

Non-Self and Mindfulness in Thích Nhất Hạnh’s Buddhist Prose: An Ecocritical and Yin–Yang Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Two of the core concepts in the Buddhist prose of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh are non-self and mindfulness. These notions play a pivotal role in cultivating inner peace and fostering a harmonious world. This study focuses on two representative non-fiction prose works by Thích Nhất Hạnh: “Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2023a) and “No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom for Life” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2024). The article employs spiritual ecocriticism in combination with comparative Eastern philosophy – specifically the Yin–Yang framework of Taoism – while applying textual analysis and an interdisciplinary approach that integrates Buddhist studies, poetics, and ecology. It explores non-self and mindfulness in Thích Nhất Hạnh’s representative prose works. The findings reveal that non-self is a philosophical notion guiding human beings to transcend self-attachment, whereas mindfulness is a practical path that enables one to live deeply in each present moment. Together, these two elements establish a foundation of peace and harmony – not only on the personal level but also in relation to the community and the natural environment. Viewed through the lens of ecocriticism and in dialogue with the Yin–Yang philosophy of Taoism, Thích Nhất Hạnh’s prose emerges as an eco-humanistic discourse, emphasising the principle of interbeing among human beings, nature, and spiritual life. The findings of this article provide reference material for the reading and study of the Buddhist prose of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh.

Keywords: non-self; mindfulness; prose; Buddhism; Thích Nhất Hạnh

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary context, the world is facing multiple crises: environmental, social, and psychological. People increasingly experience a sense of disconnection not only from themselves and their communities but also from the natural world. Consequently, the search for a harmonious and balanced way of life capable of healing suffering has become ever more urgent. At the same time, many classical Buddhist teachings (particularly profound concepts such as non-self and mindfulness) are often perceived as abstract or difficult to access for modern readers living amid rapid social change and ecological instability.

Buddhism, with its long-standing tradition of wisdom and practice, has offered numerous philosophical insights to address these crises. Among modern Buddhist figures, Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh (1926–2022) stands out as one of the most influential voices – not only within Vietnamese Buddhism but also on a global scale. As a monk, writer, and peace activist, he left behind a vast intellectual and spiritual legacy, in which his non-fiction prose holds a particularly significant position. A distinctive feature of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s prose lies in his ability to reinterpret classical Buddhist doctrines through concrete, everyday language, frequently drawing on images of nature and patterns of balance to render subtle teachings experientially intelligible.

Works such as “Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life” (2023a) and “No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom for Life” (2024) serve as the primary texts analysed in this study. While other writings, including “Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames” (2023b), “Finding Peace in the Family” (2023), and “Planting Seeds: Practising Mindfulness with Children” (2023c), are referenced for supplementary illustration. Together, these non-fiction works combine Buddhist philosophy, practical guidance, and narrative elements, serving as pathways through which readers can access and apply spiritual insight in daily life. Thích Nhất Hạnh’s prose stands out for its simplicity and depth: it is both philosophical and therapeutic, often regarded as a form of “meditation through language”. Through metaphors drawn from clouds, water, trees, footsteps, and breath, his writings consistently situate spiritual awakening within the rhythms of the natural world, suggesting an implicit ecological consciousness embedded in Buddhist practice.

Although numerous studies on Thích Nhất Hạnh have been conducted both in Vietnam and abroad, most have approached his work from religious, ethical, or psychological perspectives. Existing scholarship often examines non-self and mindfulness as foundational Buddhist doctrines or therapeutic practices, yet tends to treat these concepts separately. Similarly, ecocritical studies in religious and literary contexts frequently explore nature as a source of healing or moral reflection but rarely consider its role in articulating the dynamic relationship between non-self and mindfulness. Moreover, symbolic frameworks such as Yin–Yang are usually analysed as representations of binary oppositions, without being mobilised to illuminate how Buddhist concepts function relationally in lived practice.

As a result, there remains a significant research gap concerning the integrated analysis of non-self, mindfulness, ecocritical thought, and Yin–Yang philosophy in Thích Nhất Hạnh’s prose. While his writings consistently weave together these dimensions – using natural imagery and patterns of balance to reinterpret Buddhist teachings – the scholarly literature has yet to systematically examine how this convergence contributes to making Buddhist philosophy more accessible and meaningful in the contemporary world.

This study seeks to fill that gap by analysing the representation and function of non-self and mindfulness in Thích Nhất Hạnh's non-fiction prose. Specifically, the research focuses on three main objectives:

- (1) To examine how Thích Nhất Hạnh develops the concept of non-self as a philosophical foundation that affirms interconnectedness among human beings, communities, and the natural environment.
- (2) To clarify the role of mindfulness as a practical method of healing and transformation that enables individuals to respond to psychological, social, and ecological challenges in everyday life.
- (3) To explore the dialectical relationship between non-self and mindfulness as a complementary pair that can be interpreted through the combined lenses of ecocriticism and the Yin–Yang principle of Taoist philosophy.

To achieve these objectives, the paper addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How is the concept of non-self represented in Thích Nhất Hạnh's prose, and in what ways does it articulate an ecological vision of interconnectedness?
- (2) How is mindfulness developed as a concrete practice of healing and transformation in contemporary life, particularly through engagement with nature and everyday experience?
- (3) How can the relationship between non-self and mindfulness be interpreted through ecocritical thought and the Yin–Yang framework, and what does this reveal about the accessibility of Buddhist teachings in modern contexts?

By integrating ecocriticism with Eastern comparative philosophy, this study not only elucidates the distinctive features of Thích Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist prose but also affirms its significance as a humanistic–ecological discourse that bridges spiritual practice, literary expression, and contemporary concerns.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Within Thích Nhất Hạnh's prose, the concepts of non-self (*anattā*) and mindfulness (*sati*) occupy a central place. Thích Nhất Hạnh engages with classical Buddhist teachings on non-self and mindfulness, reinterpreting them through concrete and accessible language that allows contemporary readers to understand and experientially engage with these principles. Internationally, some academic studies have explored Thích Nhất Hạnh's literary and spiritual contributions. Notable works include the thesis "Thich Nhat Hanh and the Literature of Interbeing: Origins, Development, and Continuation" by Grégoire Mauraisin in Sweden (2022), the article "Thich Nhat Hanh's Contributions to the Field of Mindfulness" by Suresh Sankapal in an Indian journal (2024), "Mindfulness and Motivation in Self-Transformation" by Lim Hui Ling in a Thai journal (2021), and "Reflecting on Thich Nhat Hanh" by Janine Schipper in a U.S.-based journal (2024). In Vietnam, several publications have addressed his philosophy, such as "Engaged Buddhism in the Teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh (2023): Concept and Expressions" by Phạm Hoài Phong and Phan Văn Chín (2020), "Engaged Buddhism in Thích Nhất Hạnh" by Trần Thị Thúy Ngọc (2022), and "From Cultivating Inner Peace to World Peace in 'No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom for Life' of Thích Nhất Hạnh" by Hoàng Thị Thùy Dương (2025).

Research on Thích Nhất Hạnh's thought, both in Vietnam and abroad, is generally abundant and can be divided into two main directions:

- (1) A number of studies approach his works from a religious perspective, focusing on the analysis of Buddhist doctrines in his writings and emphasising the role of foundational concepts such as non-self, mindfulness, and compassion in spiritual life.
- (2) Some works adopt an applied psychological approach, viewing Thích Nhất Hạnh's texts as a form of therapeutic literature that helps alleviate stress, heal trauma, and cultivate inner peace.

While these studies provide valuable insights, they often examine non-self and mindfulness separately and rarely consider how Thích Nhất Hạnh intertwines them with natural imagery and literary devices. Similarly, ecocritical studies in religious and literary contexts, such as Glotfelty and Fromm (1996), DeLoughrey and Handley (2011), Bùi Thanh Truyền (2018), Tucker and

Williams (1998), and Taylor et al. (2009), often consider nature as a tool for purification, healing, or supporting enlightenment, but rarely explore its role in relation to both non-self and mindfulness simultaneously. In Thích Nhất Hạnh's prose, natural imagery is not merely illustrative; it actively facilitates the intertwined practice of non-self and mindfulness, rendering these concepts experiential, relational, and ethically meaningful for contemporary readers.

Likewise, Yin–Yang imagery has traditionally been analysed in literature or religious texts as representing opposites – such as light and dark, activity and stillness, or good and evil (Ames, 2011; Cheng, 1987; Tu Weiming, 1985; Saunders Jr., 2024). Classical Taoist texts, including the “*Dao De Jing*” (Laozi, 2021) and “*Zhuangzi*” (Zhuangzi, 1994), provide models of relational balance, processual thinking, and non-dualistic perspectives. Yet few studies have used Yin–Yang imagery to illuminate the dynamic interplay of non-self and mindfulness in lived practice. By integrating Thích Nhất Hạnh's reinterpretation, ecocritical perspectives, and Yin–Yang imagery, it becomes possible to show how these frameworks collectively clarify and make subtle Buddhist teachings more accessible and meaningful.

Taken together, the literature indicates a clear research gap: although Thích Nhất Hạnh consistently blends non-self, mindfulness, natural imagery, and Yin–Yang patterns to create a humanistic–ecological philosophy, few studies systematically examine how these elements converge to make subtle Buddhist teachings more accessible and meaningful in contemporary contexts. By situating non-self and mindfulness within a combined ecocritical and comparative philosophical framework, this study seeks to address that gap, exploring how Thích Nhất Hạnh's reinterpretation of classical Buddhist doctrines – mediated through nature and resonant with Yin–Yang balance – articulates a holistic vision bridging spiritual practice, literary expression, and modern life challenges.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is conducted through a combination of ecocriticism and Eastern comparative philosophy (specifically the Yin–Yang principle in Taoism) as an analytical framework. This approach not only adheres to the distinctive features of Thích Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist prose but also broadens the interpretive horizon within philosophical and cultural correlations.

First, ecocriticism provides a theoretical foundation for analysing the relationship between human beings, nature, and spiritual life. In Thích Nhất Hạnh's prose, nature is not merely an aesthetic backdrop but a medium through which Buddhist philosophy is conveyed: the cloud, the river, the flower, and the leaf all embody the notion of “interbeing,” emphasising the interconnectedness between humans and the environment. According to Rueckert (1978), ecocriticism is considered an innovative experiment in literary studies, centring on the relationship between texts and ecology. Since the 1990s, with the contributions of Glotfelty and Fromm (1996), ecocriticism has become an influential approach, extending to various fields such as natural, social, gender, and postcolonial ecologies. In Vietnam, numerous studies have affirmed the potential of ecocriticism in interpreting the relationship among humans, nature, and society (Bùi Thanh Truyền, 2018; Hoàng Tố Mai, 2017; Nguyễn Thị Tịnh Thy, 2017; Trần Thị Ánh Nguyệt & Lê Lưu Oanh, 2016). In this article, ecocriticism is employed in a broad sense – encompassing both inner ecology and social ecology – to analyse non-self and mindfulness as experientially realised through the natural world, highlighting the ethical and relational dimensions of human engagement with nature.

Second, the study employs the Yin–Yang framework of Taoism as a tool for comparative philosophy. Rooted in Laozi’s “*Dao De Jing*” (2021) and Zhuang Zi’s “*Nan Hua Jing*” (Zhuangzi, 1994), Taoism emphasises the Dao (the ultimate principle of the universe), Yin–Yang (opposing yet complementary forces), and Wu Wei (living in harmony with nature). In Western scholarship, numerous studies have examined the depth of Taoist philosophy and practice. Livia Kohn (1993), in “*The Taoist Experience: An Anthology*”, compiled and analysed classical Taoist texts, revealing the diversity of Taoist theory and practice. At the comparative level, Ramsden (2022) outlined the similarities and differences in core doctrines, spiritual cultivation methods, and interrelations among Buddhism, Taoism, Brahmanism, and Yoga – emphasising the mutual enrichment among major spiritual traditions. Complementing this perspective, Saunders (2024) explored the parallel development of Buddhism and Taoism in Chinese history, particularly the deification of Lao Tzu as a religious founder, highlighting both the integration and competition between the two systems of thought. In addition, several foundational works on Eastern culture have addressed the role of Taoism in the spiritual life, such as “*The Sacred Paths of the East*” by Theodore M. Ludwig (2000) and “*General Introduction of Eastern Culture*” edited by Luong Duy Thù (1998). These studies provide essential theoretical and historical foundations for situating Taoism in dialogue with Buddhism, while suggesting the potential of applying the Yin–Yang framework to the study of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s Buddhist prose.

Viewed through the Yin–Yang lens, the concepts of non-self and mindfulness in Thích Nhất Hạnh’s thought can be interpreted as two complementary poles: non-self embodies release and transcendence of ego-attachment (the Yin aspect), whereas mindfulness represents active awakening and luminous presence (the Yang aspect). When practised in tandem, they create a holistic balance reminiscent of the Taoist principle of harmony. Furthermore, non-self can be illuminated through the Taoist notion of *wu wei* (non-action), which advocates living in accordance with the natural order; while mindfulness, understood as living deeply in each moment, resonates with the dynamic unfolding of the Dao – the path that connects human beings with the cosmos.

By integrating ecocriticism, Yin–Yang philosophy, and the analysis of non-self and mindfulness, this framework establishes a coherent analytical lens for Thích Nhất Hạnh’s prose. Non-self and mindfulness are understood as mutually reinforcing practices; nature provides a medium for readers to experientially grasp these concepts, and Yin–Yang imagery illustrates the balance and relational dynamics between them. Together, these elements form a unified analytical structure, allowing the study to reveal how Thích Nhất Hạnh’s reinterpretation of classical Buddhist doctrines fosters a humanistic, ecological, and philosophically nuanced understanding accessible to contemporary audiences.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs textual analysis in combination with an interdisciplinary approach that integrates Buddhist studies, spiritual ecology, and poetics.

Specifically, the research process consists of the following steps:

- (1) Two representative prose works by Thích Nhất Hạnh: “Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life” (2023a) and “No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom for Life” (2024), are selected as the primary corpus for this study. These non-fiction works are highly influential and clearly embody the central ideas of mindfulness and non-self, allowing for detailed textual analysis. Other works by Thích Nhất Hạnh, including “Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames” (2023b), “Finding Peace in the Family” (2023), and “Planting Seeds: Practising Mindfulness with Children” (2023c), are referenced selectively to provide supplementary examples and contextual support.
- (2) Content and formal analysis: The study focuses on how non-self and mindfulness are expressed through natural imagery and narrative structures. From this, it explores the relationship between Buddhist thought and modern life – particularly the ecological and humanistic connections.
- (3) Comparative analysis: The selected texts are compared to identify both the consistency and variation in Thích Nhất Hạnh’s articulation of non-self and mindfulness. The study also situates his prose within the context of previous scholarship, thereby highlighting the novelty of approaching his work through the lens of spiritual ecology. Simultaneously, the research applies the Taoist Yin–Yang framework to add a comparative philosophical dimension, elucidating the complementarity and balance between non-self and mindfulness within the triadic relationship of human beings, nature, and community.
- (4) Synthesis and interpretation: Drawing on the detailed analyses, the study concludes with an overview of the functions and meanings of non-self and mindfulness in Thích Nhất Hạnh’s prose, thereby affirming the role of Buddhist prose as a moral, ecological, and humanistic discourse in the contemporary context.

RESULTS

NON-SELF: THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATION OF INTERCONNECTEDNESS

In Buddhist thought in general, and in the prose of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh in particular, the concept of non-self plays a central role. Non-self is a philosophical foundation that enables individuals to transcend suffering and the illusion of a separate, isolated self. It is not merely an abstract doctrine but a way of perceiving and transforming reality. According to this view, the “self” to which people cling is not an independent or permanent entity. Rather, it is a temporary aggregation of physical, psychological, and social conditions. When one realises the non-self nature of oneself and all phenomena, one can release attachment to the ego. As a result, one may live with a spirit of tolerance, harmony, and freedom from self-centred impulses.

However, to deeply understand the nature of non-self, Thích Nhất Hạnh always presents it in close relationship with other core Buddhist concepts such as impermanence, interbeing, and dependent arising. Impermanence emphasises that all phenomena change over time, demonstrating that clinging to a fixed and unchanging self is irrational. Interbeing highlights the interrelatedness of all things, asserting that nothing exists independently, reinforcing the view that the separate self is an illusion. Meanwhile, dependent arising explains that all phenomena exist only through the combination and interaction of various conditions, including both material and mental elements. These four concepts not only support one another philosophically but also form a coherent cognitive system. They allow practitioners of meditation and readers of Thích Nhất Hạnh’s Buddhist prose to approach the true nature of self and the world. This study shows that these

concepts function not only as philosophical principles but also as practical tools for fostering ethical behaviour, ecological awareness, and interpersonal compassion.

From this interconnected framework, it becomes clear that the non-self does not deny the human being but, on the contrary, opens a more profound and compassionate perspective toward oneself and others. Non-self is a gateway to connection, for when the notion of a fixed, individual ego is dismantled, one becomes more capable of understanding and walking alongside all beings. In other words, the realisation of non-self leads to measurable changes in attitudes and behaviour, promoting patience, forgiveness, and ecological responsibility, as demonstrated through the recurring natural imagery and narrative examples in his prose. The key concepts related to “non-self” in Thích Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist prose are summarised in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1. Representative Concepts Associated with “Non-Self” in the Buddhist Prose of Thích Nhất Hạnh

No.	Core Concept	Cognitive Role
1	Non-self	There is no separate and permanent self.
2	Impermanence	All things and phenomena change over time.
3	Interbeing	All things and phenomena contain one another; nothing exists independently.
4	Dependent Arising	All things and phenomena exist due to the combination of conditions.

Table 1 summarises the representative concepts associated with the notion of non-self in the Buddhist prose of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh, including non-self, impermanence, interbeing, and dependent arising. In “No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom for Life”, he writes: “When we speak of self, we mean something that does not change from day to day” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2024, p. 61). He asserts that nothing in this world exists in isolation or remains unchanged. Because nothing is separate or permanent, a fixed and independent self cannot exist. Therefore, all things exist in a state of non-self. When people no longer cling to notions of “I” or “mine”, they are less affected by praise, criticism, or competition. The concept of non-self helps us understand that there is nothing to possess or hold onto forever. This leads to letting go of the desire to control life. Non-self reduces egocentrism, helping to prevent conflict in human relationships. When individuals realise non-self, they become more tolerant, patient, and forgiving. Moreover, non-self also means that one is not separate but part of a larger whole. From this perspective, one develops empathy and lives in harmony with others and the surrounding world.

Closely related to the concept of non-self is impermanence – the result of observing reality through the lens of time. According to Thích Nhất Hạnh, “Impermanence means that everything is changing; nothing remains the same in two consecutive moments. Because it changes every moment, we cannot precisely describe whether it is the same or different from before” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2024, p. 54). When people understand impermanence, they stop clinging to fame, physical appearance, possessions, and so on. This letting go leads to a lighter, more tolerant attitude toward life. Impermanence helps us realise that each moment is precious and cannot be repeated. As a result, we become more present, more peaceful, and more harmonious in our actions. It also reminds us that others are also subject to the flow of impermanence. This awareness nurtures compassion and helps release anger and blame.

All things exist in mutual dependence within the intricate web of the universe – this is interbeing and dependent arising. Interbeing means that this exists within that; each thing exists in dependence on everything else, and nothing exists in complete isolation. A phenomenon appears only when sufficient causes and conditions come together; when such conditions are absent, it remains latent. In Thích Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist prose, ecological awareness is expressed naturally

through emotionally rich language. It is the voice of one who lives mindfully with every step, every breath – knowing that humans are not the centre but merely one link in the web of life. He points out that when we breathe in mindfully, we receive the air made possible by trees; when we eat a spoonful of rice, we are receiving the clouds, the sun, and the labour of farmers. In every line, Thích Nhất Hạnh reminds the reader that every thought affects the world. Thus, one must live with ecological responsibility. Everything exists through dependent arising. When we understand interbeing, we no longer see others as separate or threatening. We recognise all beings as part of ourselves. This realisation nurtures a way of life based on inclusiveness and non-discrimination. It fosters compassion, humility, and a deep sense of responsibility toward all beings.

From the concepts of non-self, impermanence, interbeing, and dependent arising, Thích Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist prose consistently emphasises the close connection between inner life and the external world. He does not place humans at the centre, but rather views them as a part of a vast ecological network, in which every thought and action contributes either to peace or to chaos in the world.

According to Cheryll Glotfelty – one of the pioneers of ecocriticism – “Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, xviii). This definition affirms that ecocriticism does not view literature merely as an aesthetic product, but as a medium that reflects and constructs the relationship between humans and the natural environment. From this perspective, nature in Thích Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist prose is not merely a background or descriptive setting; it becomes a dialogical subject. Images of clouds, the moon, water, leaves, and rivers simultaneously embody the Buddhist ideas of non-self, impermanence, and dependent co-arising, allowing readers to experience the interbeing between humans and all forms of life deeply.

The recurring presence of natural imagery is one of the most distinctive aspects of Thích Nhất Hạnh's poetic and narrative aesthetics. These images serve as vehicles for expressing the notion of non-self and related philosophical concepts. Representative examples of natural imagery in Thích Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist prose – drawn from the works “Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life” (2023a) and “No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom for Life” (2024) – are presented in Table 2 below. Similar imagery can be found throughout Thích Nhất Hạnh's other prose works, illustrating consistent themes of interbeing, impermanence, and non-self.

TABLE 2. Representative Natural Images Associated with Non-Self in the Buddhist Prose of Thích Nhất Hạnh

No.	Natural images	Meaning
1	Clouds, rain, waves, rivers, sea	Expresses the principles of impermanence and dependent arising: when conditions come together, a cloud can become rain, rain becomes a river, and the river flows into the sea – a process of continuous transformation.
2	Fire	Expresses the principles of impermanence and dependent arising: fire burns and then dies out; it exists only when conditions such as fuel, air, and heat are present.
3	Flowers	Expresses the principles of non-self, interbeing, and dependent arising: a flower cannot bloom by itself without the rain, sunlight, wind, soil, or the caring hands of a gardener.
4	Trees	Expresses the principles of non-self, interbeing, and dependent arising: a tree grows thanks to the rain, sunlight, wind, soil, and the caring hands of a gardener.
5	The sun	Expresses the principles of interbeing and dependent arising: the sun sustains life for all beings, while it itself exists in dependence on the laws of the universe.

The natural images presented in Table 2 – such as clouds, rain, waves, fire, flowers, trees, and the sun – function not merely as aesthetic elements but as condensed philosophical metaphors in Thích Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist prose. Rather than illustrating nature for its own sake, these images articulate core Buddhist insights into impermanence, dependent arising, and non-self. Through continuous transformation (cloud–rain–river–sea), conditional existence (fire), and interbeing (flowers, trees, and the sun), the prose guides readers to recognise that no phenomenon possesses an independent, fixed essence. In this way, natural imagery becomes a pedagogical device that renders abstract Buddhist doctrines experientially accessible and ethically resonant. As Thích Nhất Hạnh writes:

All beings must consume sunlight in order to live. Our body cannot survive only because of the heart; it also needs nourishment from the air. If the atmosphere were to disappear, our lives would end. Therefore, there is nothing in the universe that is not related to us – whether it is a tiny pebble deep beneath the ocean or the movement of light from a million years ago.

(Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2023a, p. 67)

Through such imagery, nature becomes a profound language of Buddhist wisdom, enabling readers to grasp the teachings not only through intellect but also through direct, lived experience drawn from the most familiar and simple aspects of life.

In the Buddhist prose of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh, short stories often recount a personal memory, a Zen anecdote, or an everyday conversation. These stories possess a gentle narrative quality while simultaneously revealing profound connections between human beings and nature. Representative stories in Thích Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist prose – examined in works such as “Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life” (2023a) and “No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom for Life” (2024) – that embody the concept of non-self are presented in Table 3. Similar narrative patterns appear across Thích Nhất Hạnh's other works, consistently illustrating the principles of non-self.

TABLE 3. Representative Short Stories Associated with Non-Self in the Buddhist Prose of Thích Nhất Hạnh

No.	Story	Meaning
1	Anger as a Storm	Expresses the principles of impermanence, interbeing, and dependent arising. When conditions are sufficient, a cloud transforms into water, then into tea, and eventually into our breath and life itself.
2	The Pebble in the Meditator's Pocket	Expresses the principles of non-self and impermanence. The “self” and the “ancestors” are not separate; the ancestors continue to live in every cell and every breath of their descendants.
3	The Sound of The Mindfulness Bell	Expresses interbeing and dependent arising: in a single piece of bread, there is the sun, rain, soil, the farmer, effort, and care. No object or phenomenon can exist independently.

The short stories presented in Table 3 demonstrate how Thích Nhất Hạnh employs everyday narratives as an effective medium for conveying the Buddhist insights of non-self, impermanence, interbeing, and dependent arising. Rather than presenting these concepts in abstract doctrinal terms, the Zen master situates them within ordinary acts such as drinking tea, breathing, eating, and reflecting on one's lineage. Through images like the cloud in a teacup, ancestors in every cell, or the sun in a piece of bread, the stories invite readers to experientially realise that no phenomenon exists independently. In this narrative mode, non-self is not taught as a philosophical abstraction but emerges naturally through mindful engagement with lived experience, allowing readers to internalise Buddhist wisdom in a concrete and accessible way.

In Thích Nhất Hạnh’s Buddhist prose, both natural imagery and everyday stories serve as vehicles for expressing philosophical insights, with nature playing a particularly prominent role. Images such as the moon, water, clouds, forests, or autumn leaves become symbols that evoke the ideas of non-self, impermanence, interbeing, and dependent arising. Here, nature is not merely present as a described object but also functions as a mirror reflecting the empty essence of existence, where the personal self dissolves within the endless flow of the universe. The interconnectedness between humans and nature in Thích Nhất Hạnh’s prose can be examined within the historical and philosophical context of the Buddhist–Taoist interplay. As Saunders (2024, pp. 136–137) notes, on the stone steles at Kongwang Mountain (Lianyungang), Buddhist imagery appears alongside Laozi as objects of veneration, evidencing spiritual harmony. Moreover, many Buddhist relics excavated in Sichuan also feature Taoist motifs, demonstrating the coexistence and mutual enrichment of the two traditions. This indicates that both in history and literature, Buddhism and Taoism emphasise harmony with nature and cultivate peace through a balanced relationship with all beings. The Yin–Yang philosophy is a core Taoist principle:

These are Yin and Yang, the original pair of complementary opposites. Through them, there are heaven and earth, the sun and the moon, light and darkness, hot and cold, and all the various distinctions that make up the world of existence.

(Kohn, 1993, p.33)

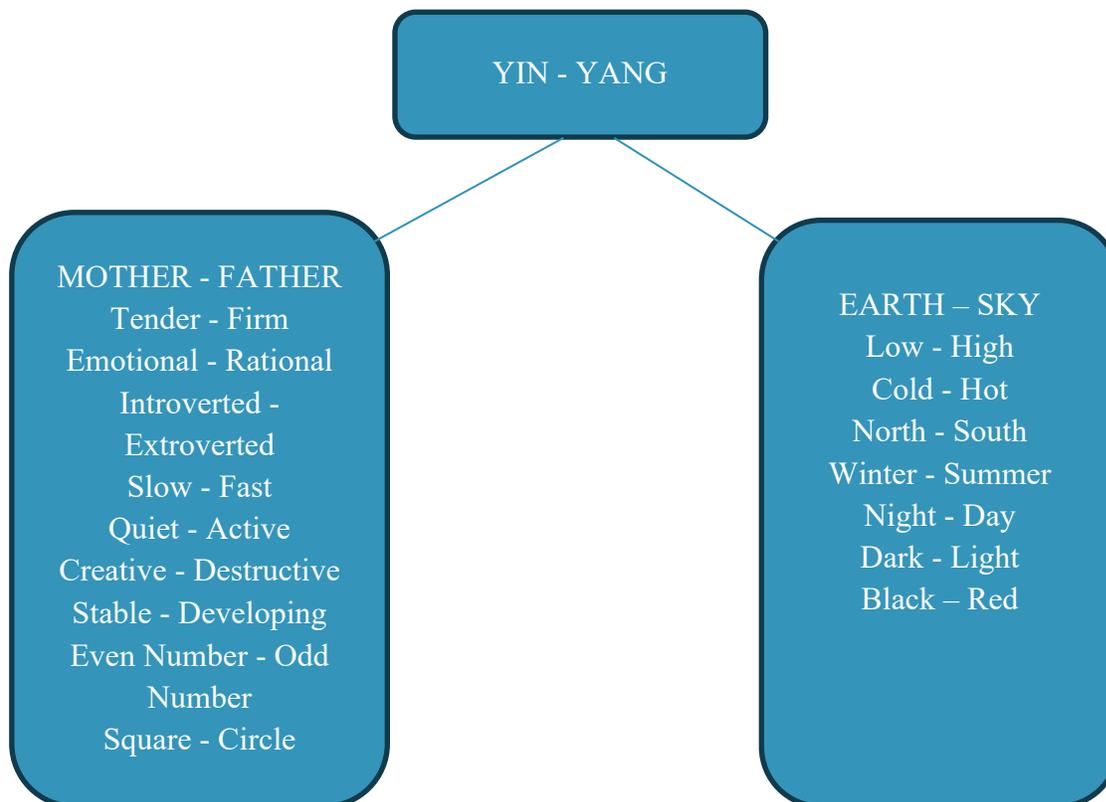


FIGURE 1. An initial overview of the Yin–Yang philosophy (Trần Ngọc Thêm, 2021, p.56)

When compared with the Yin–Yang philosophy, non-self can be seen as closely aligned with the Yin principle: quiet, receptive, latent, serving as the foundation to nurture and contain life. In the texts, many images associated with the Yin dimension are deployed: the reflective moon, flowing water, the decay of leaves... All affirm that the self does not exist independently, but always depends on and operates in harmonious relation with the whole. Non-self, therefore, is not a form of loss but an opening, where the individual ego dissolves into the shared web of life. Framed within Yin–Yang philosophy, one can perceive the convergence between Buddhism and Taoism: non-self (Yin) is the empty, foundational space necessary for life and transformation (Yang) to manifest. This sets the stage for the next discussion, where mindfulness is understood as the Yang principle – movement, awareness, and the cultivation of vital energy.

MINDFULNESS: TRANSFORMATIVE ENERGY AND THERAPEUTIC METHOD

If non-self is the philosophical foundation that enables individuals to release attachment to the ego and integrate into the stream of life, then mindfulness is the concrete path of practice that allows each person to return to vibrant, lived reality. In the Buddhist prose of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh, mindfulness is not merely a meditative term. It is a practical way of living – one that has the capacity to transform suffering and heal the mind. Mindfulness is the capacity to clearly and fully recognise what is happening in the present moment, without judgment or reactive impulses. Through mindfulness, individuals can identify emotions, pause before impulsive actions, and establish an inner space of calm and awareness.

Unlike ordinary attention, mindfulness is infused with understanding and compassion. That is why Thích Nhất Hạnh refers to mindfulness as a transformative energy – an energy that allows people to come into direct contact with suffering, anger, and anxiety, to clarify their emotions, and to bring the mind back to the here and now. With mindfulness, one is no longer fearful of past wounds, as one can approach and embrace these feelings with understanding. In this sense, mindfulness can also be regarded as a spiritual method of therapy. It helps reduce stress and enables individuals to face themselves with greater gentleness and compassion. The study demonstrates that mindfulness in Thích Nhất Hạnh’s prose functions as both a cognitive and emotional regulation tool, showing measurable benefits in reducing negative affect and promoting prosocial attitudes.

In Thích Nhất Hạnh's prose, the manifestations of mindfulness are expressed through simple yet profound language. Readers easily encounter small stories and familiar images through which they can discover how to apply mindfulness in breathing, walking, speaking, and listening. The practical roles of mindfulness in the Buddhist prose of Thích Nhất Hạnh are summarised in Table 4 below.

TABLE 4. Representative Concepts Associated with “Mindfulness” in the Buddhist Prose of Thích Nhất Hạnh

No.	Core Concept	Practical Role
1	Mindfulness	Clearly recognising what is happening in the present moment without judgment.
2	Mindfulness as Transformative Energy	Transforms suffering, anger, and anxiety into understanding and compassion.
3	Mindfulness as a Therapeutic Method	Helps individuals face past wounds without being overwhelmed.

Table 4 summarises the key conceptual dimensions of “mindfulness” as they emerge from the analysis of Thích Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist prose. Based on the principles of non-self, impermanence, interbeing, and dependent arising, Thích Nhất Hạnh encourages individuals to cherish each moment of the present. This is realised through the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness is the capacity for lucid and wholehearted awareness of reality – it is intentional attention to the present moment, without judgment or impulsive reaction. In Thích Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist prose, mindfulness is not only a meditative term but also a practical way of living:

In life, there are still so many wonders, but because we do not practice mindfulness, we fail to appreciate them. When we cultivate mindfulness, we begin to cherish these wonders and take care of them. Knowing how to care for the present is knowing how to care for the future. To create happiness for the future, we must first create happiness in the present moment.

(Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2023a, p. 60)

This shows that mindfulness is not only theoretical but can be operationalised in daily life, supporting the research claim that Thích Nhất Hạnh's prose provides concrete techniques for psychological and ecological well-being.

In daily life, people are often so busy that they forget what they are doing – or even who they are. They worry about the future or dwell on the past and forget the present moment. Some even forget that they are breathing. Therefore, people need to practice mindfulness to live fully in the present. This practice can begin with awareness of the breath – the basic sign of being alive: “We must return to the present moment to live fully; we practice mindful breathing so that we can truly connect with the present – the place where the miraculousness of life unfolds in countless forms” (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2023b, p. 67).

The Zen master also encourages mindfulness practice in simple everyday actions such as washing dishes, drinking tea, or walking. He developed very specific mindfulness techniques, including: mindful breathing – focusing on the breath to dwell in the present; mindful walking – feeling each step and one's connection with the earth; mindful eating – enjoying each bite with gratitude; deep listening and loving speech – improving communication and healing relationships. According to him, every mindful act enables people to live fully and peacefully. In “Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life”, Thích Nhất Hạnh writes:

Feel the contact of your feet with the earth. Walk as if you are kissing the earth. We have caused a lot of harm to the earth. It is time we learn to take care of it. We walk to bring peace to the earth and to share our love. From time to time, we may stop to look at a beautiful scene, a tree, a flower, or children playing. While looking, we stay with our breathing so we don't lose the flower to our thoughts.

(Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2023a, pp. 44–45)

Thus, each step becomes an act of deep reverence and connection with nature, reminding us to be mindful of our every step on this earth.

Moreover, mindfulness is also applied in transforming negative emotions such as anger and hatred. In “Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life”, Thích Nhất Hạnh advises that we embrace our anger with mindfulness:

By shining the light of mindfulness on our anger, we begin to see its roots. Anger arises from many causes: misunderstanding, clumsiness, injustice, or the presence of numerous seeds of resentment within our consciousness. These causes may exist both within ourselves and within the person who triggers our anger. Only through mindful contemplation can we recognise these conditions and understand their true nature. Seeing and understanding are the conditions that give rise to loving-kindness and compassion.

(Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2023a, p. 91)

The Zen master also explains that these internal formations long to surface into consciousness. If they are suppressed, the mental flow becomes stagnant, leading to psychological illness. Therefore, instead of repressing these internal knots, we should embrace them so they can return to the deeper layers of the mind. Thus, the practice of mindfulness helps people reduce anxiety and live with awareness. It is a path toward establishing lasting inner peace. These narrative and natural examples provide evidence that mindfulness practices in literary texts can enhance emotional intelligence and self-regulation, a point highlighted in the ecocritical perspective.

According to Hoàng Tố Mai:

Ecocriticism is the criticism of literature and culture from the perspective of environmentalism. Texts are evaluated in terms of their potentially harmful or beneficial impact on the environment. Beliefs and ideas are examined for their environmental implications in literature.

(Hoàng Tố Mai, Ed., 2017, p. 106)

Thus, from an ecocritical perspective, the images and stories of nature in Buddhist prose not only hold aesthetic value but also reflect the relationship between humans and the natural world, while contributing to the cultivation of awareness and mindfulness practices, helping individuals to be fully present in each moment. In terms of artistic expression, in the works of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh, images such as the moon, footsteps, birdsong, and paths carry the depth of mindfulness practice, guiding practitioners back to the present moment. The representative natural images associated with mindfulness in Thích Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist prose are presented in Table 5 below.

TABLE 5. Representative Natural Images associated with mindfulness in the Buddhist Prose of Thích Nhất Hạnh

No.	Natural images	Meaning
1	The moon	Mindfulness in stillness: the moon symbolises clarity and serenity; the mindful mind illuminates all phenomena like moonlight reflecting on water, without judgment, perceiving purely and fully.
2	Footsteps	Mindfulness in action: each step is an opportunity to return to the present; body and mind are united, cultivating a sense of peace in every movement.
3	Birdsongs	Mindfulness in listening: natural sounds awaken the capacity for deep awareness, guiding the listener back to the life unfolding in each present moment.
4	The path	Mindfulness in returning: the path serves as a sacred space for practice; each step is a return home, where body and mind meet in mindfulness.

In the table above, the moon evokes a sense of stillness. Each step is a mark of presence, a return to the present moment. Meanwhile, the small stone in the palm of the hand serves as a simple yet profound symbol of mindfulness: when sitting in stillness and placing full attention on the stone, one is practising deep presence in each moment. The path serves as a sacred space for returning. Thus, natural images become means to guide people back to the present, allowing full presence of both body and mind.

Mindfulness is the ability to be fully present in each moment. Thích Nhất Hạnh conveys mindfulness through simple yet profound stories. The exemplary stories in Thích Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist prose are presented in Table 6.

TABLE 6. Representative Short Stories associated with mindfulness in the Buddhist Prose of Thích Nhất Hạnh

No.	Story	Meaning
1	Anger as a Storm	Mindfulness in emotions: it helps people recognise, embrace, and transform anger through understanding and compassion. With mindfulness, anger no longer controls one's actions but becomes an opportunity to practice understanding and loving-kindness.
2	Hug Meditation	Demonstrates mindfulness and interbeing: being fully present harmonises emotions and separations; hugging a person fosters connection and love, while hugging an object highlights our interconnectedness with all beings.
3	The Sound of The Mindfulness Bell	Mindfulness in listening: the bell is a sound of awakening, bringing one back to the present moment, letting go of past–future anxieties, and resting peacefully in the here and now.

In the table above, the stories provide practitioners with concrete means to engage with and cultivate mindfulness. In the story “Anger Like a Storm”, the Zen master compares the emotion of anger to a great storm rising within the mind. In such moments, one can easily be swept away and act uncontrollably, causing suffering to oneself and others. However, with mindfulness, one can embrace and transform anger through understanding and compassion – Investigating its causes to understand oneself and others, and thereby cultivate love and care. The story of “Hug Meditation” illustrates how the practitioner, by embracing a person or an object with full awareness, returns to the present moment, to each breath, and to a deep sense of connection. In the story “The Bell of Mindfulness,” the bell reminds one to return to the present moment, preventing the mind from drifting into the past or future. Through this practice, one can live peacefully amid the disturbances of both inner and outer worlds. Taken together, these narrative and natural images demonstrate that mindfulness in Thích Nhất Hạnh’s prose functions not only as a contemplative ideal but as a practical method that enhances emotional regulation, relational awareness, and embodied presence in everyday life.

From the exemplary images and short stories of nature illustrating mindfulness, it is evident that Thích Nhất Hạnh employs nature as a means of practice and a medium to convey Buddhist wisdom. Nature is not merely a backdrop but a companion on the path of awareness, guiding individuals back to their breath, their steps, and their own selves. From an ecological perspective, mindfulness in Thích Nhất Hạnh's prose is not only a method for cultivating inner peace but also an energy that helps humans reestablish harmonious relationships with the natural world. Practising mindfulness allows individuals to realise deeply that their lives depend on countless beings and the surrounding environment, thereby fostering compassion, appreciation, and responsibility toward the planet. Thus, mindfulness in Thích Nhất Hạnh's prose carries two interrelated dimensions: spiritual therapy and ecological reawakening, directing humans toward a conscious, harmonious, and sustainable way of living in the world.

From a broader perspective, the development of the concept of mindfulness in Thích Nhất Hạnh’s prose corresponds to the Yang principle in Taoist philosophy. While “non-self” in the previous section embodies Yin – emphasizing emptiness, letting go, and returning to the foundation of non-action - “mindfulness” embodies Yang, expressing vibrant energy, active transformation, and creative engagement “Ever since Nine Palaces, heaven was Yang and earth was Yin. Yang is hard and strong” (Kohn, 1993, p. 39). In Yin–Yang philosophy, Yin and Yang are not absolute opposites but complement each other to operate the universe. According to scholar Trần Ngọc Thêm, Yin and Yang follow the “Law of Relations: Yin and Yang are always interconnected and transform into each other” (2021, p. 58). Similarly, non-self and mindfulness in Thích Nhất Hạnh’s thought are inseparable: non-self serves as the philosophical foundation,

while mindfulness is the concrete method of practice. Thanks to non-self (Yin), mindfulness (Yang) does not fall into personal attachment, and through mindfulness (Yang), non-self (Yin) becomes a lived experience rather than a mere theoretical concept. Thus, through the interplay of non-self (Yin) and mindfulness (Yang), Thích Nhất Hạnh's philosophy operates according to the principles of balance and mutual generation in the universe. This also forms the basis for a comprehensive ecological awareness, where humans not only find inner peace but also establish harmonious relationships with the environment and all beings. Overall, the interplay of non-self (Yin) and mindfulness (Yang) in these texts demonstrates how Buddhist philosophy is operationalised through literary practice, producing observable effects on ethical awareness, ecological responsibility, and emotional transformation. This approach resonates with prior scholarship, which has shown how religious concepts, including Buddhism and Taoism, are conveyed and interpreted in literary texts (Reynolds & Liao, 2014).

CONCLUSION

This article contributes to clarifying the core values of Buddhist thought as expressed through literary form, particularly through a focused examination of two selected works: "Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life" (Thích Nhất Hạnh, 2023a) and "No Death, No Fear: Comforting Wisdom for Life" (2024), to illustrate the convergence of non-self, mindfulness, natural imagery, and Yin–Yang principles. The concepts of non-self and mindfulness are classical Buddhist doctrines that predate Thích Nhất Hạnh; his contribution lies in how he reinterprets and presents them for contemporary readers. Thích Nhất Hạnh conveys these teachings in a gentle and accessible prose style. Non-self offers a path to liberation from the constraints of fixed identity, while mindfulness serves as a means to sustain awareness and deepen one's understanding of life. The article also affirms the practical significance of Buddhist prose, rooted in ordinary lived experience. The insight of Buddhism is presented not merely as philosophy but as a way of practice – a path to transforming suffering, cultivating inner peace, and nurturing authentic compassion.

Thích Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist prose is not merely doctrinal or meditative in nature; rather, it constructs a profound ethical and ecological discourse. His works resonate with the existential, psychological, and environmental crises of the modern world. By integrating his reinterpretation of non-self and mindfulness, natural imagery, and Yin–Yang principles, this study shows how these elements converge to make subtle Buddhist teachings more accessible and meaningful. The key concepts in his writings go beyond philosophical abstraction. They are reinterpreted into a practical system that orients human behaviour, shapes intersubjective relationships, and cultivates a sense of mutual connectedness between humans and all forms of life. On the ethical level, his prose helps readers reconstruct their relationship with themselves and with others. He encourages individuals to abandon instinctual reactions and move toward understanding, deep listening, and compassion. Non-self opens a path to a way of living that transcends self-centeredness, while mindfulness offers a concrete method for living well and ethically. From an ecological perspective, Thích Nhất Hạnh's prose reflects a worldview that decenters the human position. Humans are seen not as rulers of nature, but as one component within an intricate web of life. In reality, each action, thought, and breath has an impact on the surrounding environment. Therefore, ecological discourse in his texts is not limited to descriptions of nature. It is also embodied in the way his prose guides readers to live mindfully, moderately, and in harmony with Mother Earth. In this context, ecology is not only a physical relationship – it is also an ecology of the mind, of community, and of interbeing.

With these characteristics, Thích Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist prose transcends the boundaries of religious literature to become a compelling ethical and ecological discourse in an age marked by global spiritual and environmental crises. At the same time, viewed through a comparative Taoist lens, the concepts of non-self and mindfulness can be understood as a Yin–Yang pair: non-self embodies letting go and following the natural flow (Yin), while mindfulness leans toward wakefulness and deliberate action (Yang). These two dimensions are inseparable and mutually reinforcing, illustrating how Thích Nhất Hạnh integrates Buddhist philosophy, ecological awareness, and relational balance to create a holistic vision for personal and communal life. Thích Nhất Hạnh's prose does more than communicate philosophy; it offers direct guidance for spiritual practice. Through his writings, readers are invited to converse with themselves, with others, and with nature. In a modern world marked by anxiety, stress, and fractured relationships, returning to mindfulness and practising non-self is not merely a personal journey but also a foundation for reconciliation and global connection. This study contributes by systematically analysing the interplay of non-self, mindfulness, natural imagery, and Yin–Yang principles, providing a novel framework for understanding Thích Nhất Hạnh's prose in both philosophical and ecological contexts.

Building on these initial findings, future research may expand by placing Thích Nhất Hạnh's Buddhist prose in comparative dialogue with other religious literary traditions. Such studies may uncover both convergences and divergences in how different spiritual cultures use literature as a medium for awakening consciousness and healing the soul. These directions promise to enrich the interdisciplinary landscape between literature, religion, and philosophy in today's global context.

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