns of oppression that may be operating among

² Initially focused on North American practitioners, due to time, language, and cultural considerations. Future open.

them, supporting each other in personal challenges, and coming to enjoy loving relationships. This is deep sangha-building.

- **Collective liberation.** On the solid foundation of mindfulness practice and caring for one another, the BCC agrees to 12-20 days a year of collective action on an issue or issues of their own choosing (see next paragraph). Practices include studying, learning, visioning, skill-building; developing an intersectionality approach; committing to nonviolence.

Self-chosen focus. Each BCC determines its own action focus somewhere in the territory of racial, social, and climate justice. A Beloved Community Circle might want to organize around a particular identity marker or vocation such as a BIPOC BCC, a Queer BCC, or a BCC of healers or artists or vegans. A Beloved Community Circle might be focused more generally on social justice or be organized around the specific interests of its members. One Circle may be comprised of folks who want to work on community resilience and apply those skills to their local community. Another Circle may focus on shutting down a coal-fired power plant in a low-wealth neighborhood, or equitable climate legislation, supporting Indigenous leadership in Water Protecting, or restoring voting rights, and so on.

Self-organized and autonomous. Each BCC is free to act on its own, organize itself, and call itself a Plum Village Beloved Community Circle as long as it is in harmony with the basic what, why, and how outlined in this document.

Six month commitment to begin. Each member of their Beloved Community Circle for at least six months. This minimum (and renewable) commitment helps create consistency, stability, and trust among the members. It is anticipated that practice and community-building will absorb much of the first six months, with mindful action days mixed in as the group matures.

Commitment to explore issues of race and oppression. Given the context of white supremacy and patriarchy in the United States, each BCC must be intentional about inclusive and equitable practices and processes, so as not to slip into recreating dominant-culture inequities. The Earth Holder Community has deliberately positioned itself at the intersection of racial justice and climate justice, understanding that the two are inseparable.

Given the demographics of the North American mahasangha, we can predict that at least for the foreseeable future, many Beloved Community Circles may have predominantly white practitioners as team members. This is welcome, as all of us are included in the Beloved Community's vision. With that said, This effort includes members doing ongoing work to heal from racism and other oppressions, to train on racial justice and environmental racism, and to continue to make clear the links between race and climate issues.

Ongoing training. Each Beloved Community Circle receives initial onboarding training and ongoing training spread throughout the year, mostly online, for easy access. Over time, training could include skill development in good group process, awareness and healing around racial and social inequities, Kingian nonviolent direct action, trauma healing and resiliency, deep listening-partnerships, nonviolent communication skills, applied ethics, and mindful action pathways. Circle members have opportunities to learn skills and methods from practitioners who are experts in these fields. Such training bolsters our mindfulness skills with other effective skills and methods that are consistent with PV practice. Training is offered at no cost and supported by a gift economy process.

Helping sustain the network. To cover operating costs of the BCC network, we aspire to cultivate a “gift economy model,” trusting that each local BCC member will offer what they can from their wallets, resources, and hearts in a collective experiment of mutual support, transparency, and generosity.

Belonging to a Network. All local BCCs are linked together through electronic platforms for BCC members for sharing resources, experiences, and questions; connecting across the network; inspiring each other with our mindful actions, and so on. Indeed, the BCC Network sees itself as part of the larger “movement of movements” aimed at planetary liberation.

Reasons for a Beloved Community Circles project

Relevance of Plum Village practices. Our Plum Village teachings and practices are exquisitely relevant to addressing the multiple issues that our societies face today—the climate crisis, ongoing racial suffering, democracy under assault, an unjust economic system, and a global pandemic. Our Buddhist/mindfulness practice and Thay’s teachings have much to contribute to our collective efforts to face our situation; handle the grief, numbness and fear; and attempt to curb the worst suffering. For example, our teachings offer elements of wise view (impermanence, interbeing, and the Four Noble Truths); a deep understanding of the key sources of suffering (greed, hatred, and delusion of separateness); practices of developing our love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity (the Four Immeasurable Minds); a centering of community building as a necessary refuge (sangha building); methods for resolving conflicts and reaching decisions (deep listening, Beginning Anew, Shining Light, Love letters, Care Taking Councils, etc.); a specific set of ethics for everyday life emphasizing reverence for life, generosity, kind speech, sexual responsibility, and mindful consumption (Five Mindfulness Trainings); and a history of socially engaged practice as modeled by our Teacher, Venerable Thay. The development of a network of Beloved Community Circles deliberately and purposefully organizes our community to offer these practices in the wider world of suffering,

by embodying our teachings in action in order to help bring forth healing, justice, and liberation for all beings.

There are thousands of potentially socially engaged Plum Village practitioners. Some are already engaged in ARISE or Earth Holders or Wake Up, or EMBRACE, or Wake Up Schools, or Chrysanthemum, or other initiatives. For example, as of 2022, in the Earth Holder Community, there are about 2500 followers on Facebook, 1000 on Twitter, 650 on Instagram, thousands on a newsletter list, 300 on the Basecamp platform. 435 people have participated in the three 8-week Earth Holder THIS IS IT Online Retreats since 2020. 50 to 100 folks attend the monthly Online Earth Holder Sangha. In March 2021, 850 people participated in a 5 day Plum Village retreat for Activists. 200 folks registered for a book club focusing on Thay's book, *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*. So it seems there is a lot of interest in racial and climate justice work.

Resolves tension. The development of Beloved Community Circles serves to resolve tension that often surfaces in local sanghas between those who want sangha to be a refuge from the world, a place for practice of meditation, concentration, and insight, and those who lean towards applying the practice to serve in the wider world, and want the sangha to engage in more mindful action. Both tendencies are understandable and beautiful in their aspirations. Many sanghas have wrestled with this tension and have come up with different solutions. A local Beloved Community Circle can serve as a landing place for those practitioners who are drawn to the more activist side of things, without contributing to sangha disharmony, nor trying to "transform our community into a political instrument." (Tenth Mindfulness Training)

Invites sangha expertise. Furthermore, there are many mindfulness practitioners who are highly trained in skills and methods that do not arise directly from Plum Village tradition but are complementary to and consistent with Plum Village practice. Beloved Community Circle members will have access to this rich learning and practice, through a menu of annual trainings to augment mindfulness, mostly likely online. For example, Race: A Dharma Door (ARISE), THIS IS IT (Earth Holder Community), Nonviolent Communication, Community Resiliency Model, Healing America's Racial Trauma (The Lotus Institute), The Work That Reconnects (Joanna Macy), Re-evaluation Counseling, Somatic Experiencing, Block, Build, Be (Buddhist Peace Fellowship), Fierce Vulnerability, Kingian Nonviolence (East Point Peace Academy).

The origins and development of the Circle concept to date. The Beloved Community Circles idea (formerly named Mindful Action Pods, or MAPs) was first put forth by a member of the Care Taking Council of the Earth Holder Community, and since has been vetted and amended by many contributors, BIPOC and white, lay and monastic. The name was suggested by Bishop Marc Andrus in his book, *Brothers in the Beloved Community*, and is used with his blessing. The project has also been greatly inspired and informed by a sibling initiative called the Fierce

Vulnerability Network, whose key developers, Kazu Haga and Chris Moore-Backman, generously offered their time, feedback, and written materials in support. A deep bow to all.

Summary. A Beloved Community Circle provides an entry point for folks who are wanting or waiting for an organized, safe, personalized, and collective way to engage in the issues of the day under the umbrella of their spiritual community. The small size of a BCC is manageable in terms of caring about each other, decision-making, resolving conflicts, determining a common action or project. Each BCC is supported through a menu of trainings, a “how-to” handbook, and being linked together in a network. The Beloved Community Circles network is in the early stages of expansion and welcomes your participation. The vision is of a large, robust, coordinated network of local mindful action teams that add more mindfulness, kind speech, caring nonviolent action, nondual thinking, deep listening and compassion to humanity’s noble effort to protect and preserve Mother Earth and its beings on the way to living in the Beloved Community.

Thank you for your interest. Please email your ideas, feedback, questions, and interest to belovedcommunitycircles@gmail.com.

In gratitude from the current Beloved Community Circles Caretaking Council,

Melanie Gin. (she/they) is a writer, social change maker, and Zen Buddhist practitioner committed to love in action. They identify as a person of Japanese and Chinese descent, and reside on the Indigenous lands of the Chochenyo Ohlone people (Oakland, California, United States).

Sister True Vow / Thệ Nghiê. (she) is second-generation Vietnamese American, a Buddhist nun in the Plum Village tradition since 1999, with interests in psychology, music, and Earth-holding.

Ivan Trujillo-Priego. (he/el) was born in the land of Tenochtitlán, now known as Mexico City. His ancestry is mixed, native mexican, spanish, german and belgian, providing privilege in some occasions and disprivilege/discrimination in others. One of his deepest aspirations is to have a daily practice of interbeing so his actions may manifest true love.

John Bell. (he/him) is a cis-gendered White man, raised working poor near Seattle, who is now upper middle class, a lifelong social justice worker, and a Dharma teacher, living near Boston on ancient lands of the Wampanoag people. He loves sharing the Dharma, poetry and music, being an ancestor his children & grandchildren love, and devoted to realizing the Beloved Community.