

**A Road Back for Lapsed Order of Interbeing  
Core Community Lay Members Who Wish to Renew**  
*An offering from the North American Dharma Teachers Sangha*

**I. Origins and Purpose of this Document**

From time to time, Order of Interbeing (OI) Core Community members may fall away from their practice as brothers and sisters in the OI family. Some of these friends retain or rediscover their heart's connection to the Order of Interbeing core community and practice, but finding a way back into practice with the OI community may be challenging for the practitioner and confusing for the local Sangha that was "left behind." The Order of Interbeing Charter encourages OI members to develop appropriateness and skillful means, leading "to a capacity to be creative and to reconcile." The North American Dharma Teachers Sangha offers this "road back" as a means to support local Sanghas and lapsed core community members who wish to renew their commitment to Plum Village practice and the OI core community. We hope it will help lapsed OI core community members reconcile with and rejoin their local Sanghas, reconnect with the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings and the OI core community, and renew their commitment to practicing as an Order of Interbeing core community member.

## II. Background of the OI Core Community

We students of the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh (Thay) are fortunate in that in the mid-1960s, Thay initiated the Order of Interbeing, a spiritual path to help monastics and lay people “actualize Buddhism by studying, experimenting with, and applying Buddhism in modern life with a special emphasis on the bodhisattva ideal.”<sup>1</sup> Order of Interbeing core community members cultivate and sustain engaged living by deeply developing our personal practice, supporting Sangha building, and grounding our daily actions in mindfulness.

The Order also bridges monastic and lay communities practicing in the Plum Village tradition. The Order offers committed lay practitioners the opportunity and responsibility of traditionally monastic practices. Practicing as core community members nourishes laypeople’s ability to enrich their families, local Sanghas, workplaces, communities, and themselves — as well as the world — through deep mindfulness practice.

Ongoing dedication to Sangha and personal practice is key to the Order’s ability to cohere as a spiritually-engaged community in difficult

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<sup>1</sup> Order of Interbeing Charter ¶ 1

times. Being an OI core community member is not about ordinations, titles, or brown jackets, but about living mindfully every day. Thay has emphasized participating regularly with a local Sangha and supporting its efforts, studying and regularly reciting the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, and observing sixty days of mindfulness or retreat each year. Reflecting Thay's intentions, the OI charter requires core community members to:

1. Commit to observe the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings;
2. Accept responsibility to organize and support a local Sangha;
3. Help sustain mindfulness trainings recitations, days of mindfulness, and retreats;
4. Be happy and steadfast in the practice;
5. Practice in harmony with the Sangha;
6. Be able to explain the Dharma from personal experience;
7. Nourish the bodhicitta in others;
8. Maintain a regular meditation practice;
9. Practice in harmony and peace with one's family; and
10. Observe sixty days of mindfulness each year,

*“all as manifestations of the bodhisattva ideal.”*

### **III. Recent developments in OI mentoring and ordination**

Over the decades, many criteria have been used to assess an aspirant's readiness for ordination into the core community. In addition,

diverse expectations have been common among those ordained into the core community.

Recently, in accordance with the charter<sup>2</sup> and to ensure a vigorous and well-grounded Order, the North American Dharma Teachers Sangha and the Plum Village monastic community have worked to assure a meaningful mentoring process for core community aspirants. (See [www.orderofinterbeing.org](http://www.orderofinterbeing.org).) The process provides minimum qualifications to be a mentor or an aspirant and suggests mentoring criteria. At the request of Thay and the monastic sangha, a Dharma Teacher is always to be included in the mentoring process and formal mentoring documentation is required for ordination.

#### **IV. Falling away**

The prior informal and varied mentoring criteria and expectations may have contributed to some core community members falling into patterns of inconsistent practice and absence or inconsistent participation with their local Sangha. Those ordained may no longer practice in accord with the ten expectations from the Order Charter listed above. They may not recite or study the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, not

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<sup>2</sup> Charter, ¶ 17

practice sixty days of mindfulness each year, abandon practice altogether, or perhaps leave the Plum Village practice to explore another tradition. This sort of irregular practice can become a source of confusion within the Order community and within local Sanghas. Local Sangha members are often puzzled when those who have received Order of Interbeing ordination participate with the Sangha infrequently or only during large retreats, and sometimes bring with them an energy and aura of authority not in harmony with the Sangha's stability, harmony, and way of practice.

An ordained OI member's failure to practice and irregular Sangha participation can easily lead local Sanghas and Order of Interbeing aspirants to wonder what it means to be an Order members. They may question the genuineness and sincerity of the Order. They may wonder if becoming an Order member is about ordination ceremonies, robes, and titles rather than being about a commitment to Thay, sangha, and wholehearted practice.

Sometimes those who have fallen away wish to renew their practice and recommit to the Order of Interbeing community. Because the OI core community is dedicated to deepening and practicing within a

specific tradition, ordained OI who have lapsed from our community and practiced in different communities or traditions during these lapses may need a period of reintegration. In addition, Sanghas will be better able to support and receive support from a re-engaging OI member if a process is offered to support the OI member's efforts to re-engage. Thus, the North American Dharma Teachers Sangha perceived the need for a path to support both the lapsed core community member and the Sangha with which he or she is re-engaging — a path for these Order members to formally renew their practice and their commitment, and to be welcomed by the Order and local Sanghas.

## **V. A Path Home**

The Care-Taking Council of the North American Dharma Teacher Sangha offers this “route back” to fully engaged practice within the Order community. It is intended for practitioners who were ordained into the Order of Interbeing core community, but who have experienced a significant lapse in regular local Sangha participation, have not been observing sixty Days of Mindfulness, or otherwise have not been fulfilling their commitment to the Order and the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, but who now wish to formally re-express their commitment

to the Order, the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, to Thay, and to the Sangha. This route back suggests ways the lapsed Order member and mentor may engage to support the Order member's intention. Because individual circumstances and needs differ, no particular timeframe is suggested or included. The route designed to support such persons in their re-engagement is:

- To engage with a Dharma Teacher in this process, the re-engaging OI begins by writing to his or her original OI mentor and Dharma Teacher, asking for support during a period of re-engagement with the OI community and their local Sangha. If the original Dharma Teacher is unavailable after this attempted contact, the re-engaging OI should contact the most geographically proximate Dharma Teacher for support. In many cases, the original mentor and the local Dharma Teacher may work as the “mentoring team” to support the re-engaging Order member.
- In the initial contact, the re-engaging OI should state clearly the reason for the lapse in OI practice, and begin a dialog leading to a written agreement between the re-engaging OI and the Dharma Teacher and if a team is engaged, the mentoring team. The agreement should outline a process for reengagement and reaffirming the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings in their then-current incarnation.
- As each circumstance will be different, return plans will vary. A typical agreement might include one or more of the following items or others that would best serve the circumstances. The mentor or mentoring team also may wish to re-

fer to the ten items required by the Order charter (above) to create a specific plan.

- a) practice consistently with a local Sangha for a year;
- b) recite the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, ideally once a month but at least quarterly, preferably in community;
- c) observe at least 60 Days of Mindfulness or retreats each year;
- d) study the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings wholeheartedly;
- e) practice wholeheartedly — demonstrating sincerity, commitment and humility, including clear right speech in all aspects of this renewal process;
- f) not do anything that can lead to division or fragmentation within the Sangha of origin, current practice Sangha(s), or other practice communities;
- g) work with the Dharma Teacher who signed the return plan until there is harmony on the readiness to reaffirm OI commitment;
- h) publicly re-affirm the commitment to the Order of Interbeing, the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, Thay, and the Sangha in either
  - (1) a Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings Transmission ceremony at a retreat or day of mindfulness organized at a Plum Village monastery or
  - (2) a local recommitment ceremony organized especially for the re-engaging Order member in their local sangha and facilitated by the mentoring Dharma Teacher.
- i) Work to reconcile and resolve conflicts within the local Sangha and have the Sangha's support for re-engaging.

“Lapsed” OI members do not meet the spirit of the criteria to mentor OI aspirants, as set forth by the Lay and Monastic Dharma



Teachers and posted on the OI web site. Therefore, a “lapsed member” shall refrain from mentoring OI aspirants until after their retransmission or recommitment ceremony.