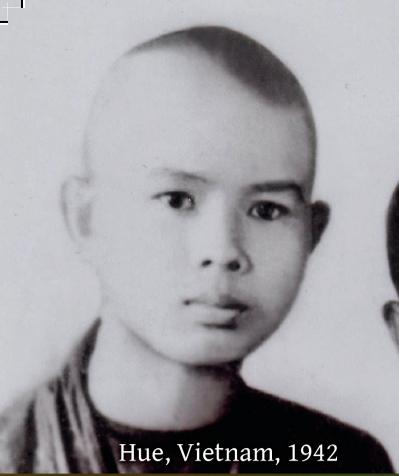


# Plum Village Newsletter

№45  
2022



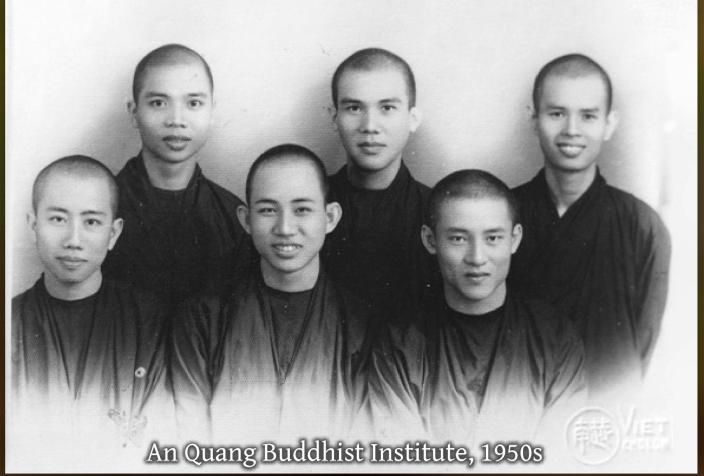
Honoring Thay  
&  
Celebrating 40 Years of Plum Village



Hue, Vietnam, 1942



Vietnam, 1951



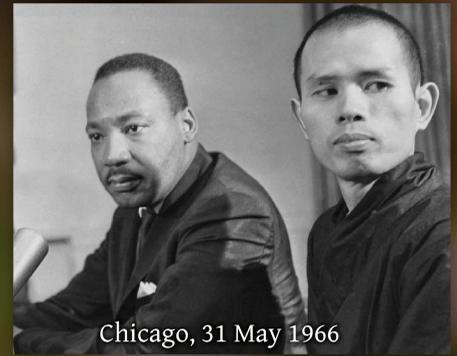
An Quang Buddhist Institute, 1950s



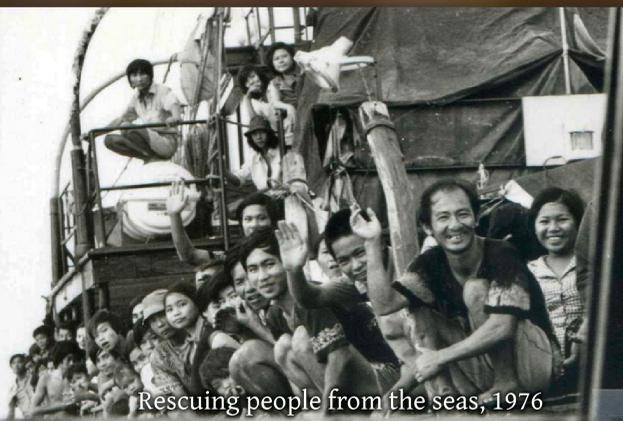
Vietnam, 1960s



Vietnam, 1966



Chicago, 31 May 1966



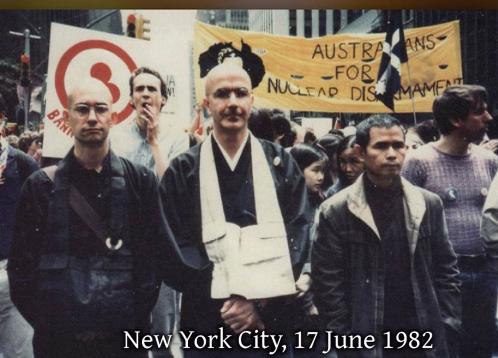
Rescuing people from the seas, 1976



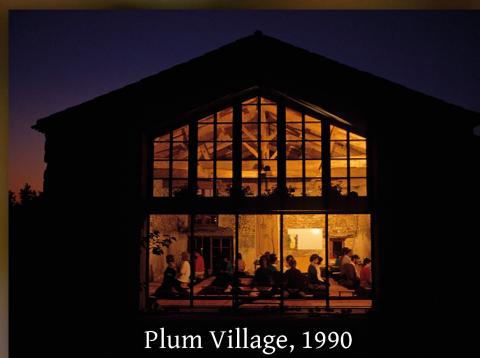
"Sweet Potatoes" near Paris, 1970s



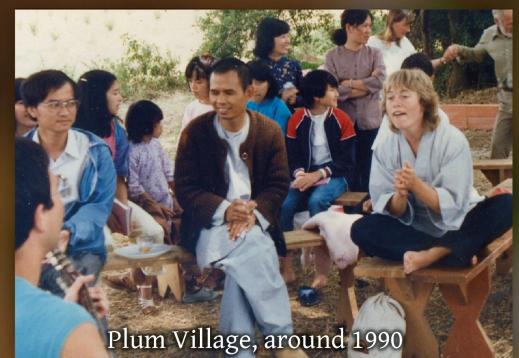
Plum Village, 1980s



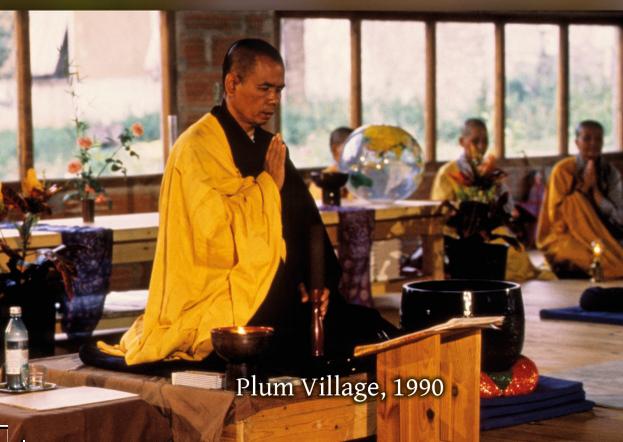
New York City, 17 June 1982



Plum Village, 1990



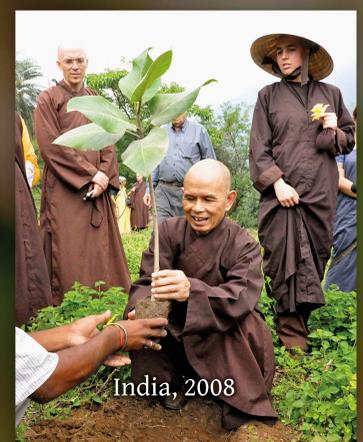
Plum Village, around 1990



Plum Village, 1990



Từ Hiếu Temple, Hue, Vietnam 2005



India, 2008



EIAB, Germany, 2008



Malaysia, September 2010



Indonesia, 2010



Trafalgar Square, London, 2012



Hong Kong Coliseum, 2013



Hong Kong, 2013



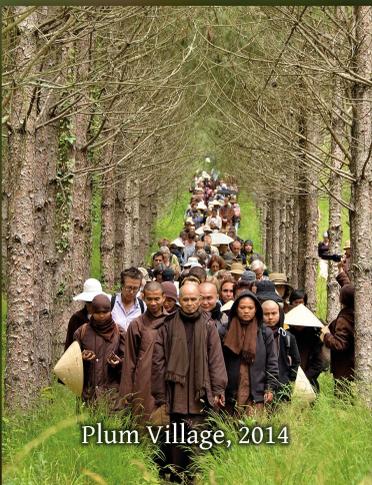
New York City, 2013



World Bank, Washington D.C., 2013



Plum Village, Summer 2014



Plum Village, 2014



Thailand, October 2018



Tu Hieu Temple, Hue, Vietnam, 2018



you have seen  
the path  
do not fear  
anymore



Celebrating 40 Years of Plum Village



Honoring Our Beloved Teacher

Thich Nhat Hanh

# Editor's Notes

Dear Beloved Community,

It is with deep joy, gratitude, and respect that we present this very special edition of *La Thu Lang Mai*, The Plum Village Newsletter.

When we began our work in Plum Village, France, during the Rains Retreat in autumn 2021, our aspiration was to celebrate the blossoms and fruits of 40 years since the founding of Plum Village in southwest France in 1982. Many of us remember Thay's joy and delight to celebrate "The Day I Turn Twenty" in summer 2002, and the festival to celebrate Plum Village's 30 years in summer 2012 with a special calligraphy exhibition in Son Ha, as well as picnics, music performances, and dance. Today, we can feel Thay's joy in our joy as we celebrate four decades of bringing the Dharma to the West and building a beloved international community together. If in 2012 we could feel that the Plum Village Tradition has two feet firmly rooted into the soil, in 2022 we can see clearly the path ahead and know we have nothing to doubt or fear.

It was just as we were completing our work, ten days before Tet, that Thay chose his moment to peacefully transform into a cloud. The week of Thay's ceremonies was a powerful, sacred time for us all, as hundreds of thousands of Thay's students came together to generate the energy of mindfulness and peace and honor Thay's life and teachings. It is extraordinary that Thay has been able to give our beloved Plum Village community *four full decades* of love, guidance, and support. Our gratitude is beyond words. We begin this special edition with an account of the days of Thay's memorial ceremonies, and a selection of memorable tributes to Thay that we received from around the world. As we continue Thay's legacy, and in particular his work of sangha-building, it is an honor for us to include here—for the first time—an English translation of one of Thay's most powerful teachings on why sangha-building is our highest career.

Our brotherhood and sisterhood as young monastics has been nourished by the work to collect the voices of so many well-known and beloved

elders. We are delighted to share their personal, loving and joyful memories of Thay in the chapter "The Early Years of Plum Village," and in the chapter "Harvesting the Fruits," you can be inspired by their stories of personal transformation and healing. We are also honored to include the tender and unforgettable testimonies of those closest to Thay over the past few years, including our beloved elder Sister Chan Khong, as well as Sister Dinh Nghiem, Sister Thao Nghiem, and Brother Phap Huu.

In the chapter "Hands Reaching Out," we have captured a glimpse of Thay's immense legacy of engaged Buddhism, with voices from the monastic and lay community sharing their experience of bringing Thay's teachings into education, healthcare settings, and the 2020 international COP26 climate conference in Glasgow. This year we also celebrate ten years of the Plum Village Happy Farm and our growing initiatives to take better care of our beautiful planet. As ever, it is a joy for us to bring you the voices of young monastics from many different backgrounds and countries. In the chapter "Tending the Garden", you can enjoy reading stories of their practice and transformation in our diverse community.

Dear Beloved Thay, dear Beloved Sangha, many times over the past few months we have asked ourselves, How can we ever do justice to the last 40 years of Plum Village and Thay's extraordinary legacy? It is an almost impossible task, but, as Thay would say when climbing a high mountain, "You only ever need to take one step." And so, in this spirit, we offer this unique edition of *La Thu Lang Mai*, compiled with much love, brotherhood and sisterhood, knowing that there are so many more stories yet to be told and enjoyed in the months and years to come.

We look forward to continuing on this beautiful path together.

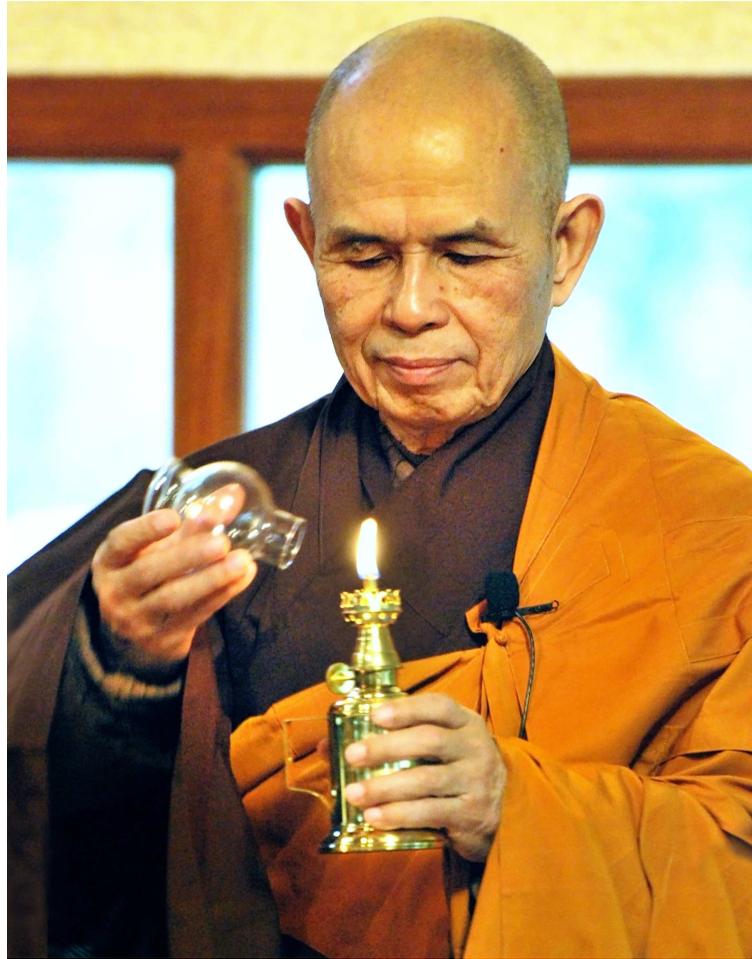
*With a deep bow,*

*The La Thu Lang Mai Editorial Team*

*In Plum Village, France, and Tu Hieu, Vietnam ☸*



42<sup>nd</sup> Generation of the Linji Dhyana School,  
and 8<sup>th</sup> Generation of the Liễu Quán Dharma Line,  
Patriarch and Abbot of Từ Hiếu Lineage,  
Founder of the International Plum Village Dharma School,  
whose first name is Trùng and whose second name is Quang,  
whose lineage name is Phùng Xuân,  
whose Dharma Title is Zen Master Nhất Hạnh,  
and whose family name is Nguyễn,  
an Awakened Master.



11 October 1926 – 22 January 2022

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# TRIBUTES



# Tributes to Thay

*We have been receiving an outpouring of love from the global community, offering tributes to our teacher. We offer a selection of tributes from notable figures below.*

---

“In his peaceful opposition to the Vietnam war, his support for Martin Luther King and most of all his dedication to sharing with others not only how mindfulness and compassion contribute to inner peace, but also how individuals cultivating peace of mind contributes to genuine world peace, the Venerable lived a truly meaningful life.”

—*His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama*

“The government hopes that the Plum Village community will continue the Zen master’s vision and aspiration for engaged Buddhism, and so contribute to the prosperity of society, and, together with the wider Buddhist community in Vietnam and abroad, promote peace in the world.”

—*President Nguyen Xuan Phuc and Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh of Vietnam*

“Thich Nhat Hanh will be most remembered for his tireless championing of religious freedom, human rights, non-violence, and his message of mindfulness in daily life. Although Thay’s influence spread well beyond the realm of religion, he leaves a legacy as one of the most influential religious leaders in recent history. Thay is probably best remembered as a leading light in interfaith and interreligious dialogue.”

—*US Embassy in Vietnam*



Thay and His Holiness the Dalai Lama in the 1990s

“Thich Nhat Hanh is respected by many as the most influential spiritual leader. He showed his love for humankind through his actions. His teachings on happiness touched many hearts. His footsteps and words will continue to live on through the practices of the people.”

—*Moon Jae-in, President of South Korea*

“Thich Nhat Hanh’s legacy is one of insight, compassion, and respect for our planet and for one another. His memory and teachings will continue to inspire the next generation of environmental and social activists in the enduring struggle to protect the Earth and its people.”

—*Al Gore, Former Vice President of the United States*

“Thich Nhat Hanh influenced me and so many others by blending his unique approach to mindfulness with a fierce commitment to social justice. When I invited him to visit the World Bank, he touched the lives of hundreds of staff members and even led them on a walking meditation through the busy streets of downtown Washington, DC. He will be deeply missed but his legacy will live on through his many disciples in all corners of the world.”

—*Jim Yong Kim, Former President of the World Bank*

“Thich Nhat Hanh was a lifelong peace advocate who taught that polarization can be overcome as we nurture tolerance, inclusiveness, and the understanding of our deep interconnection with all human beings.”

—**Antonio Guterres**, *Secretary General of the United Nations*

“Having Thay as a brother and friend was one of the greatest gifts in my life. At this time of grieving, I’d like to stretch out my hand to countless others who feel empty-handed at his passing and say: Let’s honor his legacy of Interbeing by joining hands worldwide, ready to carry on with renewed dedication to Thay’s work of peacemaking.”

—**David Steindl-Rast**, *Catholic Benedictine monk, author, and lecturer*

“From Thay (“teacher,” in Vietnamese) I learned much but perhaps the most important was the skill of deep listening as an avenue to conflict resolution, helping to melt away countless political barriers in the negotiations. His insights and practices helped to open a new fertile space of collaboration through which governments were able to come to the historic agreement.”

—**Christiana Figueres**, *former Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention on Climate Change and a student of Thich Nhat Hanh*

“The most venerable Thich Nhat Hanh was one of the most respected moral and spiritual figures of our times. Not only was he one of the most articulate and inspiring proponents of Buddhist teachings and practice, but he was also a beacon of truth in his nonviolent campaigning for human rights.”

—**Matthieu Ricard**, *Buddhist monk and author*

“Thay taught me that being a social activist is not separate from being a contemplative. Thanks to him, untold numbers of us opened our lives to the path of socially engaged Buddhism.”

—**Roshi Joan Halifax**, *Abbot of the Upaya Institute and Zen Center*

“Thich Nhat Hanh had a dramatic influence on me. He once asked me, ‘What is more important, being successful or being happy?’ I thought ‘both!’ But he said, ‘You have to choose—you can be a victim of your success but you can never be a victim of your happiness.’”

—**Marc Benioff**, *CEO of Salesforce*

“Thich Nhat Hanh’s teachings and practices transformed my life. Millions of people have been touched by his wisdom. Mindfulness is more powerful than nuclear energy.”

—**Alejandro González Iñárritu**, *Academy Award-winning director*

“Thich Nhat Hanh was the most influential Buddhist teacher of the past fifty years. In addition to promoting mindfulness, his ability to present Buddhist insights and practices in clear, accessible, and heartfelt language greatly increased the number of people exposed to Buddhism. Thich Nhat Hanh’s legacy will continue to shape Buddhism’s present and future.”

—**Jeff Wilson**, *Professor of Religious Studies and East Asian Studies, Renison University College, and author of Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture*

# Thank You, Thay

*During the memorial week for Thay, we received an outpouring of gratitude from people all over the world who have been touched by Thay's teachings. We offer you a selection to read here. Each gratitude while coming from one person in fact represents a multitude of others who have been touched in similar ways.*

---

## The practice

"I heard about Thay during a casual conversation at work. That same day I searched for him on YouTube and watched my first Dharma talk. By the end of that week I'd booked a ticket to fly to Bordeaux from Mexico City for the final week of the Summer Retreat in Plum Village in 2014.

"Little did I know then that it would be the last Summer Retreat taught directly by Thay. I arrived in a state of utter exhaustion, incredibly angry at the world, and could not see a way out. Within five short days, a deep transformation had taken place. There was lightness, joy, and hope in my heart. I made lifelong friends. I took the Five Mindfulness Trainings and do my best every day to put them into practice. My life is infinitely clearer, more grounded, calm, spacious, and filled with gratitude. Thank you so much, dear Teacher, dear Community. For everything."

—Tanya

"At 00:00 hours, January 22, 2022, Thay moved outside of time. Has he passed? Is he dead? What do we see when we study the corpse? What is it that we mourn?

"Thay was like a sun-drenched boat that kept me warm and safe on the way to the shore. He taught me how to touch the water and the earth as a means of feeling my own fundamental goodness and wisdom. He taught me how to discern the moon from the pointing finger, the name from the flower, the righteous anger from the fear, the crying infant from the tender parent. He showed me the joys and peace of uni-tasking and taking a single step. He taught me that every mindful breath is our shared humanity. He reminded me of the value of all relationships.

"Most importantly, whatever the song, dance, or form of my practice- that just to practice- is enough. I miss him. And he continues..."

—James Vining

"Dear Thay, how does one say thank you for helping me to come home to myself? I bow in immense gratitude for your love, wisdom, teachings, the sangha and showing us the path. You are a true gift to humanity. I feel your whispers of wisdom in my heart and in every step. May I be your worthy continuation dear Thay and spread the message of love and compassion through my work, presence and being."

—Rani



## Meeting Thay on retreat

“Thay has been such a grounding and inspiring human in my life. Two of my favorite things he has said: ‘You never appreciate the absence of a toothache,’ and, ‘In this world we have honey and so we also have bees.’

“This second quote is from a time I went to Deer Park Monastery to hear him speak. While on walking meditation, a woman stepped on a hive of bees and the angry bees stung the entire group. People were shrieking. Thay stayed calm as leaders at the monastery helped those who were stung. He then walked with some of the group back up to where he was giving his talk. Amidst the drama of the moment, people eventually made their way back to the building to sit down for the talk but there was a lot of anxiety and confusion in the air. After some time passed, Thay came and sat down at the front of the room, rang the bell to begin his talk, and all he said to address what had happened was – “in this world we have honey and so we also have bees.’ It’s a moment I will never forget.”

–Alisa

“While volunteering in Plum Village, I was asked to clear the leaves as Thay was unexpectedly coming this way. I started sweeping as fast as I could. A sister gently walked towards me saying, ‘Perhaps if you do the same thing with mindfulness...’ My ego silently responded, ‘But it won’t be clean before he arrives.’ Yet knowing the right path, I slowed down and diligently practiced mindfulness, matching my breathing to my raking. A few moments later, I felt an energy behind me. I turned and there was Thay smiling at me, leaves or no leaves. I have stayed on this path to this day, to this moment.”

–Earleen

“On a retreat at Plum Village in 2010, Thay led nearly 1,000 of us on walking meditation. Thay had children with him at the front – my son was one of them. Thay gazed at him and put his hand on my son’s head. My son was very moved. I was behind in the silent, slow moving line. We were breathing and mentally chanting ‘I have arrived, I am home’ with each ball to toe mindful step. Our walk was so quiet, peaceful, and slow. I saw a small rabbit by the path totally unthreatened and it made me see the power of peace to allay fear and foster harmony. A beautiful lesson – one of many – from Thay.”

–Tilda

“Every day I try to live up to the Dharma name Thay gave me— Happy Sunshine of the Heart. My partner teasingly says ‘Cheer up, Happy Sunshine,’ when I am brooding and sulking. I am so grateful to Thay for even thinking that I can live up to his challenge! I can’t believe my great fortune to cross paths with Thay in this lifetime.”

–Richard

“Dear Thay, thank you for being the best teacher in the world. Your body has left us but your spirit, words, wisdom, and guidance will be with us all always. I believe your wisdom will continue to ripple the planet until the final days of mankind. You have been my teacher since I was sixteen years old. You radically transformed my life and the lives of so many others.

“Because of you, my organization has taught hundreds of thousands of children mindfulness, compassion, gratitude, mindful walking and eating. There are millions of little souls all over the globe whose lives you have touched. Thank you for being a ‘Mission Be Mindful Hero’.

“When the heart weeps for what it has lost, the spirit laughs for what it has found.’ I am joyful because I found you. Thank you!”

–Carin

## Expressing grief

“My name is Kevin and I’m from Canada. I never got to meet Thay, but I still have a relationship with him through his books. Here are a few that deeply impacted me: *Anger*, *Fear*, *Silence*, and *No Mud, No Lotus*. Each book changed the way I view life. I have become a more peaceful being because of him and the Dharma. ‘Clouds never die’ ... but my tears don’t care. I wish that I could have met him, just to feel the presence of such a magnificent human being.

“My heart is with you, Plum Village. May your compassion and love for one another carry you through your grief.”

–Kevin

“I am at once filled with both beauty and sadness, heaviness and lightness. I planned to some day visit Plum Village and practice with the sangha and Thich Nhat Hanh – a teacher I never met but who has somehow touched my life so deeply over the years. I regret that I will never have that chance to sit with him. Thank you so much for the lightness and the heaviness ... the beauty and the sadness.”

–Derek

## Reading Thay's books and listening to his teachings

"I am so thankful. Thanks to Thay and his books and online teachings, I managed to return to mindfulness at least a bit—every now and then. In my darkest hours I know where to look/read. He has helped me to understand myself so much better ... to even care for myself a lot more so I can be a better mother for my little daughter. Being a single Mum ain't easy—but thanks to Thay, I've had enough power to push through, to keep on working on myself for the right reasons. I will keep on going and trying and learning."

—Tanja

"Some years ago I was thinking about taking my own life and that day I found a video from Thay about looking deeply into the nature of things. I didn't know anything about this great master, but Thay's words gave me the hope to live. I cried so much that day. I couldn't believe the connection I found with someone just with a video.

"From that moment, Thay became the center of my life, he became a teacher through distance, the right water for the seeds in my consciousness to come alive and let many people around me know about his teachings, compassion, mindfulness, and loving-kindness. Now I have to keep spreading his teachings, because I know I am his continuation and by doing this, I can keep him alive in my heart and on my mind."

—Roberto

"I don't have words to describe how Thay's teachings have helped me make peace with myself after a lifetime of suffering from the effects of childhood trauma. I work in a K-12 public school with kids who often experience toxic stress and trauma. Through Thay's teachings, I have avoided burnout and have been able to continue helping others. Thank you."

—Jennifer

"Thay's book *Peace is Every Step* saved my life. It was like drinking a cup of cool water after forty days and nights in the desert! The simplicity and utter logic of his message drove straight to my heart. I have given almost thirty copies of that book to friends and colleagues who were suffering. We are all Thay's continuation. May we all live up to that challenge!"

—Cynthia

"Thay's life changed mine forever. I didn't believe I had value until I picked up *The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings*. Thay taught me I had been so wrong. He showed me the kind of person I wanted to be, and that she was already in me, waiting to wake up. He will live on in all of us who love him and owe him for such a simple and profound truth."

—Ciera

"Thay came into my life in 2016 just after my sister suddenly passed away and I was lost in the pain. I discovered him on YouTube and found refuge in the gentleness and loving-kindness in his words and his presence. He helped me grieve and find joy again. He has become a teacher to me although I am a Christian. He will live on in my heart and actions. May he be rewarded with eternal rest and peace and may we be his continuation on the path of love and compassion."

—Trish

"I found a copy of *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* in the laundry room of my apartment building eleven years ago. It transformed my life and how I interact with the world. It set me on a journey of mindfulness, open-hearted curiosity, and practice. I had the privilege to experience a retreat at Blue Cliff. Watering the seeds of wisdom and compassion and embracing impermanence and joy has resulted in action, from co-leading meditation each week with my colleagues at the US Environmental Protection Agency; to community building, social justice and anti-racism work; to transforming old patterns of dealing with anger and loving more authentically. I still have much to learn. Thank you, Thay. I bow deeply. May we all be happy, peaceful, and free."

—Denise

# Eulogy

## THAY'S DISCIPLES IN PLUM VILLAGE

28<sup>th</sup> January 2022

Dear Beloved Thay,

It is the greatest fortune of our life to have been able to become your students, to receive your guidance, and to belong to your Beloved Community.

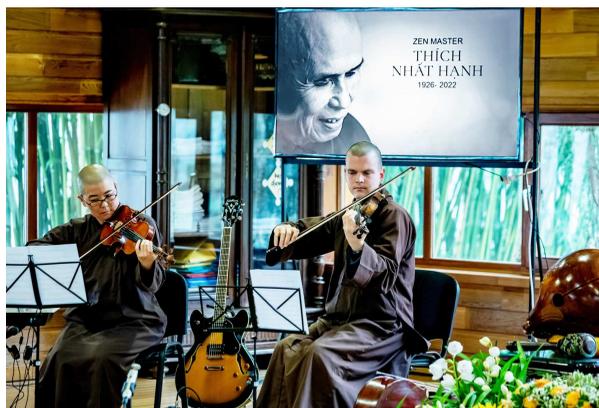
You are our Teacher, and you have taught and nurtured us with boundless love, patience, and care. The dewdrops of your compassionate nectar have refreshed our thirst. You have been the torch guiding us through the forest of confusion; the hand reaching out to us when we fall; the ladder rescuing us from our darkest moments. You have given us a path to walk, so that we no longer have anything to fear.

You have offered us the most profound teachings, and so many practices to realize those teachings in our daily life. You have transmitted to us the precepts, renewed and reinvigorated. You have trained us in a new kind of Buddhism that can serve the world and help respond to the suffering and difficulties of our time. And you have built a healthy and happy community for us to take refuge in, and a vibrant monastic culture to nourish and support us on our way.

Dear Thay, your deep bodhicitta, which began in the heart of a little child from central Vietnam, has grown to be a vast force of action across East and West. You met your hermit at the well; you saw the kind of Zen master you wanted to become. You had a dream and, dear Thay, you have realized that dream. At every turn you took the path less-traveled; the difficult path.

Throughout your life you encountered acute moments of loss and injustice—like when you were exiled, heard the news of your students being shot on the riverbank, or when your passport was cancelled, or when your program to rescue thousands of boat people from the South China Sea was shut down—and yet you met these moments with the strength of your mindfulness practice, and your indestructible courage, compassion and clarity.

Dear Thay, despite all the difficulties, you never



Sr. Trai Nghiem, Br. Troi Niem Tan

gave up—on hope, or on this path, or on your vision of creating a practice that could truly help the world. You found ways to build sangha out of all the non-sangha elements around you. You overcame your gentle shyness to open your heart to embrace new people, cultures and perspectives.

Amid the rolling fields and oak forests here in France, the Beloved Community has taken root in Plum Village and grown branches wider than anyone could ever have imagined. You touched “the soul of ancient Europe”—and today the sound of the great temple bell resonates across her valleys. Here, you have created a true Pure Land, a beautiful environment of practice, for people of all faiths, backgrounds and nationalities to take refuge in. Today, your Plum Village Tradition has become a beacon of mindfulness in the West. You have taught us how to breathe, how to walk in freedom, how to generate happiness, handle suffering and reconcile with those we love. It is thanks to your vision, creativity, courage and simplicity that the world has the kind of accessible mindfulness we have today.

Dear Beloved Thay, how can we ever thank you enough for your courage, compassion, and endurance, and for everything you have given the world? Embracing the pain of exile you healed your wounds, and got the breakthrough, to find your true home, right in the heart of the present moment. You transformed your suffering and have given us all the practices we need to transform ours. You have offered us, your students from around the world, the rich spiritual heritage of Vietnam, and accepted us

as your spiritual children without ever asking us to abandon our culture or roots.

Despite the injustices you've experienced and the suffering you've witnessed, you have always found ways to respond to injustice with the healing balm of compassion and nonviolence; you have found ways to embrace *everyone*—even those who have caused you harm or harboured ill-will.

Dear Thay, we honour and cherish your virtue, your ethics and your integrity. You have dug deep into your own experience and the riches of Buddhist heritage to offer us a robust code of global ethics that can guide us through even the harshest storms ahead. You have shown us how to share these “applied ethics” in families, schools, workplaces, prisons, parliaments and town halls around the world. You have shown us how to wake up and fall in love with the Earth, so we may protect and heal her with all our heart. We may spend our whole lives trying to keep up with you, dear Thay, and your vision for a future that is possible—a future whose foundation you have built step by step, breath by breath, page by page.

Dear Thay, you are the gentle and skillful revolutionary—the Zen master who is ready to update our Pratimoksa, remove Buddhas from altars, establish equality for the nuns, and create a truly *multifold* sangha.

Dear Thay, we see you sitting in meditation on the podium: so profoundly at peace, natural and relaxed; still and unshakeable. We see your one-pointed mind as you offer incense at the altar; and your deep concentration as you touch the Earth. We see you sitting in silence on Vulture Peak as you watch the sunset—a true “soulmate of the Buddha.” And we see you sitting on the Deer Park mountain with the sangha as you watch the sun rise over the ridge.

We see you walking. You arrive in every step; you are the master of every step, walking in freedom, one step, one breath, and we see you walking with the freedom of a Buddha. You have shown us the healing power of collective energy; and you have shown us that, with a sangha, peace becomes possible.

We see you teaching in the Dharma hall. We feel the silent, healing tears. And we hear the hall erupting in laughter at the story of the hammer and two hands. You have shown patience and compassion for every one of your students, meeting us right where we are. You knew when to be gentle, when to tease, when to challenge us.

Dear Thay, the Dharma sings through your poems and calligraphies—their truths touch our hearts and lift our spirits. You have lived each day in beauty, no matter what adversity you faced. You know how to take refuge in Mother Earth. Even when you faced the calamity of your stroke, you knew how to take



refuge in nature and in your beloved community. With immense compassion you stayed with us, never giving up, teaching us that, even in the most challenging situations, it is *always* possible to cherish life's beauty and the miracle of being alive.

Dear Thay, when you returned home to Vietnam and Tu Hieu two years ago, you brought us all with you. It is a great happiness for us, your students, to know that you could live your final days in peace at our Root Temple, the home of our spiritual ancestors.

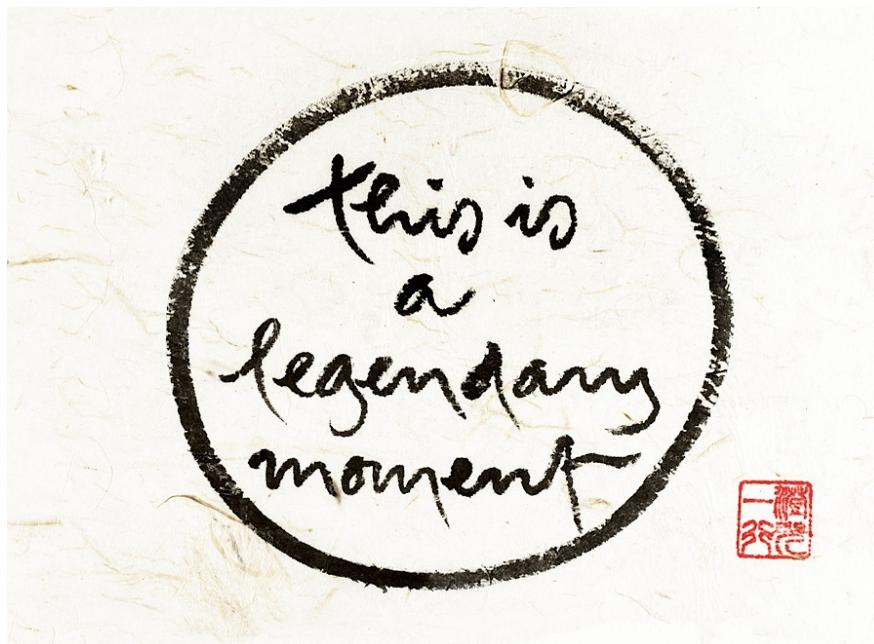
Dear Thay, we know that you are much more than your physical body. You are your teachings, your sangha, your immense compassionate action in the world. You are present wherever one of your students is taking a mindful breath or mindful step. You are also present in your cosmic body, just as the cosmos is present in you. And so, every time we enjoy the golden daffodils, or the purple bamboo, the view from the mountain peak, or the gentle creek winding its way to the ocean, we will enjoy these wonders with your eyes and with your smile.



You have said that, "Time is stilled in eternity, where love and the beloved are one." Dear Thay, you are present here with us in this very moment, as we climb the hill of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century together. What you have not yet completed, we promise to complete for you. We would like to express our deep love and gratitude as we make the vow to carry your teachings, compassion, and insight far into the future.

This is a legendary moment.

This is a moment of continuation. ☸



# Eulogy

## THAY'S DISCIPLES IN VIETNAM

Dearly Beloved Thay,

This morning the weather is so beautiful—very cool, with the sunlight bright and the air pleasant. Purple flowers carpet the hillside running from the nuns' quarters in Dieu Tram to the Root Temple. Each time we set foot on this path, we feel so happy, content with each breath and each step that we make. We walk just to walk; we don't need to arrive anywhere, knowing Thay is still there, and that we are about to see him. We walk very slowly, very peacefully as we apply what Thay has taught us. We have the impression that we are walking hand in hand with Thay, even though we have never experienced this the way our elder brothers and sisters have.

We are your baby disciples. We have only come to know you through your books or your Dharma talks. We knew only that you lived far away and we never dared to dream of one day being able to meet you in person. Nevertheless, we made the vow to follow you on this beautiful path. Then, beyond our wildest imaginings, we had the good fortune to be in your

presence and to help attend you for more than three years. We remember the day we heard news of your return to the Root Temple, we were bursting with excitement. It was such a great joy to come to the Root Temple to prepare for your arrival.

We will always remember the first days upon your return to the Root Temple; never before had the Root Temple been so joyous with so many people. It was only then did we realise that we had so many elder brothers and sisters. They came from all around the world to visit you. There were days when we had to cook continuously, yet we were always running out of food—there were so many close friends and disciples who came to pay their respects. And although we were busy, there was so much joy. Since you've been back, Dieu Tram has become even more welcoming. Every morning and every evening we could hear the morning and evening chants from the Full Moon Meditation Hall. Once, while doing walking meditation towards the Deep Listening hut, you appeared before us. We were able to join you and placing our steps very



Half-moon pond, Tu Hieu Root Temple

mindfully, we were aware that we were walking on sacred ground—walking in the footsteps of our spiritual ancestors, of Great-Grand Teacher, and of you. All of our spiritual ancestors and you have imprinted your steps on this land, have you not? You led us around the Half-Moon pond where the aspirant Sung had once sat to peel jackfruit for Auntie Tu, the temple cook when you were a novice. It was also where you sat to listen to the powerful chanting rising from the main hall. In the poem "The Little Buffalo in Pursuit of the Sun," you said that one day should you return, you would take your disciples on a tour around the temple, visiting every nook and cranny to show us how you had lived as a novice. And you kept your word. Walking alongside you, we had the conviction that even in twenty, thirty, a hundred, or more years from now, you will still keep to your word and accompany our younger siblings as they visit every nook and cranny of the Root Temple.

There were days when the weather was nice, and we were able to take walks with you around your hut, pushing your wheelchair along, singing songs and sitting close to you. Whenever your health permitted, you would pay a visit to Great-Grand Teacher's hut, and we were able to accompany you. Every time, with your eyes bright and your face exuding joy, you would bring your hand up to bow to Great-Grand Teacher with the utmost respect. We had the impression that in Great-Grand Teacher's hut you became once more the novice known as Phung Xuan. The Phung Xuan attending his teacher during meals, plucking osmanthus flowers to make tea for his teacher, or picking fruit from the ancient starfruit tree to offer the venerable Trong An when he paid his visits. In Great-Grand Teacher's hut you would admire the silk embroidered portrait of Great-Grand Teacher you had commissioned in Saigon. How joyful the whole Temple must have been when they saw this offering. You would then take your time gazing over the items in the hut, as carefully and respectfully as you had upon the first day of your return. In your silent and natural way, you have given us a direct transmission of your love and respect for Great-Grand Teacher and for our spiritual ancestors.

Once in a while you would also visit the nun's quarters in Dieu Tram, turning the nunnery into a joyful festival. We took turns to push your wheelchair, to hold your hand or to sit next to you. You slowly made your rounds, visiting every part of the nunnery. Your care warms our hearts and we feel nourished each time we remember it. Your

return has allowed us to taste the sweetness of the love between teacher and disciple.

There were many monastics and lay members who came from all over Vietnam and the world. Whether young or old, they came with a wish to see Thay at least once in their lifetime, even if it was just from afar. They practiced walking meditation on the grounds of the temple and turned toward the direction of wherever you are to prostrate. At times when you happened to be outside on the temple ground, they felt so fortunate that tears of happiness flowed. You would hold the hands of the children or pat their heads as their parents looked on with elation and tears. You met everyone with love and inclusiveness.

One time, we witnessed you holding the hand of a former student. The fourteen-year-old student of yesteryears was now silver-haired. Former students from the An Quang Buddhist Institute and the School of Youth for Social Services and former colleagues from the Bao Quoc Buddhist Institute also came. We know that you are also teaching us to treasure, nurture, and strengthen the bonds we have with our brothers, our sisters, and our teachers.

With Thay here, every day we looked forward to coming to your hut, even to do little things like sweeping or tidying up. No words can describe our happiness each time we could share a meal with you. You sat in your chair with your meal before you, and we sat in front of you. You would always look at our bowls to see whether we had something to eat before holding your palm up to practice the contemplations. If you saw that we didn't have anything, with your eyes and gesture, you would ask, "Where is your food?" Then we would scramble to find something—a piece of fruit or a box of soy milk—so that you wouldn't have to wait for us to join you in your meal. You always refused to start your meal if we did not have something to eat. Picking up your spoon, taking some food, you looked at it carefully before pointing it in our direction as if to say, "*Bon appétit*, my dear." Then bringing the spoon forward, you ate and chewed the food very mindfully. Each movement, each spoonful was filled with awareness. Every so often you would look out the window to admire the greenery, or to smile at us. You were communicating so many things to us through your eyes. After the meal, you would have a cup of macca milk, and you would chew each mouthful eighteen times before swallowing. In one Dharma talk you had shared about how you had practiced chewing water or milk before swallowing. We didn't understand

how this could be possible until we witnessed it for ourselves, seeing you chew the liquid slowly and with ease. Whenever we happen to finish our meal before you, you always share your meal by putting more food into our bowls. Sometimes, your cooking attendants would be alarmed, saying, “Dear Thay, our younger siblings are already full. Please have more of your food.” Still, you continued to share your food. We could never have imagined being able to eat with you, to sit this close to you and to be given food by you. Thay’s food is always both nourishing and delicious. Sitting near you, all our sorrows evaporated like mist. What remained was only peace and joy. Coming back to our quarters, we felt full, both from the food and from the love. We felt grateful to Thay for having taught us what mindful eating is all about.

There were days when you didn’t have an appetite. You would look at the tray of food and after a while, you invite us to have our meal and then pass the entire tray to us. Or sometimes, looking out the window and seeing your students out there cheering you on, you would take at least one bite of food, or drink one box of milk. We are so grateful that you have done this out of your love and care for us.

Sometimes, we were so moved to see an attendant hold a conversation with you for long minutes while you listened attentively, with your eyes full of compassion. Later, we heard the attending brother recount that Thay had pointed to his abdomen many times. He understood that Thay was encouraging him to practice belly breathing so that he won’t be carried away by his thinking. He was going through a rough patch in his monastic life, and by practicing deep belly breathing, he was able to overcome his difficulty. We are so grateful to Thay for teaching us how to practice deep listening.

Dear Thay, ever since the start of the pandemic, we were no longer able to enter your hut. We were still able to come tidy up on the outside and occasionally look at you through the window. The way you rest is so beautiful and peaceful. We were able to sing to you or to join you for meals, just outside the window. During the meals, sometimes you would stop chewing to look at each one of us. We

are so grateful that you have taught us how to be present one hundred percent for those we love.

Dear Thay, one time there was a doctor who flew in to see Thay. You were able to pronounce some words very clearly, which was very encouraging for her, but after, you smiled at her, touched her head in gratitude, and refused to continue with speech therapy. We and the doctor understood right away that you were aware of your limitations, and also of what you wanted to prioritize. You wanted to conserve your energy, to save your energy to be present for the young monks and nuns, especially for those who have not had the opportunity to spend much time with you to receive a direct transmission. Sometimes, we don’t want to mature in the practice so that you can remain with us for a long time, but we know that three years and three months is already a lot. All of the doctors have been amazed at your resilience. The past three years and three months have been legendary, not only for us young ones, but also for everyone near and far. You have taught us about eternity in the present moment. The light in your eyes, the moments of holding your hand, of attending you, of accompanying you on walking meditations around the Root Temple, of gazing at you from afar, so many opportunities we have received from you. We vow to nurture these memories so that these brief moments become eternal in us.

We know that we will miss you very much. We promise that when we miss you, we will remember to come back to our mindful breaths and mindful steps so that right away, you can be present with us. Coming home to our mindful breathing and mindful walking, we can see right away that you are present in each one of our siblings, and in each of our lay friends. We promise to nurture our brotherhood and sisterhood so that we can be worthy of your love. We will carry you with all of us into the future, and we know that you have faith in us.

We humbly prostrate before you—on the grounds of the Root Temple Tu Hieu—with our deepest gratitude.

Your “baby” disciples,  
the young nuns of Dieu Tram Nunnery ❧



# Thay's Memorial Ceremonies

At around midnight on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2022, in the Deep Listening Hut at Tu Hieu Root Temple in Hue, Vietnam, our beloved Teacher began to transform into a cloud. Surrounded by his attendants, and with the presence of Sister Chan Khong, Brother Phap Niem, Brother Phap Ung, Sister Dinh Nghiem, Sister Linh Nghiem, and Sister Thao Nghiem. Thay began his sacred and peaceful transformation. As his breathing slowed, the brothers and sisters joined their palms and gently sang Thay's meditation, "Let the Buddha Breathe."

As we shared the news to our monasteries around the world, the great temple bells began to sound, and Thay's monastic students gathered in ceremonial robes in the meditation halls of Upper Hamlet, Lower Hamlet and New Hamlet in Plum Village, France; at the Maison de l'Inspir and Healing Spring monastery in Paris; the European Institute of Applied Buddhism in Germany; Deer Park Monastery in California; Blue Cliff Monastery in Upstate New York; Magnolia Grove Monastery in Mississippi; Lotus Pond Temple in Hong Kong; Plum Village Thailand; and in Australia at Mountain Spring Monastery near Sydney and Nhap Luu Monastery near Melbourne. The sangha sat in meditation, following our breathing, and sending Thay and our brothers and sisters in Hue all our love, peace, and compassion.

Thay gave his sangha seven incredible years of his presence and leadership since his stroke in November 2014. These were years of gentle, decisive, loving action; Thay did not simply "bide his time." Thay's courage and dignity despite adversity were deep lessons in compassionate action. When Thay miraculously survived the initial stroke in France, it was an act of love to stay with us a little longer. When he traveled to San Francisco for specialist treatments, he was teaching us never to give up on life's wonders. When he spent a peaceful year in Plum Village in 2016, he was transmitting his love and trust to help us grow up. When he then chose to travel to Plum Village Thailand, it was to give a new generation of monks and nuns all his love and care, strengthening the foundation and activities of the new monastery. And when he finally chose to return to Tu Hieu Temple in Hue, where he first ordained, it was to "close the circle" with our ancestors, and offer the gift of peace, compassion, brotherhood and sisterhood to his beloved homeland, and to connect his international sangha to Vietnam. For many of us, Thay has been like a loving mother, and even the manner of his passing, so gently and lightly, after the remarkable gift of these sweet seven "bonus" years, felt full of love, trust, and peace.



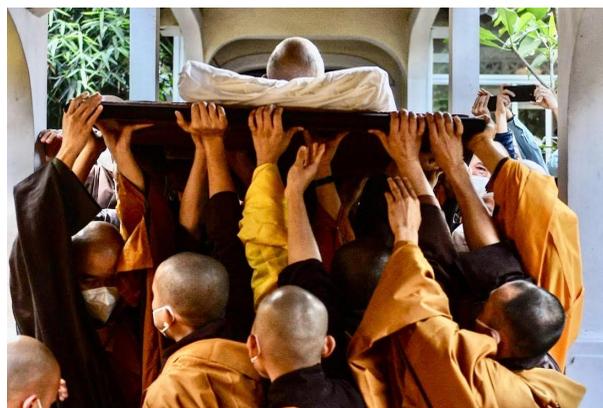
When we formally announced the news on behalf of our community, word spread rapidly, with reports on all major news outlets, including the BBC, CNN, Sky News, Al Jazeera, and national newspapers around the world. It was extraordinary to witness a huge outpouring of appreciation and gratitude from countless thousands of people, who left messages on social media and on the Plum Village website. Many of them shared how Thay's teachings had "saved their life" or helped heal their relationships, or had given them meaning, purpose, and hope when all was lost. Thay is a beloved teacher to more people than we could ever have imagined.



As preparations were underway in Vietnam, Deer Park Monastery in California was the first to hold a large ceremony in the Ocean of Peace Meditation Hall, livestreamed online and watched by tens of thousands of people. Plum Village, France soon followed, livestreaming sitting meditation and chanting from the Still Water Meditation Hall in Upper Hamlet. In Vietnam, hundreds of venerables, monastics, and lay practitioners gathered from around the country for the Casket Ceremony in the early morning of Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> January. Tens of thousands of people watched the ceremony live on the Plum Village international and Vietnamese YouTube channels as Thay's body was formally invited to be carried from the Deep Listening Hut to the Full Moon Meditation Hall. Monastics offered

commentary in English to allow our friends around the world to understand the beautiful and deep ceremonial traditions of Vietnamese Buddhism.

As the sound of chanting the name of Avalokiteshvara rose up from the vast assembly gathered under canopies, we witnessed Thay's body carried with grace and love through the temple grounds, above the heads of his beloved attendants and disciples who have cared for him day and night over the past seven years. As the sangha chanted, Thay's body was raised ceremoniously three final times in front of the altar, before being gently placed in the casket, made of padauk wood from Hue, and covered with sandalwood and fragrant oils. Thay's young monastic disciples from Dieu Tram Nunnery adorned the casket with simple garlands of precious ochre and gold chrysanthemums—Thay's favorite flower.



And with this, the sangha began a remarkable weeklong "memorial of the heart" (Tam Tang), to generate the energy of mindfulness, peace, and compassion in memory of our teacher and in honour of his legacy that lives on in his teachings, practices, and community. Thay's monastic students kept vigil around his casket day and night. Over the coming days, thousands made the journey to Tu Hieu Temple to learn about mindful breathing and walking, to sit in meditation under the canopy, to

circumambulate in mindfulness, and to pay their respects with mindful prostrations at Thay's altar, and to express their gratitude in the Book of Condolences. Following Thay's wish to offer the world a renewed Buddhism that can be accessible to all, the ceremonies were simplified to their essence, and offered in modern Vietnamese rather than Sino-Vietnamese, and included many of Thay's own chants and translated texts. In this way, the chants could touch deeply the hearts of everyone who listened. People from all walks of life came to experience the peaceful, sacred atmosphere, among them representatives of the President and Prime Minister of Vietnam. We are deeply grateful that the government allowed such a huge gathering, even in the midst of a pandemic.

Monasteries in the Plum Village tradition around the world also participated in the weeklong "memorial of the heart," and thousands gathered with local lay sanghas in Europe, America, Asia, and Australia to organize their own ceremonies of gratitude and remembrance. At Thay's altars in every monastery on every continent, candles were kept alight through the nights, and each day the sangha poured Thay a cup of tea, and offered his favorite dishes, lovingly prepared.

In Plum Village, France, every day ceremonies were livestreamed to tens of thousands of practitioners from all over the world, who participated in the guided meditations, listened to the sutras, and savored the new Buddhist chants in our tradition, accompanied by cello, violin, and guitar. Plum Village's weeklong program included an online Day of Mindfulness, with teachings, walking meditation and mindful eating, and also a special novice ordination day for young men and women entering monastic life. Novice Ordinations for this special "Mimosa" family were also held in Plum Village Thailand, Dieu Tram in Hue, and Blue Cliff and Deer Park Monasteries in the U.S.

This brings the number of monastic students ordained by Thay in the last thirty-four years to 1,214, as well as around one hundred more from other traditions who have taken refuge in Thay as their teacher. Since the 1990s Thay has transmitted the Dharma lamp to 759 monastic and lay disciples who continue to bring the light of his teachings into the world. During the course of the memorial week, in Europe, America, and Asia, Thay's lay Dharma teachers hosted online meditations and Dharma sharings to embrace feelings of grief and tears, and to allow the community's collective insights to ripen.

During the first weeks since Thay's passing, clips of Thay's teachings and memorial ceremonies on the Plum Village YouTube channels received over 8 million views. It was as though Thay's teachings and guidance were holding the global community in the embrace of right view. Our gratitude for his decades of deep teachings on no-birth, no-death and continuation overflowed.



As news spread of Thay's passing, thousands began to share their personal stories of transformation and healing on the Plum Village website, and world leaders paid tribute to his contributions to peace, community, and collective awakening. As a community we were deeply moved by the affectionate words from His Holiness the Dalai Lama and renowned monks Matthieu Ricard and Father David Steindl-Rast, as well as from the

Director General of the United Nations, the former President of the World Bank, the President of South Korea and many other distinguished voices. Obituaries in *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, and *The Washington Post* reflected a deep understanding of Thay's life and legacy. Contemporary philosopher Rebecca Solnit, writing in *The Guardian*, eloquently expressed how Thay's way of teaching Buddhism has transformed society, and changed the West for the better.

On Friday January 28<sup>th</sup>, in Hue, Vietnam; Plum Village, France; and Deer Park Monastery, California, special memorial sessions built towards the climax of Saturday's funeral ceremony and cremation in Vietnam. At Tu Hieu Temple, high venerables gathered for the traditional ceremony ("Giac Linh") to invite Thay's energy to be present ahead of his cremation, and this was followed by a formal ceremony of respect and gratitude attended by distinguished guests, including official representatives of the people of the United States. Meanwhile, in Plum Village, France, Thay was remembered in moving musical and spoken tributes, including two newly composed songs of Thay's poetry, a beautiful eulogy, and sharings from the heart. At Deer Park in California, the mahasangha gathered for the weekend to listen to a teaching from Br. Phap Dung, practise walking meditation along Thay's path, and prepare to follow the funeral ceremony live from Vietnam.

On Saturday January 29<sup>th</sup>, tens of thousands gathered in the grounds of Tu Hieu Temple and along the streets of Hue to witness the solemn and moving final funeral ceremony and procession to the cremation park. It was the largest funeral in Hue in living memory. In Plum Village, France, the sangha gathered at 1:00 a.m. in the Still Water Meditation Hall to follow the funeral procession live, and offer commentary in English for tens of thousands of practitioners who were following live online.

The ceremony opened in the Full Moon Meditation Hall with the reading of Thay's life at Thay's altar by Br. Phap An, representing all Thay's disciples and students, with all those present in Hue kneeling up behind him. Following the beauty and pageantry of Vietnamese tradition, there were more than three dozen pallbearers, decked in imperial gold and red, to bear Thay's casket out of the meditation hall and through the temple grounds. The procession took place in a reverent silence, accompanied by the gentle tolling of the bell and rolling of the prajna drum, and witnessed by row

upon row of devoted students holding fresh white lotus buds. Under golden parasols, Br. Phap An carried the incense, representing the connection to our ancestors; Br. Phap Niem and Br. Phap Ung carried Thay's Memorial Dragon Plaque; Br. Phap Hoi and Br. Phap Khoi carried his portrait; Br. Phap Hai his sanghati robe; and Br. Phap Luu his simple alms bowl. Together these sacred objects led the procession of hundreds of monastics, as Thay's casket wound its way through the temple grounds, along Thay's cherished paths, around the half-moon pond and through the central portal of the Temple Gate representing the Three Doors of Liberation.



As the casket left the temple grounds, and dawn broke through the pines, thousands of people had a chance to witness the timeless beauty of this ancient ritual. After adding extra wooden shafts, the coffin

was raised higher, higher, and higher again, in a wordless and unmistakable sign of respect and love, to be borne high above the heads of the pallbearers for the final journey past Thay's beloved Duong Xuan Hill to the waiting cortege. Specially-decorated vehicles, adorned with flowers and golden cloth, were waiting to receive the casket and ceremonial objects. As the cortege of over 300 vehicles swept through the city and countryside, along the Perfume River, the roads were lined with devotees who touched the Earth in gratitude as Thay's casket made its way to the "Paradise Garden" in the "Eternity Park."

There, the procession approached the specially-built crematory, adorned with thousands of white lotuses and sheltered by a vast golden awning. As the congregation assembled, the distinguished venerables, and Br. Phap An representing the Plum Village International Community of Thay's students, lit their torches at the Buddha's altar and solemnly carried the sacred flames to the crematory. There, to the sound of chanting, the fire was lit and the crematory sealed with clay. For the next seventeen hours, the fire burned as the sangha kept vigil and practised sitting meditation, chanting, slow walking, and generating a sacred atmosphere of peace, compassion, and togetherness. The global audience was moved to tears by Sr. Chan Khong's song, "I smile." Thay would invite her to sing this song after every public talk as he quietly left the stage, and with bright eyes and great radiance, Sr. Chan Khong offered this song to help us accompany Thay in his transformation. Sr. Dinh Nghiem, with quiet dignity, strength and concentration, offered one of Thay's favourite songs in French, "Le Bonheur," and the sangha read letters and poems written for us by Thay. In a global first, these legendary moments were followed online by more than 100,000 people throughout the day, and many wrote to us to say that they did not miss a single moment of the hours-long live-streamed events.

At five in the morning on Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> January, the crematory was unsealed and Thay's ashes brought out to cool and be gathered into urns, before being ceremoniously brought in procession, along with Thay's sacred objects, back to Tu Hieu Temple. There, as the ashes were brought to the ancestral altar and Thay's Deep Listening hut, the procession was formally greeted by monastics in sanghati and lay followers kneeling and bowing in respect. Shortly after the ashes arrived, a gentle

auspicious rain began to fall on the city of Hue, following a week of golden sun.

Monday 31<sup>st</sup> January marked the eve of the Lunar New Year ("Tet") of the Tiger. Thay's monasteries around the world welcomed the new year and a new chapter, in Thay's spirit, just as Thay's own teacher encouraged him to enjoy the warmth of spring when he first gave him the name Phung Xuan—"Meeting the Spring." Thay's timing was perfect. The sangha was able to celebrate his memorial before the turning of the new year; and then celebrate his continuation during Tet, with poetry, music and oracles, and time together, taking care of each other as a spiritual family. As Thay taught us, "Now we have seen the path, there is nothing to fear." ☸



# What's Now?

BROTHER CHÂN PHÁP HỮU

Dear Beloved Thay,

Please allow me to open my heart and express my deepest gratitude to you, a teacher, a leader, and a legend.

You have helped us learn how to be human, how to connect, how to love, how to see each other as flowers in one garden of humanity. In the past week, in the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood we have continued to embrace and support each other; holding space for our tears of both sorrow and joy. While we have cried, we have also touched true happiness as we shared stories together – both in Plum Village and online with so many of our friends from around the world.

Dear Thay, through your daily practice, you were able to see your continuation. You taught us that if you saw someone walking with mindfulness and compassion, you knew they were a continuation of Thay and the spiritual ancestors. Dear Thay, do you

remember our conversation in Hong Kong? You said you wanted us to continue to renew Buddhism; that you have been able to do 60 percent of the work, but there is still so much more to do. You gently reminded me that it is up to us, your monastic and lay descendants all over the world, to keep the Dharma wheel turning, to translate the practices and teachings into the language of our times, to make them accessible and practical for use in our world today. Dear Thay, thank you for trusting us and taking refuge in us. When we take refuge in each other, we know we are continuing you.

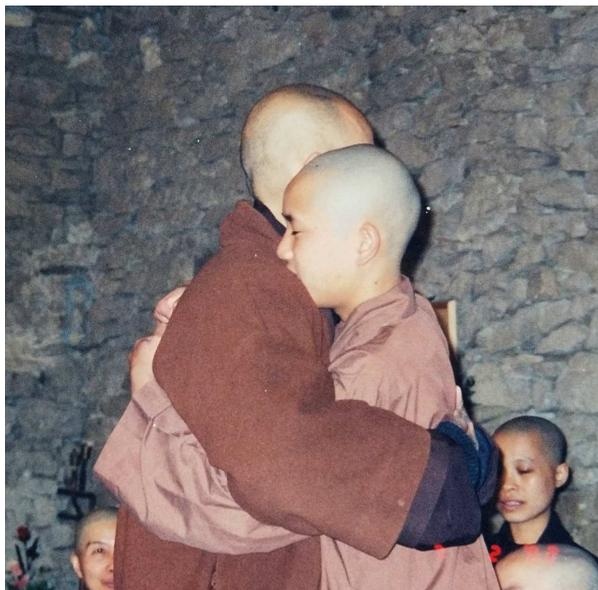
There are moments, dear Thay, because I am still young and have much to learn, when I feel overwhelmed with the task and responsibility of being your continuation. But then, I remember that I do not have to do it alone; that with the support of the sangha, I am never alone! Great action comes in many forms, big and small, and with the sangha, your continuation is a collective effort. We can each focus on our own spheres of influence whether we



are with our families, friends, classmates, or colleagues. No matter where we are or what we are doing, we have the opportunity to build a beloved community and to generate the energy of mindfulness so that healing can be possible. Thay, when I feel there is too much to do, or that the task is too big, I know I can take rest and refuge in the sangha body. Like you have taught us, Thay, we are each a drop of water, contributing to a vast flowing stream.

Thay, in the past two weeks I have been asked, “What’s next?” Each time someone asks me this, I can see you gently holding your teacup with a warm smile on your face because I know instead of asking “What’s next?” you would point towards the “What’s now.” Now is what has always been and will ever be. Now is where we get the chance to walk with Thay, to sit, speak, build community, drink tea, smile, laugh, and cry for Thay. Now is where the beloved community will meet each other, to care for each other, to embrace each other, to support each other, and to slow down together so that we can recognize and transform the sufferings of the world with limitless compassion and wisdom. “This is it,” right, dear Thay? This is the legendary moment.

We have a beautiful community full of talent and vitality, and we will carry the torch of wisdom you have handed to us into the here and now—and towards the future for generations to come.



I hold you close to me, I release you to be so free; because I am in you, and you are in me.

Your student,  
*Pháp Hữu*  
Plum Village, January 30<sup>th</sup> 2022 ☸



# REMEMBERING THAY





# True Sangha

A DHARMA TALK BY THAY

Dear sangha,<sup>1</sup> today is the 14<sup>th</sup> of October, 2010. We are in the Space Beyond Space Meditation Hall in Pak Chong, Thailand, during our Monastic Retreat.

## Insight without boundaries

In Sino-Vietnamese we have the term *Phương Ngoại Phương* (方外方 *Fāng wài fāng*). “*Phương*” means space. A practitioner really needs space. Space is the essence of freedom and liberation. The purpose of a practitioner is to bring more space into our hearts, to truly offer space to ourselves and to those around us. We can only realize this space through practice, through insight and compassion.

Insight and compassion always go together. Anyone who has insight and compassion also has happiness and no longer suffers. Compassion and insight are not two separate entities. They have a very close relationship. Insight comes from compassion, and compassion comes from insight: without one there cannot be the other. In Buddhism, when we speak of love we always speak of the Four Immeasurable Minds (Four *Brahmavihāras*), namely

loving kindness (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), joy (*muditā*), and inclusiveness (*upekṣā*). These four minds are limitless. That is why they are called immeasurable, which means a mind without boundaries or borders. Love in Buddhism is the kind of love that does not have boundaries. All of the different Buddhist traditions teach the Four Immeasurable Minds and all traditions recognize that love has no limit and is boundless. If it is limited then it is not the true love of a Buddha.

This is very important because true love is made of insight. Without understanding there cannot be love, we can experience this for ourselves. If a father cannot understand the difficulties of his child then the more he loves his child, the more he makes his child suffer. The same is true between teacher and disciple. If a teacher does not understand the difficulties and suffering of their disciples, then the teacher does not yet know how to love them or help them. Therefore, a teacher’s responsibility is to understand their disciples. Only when a teacher understands deeply their disciples’ difficulties, suffering, and struggles do they truly have love, and

1. Editor’s note: In this article we distinguish between the “Sangha” of the Three Jewels (which consist of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha) and “sangha” (lowercase) when it refers to a community of practitioners.

from then on, whatever the teacher says, teaches, and does can be of help. Before that, no matter how much the teacher wishes to love their disciples, it would not be true love. The same goes for disciples towards their teachers.

Now we come to an important conclusion—if compassion is boundless then insight is also boundless. If love is boundless then understanding is also boundless. That is why we need to look again at the term *sarvajñatā* (一切智 *yíqiè zhì*). In Sanskrit, “all-knower,” “all-knowledge,” or “omniscient” (*Nhất Thiết Trí*) or “complete enlightenment” (*Toàn Giác*) *saṃbodhi* / *vidyācaraṇasampanna*). The insight that is considered “omniscience” needs to be insight without boundaries. If anyone says that they already have enough insight and there is nothing higher to attain, that is not the insight of a Buddha. As students of the Buddha, we always praise him as the one who has reached the highest, unsurpassable understanding. This is because we love and respect the Buddha. The Buddha may not necessarily agree with our praise. That being said, many will continue to praise the Buddha thus because for thousands of years they have been accustomed to thinking in that way. Praising the Buddha as the One who has attained Unsurpassed Complete Perfected Enlightenment (*anuttarasamyaksambodhi*, 無上正等覺) means his insight has reached the highest point, which also means that it has boundaries, that it is limited. We cannot be sure that is true, because if love can be boundless, then the insight which that love is made of is also boundless. It can always be more vast. This is a koan, a topic for us to look deeply into and contemplate. If we are caught in dogma then we can never understand.

### Does the Buddha still need to practice?

In the sutras it is clearly recorded that after the Buddha reached enlightenment, he continued to practice walking meditation, practice the full awareness of breathing, eat meals in silence, and participate in Dharma discussion with the monks. We ask: those who have not yet become Buddhas need to practice, but why continue to practice when one has become an awakened one? If you gave yourself time to look deeply, you would find the answer—because practicing like that is not only to become a Buddha. Only becoming a Buddha is not enough.

What purpose do these practices serve if not to become a Buddha? The answer is very clear. It is because these practices nourish us. The Buddha also

has a body and a daily life, and he also has the need to be nourished and to heal through the practice.

### Building sangha—the career of Buddhas

What are you going to do when you become a Buddha? You become awakened to help living beings. Becoming a Buddha is only the beginning. Every Buddha has a career to fulfill. Therefore, after realizing the Path, Shakyamuni Buddha sat at the foot of the Bodhi tree to nourish himself with the energy of awakening. Then he started to think about his career. His career was the task of building a sangha. If there was not the sangha, then one Buddha alone also could not accomplish much. Because there was a sangha, the Buddha was able to fulfill his career. The Buddha’s sangha could bring the teachings to the world. The Buddha had many things to do. It wasn’t that once he became a Buddha he was done.

### Practicing with the sangha

One thing we need to clearly see is that the Buddha transmitted the teachings for us not to practice with them on our own. The sutras, sastras, and vinaya all show that the teaching of the Buddha is meant to be practiced as a community and not as an individual. When we receive the precepts, whether as a novice, bhikshu, bhikshuni, or lay practitioner, we have to recite the precepts. Not reciting the precepts is a transgression. But who do we recite the precepts with? We recite them with fellow practitioners. Novices recite the precepts with novices; bhikshus with bhikshus, and bhikshunis with bhikshunis. For the three-month Rains’ Retreat, we also have to go where we can practice together with fellow practitioners. To practice, you need a sangha. The Three Refuges form the foundation of practice life. When we say, “*Sangham saranam gacchami—I take refuge in the Sangha,*” it means that I vow to never leave the Sangha. If we do not take refuge in the Sangha, we are not a child of the Buddha. This is very clear.

To think that we can retreat to the mountains to practice to become a Buddha and do whatever we want, because living with humans is complicated and bothersome, is a very wrong idea. Therefore, if anyone has that idea, you should let go of it right away. To practice is to always practice with a sangha. However, if we are living with a sangha that has many weaknesses and shortcomings, one which does not operate according to our wishes, then we should know what to do in order to help improve the quality of our sangha.

When we practice alone, the energy of mindfulness and concentration we generate may still be weak. It is not yet strong enough for us to transform and bring more space to our heart. When we come to a sangha where many know how to practice and how to generate the energy of mindfulness and concentration, we will see that this is a powerful source of energy. We can borrow from it to do the work of transformation that we alone cannot do.

Like a drop of water flowing towards the sea, it knows that it can hardly succeed alone. It could evaporate half-way, become a cloud, wander here and there and never reach the sea. But if that drop of water enters a river and allows the river to embrace and transform it, then for sure it will arrive at the sea. As practitioners we must allow the sangha to lead, embrace, and carry us, for us to succeed.

### **True sangha**

The sangha is a community of people practicing together. It has the capacity to generate the energy of mindfulness (*smṛti*) and concentration (*samādhi*). When breathing or walking, we breathe and walk in such a way that we can generate more mindfulness and concentration. When we interact with a sangha, a community that is practicing like that, we will recognize this energy right away. That is a true sangha (*chân tǎng*). If we interact with a group of people who are donning brown robes or yellow sanghati, yet we do not sense a strong energy of mindfulness and concentration, then that means they are not a true sangha yet. It could be that the group has the form of a sangha but not the essence of a sangha.

A true sangha is a community that has the practice and can generate true Dharma. When breathing and walking, they can generate the energy of mindfulness and concentration of breathing, of walking. When eating, drinking water, washing dishes, brushing teeth, they have the capacity to generate mindfulness and concentration. When we encounter a strong collective energy of mindfulness and concentration, we know it is a true sangha in which one can take refuge.

You are a fortunate person if you can meet such a sangha because such a sangha contains the right Dharma (true Dharma, *chân pháp*). The Dharma we speak about here is not the spoken Dharma or the Dharma recorded in writing or books. The spoken and written Dharma is also the Dharma, but it is not as precious as the *living Dharma*. The living Dharma is when you breathe or walk in mindfulness and

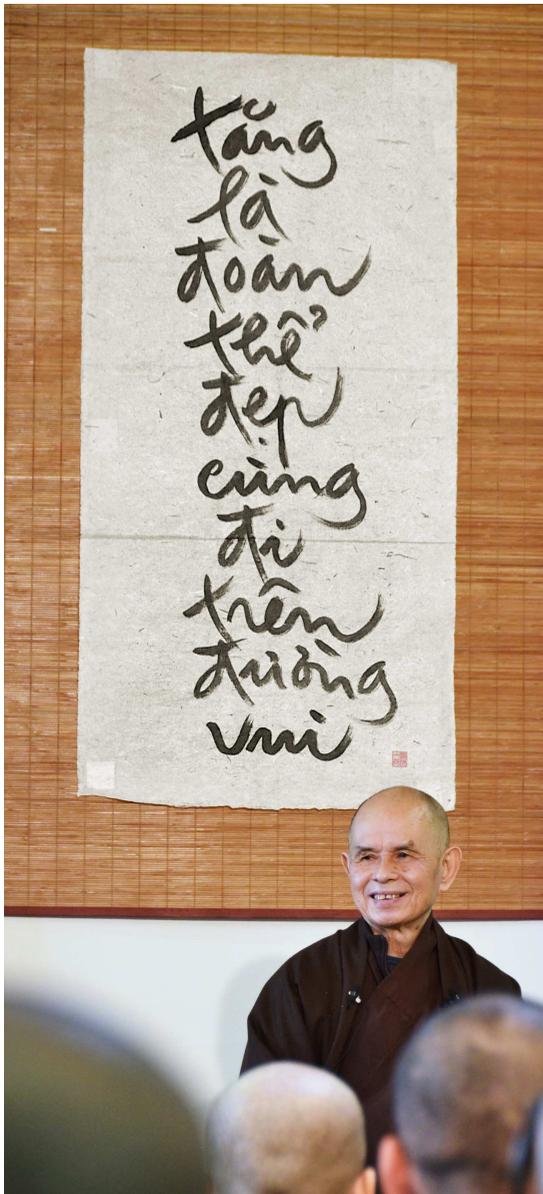
concentration. You do not need to speak or write. By your breath, your steps, smiles, the way you brush your teeth or wash clothes, you can generate the living Dharma, the true, present Dharma. If the Dharma is present, then the Buddha is also present and this is called the True Buddha (*chân Bụt*). It is not a Buddha carved from stone, sculpted from clay, molded from copper, or painted with oil on canvas. The True Buddha is made of the energies of mindfulness, concentration, and insight. Shakyamuni is called the Buddha because he has the energies of mindfulness, concentration, and insight. If a monastic has those energies, they are also an awakened one. Whether that Buddha is great or small depends on the strength of these energies.

There are people who ask, “Where can we find the Buddha today?” That is very easy to answer. When you can find a sangha with the practice, with the capacity to generate mindfulness, concentration, and insight, then you have found the Dharma—and when you have found the Dharma, the Buddha is there. The Buddha is truly present in the Dharma and the Sangha.

### **Taking refuge in the sangha to practice and help the world**

This morning we chanted the sutra Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone after sitting meditation. Living alone does not mean separating from the sangha and retreating to the mountains. There are many sutras in the Majjhimanikāya (Collection of Middle Length Discourses) that speak of living alone, including The Ideal Lover of Solitude (Bhaddekarattasutta, MN131). Some have translated it as Nhất Dạ Hiền Giả Kinh (A Single Excellent Night). In the sutra it states that we should not allow the past or the future to pull us away. We should dwell and contemplate on what is happening in the present moment. It is through this contemplation that we can untangle, transform, and then make space in our heart so we can be happy.

Therefore, one who lives alone here is actually a person who knows how to live in the present moment. That person can live alone with the sangha and not lose themselves in crowds or be carried away by the majority. While practicing walking meditation, sitting meditation, or eating with a sangha of two thousand people, you are still you. You do not lose yourself and you benefit from the collective energy of the sangha. That is how wonderful taking refuge in the sangha really is!



Calligraphy: "Sangha is a beautiful community that walks together on the joyful path"

In bygone days, the Buddha put much time and effort into building a sangha. After realizing enlightenment, the first thing he did was to find members to create a sangha. The largest group he received as monastics were the 500 disciples of Uruvelā Kāśyapa and the community of Uruvelā's two brothers, who were originally Brahmins. Within the space of ten days the Buddha had more than one thousand disciples. Those monks did not know the practice yet. The Buddha brought them all to Elephant Head Peak (Gayasisa) and began to teach them, starting with each breath, each step, the way to hold their alms bowl, to walk, stand, lie down, and sit. After a few weeks of training, he then allowed them to return to Rājagaha for their first alms' round.

At that time the Buddha did not yet have Śāriputra, Mahāmaudgalyāyana, or other skillful monks to assist him. He himself had to train 1,000 newly ordained bhikshus. It was no easy feat but the Buddha did it very well. In less than a year he built a sangha of 1,250 monastics. The World Honored One was an excellent sangha builder.

The sangha is a crucial element for the realization of a Buddha's career. Even an awakened one needs a sangha, let alone we who are not yet fully Buddhas. Therefore, "I take refuge in the Sangha" is not a mere proclamation. We need to stick to the sangha, build the sangha, and not be separated from the sangha. If you do not have a sangha, then day and night you should maintain the aspiration in your heart to find ways to build a sangha. Not having a sangha means not having a place of refuge. Therefore, do not think that "Sangham saranam gacchami—I take refuge in the Sangha" is a proclamation of faith. It is no other than the *career of sangha building*.

When we practice listening to the bell or walking meditation, we stop speaking and stop thinking (even though thinking is not audible, it is a kind of mental chatter). We do this by placing all of our attention on our breath and the sound of the bell or on our steps. In this way we generate the energy of mindfulness and concentration. To have mindfulness and concentration is to have the protection of the Three Jewels. That is what taking refuge really is. We cannot say for sure that when we read aloud "I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha" that we will receive protection from the Three Jewels.

The Three Jewels are the energies of mindfulness and concentration. Every sound of the bell, every step with such energy can heal, nourish, and liberate. If you practice it well, every sound of the bell, every step can help you to be in touch with the Pure Land, in touch with no birth and no death. It isn't difficult! We can all do it. It is not a distant wish. We can realize this path by the way we walk and with the bell of mindfulness. Together with the sangha, we can make the Pure Land become a reality in the present with every step we take, and by placing all our heart into the sound of the mindfulness bell.

If we want to be a beloved disciple of the Buddha, then we should learn the art of sangha building. If I want to be a beloved student of the Buddha, then I

also have to learn the art of sangha building. I would build a beloved sangha with many people who have the determination to practice. The result would be a great reward.

### **Brotherhood and sisterhood—important food of a practitioner**

When I was a young monk, a newly ordained bhikshu no older than twenty something, my deepest desire was to build a “beloved sangha.” I already used the term “beloved sangha” then — a place in which brothers and sisters live together in brotherhood and sisterhood, loving each other like blood siblings, going together as a river. I never had the idea of being a leader or an abbot. There was nothing attractive about that to me.

In the years 1954 to 1955, I had the opportunity to realize that dream for the first time. At that time, my country was divided into two. The An Quang Buddhist Institute fell into crisis, the monks were confused and unstable and they did not know what future lay ahead of them. The venerable Dharma teacher committee could not console the monks or reorganize the An Quang Buddhist Institute. I was very close to the young monks and nuns and showed them the way to traverse that difficult moment. The Venerable Thich Tinh Khiet at An Quang Temple supported me with all his love and trust.

A few months ago while in Plum Village, I had a dream. It was very simple, but it made me very happy. I dreamt that I woke up in a temple or a practice center where I felt a very joyful atmosphere of practice. While still lying on the bed, I asked an attendant nearby, “What is it that is so joyful?” He

answered, “Dear Thay, a number of brothers and sisters have just returned. We are cooking a pot of rice to eat together.” Still in the dream, I sat up, stepped out into the temple courtyard and did walking meditation. I looked into each orchid, the bamboo grove, every tree and blossom. My heart was filled with joy as if there was a festival happening because I felt I was living in the heart of the sangha. There was nothing to it. Just a few brothers and sisters returning to the temple. Just a pot of rice being cooked so they could eat together. Just the orchids and the bamboo in the yard. But why was I so happy? Because we still had each other, because we had brotherhood and sisterhood. A simple dream, but it made me happy for many days. It is exactly that brotherhood and sisterhood, that simple happiness which propels us to practice for our entire life. A practitioner also needs food. The key food that helps us to practice our entire life is brotherhood and sisterhood.

I want to transmit my happiness and experience to you, my students. If you want to be a happy practitioner, if you want to practice for your whole life and fulfill the career of a practitioner, then you should aspire to build a harmonious community with brotherhood and sisterhood. With such a community, not only will you be nourished, but you will also help the world more. Without his sangha, the Buddha would not have fulfilled his great career and handed it down to us. It is the same today. As descendants of the Buddha, we should make that aspiration: I vow to follow in the footsteps of the Buddha, to build a sangha that has brotherhood and sisterhood, a happy sangha where I can be nourished and help the world. ☸

*This talk was translated from Vietnamese.*



# Singing for Thay to Breathe

SISTER CHÂN KHÔNG

*Sister Chan Khong's sharing from the second week of Thay's memorial ceremonies at Tu Hieu Temple.*

## **Thay is the tiger master, I am the tiger cub**

I was born in the Year of the Tiger and as a child I was very stubborn; I never listened to anyone's advice. I would often say, "I am a tiger, don't force me." But when I joined the sangha, I did whatever Thay asked me to do and never argued back! I followed Thay's advice and did my best, to live and die with the things Thay asked of me.

I am twelve years younger than Thay. I see myself as a tiger cub. My role is to fill in the missing parts, however small, of the tiger master—Thay. If the tiger master is missing claws, I will be those claws. Whatever Thay needs help with, I would do. Whatever Thay is unable to do, I would do my best to realize it for Thay.

## **Singing for Thay to breathe**

One time, a group of French senators invited Thay to give a Dharma talk. I drove Thay there. Of course there were others who went along, but as I am most familiar with what Thay needed, I could be of help in whatever situation. Thay had only just returned from a trip to Switzerland the day before, so he was very tired and could not speak much.

A quarter of the way through the Dharma talk, Thay suddenly said in French, "Sr. Chan Khong will now come up and sing a song for everyone." I was so surprised because Thay had hardly shared anything yet. I quickly went up to Thay. He quietly said to me, "My dear, you can sing three, four, or even five songs for me. I am so tired that I find it hard to breathe." So I sang one song after another, and turned around from time to time to see when I should stop. Thay told me to keep singing. After a while, he smiled and looked better. Thay gave a wonderful talk that day.

At times when Thay was very tired and unable to teach, he would invite me to sing so he had more time to breathe. I see that though I could not do



much, it was still quite important to have someone to sing for Thay to breathe.

## **Thay, please let me become a nun**

When we first came to France, I asked Thay, "Dear Thay, please allow me to become a nun." But Thay resolutely refused. The reason was that after the Second World War, many French girls who had close relationships with German soldiers were considered traitors and had their heads shaved. Thay said:

*"If you shaved your head, others might misunderstand. Do you know why I let my hair grow long? Because in recent times, there appeared a group in Europe called the 'skinheads'. They completely shave their heads and have done some bad things. If I also shaved my head, others would mistake me for a 'skinhead'. That is why I have grown out my hair."*

Thay also told me to keep my hair long and wear the traditional long Vietnamese dress. Later on, when the Vietnam War ended and our efforts to rescue boat people had also ended, there was nothing more I needed to do as a lay person. I begged Thay once more to let me ordain. That time, Thay said:

*"To transmit the precepts, we need the precept transmission masters and noble witnesses. But in France, I am the only one.<sup>2</sup> Wait one more year. Next year, I will organize a pilgrimage to India and you will*

2. Back then, we were not yet able to invite the venerable monks and nuns from Vietnam to come and preside over a precept transmission ceremony in France.

*be ordained on Vulture Peak. I will pay homage to and invite the Buddha to be your precept transmission master. I will just be the witness Dharma teacher and read the precepts for the Buddha. I know you are a very good daughter of the Buddha. Just wait."*

Exactly one year later, I was able to go to India with a group of lay friends, including the singer Ha Thanh. At that time, no one knew that after ascending Vulture Peak, Thay would transmit the precepts to me and the noble witnesses would be the Venerables Mahakashyapa, Shariputra, Mahamoggallana, Upali, Ananda, Rahula, Gotami. On top of the Vulture Peak, I received the Bhikshuni Precepts along with Sr. Chan Duc, and Sr. Chan Vi received the novice precepts.

I remember sharing with Thay one time, "I love and respect the World Honored One very much. I wish to follow his path, but I feel that if I ordained in a nunnery in Vietnam, I would not be happy." The venerable nun in Ben Tre (Sr. Chan Khong's hometown), a wonderful and virtuous practitioner, loved me very much. She once said to me, "Sooner or later you will become a Buddha. But first, you must practice well so that in your next life you can be a man. Then practice well as a man and you will attain buddhahood." Hearing this, I said I would set up my own nunnery so it is not so traditional. If I plan to

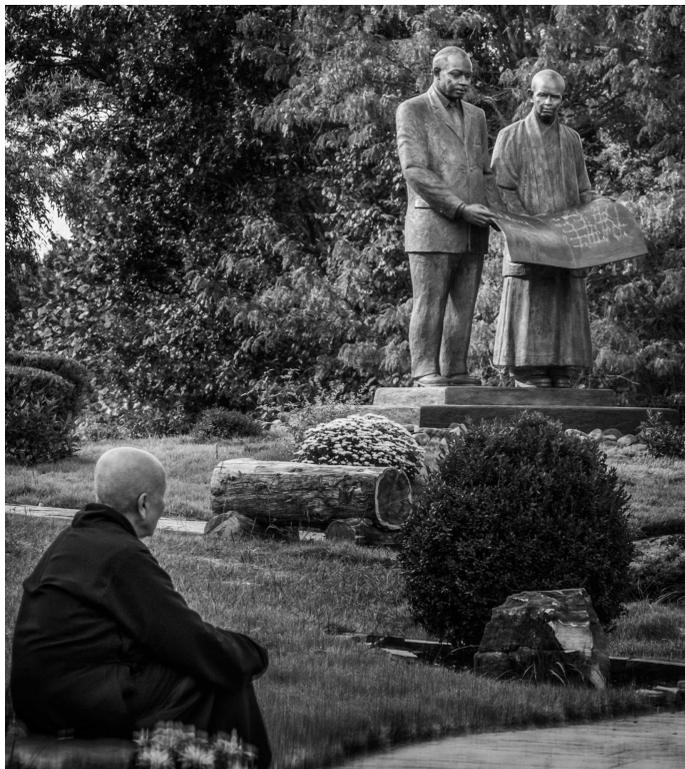
leave men behind to become a nun, why do I want to come back and be a man? It would be such a chore! Listening to me, Thay only smiled and said nothing. I continued to ask, "In the future if I establish a nunnery that does not follow traditional temples, could Thay still be our teacher?" Thay said, "That is fine."

From then on, I did everything according to Thay's guidance and Thay's ideas. I am happy to play a small part in complementing Thay's career of spreading the teachings.

### **Returning to roots like Thay**

I thought at one point that Thay would not return to Vietnam. But one day in Thailand, the Brothers Phap An, Phap Niem, and Trung Hai came to meet Thay because he wanted to express something very important to them. When the brothers arrived, Thay put one hand on his chest and using that hand, drew a circle on his chest. He stopped when his hand came to rest at the starting point of the circle. We understood the meaning—whether going East or West, in the end, Thay wished to return to his roots.

Today, I also make the deep vow that I will never forget Thay's roots. Thay's roots are also my roots. Like Thay, I will also return to my roots. ☸



Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Thich Nhat Hanh memorial statue, Magnolia Grove Monastery

# Thay Smiled Happily

SISTER CHÂN ĐỊNH NGHIÊM

## Going to watch “Journey to the West”

Dear Thay,

I remember how the teaching tours around China in the years 1995, 1999, 2000, and 2002 brought great happiness to Thay. You had told us that in the past, the spiritual ancestors from China came to Vietnam to share the teachings, and most of the Buddhist scriptures and books in Vietnam were written in classical Chinese. You returned to China to teach so that you could repay the debt of gratitude to the ancestral teachers. Your offerings to the ancestors were many of your books that had been translated into Chinese.

Every tour had a full program filled with retreats and mindfulness days for monastics and lay people. During the 2002 tour, I remember one day, we were all on the return bus after a day of activities. Br. Phap Niem and I were attendants to Thay, so Br. Phap Niem sat beside Thay and I sat behind. Br. Phap Hai was behind me. He is fluent in Mandarin, so he always had many funny stories to tell the rest of us—stories about the temples and about the world outside. That afternoon, Br. Phap Hai invited us to go and watch the opera *Journey to the West* that was being shown at the Beijing Opera House.

We were whispering and discussing this excitedly when suddenly, Thay turned around and asked in a loud voice, “Dinh Nghiem, why don’t you invite Thay to come watch the opera with you all?” I was stunned, and thought to myself: *Wow, Thay, you will also come to the theater with us?* Before I had a chance to stop being stunned and reply, Thay repeated the question. I quickly joined my palms and said: “Dear Thay, we would like to cordially invite Thay to come and watch *Journey to the West* with us.”



Thay smiled happily.

Br. Phap Hai and I were overjoyed. Not only were we not scolded for daring to discuss about going to the theater, Thay even responded and agreed to go with us. What could be greater than having our teacher join in the fun with us? In the end, we all went back to rest and prepare for the upcoming long day. How could we have gone to the theater? Yet, both teacher and disciples were filled with happiness and satisfaction as if we had just returned from a theater show.

## Opening a nursery

Dear Thay, it was rare for you to be in Plum Village, France during autumn because that was the season of long tours in North America or Southeast Asia. But that one autumn, you stayed home with us and it was the most special, most enjoyable autumn for all of us.

You took a lot of time to lead us on walking meditations in the Lower Hamlet under the alleys of poplar trees with their golden leaves. You often stopped by the New Hamlet to lead us to walk up the plum hill, where the air was infused with the scent of ripe plums. Usually we did not pick the plums but let them ripen and fall naturally to the ground. At that time, the plums were becoming really sweet and juicy. But some sisters preferred to eat the crunchy, unripened plums, so Thay cut open a plastic bottle, tied it to a stick of bamboo and used this homemade tool to harvest the crunchy plums—very effective and convenient.

In Upper Hamlet, Thay loved the most to go for walking meditation in the forest of red oaks. From afar, I always thought it was a forest of flame red flowers. In the Hermitage, every pot of flower, every tree was happy because they received Thay’s care each day. Late autumn in France is the season of chrysanthemums. Thay waited for pots of large, round, crimson chrysanthemums to bloom, as well as the elegant ones with petals that curled inwards and outwards like bodhisattvas hands performing mantras.



That morning in the Hermitage garden, Thay went around to gather all the wilted chrysanthemums from the previous year while I brought together all the old plastic pots. Under Thay's guidance, I prepared the pots with soil for you to replant the chrysanthemums. Sitting on a white iron chair under the linden tree, Thay worked leisurely with utter peace and enjoyment. When one pot was done, you passed it to me so I could add another layer of fertilizer to it. In the end, the two of us turned on the hose to water all the pots at once.

It was just like being a little kid long time ago in my garden at home. I only noticed my two hands happily playing with the soil. Sometimes I looked up to see what Thay's hands were doing. The year's last rays of sunlight were trying to peek through the

leaves to gently touch your two hands. They also wanted to give a hand to Thay! Occasionally a few ripened leaves fell lightly onto your shoulders, as if to draw your attention: "Dear Thay, we are here, let us play with you!" Those leaves slowly hopped to your feet, then to the earth, to form a pale golden carpet. In a few days or a week, the golden carpet would be thicker and softer for Thay to place your mindful steps upon.

On the other side of the Hermitage, the pines that Thay had planted in the past were now tall and strong. They were retaining their green robes for the season. The Hermitage in the autumn is full of colors and forms and that year, Thay was home. The earth, sky, and trees were all excited and competed to show off their most beautiful paintings for you to enjoy.

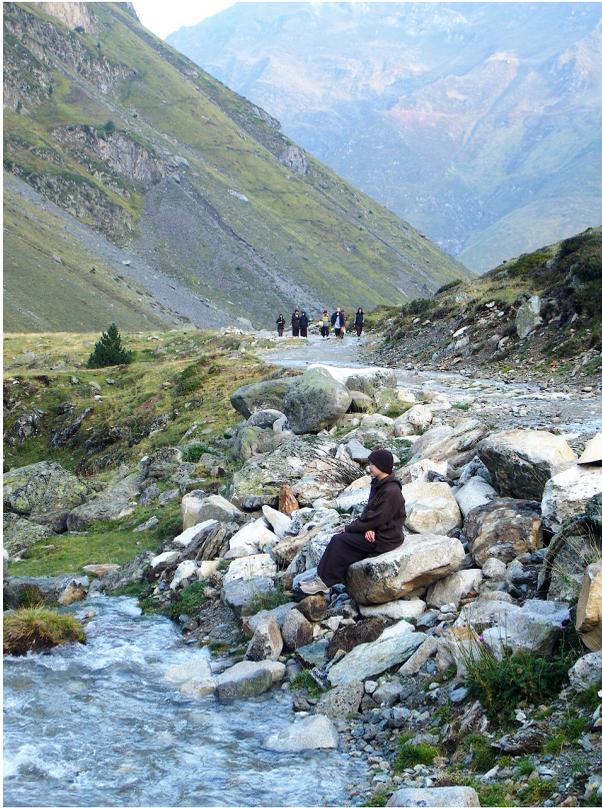
There were not enough pots for Thay to continue repotting. I had to go to New Hamlet to find more pots. In the end, that afternoon, pots upon pots surrounded the teacher and disciple—more than a hundred of them. Suddenly I had the image that in just two months, these stems of chrysanthemums will grow strong and healthy and produce many big, round flowers. Excitedly, I said to you, "Dear Thay, if the two of us are successful, we could open a plant nursery!"

Thay smiled happily.

I felt so happy right in that moment, as if we just opened a plant nursery!

### **I will lead the retreat, Thay, please come just for fun!**

That was in the year 2006. After the Summer Retreat, the sisters of both Lower and New Hamlet organized a trip to the Pyrénées. During the day, we hiked in the mountains and enjoyed being in nature. At night, I pitched a tent with Sr. Anh Nghiem right by a stream that originated from a waterfall. On the day of return, we still hadn't had our fill of mountains and forests, so we stopped at a small village called "Gavarnie." We walked towards the mountain for a few kilometers and at first, we only heard the whistling of the wind and the birds singing. But the more we walked, the more clearly we could hear the echo of water from afar.



Then all of a sudden, we stopped in amazement in front of a vertical mountain range that arced around us. No one in the group said anything. We all stood still to admire the view in front of us. On the side of the mountain, hundreds of waterfalls were rushing down. Some were high and large, splashing water as they gushed down. Others were thin and ethereal, like long silk strands suspended in air and halfway down, were blown aside by the wind. Wow! There were even waterfalls that seemed to fall from the clouds! It turned out that the mountaintop was so high that mist and clouds shrouded it. If anyone wished to count how many waterfalls were in front

of them, it would not have been possible. Hundreds of waterfalls, each was its own painting, no two were alike. Yet, all of them were continuously flowing in the same direction, synchronizing with each other to create a grand symphony without repetition.

After standing in silence and taking in this scene for a long time, we called each other to return. But even though we were only at arm's length from each other, and even though we called out with all our strength, no one could hear the others; we could not even hear our own calls. Oh, never have we felt so small, in space and in the world of sound.

After returning to Plum Village, as soon as I met Thay, I told you about this most rare and majestic beauty in the world. You have to see it! I wanted to bring you there. I thought about how I could bring you there. But I was certain that Thay would not go anywhere just for sightseeing. Thay's Pure Land was the Hermitage, the Sitting Still Hut, Lower Hamlet, New Hamlet. If Thay went anywhere, it was only for retreats. And Thay often said that you did not have much time left, which is why you only accepted invitations to lead large retreats for thousands of people. If we held a retreat in a small village like Gavarnie in France, there would only be room for 100 people at the most. Suddenly I had a great idea, "Dear Thay, I will go and lead a retreat at Gavarnie. I would like to invite Thay to come with me. You just need to come and have fun; there's nothing for you to do. I will do it all for Thay and you simply need to visit those amazing waterfalls."

Thay smiled happily.

As for me, I felt satisfied that I have found a way to bring Thay to see the beautiful scenery. ☪



# At the Foot of the Majestic Mountain

SISTER CHÂN THUẦN KHÁNH

I arrived in the Lower Hamlet on a late autumn day in 2000. The car stopped in front of a low stone house, which I later learned was the “Purple Cloud” residence. One petite sister dressed in brown, wearing a brown apron and a brown head scarf came to the door to welcome my younger brother and I. Brother Phap Do who drove us there said to her, “Dear elder sister, I have brought your new younger sister.” That sister was Sr. Bao Nghiem. She smiled, squinted her eyes, and cheerfully said to him, “Thank you dear brother.” I went into the house with her while my brother went to the Upper Hamlet with Br. Phap Do. I have stayed in Lower Hamlet since then. It has become my second home, a place of return.



Sr. Thuan Khanh (left), Sr. Tue Nghiem

## “You are back, my dear!”

A week later, my older cousin, Sr. Tue Nghiem returned from the Green Mountain Dharma Center in the United States. During a Day of Mindfulness in the New Hamlet, she brought me to greet Thay. Thay was sitting on a stone slab by the bamboo grove in front of the Buddha Hall. *How could a venerable monk sit on a bare stone, so close to the ground?* That thought flitted through my mind, and was quickly replaced by a strange sense of familiarity and peace of mind. Before Sr. Tue Nghiem had a chance to say anything, Thay said, “You are back, my dear!”

For a moment, I thought Thay had spoken to Sr. Tue Nghiem. But something stirred in my mind and I had an inkling that Thay had spoken to me—someone he did not know yet. “You are back, my dear!” It was a warm, simple, and ordinary greeting, like one my

grandfather, father, or mother would say to me when I came home from school or from playing somewhere.

I stood there with my palms joined, looking intently at Thay. I did not reply. Nor did I remember to ask for Thay’s permission to join the sangha (as a newly arrived monastic would). Every thought in my mind fell away, like the tall winter trees that stand bare without a single leaf around them. Suddenly, I bowed down at Thay’s feet, my head touching the grass. I caught the twinkle of a smile in Thay’s eyes.

Peaceful energy seemed to enfold the space around me. With his left hand still resting lightly on his lap, Thay reached out with his right hand to lift me up and patted me on the head. I wanted to cry so badly and my heart was filled with an indescribable emotion. I had no idea what it was or why I was so moved. Thay asked me some questions, and I replied; Sr. Tue Nghiem also sat down by my side and joined the conversation. But I still felt very vague, as if swimming in a beautiful dream that I found fascinating, joyful, and peaceful. I have dreamed this dream again and again—with the mystery of the tall trees that have strangely lost all their leaves, with low stone houses held in the heart of the earth, with round towers and steeped roofs where a witch or a fairy may appear at any moment...

## The book maker

The afternoon after the Day of Mindfulness, Thay brought Br. Trung Hai (my younger brother) and me to visit the Hermitage. Thay said to us, “I will be your tour guide.” The long and narrow corridors, the ancient looking rooms, the bookshelves that reached the ceiling, and the chairs and bedside drawers seemed to have been brought out of a fairytale... I took delight in all these. I felt that I was standing at a certain junction point touching certain moments from the past.

Thay led us to a small room surrounded by stacks of pages from books. A few books were left open, many others were not yet bound. Thay pointed out the binding machine on the table and explained to us how he collated the books and bound the spines

and covers. I love books and the smell of paper. Standing in that small room filled with both, and with the profound, generous, and engaging presence of the bookmaker, I felt something rise above the small and trivial things in my mind. I could not explain what it was. I felt a more elegant, more meaningful life around me. Everything lit up. The objects were speaking for themselves and smiling at me.

After the introduction, Thay handed us two books, *Entry into Meditation* and *Collection of Poems*, and said, “My child, this is a gift for you. I bound these books myself.” My eyes opened wide and my heart brimmed with joy. With both hands I received the books while my eyes remained fixed on Thay. Seeing me thus, Thay smiled. He turned, walked out the door and continued to lead us to explore the nooks and crannies of this old and strange building. Then he brought us outside to the Hermitage grounds to visit the bamboo forest and the creek he had named “Fragrant Creek” (“Phuong Khe” in Vietnamese).



### Bringing home the children

The Fragrant Creek is a quiet, gentle creek that flows along the grounds of the Hermitage. Thay had planted a bamboo forest by it. I don’t know when he did that, but I do know that he called it the “bamboo forest.” I recall a passage in a letter that Thay had written to his students who were working at the School of Youths for Social Services. I felt that it was the most profound wish Thay had for building the community:

*“Dear young ones, find a place with good soil, vibrant trees, rocks, and water. I love those things. Trees, rocks,*

*and water are the most magnificent things, and they will heal our wounds. And please remember to give me a small plot of land in that village. I will build a house and around it, I will plant vegetables and many kinds of fragrant herbs: cilantro, shiso, marjoram, mint, fenugreek, dill and so on. When you come to visit, I will treat you to a bowl of hot soup sprinkled with fragrant herbs. Each year, we have at least one month of quiet practice in that village. We do not engage in any activities. All day, we will face the rocks, the trees, the water, and face ourselves. Planting vegetables, sorting beans, playing with the neighboring children—we will find ourselves again, heal the wounds, and equip ourselves with love so that we are ready to return to serve. Let’s look at each other so we know how to care for each other more.”*

—Giving back to our motherland, *letter written on the 18<sup>th</sup> July, 1974*

From then on, the Hermitage and Fragrant Creek became a sacred place for me. Later, when I returned to Plum Village full of wounds from the forced closure of Prajna Monastery, I bowed down to the green grass in the heart of the Hermitage. I pressed my head to the ground to be sure that I was safe in that peaceful and sacred place, for it to embrace and heal me.

One morning, Thay led Sr. Tinh Hang and me on walking meditation around the Hermitage. Afterwards, we sat down on the low rocks in the bamboo forest by the creek. By that time I could begin to call my teacher “Thay,” after he told me many times that he wished for me to call him “Thay.” Teacher and students did not say much. The creek flowed by, tinkling with joy and peace as if to bring home her tired itinerant children. Sitting at Thay’s feet amidst the bamboo and by the creek, I saw myself sitting at the foot of an ancient, majestic mountain. Thay is that majestic mountain, calling back to me my own immense space.

*Let us go together to climb that nameless mountain,  
let us sit on the ageless blue-green stone,  
quietly watching time weave the silken thread  
that creates the dimension called space.*

—Excerpt from *Thay’s poem TRUE SOURCE*

After that, every time I returned to the Hermitage, I could hear the call of the sweet and majestic creek in my heart. A few younger sisters have asked me, why is the creek given such a special name—“Fragrant Creek”? It seems rather tiny. I smiled, not knowing how to answer. What they said was true from the phenomenological perspective.

But in those moments, the image of a mighty mountain touching the sky and clouds, and the image of Thay—the mighty mountain of my life, with his serene smile and leisurely steps walking along the creek always arise in my mind.

“Fragrant Creek” speaks of the fragrance and grace of a mind that has returned, a mind that is being protected. The creek is meandering at the foot of that mighty mountain. Do you see it? It is no less beautiful than the wide creeks that flow at the foot of the Alps.

My younger siblings often feel that they need to organize a Monastic Day at the Hermitage in a lively way for it to be a happy day. For me, I just need to step into the Hermitage, to experience that very first step into this sacred place. Standing at the gate, I join my palms to greet Thay—just like that day long ago when I placed my head on the sacred earth. This is enough to make me happy. I like to come to every corner of the Hermitage: the winding path through the bamboo forest where Thay did walking meditation every day, the small rock formations by the creek where Thay often stopped to lie in a hammock, the peach tree that Thay brought me to see just the other day.

The Hermitage grounds are not as large as the other hamlets, but every time I enter it, I find it truly spacious and safe. I feel that the four sides of the Hermitage are sheltered by an energy that when I, or any monastic, can be in touch with it, will protect us on our spiritual path. I often mock myself because these ideas seem to be “up in the clouds.” But I have never entered the Hermitage without

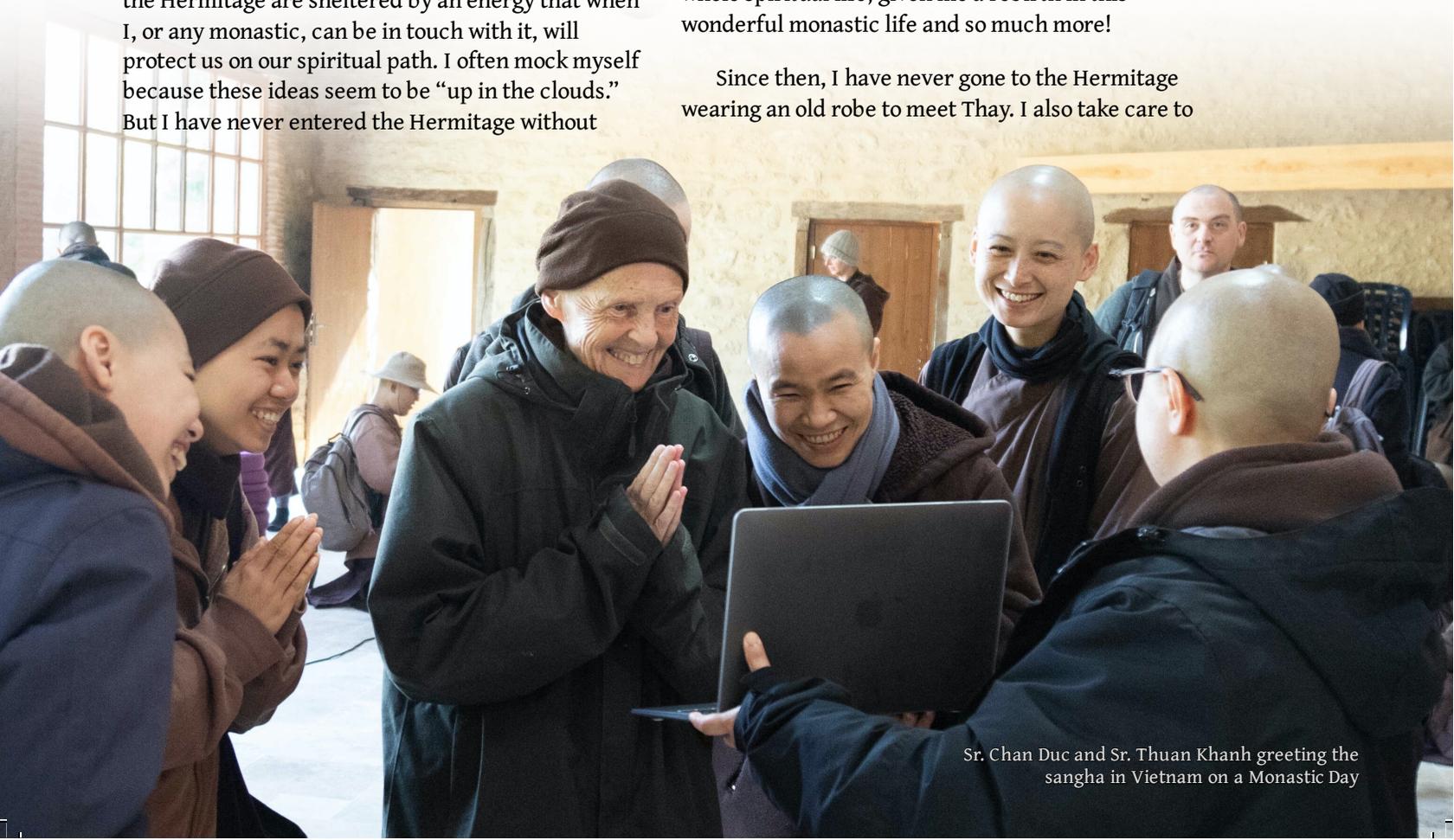
feeling and receiving that protective energy. I have never sat in a corner by the creek without feeling that I have returned to sit at the foot of that majestic mountain, and suddenly, all my woes have dissipated. After sitting in the heart of the Hermitage, I can return simply to a pristine self.

One year, I was in Hue, and I was sick. Br. Phap Nguyen was coming to Vietnam so Thay sent with him a piece of calligraphy with the words “Fragrant Creek.”

### **On the ageless green rock**

That morning, sitting in the bamboo forest, Thay stretched out his arms on two sides to embrace us, as if to comfort us. The creek still murmured calmly. Suddenly Thay looked down at the hem of my robe and asked, “My child, do you have a newer robe that is in better condition than this one?” I was surprised, not understanding what Thay was trying to say. That day I was wearing an old robe that I liked. At the knees, because I had accidentally tripped at some point, it was torn and patched over with a star. Before I had a chance to reply, Thay said, “I would like my monastic children to dress gracefully. I have enough ability to take care of my students so you can wear neat robes, isn’t that so?” I bowed my head and quietly said “Yes,” and dared not say anything else. I was deeply moved by Thay’s love. My dear teacher, you have already given me a whole spiritual life, given me a rebirth in this wonderful monastic life and so much more!

Since then, I have never gone to the Hermitage wearing an old robe to meet Thay. I also take care to



Sr. Chan Duc and Sr. Thuan Khanh greeting the sangha in Vietnam on a Monastic Day

dress properly and neatly on the Days of Mindfulness. Because if we were to meet Thay, he would be happy to see his monastic children wearing neat robes.

*One morning  
waking up,  
I stood at the foot of the mighty mountain.  
My eyes rose to its peak,  
languid clouds swirling together,  
smiles blooming on the thousand year old moss.  
Warm and inviting,  
towards infinity,  
fragrant is the sacred creek.*

In me, Thay will forever be the majestic, ageless mountain that I can lean on and turn to. Whenever you listen to your heart, you will hear the deep roar

of the rising tide. The majestic mountain is there for eons, mighty, protective, and heroic.

Being there with the Fragrant Creek, I will never need to grow up. At the Fragrant Creek, there is sunshine, rain, trees, stream, rocks, Thay, and the entire forest of brown robes. The Fragrant Creek is keeping alive so many memories of the love between teacher and student, the care, the laughter, and the heartfelt vows. The Fragrant Creek is also keeping alive the free steps and peaceful breaths of Thay, so this heritage can be given and entrusted to his monastic children. I know that wherever Thay is, the Fragrant Creek is there. Wherever I am, the Fragrant Creek is there. In the moments when I am far from the Fragrant Creek geographically, I have nourished it in my heart like this. ☪



## SOMETIMES

*Sometimes I am like  
a big eye  
looking at myself.  
It gets hot.  
There is pain,  
the mind is splintered -  
has run away from itself again  
and needs to be called back,  
to sink back,  
and down it falls into the earth  
of being  
which is in this body,  
in the bones and soft movements  
whole  
whole again, and  
home.*

—Sister Chân Trắng Chánh Niệm

## HERE

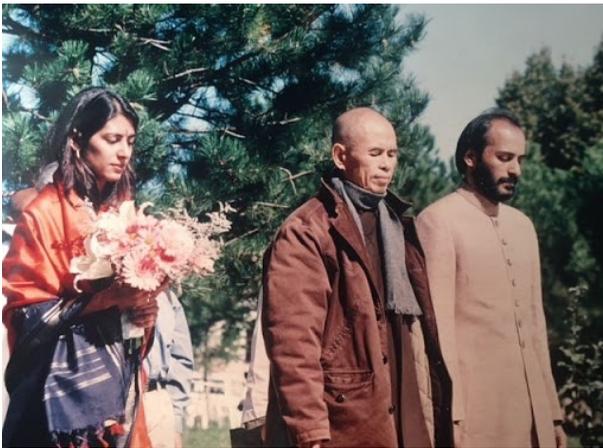
*A slip of light  
let insight ignite  
the darkness of night.  
Our hands call to the same bell,  
pools of sound resound  
throughout infinity.*

# my teacher, my friend

DHARMACHARYA SHANTUM SETH

## Meeting Thay

When I first met Thay in 1987 he was sixty-one, a couple of years younger than I am now. Yet it seemed to me then and seems to me still, that he had already got to where he wanted to go, whether it was in his form of Engaged Buddhism or his personal awakening. I can imagine him smiling if he were to read this, and gently saying, “Shantum, the whole point of this practice is not to go anywhere, but to be in the here and now.”



Our first meeting was at the Ojai Foundation in California. He was to lead a week-long retreat for artists there. More than a hundred of us were seated under a large oak. Few of us had even heard his name before and I remember everyone referring to him as ‘Kick the Can’ (because they did not know how to pronounce his name).

I was helping with recording the event, and as I was setting up the equipment. I looked up and saw a monk in simple brown robes gliding towards the tree, which everyone called the “Teaching Tree.” He walked with gentle deliberation. Involuntarily, we left whatever we were doing and rose from our seats and bowed to him. He had an extraordinary presence.

Everything he did and said was very simple. He sat still, we listened to a bell, he taught, and then he walked. For years I had been searching for some way to be peaceful, and now I could feel that sense of peace with each step and each breath that we took

with him. I did not think he noticed me at all, but when we were seeing him off, he looked directly at me and said as his hands gestured a namaste, “Bring the Buddha Dharma back to India.”

## The first pilgrimage to India

This encounter stayed with me. When I returned to India a few months later, I found I really wanted to see him again. On impulse, I wrote to him. I offered to host him, should he ever want to visit India. But the letter lay on my desk for another three months before I found the confidence to post it. To my surprise and joy he responded. Could I organise a Buddhist pilgrimage for him and thirty of his students? I jumped at the chance to connect with him again. We started in Delhi, at our home at 8 Rajaji Marg. My family was all there, slightly sceptical but very curious. Thay sat with us in the garden by the lily pond, where he showed us how to walk with his kind of intense mindfulness. My parents and siblings silently followed in his footsteps. I think they could not help but feel his magnetism.

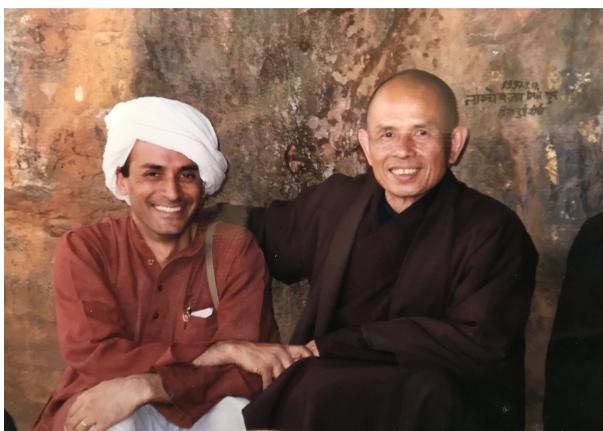
## The Buddha as a human, not a god

It was wonderful to hear the stories and drama of the Buddha’s life through Thay’s eyes. The Buddha to him was not a God, but a real person, comfortable with people from all walks of life, able to connect with beggars and farmers, rich and poor, young and old, doctors, teachers, Dalits, Brahmins, kings, prostitutes, and even with animals, insects, trees, crops, and flowers. Thay was like a happy and curious child meeting his teacher everywhere—meditating in the same caves and rocks the Buddha may have sat on, crossing the same rivers, eating the same food and greeting the children, descended from the children the Buddha met. But his favourite place was Vulture Peak, the hilltop in Rajgir from where the Buddha loved to watch the sunset.

For the next thirty-five days I traveled with Thay through Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. I had been to some of these sites before, since I had been brought up in Patna, but visiting them again with Thay was

altogether a different experience. He had just finished writing the biography of the Buddha, *Old Path White Clouds*, and at each of these sites, he brought the Buddha alive to us. It was at Vulture Peak, Thay said, that his own Buddha Eyes had opened some years before. It was also on Vulture Peak he ordained his first three monastic disciples. It was here too that he transmitted his lay teachings that had been extracted from the ancient Buddhist texts and condensed to what he called the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings and the Five Precepts. These trainings are a clear set of guidelines on how to live a good life—good in a simple, happy and peaceful way—in these confusing times.

We sat under trees and listened to Thay talk about the Buddha’s teachings. Thay held my hand without saying a word. At that moment I felt I was looking with his eyes and that everything is interconnected. I had never thought of these matters, but at that moment I understood what he was saying, that nothing is born and nothing dies. He turned to look at me and pointing to the turban on my head, he said, “Shantum, the matter of life and death is as urgent as if your turban is on fire.”



### Full moon in Kushinagar

On a full moon night in Kushinagar, where the Buddha had died, Thay and Sister Chan Khong, who was the first nun he had ordained, shaved my head. They were eager for me to be a monk, and I wanted it too, but I was not sure. A few days later in Lumbini, Thay presented me with a monastic robe. I did not wear it, but I kept it for a few years. I felt that I was not cut out to be a monk. I wanted to be in the thick of life, with all the mess of relationships and daily struggles and not sheltered in a monastery. When I said this to Thay, he warned me that it was far more difficult to practice outside than inside the monastery, but he did not discourage me to marry. I remember mentioning to him once that I often find it difficult to make choices in different situations,

especially when the competing options are all good. His answer, both simple and profound, has remained a constant teaching for me: “It does not matter what you do, but how you do it.”

### A Plum Village marriage

When I decided to get married, I introduced Gitu, my wife to be, to Thay. He said she reminded him of Yashodhara. Gitu responded, with a naughty smile, that she would rather be Sujata, who had offered the young Siddhartha kheer before his enlightenment rather than Yashodhara, his wife whom he had left to search for the path of awakening. Thay smiled. In fact, when I did marry, he conducted the commitment ceremony himself. We only went to him for a private blessing but he insisted he would perform the ceremony himself before the whole community in the meditation hall in Plum Village, France.

He asked us to repeat, every full moon night, the vows of love that he had just given us, and we have never missed doing that for a single full moon night in the last twenty-five years. It has been a regular reminder of our vows and deepened our trust and understanding of each other. It has also been a wonderful way of enjoying the moon together and being aware of its cycle.

### Thay returns to India

Gitu and I had been married nearly a year when Thay visited India again with a group of about twelve monastics. While we were in the village of Sujata, near Bodh Gaya, we visited a school where a large number of people from the village gathered. Thay was teaching on how to help people communicate. Gitu and I were sitting next to him and he turned to Gitu and asked, “What is it that irritates you or gets you angry about Shantum?” He asked her to act it out and speak openly in front of the village audience of more than a 100 people. Gitu felt too embarrassed to answer, but Thay encouraged her, saying that this would be a teaching to help in skilful communication. He suggested that Gitu use compassionate speech. So we did what we call “Dharma drama”! She said to me in a sweet way how it irritates her that I come late to meal times and allow the food to get cold. It was something many young women could relate to, she felt. Thay suggested to me that I do not react or say anything as an immediate response to what Gitu was sharing, and instead, to listen deeply; to know that it was important for Gitu to be able to share her irritation

and for me to listen with my full attention, and to try and listen with a non-judgemental mind.

It was very touching. I am not sure what the others gleaned from this, but it taught me not only that I should not be late for meals and make people wait for me, but also to listen deeply and voice my appreciation for Gitu. It is not something that came easily to me being brought up in an Indian culture. Afterwards as I sat with Thay in his room sharing a cup of the oolong tea that he loved, I brought this up, hoping he may be able to cure me of the habit. I asked him rather naively “Thay, I am always late ... what should I do?” His response was terse: “Leave early!”

### **Becoming a Dharma teacher**

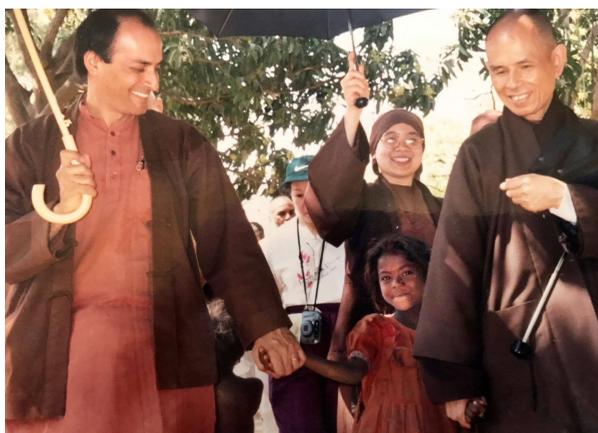
Gitu and I were with Thay in 1999 while he was on a tour in the United States. One day Thay came up to me and told me that my name had been recommended to be ordained as a Dharmacharya. This would mean that I would now be “transmitted the lamp” and be authorised to teach as a representative of Thay, who is the 42<sup>nd</sup> generation of the Chinese Zen Master Linji’s lineage.

I asked Thay who had recommended my name and he said “Thay.” I was pleased and surprised, but did not feel ready. When I told him my doubts, Thay said he had confidence in me. Gitu and I decided to go and live in Plum Village for a while so that I would feel more confident to take on my new role as a Dharma Teacher. Not that I could see Thay every day – he lived in a hermitage away from the monastery and visited twice a week to teach at one of the Plum Village hamlets, where hundreds of people would gather to hear him speak.

### **A Plum Village baby**

He always treated Gitu and me with special fondness, often stopping to ask whenever he saw us how we were doing. When Gitu became pregnant, he would ask not only about Gitu, but also of the baby in her womb. He would ask me too if I was enjoying speaking with the baby in the womb. He also suggested reading the Lotus Sutra to the unborn baby. The Lotus Sutra is one of the most revered Buddhist texts that claims that anyone can awaken the Buddha in them. Once when we were sitting on the grass, he suggested that I speak to Gitu as if I was the baby in the womb. He explained that in his native Vietnamese, the womb is called the Palace of the Child, a refuge where the baby feels safe. I felt very embarrassed to do what he asked as there were

many people sitting there with us. But there was no arguing with Thay so I bent down and addressed Gitu as the baby in her womb.



It was a most intimate conversation that developed. Thank you, I said, for carrying me in your womb and taking care of me. Thank you for nourishing me, for feeding me, for breathing for me. Thank you for taking me for a walk to watch the sunset each evening and describing the beauty to me. Thank you for speaking with me and loving me. Thank you for taking care of what you eat and drink and consume. I smile when you smile. I can feel your change of emotions and know when you are happy or disturbed. And how are you doing? Are you enjoying it? Is it difficult? How do you feel when I kick you? I asked as if I was the baby in Gitu’s womb. All at once, I could see that Thay and even the Buddha had once been babies in the womb, like me.

It was also to Thay that I owe the way I earn my livelihood. I was then working at the United Nations and decided to take only one dollar a year for my work and needed to find another way of making a livelihood. After my first pilgrimage with Thay, he had suggested that I organise pilgrimages in the Buddha’s footsteps every year. I joyfully accepted the challenge and at first was doing it once a year, but eventually this turned into my livelihood, and I have been leading this pilgrimage for more than thirty years now.

Since my first pilgrimage with Thay, I made it a point to go and stay with Thay for about a month each year, wherever he was; whether in Plum Village or in some other country where he went to teach. There have been many wonderful interactions with Thay the years thereafter, especially during his historic trip to India in 2008, but that is another story.

He has been my guide, teacher, and wise friend. ☪

# On Misty Days

SISTER CHÂN TRĂNG TIN YÊU

*On misty days,  
We cannot see much, except the beauty of the mist itself.*

*On misty days,  
We cannot hear much, except the depth of silence.*

*On misty days,  
We cannot feel much, except the sacred stillness.*

*On your departure, Thay, these beautiful misty days in Plum Village  
are sending us deep silence and stillness.*

*Did you choose this day, Thay?  
Or did Mother Earth choose it for you? Or choose for us?*

*You often reminded us that all seasons are beautiful.  
If we can have silence within, silence from all the noise in our mind,  
We can listen and enjoy all the wonders of life in every moment.*

*On your departure, Thay, you bathed our minds with deep silence,  
So we can listen carefully to you, to your fullest being and eternal teachings.*

*We listen to our pain, grief and sadness.  
As you said it is also your pain, grief and sadness.  
We listen to your promise that you will return as soon as possible.  
And yes, you have kept your promise,  
As you said that you are not limited by your physical body.*

*Our pain, grief and sadness  
have become an awakening force  
To look attentively at  
Your aspiration body,  
Your Dharma body,  
Your consciousness body,  
Your compassionate body  
To help countless people to suffer less.*

*We carefully collect all the beautiful seeds  
That you have planted inside of us.  
We want to keep them tightly so they won't get lost.  
We want to take care of them as a great treasure.  
We want to grow them tirelessly  
So we can bring you alive in every cell of our body.  
In every step and every breath.*

*Only in this way,  
Our pain, grief and sadness  
are lessened and we can be at ease  
and transformed into a source  
of endless gratitude, love, and awakening.*

Thank you, Thay ☸

# Strolling with joy on a sunny day

SISTER CHÂN THAO NGHIÊM

My beloved younger siblings,

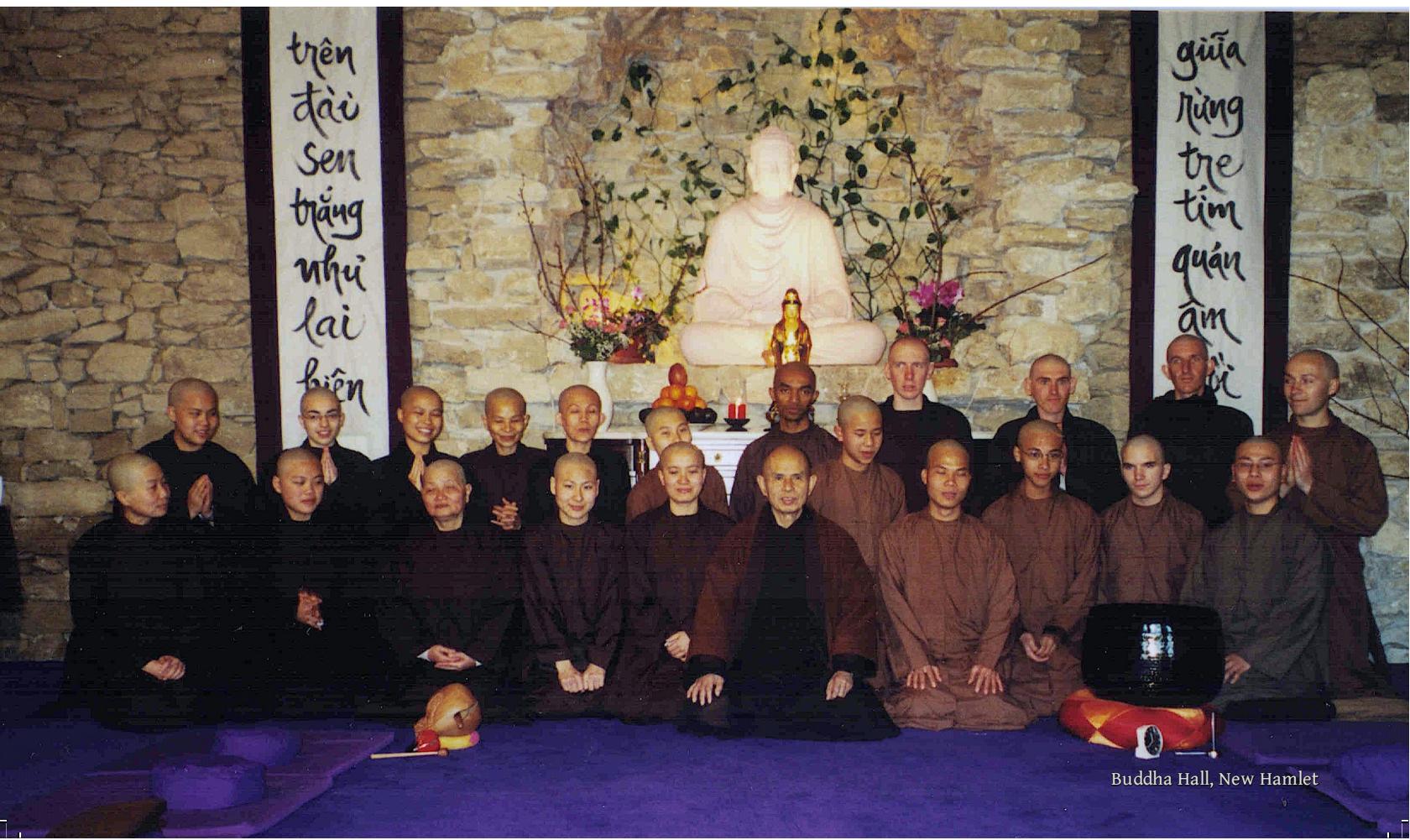
It has been two years since I left Plum Village, France for Dieu Tram Nunnery, Vietnam. How time flies! So much has happened in the world and in the sangha, for you and for me. Sometimes in my dreams or when we sit around and share stories, many memories return to me. You know what the sisters are like—we are easily carried away by stories, one after another. They contain anecdotes about Thay, about brotherhood and sisterhood, and all of the joyful times.

## The walking meditation paths

Being far away from Plum Village, I often remember and dream about the paths I have walked on. Walking them many times, they have gradually become well worn even in my mind. The ones I walked upon with a deeper awareness are more “worn” and feel dearer to me when I recall them. Those are the paths we often use during the day, especially the walking meditation paths.

How beautiful the walking meditation paths are in the three hamlets! I have walked them countless times, and yet each time, I still found them so lovely. There is the path around the crescent-moon shaped lotus pond, or the paths winding through the plum trees to ascend the plum hill in New Hamlet. There is the path beneath the “poplar cathedral” leading to the woods where one finds the creek in Lower Hamlet. Then there is the path that takes us through the oak forest and down to the sixteen Buddha statues in Upper Hamlet. Of course, it is impossible not to mention the legendary pine forest path that Thay has often spoken of.

There are many more paths that are incredibly delightful. Beautiful while we stroll freely and alone in our own hamlet, and even more beautiful when we go for walking meditation with our sisters and brothers. The images of the sangha walking quietly and peacefully are so alive and dear to me. In the days just before leaving France, I was very present whenever we went for walking meditation on those



Buddha Hall, New Hamlet

paths. I walked with reverence, expressing my gratitude to them. Sometimes I placed my hand on a plum tree or a pine tree to feel it, and to say “goodbye.”

On the continuing journey, there will be new paths that become dear, where we will have new experiences that will stay within our hearts.

### **Buddha Hall**

There is a sacred space in New Hamlet that I miss very much, and that is the Buddha Hall. We often called it the “Purple Hall” because in the past, the carpet there was purple (the signature colour of New Hamlet), which was chosen by Thay. Purple represents the land of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. The day I arrived in Plum Village, the first thing I did was to go to the Buddha Hall and touch the earth in front of the Buddha. Entering the hall, I discovered that the floor was lined with dark purple carpet. At the end of the hall was a Buddha statue, light pink in colour, sitting very beautifully and serenely in a natural stone enclave. Thay had written a pair of parallel verses for the Buddha Hall:

*Trên đài sen trắng Như Lai hiện  
Giữa rừng tre tím Quán Âm ngồi*

*On a white lotus throne, the Tathagata appears.  
In the midst of the violet bamboo forest,  
Avalokiteshvara dwells.<sup>3</sup>*

Reading it, you will immediately feel the essence of the place in which you are standing.

Stepping into the Buddha Hall, I always had a sense of serenity and of being myself. Everything in the hall is always arranged beautifully and neatly. I loved the paintings of plum blossoms, the calligraphies, and the cartwheel “chandelier” in the centre of the hall. The Buddha hall is a dignified space and carpeted, so everyone was carefully reminded to not eat or drink or make noise there, so the space could remain clean and tranquil.

One time, a plastic human skeleton was placed in a corner of the Buddha Hall (as an aid for the sangha to contemplate our mortality and the impermanence of life). It was also once used as a model to show the correct posture for sitting meditation. Whenever I went to practise touching the earth alone and saw the skeleton or knew that it was behind me, I thought, *Oh dear, why am I so scared?* After a while, the skeleton became damaged and twisted—one leg going

one way and one hand going another, it was rather falling apart, so we invited it to “continue on its journey.”

The day New Hamlet was flooded, muddy water soaked the entire Buddha Hall floor and the carpet could not be rescued; we had to let it go. Having lived with it day and night for so many years, everyone thought it was a great pity and missed the purple carpet. Fortunately we found another purple coloured material to line the floor and the signature colour of the hall was preserved.

What I love the most is the image of everyone practising together in the Buddha Hall. Once in a while I could not be at a practice session with the sangha due to work. As I walked past and looked into the hall, I could see the sangha sitting and chanting with such beauty and power! Early in the morning and after the evening session, the sisters were often there for their personal practice. Anyone would be moved by those images. I may not have been the one who was confiding in the Buddha, or bowing down to be in touch with Mother Earth, or doing slow walking meditation with ease; but even just looking in, I benefited from their energy of peace and I could also very naturally let go of difficulties in my heart and be happy.

### **The Hermitage**

*Thay's house.* Naturally the Hermitage became sacred. It is a place reserved for the monastic sangha and whenever we come there, we feel its warm embrace.

Everyone loved the Winter Rains' Retreat because we could come to the Hermitage once a week for Monastic Day. In the earlier years when there were fewer people in the sangha, we all sat spaciouly in the small meditation hall upstairs. Thay likened that small hall to the womb of Queen Maya—able to hold however many people there were.

Later on Monastic Days, whoever arrived early could sit close to the back and those arriving late had to sit right up at the front, squeezing tightly to have enough room. Thay had to remind us every time, “Move inside, don't sit where you are blocking the way.” There were a few tiny windows in the meditation hall, usually half ajar to let in some air. Whoever mistakenly sat near them would get cold, while the rest of us were all hot with flushed cheeks. There was heating in the hall. Thay turned it on the

3. Further reading: <https://plumvillage.org/articles/parallel-verses-of-our-plum-village-temples-i/>

night before to prepare a warm hall for his monastic children.

After a few years the sangha grew, so we needed to move to the two rooms downstairs. Thay sat in the inner room and there had to be a projector in the outer room to watch his talk. Many times when Thay asked about a hot topic, the brothers and sisters in the outer room were so busy discussing it that we forgot to quiet down for Thay's talk. So from time to time Thay asked, "The 'rowdy group' out there, are you listening?"

The Dharma talks on Monastic Days were often very closely related to what was happening in the sangha. We all listened attentively and felt as if Thay was giving us each a private teaching. As sangha issues were brought up and Thay shared his insights on how to resolve them, we often asked each other, "How did Thay know about that?"

The Hermitage is small, but large enough for Thay to lead the sangha for walking meditation. Thay led us around the garden, along the creek, (which is called *Phương Khê* or "Fragrant Creek"), towards the rows of poplar trees, then turning back until we arrived at the three cypress trees. On those days, Thay and his disciples often sat around a bonfire outside. The brothers always brought along guitars to play and sing meditation songs. Thay liked to sit and listen to his monastic children sing, and watch us having fun and laughing. We, the young sisters at the time, rarely sat near the bonfire. Instead we liked to hide near the bamboo grove to enjoy the dishes we missed out on at lunch or run around and play games.

Lunchtime was the most fun. The line was *really* long because there were only two serving tables. Whoever did not have responsibilities tried their best to line up first. Come lunchtime, everyone was lined up neatly. No one left the line because they would lose their spot right away. When the cooking team came carrying the food and asked for help to invite the bell, everyone would politely decline, no one was willing to do it. Tough isn't it? So many funny stories around the serving table at the Hermitage! On rainy days when there wasn't enough space, we all squeezed into the house to eat. Oh it was so crowded, but everyone was happy and enjoyed the Monastic Days. Isn't that wonderful?

During the big retreats, going to the Hermitage was a chance for teacher and disciples to be present for each other and to recharge our energy. We rekindled the awareness that we are very fortunate to have many opportunities to practise and to help others. Thay was always by our side, like a father, attentive to each child, not leaving anyone out. You, I, and all the other brothers and sisters have carried that love within us and still do so now.

### **"Teacher's Love" Meditation Hall**

A row of old stone buildings (at the southern corner of the grounds) was already at the Hermitage when Thay moved there. They can be seen in the early photos of the Hermitage that Thay has hung in his library. The buildings were badly damaged and unusable, so no one paid attention to them. For unknown reasons, Thay wished to repair them. After asking the attendants to push his wheelchair there and checking it for himself, Thay started to make signals for the attendants to clean out the



abandoned buildings. First, two attendants followed; then the rest of the attendant group was called to help and in the end, the whole community joined in with the cleaning. Thay invited Brother Phap Dung to draft the architectural designs. Thay was the one who came up with the ideas, supervised, and oversaw the whole project. When construction workers started to work on the building, Thay came to visit almost every day and was very excited about the project.

Before the building works were completed, Thay went to Thailand and then returned to Vietnam. Thay was the project initiator—the building and completion were up to his monastic children. Finally, the new meditation hall was “inaugurated.” It looked very elegant and warm. At Tu Hieu Root Temple in Vietnam, the attendants received photos of the sangha’s activities in the new hall and showed them to Thay. It is only now that I understand Thay’s wish for the project. There is nothing better than offering a welcoming space for Thay’s monastic children to practise and be present for each other. I thought “Teacher’s Love” is really a suitable name for the meditation hall. Sitting inside, for sure everyone would think of and feel Thay’s love.

### **Popcorn Day**

Speaking of the Hermitage and Thay, I recall a very memorable, very special day—*Popcorn Day*.

It was during the early days of Thay’s illness. The sangha had not been with Thay for quite a while because he was resting and recuperating at the Hermitage. The sangha missed Thay and Thay also thought of the sangha. Thay did not want the sangha to worry for him. He had already wanted to have a Monastic Day before that so the sangha could meet him at the Hermitage and feel peace of mind. He also wanted to hear the community chant the new Sutra of the Insight That Brings Us to the Other Shore, which Br. Phap Linh had just set to music.

Thay made very careful arrangements to prepare for the day. I do not know how Thay thought of it, but one day, he suggested we buy a popcorn machine for him. Sr. Chan Khong and the attending brothers and sisters were all very surprised when we heard Thay’s suggestion. None of us had ever imagined what it would be like to have a popcorn machine in a monastery. It must be very difficult to find, what would we buy and where would we put it? Thay said, “Go ahead, buy it for Thay. I will pay for it. I have some money from selling calligraphies.” That was enough for us to know that Thay really liked the idea,

so Sr. Dinh Nghiem searched online and found a real popcorn machine. It was red, not too big, and had wheels to cart it along.

The day the machine was delivered, teacher and disciples eagerly opened it to check it out. After assembling it, we discovered that one side of the glass had broken in transit; the attendants used a plastic sheet to cover it temporarily. Now that the machine was there, Thay said, “Now we go online to learn how to make popcorn.”

Br. Phap Huu, Sr. Nho Nghiem, Br. Phap Ao, Br. Phap Nguyen, and I were members of the popcorn testing committee. The customers were Thay, Sr. Chan Khong, and Sr. Dinh Nghiem. The moment we put the oil and corn kernels in to try it out and then waited to see if it would work was really exciting. Then the corn popped and came bursting out of the little pot inside the machine. Oh, it was so much fun! Thay laughed, the sisters cheered, and the four of us who had made the popcorn jumped up and down with joy. Thay was offered the first bowl of popcorn and we were all excited to try it. Thay even suggested doing some research to see if we could add a little salt and caramel to the popcorn to have more flavour. So the attendants busily popped batch after batch to measure the right quantities and work out the timing. During those days we ate popcorn to our hearts’ content and even had to send some to the New Hamlet for help.

A few days later, Thay wrote a letter inviting the sangha to come for a Monastic Day and to eat popcorn. Meanwhile, Thay reminded the attendants to bring out the popcorn machine each day and practise using it so we could demonstrate it smoothly in front of the sangha.

Several days before the appointed day, Thay had to go to the hospital for a health check. When the doctors advised him to stay longer, Thay said, “I cannot. I have an appointment for popcorn day with my students.” The attendants had to beg Thay to stay and contacted the sangha to postpone the Monastic Day so that Thay could take care of his health in peace.

Then came the day the sangha gathered. Everyone was excited. The attendants had been preparing the popcorn cart, a stove to caramelize sugar, a little salt, and a bucket to contain the final product since noon. We were all worried that as the community was big we would not be able to make enough in time. Thay had arranged the right

moment to bring out the popcorn cart for maximum effect.

I still remember how we made the popcorn in a room at the back of the Hermitage where we could look out towards the three cypress trees, (Thay often called them the “Three elder brothers of the sangha”). The sangha had gathered to chant the Sutra of the Insight That Brings Us to the Other Shore. It sounded very powerful and wonderful. Then Br. Phap Ao pushed Thay in his wheelchair to go out and listen to the sangha chanting. Looking from the inside, I could see a few brothers and sisters who could not chant and just stood watching. A few others were standing and hiding behind others ... crying.

After an introduction, Thay signaled for us to bring out the machine and to make popcorn for the sangha to see. Everyone got to eat some popcorn. It was a gift from Thay, realized by the attendants. Thay was so happy to see the sangha and the sangha was happy and moved to see Thay. Whether the popcorn was delicious or not was not important. The most precious thing was that everyone had received our teacher’s love.

Later the popcorn maker was moved to the New Hamlet and once in a while we brought it out to

make popcorn for the sangha. Everyone enjoyed it and thought of that memorable day.

My dear younger siblings, I can go on endlessly telling old stories! I am sure Plum Village has changed and is changing a lot. When I left New Hamlet, the main building was still being repaired. When I have the chance to come back, I may not even recognise it. That said, no matter how things change, Plum Village is still nestled in that picturesque countryside, tranquil and far away from hustle and bustle, still simple with a welcoming and lively atmosphere.

While at the Root Temple, myself and the other sisters and brothers often share stories with each other—so many stories of Thay, of Plum Village, and of the different centres. Thay’s hut here is peaceful but also filled with the sound of our stories and laughter. We still have Thay in us, we can always return to the embrace of the sangha, and have the time to roam with joy. What more do we hope for?

I wish for you, my dear younger siblings, to fully enjoy the happy days, to smile with the difficulties that are there, and to be a beautiful continuation of Thay and Plum Village. I am also doing just that.

*With much love,  
Sr. Thao Nghiem ☸*



Sr. Thao Nghiem operating the popcorn machine

# EARLY YEARS OF PLUM VILLAGE



# Returning to Lower Hamlet

SISTER CHÂN ĐỨC

## Here is India, India is here

I arrived in Plum Village on the first of July, 1986. A lay friend driving an old yellow Quatrelle picked me up at Sainte-Foy-La-Grande station. Three months earlier when Thay was in England at the invitation of myself and some friends at the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, he had suggested I come to Plum Village for a month. When I arrived in Upper Hamlet, Thay was sitting in a hammock, which was always slung between two trees opposite the Stone Building. He was wearing a grey *ao vat ho*<sup>4</sup> because it was a very hot day.

When I joined my palms to greet Thay, he said, “Here is India. India is Here.” I did not understand and I thought Thay meant, “The weather is very hot here, like in India.” Later, on reflection, I realised Thay meant something like, “My child, this is your spiritual home. You do not need to go to India to find your home.” Thay told me later that this was a quotation from a poem by the Vietnamese meditation master Vô Ngôn Thông of the ninth century.<sup>5</sup>

## First impressions of Upper Hamlet

My first impression was how relaxed Upper Hamlet was. It was two weeks before the annual Summer Opening and preparations were being made in such a joyful and leisurely way. A bed had been prepared for me in a room whose name over the lintel was “Young Moon.” The bed consisted of four bricks, which supported at each corner a plank of plywood, covered by a thin piece of foam. In the following days I helped prepare beds like that for the guests who were to come.

Another impression was: *This is a five-star hotel*, because in the monastery where I had practised in India, we had been so poor. We had no running water, no electricity, and no beds. Here I had the basic amenities as well as a spiritual family to practise with, and a teacher who spoke English and French and could guide me in the practice.

## Life in Lower Hamlet



After a month, I was allowed to go to Lower Hamlet for the last two weeks of the Summer Opening. I stayed in the Plum Hill Building, which had eight beds like the ones in the Upper Hamlet. I had a strange feeling of being at home when sitting under the centenarian oak trees and looking out to the north. The view was more expansive then because there was not yet the poplar tree grove. I experienced the same feeling when practising circumambulation in the Red Candle Hall and seeing the stones that made the walls. At that time, there was no plaster between the stones.

Around Lower Hamlet there was much more forest than there is now, and the 21 hectares that belonged to the hamlet had vineyards and many fruit trees. It was indeed a secret garden to explore. One day in the autumn in August, Thay picked blackberries and gave them to me, asking me to make jam. He must have known that my mother made bramble jelly every year so it was easy for me to continue her.

During the Summer Opening, by the side of the oak trees was the “Oak Tree Kiosk” selling all kinds of sweetmeats in the afternoon. The proceeds went to the poorest children in Vietnam. With this money, Sr. Chan Khong would buy medicine. We would put the medicine in boxes and send them to social workers in Vietnam. They would sell the medicine and give the money to those who needed it. We did

4. Traditional Vietnamese short robes worn by monastic practitioners

5. *Tây Thiên thứ độ, thứ độ Tây Thiên* (西天此度, 此度西天 - 無言通禪師)

not just send material things; every parcel also contained some exhortation to practise mindfulness.

After the Summer Opening, the guests went home and I moved into the Cypress Building. This building is now the kitchen, store, and dining room of the Lower Hamlet. At that time, the Purple Cloud Building was full of straw and dung left by the cattle that had inhabited it. The room I was given was quite large. It had a floor of baked tiles, a green porcelain wood stove, a chair, and a desk. I stayed there alone until Sr. Chan Vi arrived in May 1987.

Cypress Building had an attic. There were many buckets and basins up there to catch the rain. When it rained hard, there were never enough buckets in the right place and the rain would come through the ceiling and sometimes on to my bed. Plum Village did not have the money to repair the roof at that time.



Monsieur Mounet (fourth from right) and Robert Naeff (third from right)

When I first came to the Lower Hamlet, there was a traditional brick bread oven. It was in a little stone building behind the Purple Cloud. It had been repaired by a Dutch Order of Interbeing member, Robert Naeff, who had knowledge of building this kind of bread oven, so we could actually make bread. You made a wood fire in the oven and when the wood began to turn into embers, you took them out and put them in a bucket. You had to be very careful doing this because if they fell onto the surrounding dry grass, it could cause a fire. Then you placed the uncooked bread in the heated oven. We had to try a few times in order not to burn the bread, but eventually we succeeded in making something edible.

We had a wonderful neighbour who lived in what is now the Cherry House. Monsieur Mounet made apple tarts and took them to the markets to sell. He had constructed his own gas-fired oven and he said after he had finished baking the tarts, the oven was

still hot enough to bake bread, so I would bring my bread and bake it in his oven, which was much simpler.

### **Dharma music**

For Thay, music and poetry were an important part of the practice. We did not have any English practice songs when I first came to Plum Village. Thay encouraged all his students to write Dharma songs. At first we thought we could never write a song but somehow Thay managed to water that seed in us. The first song I wrote was before I ordained as a nun. It came to me as I was washing dishes in the small, low sink that we had in the kitchen of. It was "Breathe and you know that you are alive." Thay had been teaching the Anapanasatti Sutta. When I look at this song, I see that Thay must have taught this sutta in a very colourful and poetic way and I had already heard about Great Master Bamboo Forest (Truc Lam Dai Si) of the thirteenth century who told his disciples, "Whenever I pick something up, it is always new," and that's what gave rise to the last line of the song.

### **Taking care of the brothers**

In 1990 after the ordination of Brothers Nguyen Hai, Phap Dang, and Vo Ngai, Thay told me to go and live in Upper Hamlet to keep an eye on the practice up there as there were no other elder monks yet. Although I had two younger blood brothers, I was a real novice in taking care of young monks. I considered my task was to make sure they came to the sitting meditation. There were also a couple of novice monks from a temple in the United States. I think there were five novices in all. Two of them were compliant to my wishes, but the other three thought it very strange to have a nun telling them what to do. One said it was like being in the army with me as the colonel! One day in frustration at the novices' absence in the morning sitting, I entered the room of one of them and pulled back the sleeping bag from the sleeping monk. This is probably where my reputation for being an army colonel came from. Thay had recently introduced the practice of Beginning Anew, so we had to do it. One young brother told me that I needed to understand that he had stomach problems and that is why he did not come to meditation.

When I came to Upper Hamlet, I was inexperienced in building sangha as a family. Maybe because of my training as a schoolteacher, I was only aware of myself in relationship to the brothers as the one who had to remind them to practise. I was

translating the *History of Vietnamese Buddhism* at the time. Any free time I had, I spent upstairs in the Stone Building doing this, rather than devoting myself to making a family atmosphere. I still had much to learn about how to be a good elder sister. This has been a learning process throughout my monastic life.

In 1991, fortunately Br. Giac Thanh arrived and I could be relieved of my Upper Hamlet duties.

### Trusting the Dharma and the sangha

In my thirty-three years as a nun, I have certainly had challenges to face. What helps me most is my deep trust in the Dharma as the teachings of truth, and in Thay as the one who can transmit them to me. As the years have passed, my trust in the compassion and wisdom of the sangha has grown and this place of refuge always helped in difficult moments.

Sr. Chan Khong, my elder Dharma sister, has been a stable and compassionate guide for me. When I first lived in Plum Village, my practice was to nourish the seeds of happiness. Sr. Chan Khong was a very good example of someone who had been through so much and who could find so much happiness in little things in the present moment. I learnt more from her examples than from her advice. One thing that was very helpful for me was reminding me to smile every half hour. I had to keep an eye on the clock, but I really wanted to be able to do that. Sr. Chan Khong has taught me in difficult moments to be aware of all the things I have to be grateful for, right here and right now, and how to practise mere recognition in order to take care of unwholesome mental formations.

Now when Thay is no longer physically there in Plum Village, my trust in the sangha has deepened. Over the years I have seen how compassionate the sangha is. When dealing with a sister who has difficulties, rather than punishing and blaming, the sangha tries to embrace that sister. The sangha's growth in compassion is thanks to the advice and guidance of Thay. Of course there are times when the sangha has to lay down firm guidelines, but that is done out of love. I also see how the sangha has the capacity to listen deeply to each other in a way that thirty years ago would not have been possible.

We certainly have our ups and downs but we can sit together, begin anew, and go ahead while understanding each other more deeply. Very often it has been the difficulties that have emptied me of

pride and self-confidence, and filled me with *non-self* confidence. This is how I understand "the kleśa are the bodhi, the afflictions are the awakening."



Sr. Chan Duc, Br. Phap An

Some of the important moments of revelation seem to occur when I am sitting in a circle with other practitioners. I suddenly realize that I do not have a separate self and I can only be in relationship to others. When I first come into a circle, I usually arrive early and watch sisters coming in. As we become settled, I like to look around and feel my affection for each sister who is sitting there. I follow my breathing as I am doing this. I know that we all come from very different backgrounds and on the surface we all look and behave very differently. Nevertheless there is something very deep that connects us. It is rather like the trees in the forest where the roots of one are always connected to the roots of others. The simple fact that we live together twenty-four hours a day, and we have all made the same commitment to the monastic life seems to bond us in a special way.

Since I came to Plum Village, I have transformed, but I recognize I still have so many shortcomings. No one wants to do harm. But I can still unwittingly say something that causes trouble. I have to forgive myself because I did not know what I was doing. However, at the same time, I have to make a strong resolve to do better. When I first came to Plum Village I found it difficult to listen to someone pointing out my faults. I think I am better at doing this now. In the beginning I had trusted Thay more than the sangha. I have much more trust in the sangha now and I am able to see that Thay is in fact the sangha because the sangha is Thay's masterpiece.

### Gathering the fruits of practice

My fear of death has lessened and the teachings on the cloud have helped me. I remember when I was

living in the Green Mountain Dharma Center; we had so much snow in the winter. One of the things we liked to do was to lie on the snow, stretch out our arms, and then move them back and forth. Then we would stand up and look at the image impressed on the snow – it was exactly like an angel. As I lay in the snow, I would see how the water in my own body and the water outside in the form of snow were not two separate things. This meditation on the six elements inside my body and outside my body helps me to see that I am not able to die in the sense of becoming non-existent. In fact there is no “I” anyway to die. In France where we do not often have snow, I see myself in the cloud and the cloud in me.

I have been in Lower Hamlet for about twelve months now. I left Lower Hamlet in 1996 to go to New Hamlet and then to Maple Forest Monastery in the U.S., so I was absent from Lower Hamlet for twenty-four years. There are places that have not changed very much, like the little path that leads down to what was my hut, the path behind the Dharma Nectar Hall, the Red Candle Hall, and the grand oak trees. Thay’s room in the Lower Hamlet where Thay would lie in the hammock after the Dharma talk and invite us to drink tea with him is one place where we can feel Thay’s presence very clearly. As soon as I practise mindful walking in the Lower Hamlet, the flavour of Plum Village thirty or more years ago is very apparent.

I remember one time in the Lower Hamlet when I was a layperson and we were preparing to get in the car to go to visit Fleurs de Cactus in Paris. I had a deep aspiration to walk just like Thay walked, so I tried it out for myself while waiting for others to arrive. Maybe at the time it was more outer form than content, but over the years, the peace and joy that come from walking like this are authentic. Thay’s steps in Plum Village are what have made the atmosphere of Plum Village sacred, and of course we all want to keep this sacred atmosphere alive by continuing to walk mindfully.

### Letter to Thay, October 2021

Beloved and respected Thay,

Last night at about 4:00 a.m. I had a dream. Our international monastic sangha had gathered at a train station. Hundreds of us were all there together. Sr. Tu Nghiem (Sr. Eleni) and I for some reason did not have a ticket. I felt it was urgent that we buy a ticket without delay. We went to the ticket office but



With sisters during earth-cake wrapping, 2021

it was closed. Then the man who sold tickets appeared. He was very kind and agreed to sell us tickets immediately. I worried that I did not have any money but the man said he wanted to give us two tickets for the price of one. I had exactly the right amount of money. With our tickets we went outside to join the sangha which was going up the steps to the train together. On seeing the sangha I could not believe how beautiful it was: even more beautiful than the wild-goose sangha that migrates over France in the autumn and spring in a stunning “V” formation.

When I woke up, I thought, *I have seen Thay. The sangha is Thay; Thay’s lifetime creation.*

I remembered the times I accompanied Thay on tours to China or Korea. We visited ancient monasteries with old attic libraries full of wood blocks from which the sutras were printed. On two separate occasions Thay had pointed out to me the gatha from the Vajracchedika Sutra:

*Someone who looks for me in form  
Or seeks me in sound  
Is caught in an abstraction  
And will not find me*

For many years I have been caught in that abstraction, that misapprehension. This morning I have seen a much greater Thay.

Sometimes as an elder sister I need to be a teacher for my younger siblings. I need to practise signlessness in looking at them too and realise that Thay is in each of them.

*Touching the earth in boundless gratitude,  
your child,  
Chan Duc ❧*

# A Box of LU Biscuits

SISTER CHÂN HOA NGHIÊM

## A life of practice

Plum Village in the 1980s and 1990s was like a rural village, still very rustic. There were very few people there and life was quite simple. Our room only had a table and a bed. The bed was nothing but a plank of wood on top of four bricks. On my ordination day, my elder sister, Sister Doan Nghiem, offered me a set of faded brown short robes. I also received a top from Sr. Vien Quang and a pair of pants from Sr. Chan Vi so I could have another complete set of short robes. Thay also gave me one grey long robe, which I liked very much. At that time, I was only half my current age. I was young and full of spirit. I was quite active and eager to do everything. I volunteered to work in the garden because our food was very basic then and we ate what we planted in the garden—but I was born and raised in the city so gardening was something very new to me. I followed Sr. Chan Vi to learn how to garden. We were so keen on digging the soil that we even skipped evening sitting meditation sessions. Sr. Chan Vi and I were scolded by Sr. Thanh Luong: “You are here to practice, not to work!” We immediately went to her to begin anew because she was our eldest sister at the time.



## Compassion for all living beings

When the seeds of the pumpkins and tomatoes germinated, I was besotted with the baby plants, and watched them grow every day. On lazy days, my elder sister, Sr. Bao Nghiem woke me up at 6 a.m. so that I could go with her and Sr. Chan Vi to the garden to catch slugs. Like snails, slugs really like to eat young pumpkin, squash and other vegetable plants. It only took a slug one morning to chew up a young pumpkin plant, negating all our hard work of two

spring months to sow the seeds and water the plants. One morning like that, we could fill up a whole jar with slugs. Sr. Chan Vi looked at me, smiling, “Hoa Nghiem, now we bring them to a new economic-zone.” I looked back at her, surprised, “Where would that new economic-zone be?” She laughed out loud, “We will bring them to the woods. There they don’t have vegetables to eat, they will eat only grass.” I realized then what she meant. I reckoned it was better that they ate grass instead of being killed. There were gardeners who sprayed pesticides on the young plants and vegetables. Without knowing it, slugs ate the sprayed plants and burst their bellies and died. Thay often told us that we could share half of the vegetables with the slugs and eat only half ourselves rather than killing them, as it would be too painful to do so. Compassion taught us to love all species, all living beings.

## Learning from Thay

When Thay was not away for teaching tours in the U.S., we were very happy. In those days, Thay often came to Lower Hamlet and taught us the monastic mindful manners. Things like, when sweeping the floor, we should not raise the broom too high because doing so would stir up the dust everywhere. Or when eating, we should keep our head straight up and not bent over, etc. Thay also taught us how to write poetry. Ms. Tinh Thuy and Br. Vo Ngai were the quickest learners among us. Soon after Thay finished his teaching, they already submitted their newly composed poems. Thay then taught us how to edit their poems to make them rhyme better. Each time Thay came to Lower Hamlet, we were so happy as if it was a festival. These sweet, beautiful memories, they are endless! All of them have nourished my bodhicitta until now.

## Learning to cook

During the summer retreats, so many people came to practice. In the old days, Lower Hamlet was reserved for Vietnamese practitioners. In the first Summer Retreat I joined as a novice nun, my responsibility was to help Sr. Chan Khong to organize tea meditation sessions. I checked the registration list and made invitation letters for the tea sessions, and then prepared tea cups and took care of the



work of the tea attendant. I did this for the whole Summer Retreat. Besides that, I also helped Ms. Tinh Thuy in the bookshop and joined the cooking team with Thanh Tuyen (now Sr. Huong Nghiem). Having just ordained, how could I know how to cook for that many people? At that time we hosted sixty, seventy or even a hundred lay friends each week.

Before the Summer Retreat, Sr. Thanh Luong already trained us in cooking. Which pot should we use to cook for fifty to a hundred people? How many knives and cutting boards should we prepare for lay friends to help us cut vegetables during mindful service time? Thanh Tuyen and I were on the same team. We discussed and planned that we would cook the same dishes every week. We thought that each week new friends came and no one would know! Only the sisters complained. Sr. Chan Vi said, “Every time you two cook, you do the same old thing. Don’t you get bored?” I replied quietly in my head—*Only once a week, how could anyone get bored?* I don’t really remember what dishes they were but I still remember my favorite dish, which was black bean porridge topped with coconut milk and salted roasted-peanuts for the evening meal. I cooked that dish every week when it was my turn. There were weeks when many Vietnamese people came. Thanh Tuyen arranged for the aunties (the elder women) to stay in my room. I once shared the room with seven of them. I was quite happy. Sharing the room with them I could listen to stories about their families and children. I felt very fortunate that I took the monastic path; otherwise I would have suffered as much as they did at the time.

### The simple life

In a little forest near Lower Hamlet there is a creek with crystal-clear water. The trees in the forest were very beautiful; their branches leaned on one another just like us in the sangha. After the Summer Retreat we would normally have a ten-day lazy period. On



Lamp Transmission, 1999

these lazy days I often packed a little sac with a piece of bread, a banana, and a thermos filled with hot water. Walking into the woods, I would find a clearing to spread out a sitting mat. I practiced sitting meditation and then ate my lunch there. After that I took a long nap until the afternoon set in, then I cleaned up and went back to the hamlet. My novice nun experience in the old days was really pure—only practice, nothing else.

In the old days of Plum Village, we only interacted with lay friends who came to practice with us. When they came here they only focused on the practice and followed the schedule. That was why we had very limited contact with the outside world. News of the world about politics or incidents of violence, etc., have never once appeared in my mind, let alone my imagination. Each month we received a modest amount of pocket money that was enough to buy personal hygiene items, or a notebook to write down the teachings from Thay, or sometimes a box of LU biscuits, which would be saved for moments of sweet craving. The word “donation” was really foreign to me. After so many years staying in Plum Village, I only received a donation one time and the amount was equivalent to five or ten dollars. I always said to myself—*I didn’t become a monastic to look for donations.* Thay taught us in a monastic retreat: The purpose of a monastic is not for receiving food and clothing. It is also not to look for material comfort. The practice of Plum Village is to generate happiness.

In the old days when there was no internet, or iPhones, iPads, computers etc., communication through technology was limited and people did not have many fears or worries. Today however, the more modern and expansive the means of communication, the more people like to amass information. Most of the time however, this information brings us worry and suffering. Our lives become so busy without a moment of peace.

## Leaving the nest

I still recall the day we celebrated twenty years of Plum Village. When Plum Village turned twenty, we were a little older in the Dharma and had already received the lamp transmission to become Dharma teachers. At that time, we were like young birds trained to fly from their warm nest. Thay assigned us with the task of going out to build Plum Village practice centers in Europe, America and Asia.

Now Plum Village is forty years old and we are also becoming middle-aged. Though the phenomena of birth and death, of change, are in the historical dimension, it is still time to prepare a place to return to. I always remind myself of that. My younger sister, Sr. Chi Nghiem, was already ahead of me.

## The light and shade of impermanence

This morning, after many months of battling with cancer, Sr. Chi Nghiem waved her last goodbye to the sangha amidst the sound of us chanting the Buddha's name. Conditions have ceased in this lifetime and when they converge again, she will manifest in a new, even more beautiful form.

When Deer Park Monastery was founded in California, Sr. Chi Nghiem followed Thay's instruction to go there first and build it with other sisters. When Blue Cliff was founded in Upstate New York, she also volunteered to come here to support

building the new sangha. She had never let Thay and the ancestral teachers down. In her last moments, she was at peace. Last night in the Purification Ceremony, Venerable Minh Tuan brought a dark yellow paper fan on which was painted a Zen circle with Thay's calligraphy in it—*My child, smile as you cross to the other shore.*

Walking on the path to the Great Togetherness Meditation Hall, I saw the monks' residence alight with beautiful colors. Christmas has arrived. My sisters have also turned on decorative lights in our quarters to celebrate Christmas. It feels so alive and joyful as if there had never been a funeral just a few days ago. The light and shade of time!

It seems like only yesterday that I saw Thay sitting on the podium teaching. It seems like only yesterday that I saw myself helping Thay put down fertilizer for the chrysanthemums. It seems like only yesterday that I saw myself together with a delegation walking behind Thay, ascending the Vulture Peak with mindful steps. All of that seems like a beautiful dream now. I have to accept the change in order to touch the unchangeable, which is the love between Thay and his disciples, brotherhood, and sisterhood and, bodhicitta. These will stay dear in my heart forever, in this life and for many lives to come. ☸



Sr. Chi Nghiem - front row, 5<sup>th</sup> from the left, with the Blue Cliff sangha

# The laughter of children echoes

BROTHER CHÂN PHÁP NIÊM

## Brother Giac Thanh

Br. Giac Thanh was one of the elder brothers of Plum Village. He lived in the Floating Cloud Hut on the hill looking towards the sunrise, right by Thay's Sitting Still Hut in Upper Hamlet. That is why at times he was also called Brother Floating Cloud. In the early years when the Fleur du Cactus Meditation Centre in Paris, which later became La Maison de l'Inspiration, was first established, every month Br. Giac Thanh would go there for a weekend to teach and guide the lay friends. Then he would return to the Dharma Cloud Temple to help the younger brothers progress in their practice. That is why some also called him Brother Fleur du Cactus.

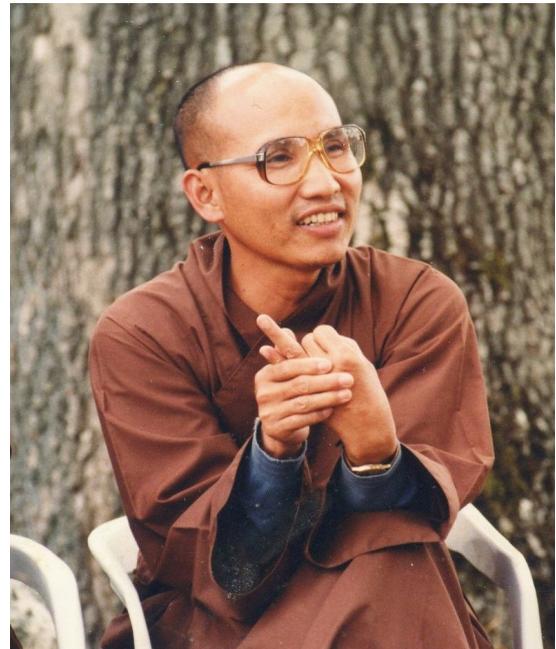
Aside from the nicknames Brother Floating Cloud and Brother Fleur du Cactus, there was another name given to him by Thay – Tra Su (Tea Master). Perhaps this is the name that everyone liked and associated with Br. Giac Thanh's Zen master style. He also really liked the name Floating Cloud. These two names captured his peace, freedom, and ease, and anyone who had a chance to approach him could enjoy these qualities because he always exuded a holy and pure energy. Friends from the West treasured him and loved being near him.

## The seeker

When I arrived in Plum Village on the 12<sup>th</sup> June, 1994 to be an aspirant, Br. Giac Thanh was already there. He first came to Plum Village in 1991. I would like to recount a few anecdotes and special moments from my time attending and learning from my elder brother.

The story of how he came to Plum Village, according to what I have heard, is very interesting. Br. Giac Thanh was someone who always sought to learn, especially about meditation. While still in Vietnam, he had already learned meditation with Zen Master Thich Thanh Tu of Bamboo Forest Monastery (Tu Vien Truc Lam). At that time, his fellow students included Br. Thich Minh Nghia (now the Abbot of Toan Giac Monastery and also Giac Nguyen Ancestral Temple), Br. Thich Phuoc Tinh, who is now at Deer Park Monastery, and many others. Those who wish to know more about Br. Giac

Thanh should come to the above-mentioned venerable monks, especially the Venerable Phuoc Tinh.



Br. Giac Thanh

While searching for a teacher, as far as I know, Br. Giac Thanh was keen to learn, sincere, spacious, and someone who is not caught in the form. For certain work skills, or Zen rituals, perhaps he was not so proficient. He focused all his energy on the practice and preferred a quiet, contemplative life. He always had a burning desire to learn and to realize the essence of Zen. Br. Giac Thanh wandered everywhere wanting to learn, even after coming to the West. Whenever he heard of a well-known meditation master, whether lay or monastic, male or female, he would come to learn meditation with them.

He meditated diligently for long periods of time, reflecting in silence, hoping to realize the essence of Zen. Br. Giac Thanh often went into deep concentration and became completely unaware of his body. It is also perhaps because of this that whenever he sat in deep concentration, even while listening to Thay's teaching, he often rolled his head back and forth without realizing it. Every time Thay saw this, Thay would call out: "Br. Giac Thanh, open your eyes! Don't keep your eyes closed in

concentration!” Hearing Thay, Br. Giac Thanh opened his eyes and his head stopped rolling.

### The end of wandering and seeking

Br. Giac Thanh was searching for a teacher. One day while visiting family in Canada, he met Thay at a retreat in Maple Village, Montreal, Canada. Autumn in North America with its brilliant colours is always magnificent beyond words. One can only be silent and enjoy it, fully enjoy it. During one walking meditation, Thay and the sangha stopped, sat down on the grass to bathe in the fall colours, and drank tea. Br. Giac Thanh sat next to Thay. Amidst that wondrous reality Thay pointed at the radiant autumn forest and said, “Br. Giac Thanh, that which you have been searching for so long is right there! There it is! This is it!” Those instructive words were the last drop of water leading to an overflow, creating an opening, a loosening in Br. Giac Thanh’s mind, which reached a wonderful state of freedom. The happiness of that taste of freedom was immense. Perhaps only he could feel it clearly and no one else can possibly describe it. From then on, he truly stopped searching. He took refuge in Thay as his teacher until he passed away. Since that autumn, whenever the younger ones thought of Br. Giac Thanh, we couldn’t help but sing “One Maple Leaf Falls” as an offering to him. He really liked that song.

*One maple leaf falls,  
my dear, do you hear it?  
One maple leaf falls,  
autumn returns with its beauty.  
A thousand leaves are falling,  
amber, crimson, gold.  
A thousand leaves are falling,  
soaring across the sky.*

During the years of learning from him and drinking tea by his side, I heard from Br. Giac Thanh that before coming to Plum Village, he had a dream. In it, he was lying down and saw an old woman by the foot of his bed. She looked at him with very gentle, kind, and bright eyes, and said, “Come home my child.” Later when he met Thay, he saw that the old woman in the dream looked very much like Thay, and he was certain that she was no other than Thay. It is precisely due to these predestined conditions that Br. Giac Thanh always held Thay in his heart with much respect and love, in a quiet and infinitely lovely way.



Buddha Garden of the Dharma Nectar Hall in Lower Hamlet

The story of awakening while viewing the autumn splendor may remind us of the story of Zen Master Lingyun Zhiqin (Master "Sacred Cloud"). One morning he woke to blooming peach blossoms and suddenly became enlightened. Many doubts in his mind were dispelled and he touched the nature of life, of nonself. The master had spent thirty years to find the master swordsman, that is, finding one’s original face, one’s true nature. Peach blossoms bloom, the Zen master sees.

三十年來尋劍客  
几回落叶又抽枝  
自从一见桃花后  
直至如今更不疑

*For thirty years I’ve sought the swordsman.  
Many times the leaves have fallen to sprout anew.  
Following one glance at a peach blossom,  
I no longer have any more doubts.<sup>6</sup>*

Thay offered a pair of parallel verses to Br. Giac Thanh when he passed away:

*One maple leaf has fallen down, and yet you continue to  
climb the hill of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with us.  
Thousands of daffodils are beginning to bloom and the  
earth continues to be with the sky, singing the song of  
no-birth and no-death.*

### Putting on the robe of freedom

There was quite a long period of time when Br. Giac Thanh went “sanghati free.” He came to precept recitations wearing just the long robe, or even just short robes covered with an Order of Interbeing jacket. The abbot at that time was extremely upset. Every time he saw Br. Giac Thanh, an elder brother, coming to the precepts recitation “sanghati free,” he

6. Translated by Andy Ferguson, *Zen’s Chinese Heritage: The Masters and Their Teachings* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), pp. 183–184.

showed his displeasure. Of course the unhappiness of the abbot, the second oldest brother in the sangha, was understandable. It was his responsibility to guide the sangha towards order, and not an unrestrained “free style.” Knowing this though, as much as the abbot was displeased and had already respectfully asked Br. Giac Thanh to wear his sanghati for the precepts recitation, to be an example for the younger ones, he remained “sanghati free.”

I was a young monk at the time. I barely understood what was happening and I certainly was not qualified to say anything. Thay must have heard the complaints and knew about it, but somehow acted as if nothing had happened. The other brothers also knew, but no one complained and no one followed suit. The fact was that Thay was Br. Giac Thanh’s teacher, and if Thay said nothing, how could we? Only Thay and Br. Giac Thanh understood each other at that level. Maybe that is why Thay said nothing. In the end, Br. Giac Thanh was still Br. Giac Thanh, “sanghati free.”

Spring in the West is incredibly beautiful. Come winter, the forest sheds all its leaves, leaving only bare branches and appearing as if dead. But after three months of sleep, the buds and shoots burst through rapidly and emerge as green leaves in just a short while. The forest was a tender green and full of life. There were times in spring when Br. Giac Thanh would sit on the deck of the Floating Cloud Hut and mutter, “My sanghati is the vast sky and earth, the green of nature; every day, I wear it at all times.”

Br. Giac Thanh had transcended false appearances into a signless reality that only he could deeply feel. Thay understood him. Though in form he did not wear the sanghati, in essence, in the heart of one who has reached the signless reality, he always wore the sanghati. He wore the robe of liberation that cannot be seen or known by others except for Thay. The stillness and freedom of zen masters are expressed in myriad ways. The special thing that everyone knows is—we cannot truly become a zen master by mere mimicry. If we try to mimic them, invariably we will be dealt a “Zen stick.”

### **Solid and free**

Upper Hamlet in those early days when I first arrived was still very rustic. The material conditions and infrastructure were still quite poor. There were only about 15 monks at the time. We lived happily and contentedly together. On freezing winter days,

the uninsulated bedrooms just had a small wood-fired stove (for heating) and a bed made of one sheet of plywood placed on four bricks. We lit the stove before going to bed, but by the middle of the night the wood had run out, the stove was cold, and huddled in our flimsy sleeping bags, we were also cold. Getting up in the morning was always a huge challenge. We had to be very *heroic*. If we wanted to get up, we had to do so right away! We danced around and moved our bodies for a while before bravely heading out to wash our face, brush our teeth, and then go for the morning practice session.

The old meditation hall was originally a cow shed. It did not have a fireplace and the walls were built of limestone. Even though it was icy cold, the brothers diligently continued the morning and evening meditations. Upper Hamlet had a small kitchen with an attic above it which was the monks’ dining room. The dining tables were arranged in a square so that while eating, the brothers could see each other and practise being present for each other.

One morning, after two sounds of the bell to end the silent meal, one younger brother (who was a very impatient person) stood up on the side opposite Br. Giac Thanh. Before anyone else could stand up, he shocked everyone by heavily insulting Br. Giac Thanh. As a younger brother, I couldn’t believe another young one could insult our eldest brother like that. For some reason he was so angry and was yelling, “Zen master? What kind of a zen master are you? You are shit, pee pee... !” When I looked over to Br. Giac Thanh I was even more surprised. He sat and ate calmly, peaceful, free, entirely unmoved by the insults. He looked at his younger brother with compassion and understanding. The other elder brothers intervened and dragged the young brother out of the dining room. I thought something big was going to happen.

But everything flowed smoothly as if nothing had happened. Perhaps Br. Giac Thanh did not allow the abbot to force the young one to apologize. Perhaps he left the matter for the other brothers to handle. Br. Giac Thanh was by nature tolerant, spacious, and always wished for things to be simpler. A few days later, the young monk went by his own will to Br. Giac Thanh’s hut, and put on his sanghati to touch the earth in repentance for his ignorance. Br. Giac Thanh did not allow him to prostrate. Instead, he asked him to take off his sanghati and sit down to drink tea with him. Br. Giac Thanh shared, listened, and guided the young monk in a gentle way. Right

after that, it was as if nothing had ever happened. That incident gave me firmer trust that liberation and awakening are real; it is something we can witness with our own eyes and not just something to be read about in books. I am happy to have had a chance to be near such an elder brother.

### Nothing is born, nothing dies

Once while being Br. Giac Thanh's attendant, I accidentally broke one of his tea cups which belonged to an antique set that he really treasured. Br. Giac Thanh was a tea master. Tea masters always had good tea and precious tea pots. But he only had that one set. One day, Br. Giac Thanh was washing his tea set on the deck of his hut and asked me to find a dishwashing sponge. When I brought it to him my toe accidentally touched one of the four cups, it rolled away, then suddenly broke into two. I was so scared! My face went ashen and my body shook uncontrollably.

Seeing this, Br. Giac Thanh quickly picked up the two broken pieces and hid them behind his back. "Huh! Nothing is broken. Isn't that right my child? This cup has never been broken. It pretends to be broken. But how can it be? Everything comes together due to conditions and then hides due to conditions. Its nature is non-broken." I was scared and felt so sorry because I knew he really loved those cups. But after hearing his words my heart was lightened. He compassionately took away my fear and even taught me the no-birth, no-death nature of the tea cup. That was a lesson I would never forget. Br. Giac Thanh really treasured the tea set, but he was also ready at any moment to let it go.

### The sweet inner child

For a long time Br. Giac Thanh did not go for walking meditation with the sangha. Severe diabetes had hit him. Apart from being Thay's attendant, I also took care of Br. Giac Thanh's food and laundry for two years. An ordinary person could not possibly eat his food because it did not have any seasoning, not even salt. I had to be very creative to make inspiring dishes. Br. Giac Thanh ate very well, but no matter how well one eats or how hard one tries, one still gets bored. One time he was incredibly bored by the food and somehow, found a packet of instant noodles and secretly made it. I caught him and tried to stop him from eating it. Br. Giac Thanh said, "Phap Niem, let your elder brother eat just one packet to ease the boredom." I could not stop him. Actually I was only pretending to stop him because I knew he had been so very bored of his food.



Centre: Br. Giac Thanh, 1993

Once Br. Giac Thanh had swollen ankles and could not walk easily unless he really tried. Because he did not go for walking meditation for many months, Thay personally visited him and asked him to come walk with the sangha. Br. Giac Thanh said his legs hurt and he could not walk. He thought this way, Thay would leave him alone. But who would have expected Thay to pressure him to go for walking meditation? Thay scolded him lightly and told him he had to walk outdoors for his legs to heal. Not daring to disobey Thay, Br. Giac Thanh managed to follow Thay's instructions. But he harboured the thought: *Yes, ok, let's go. I will walk and let my legs swell up, then you will see. Already there is no pity, now even forcing me to go to walking meditation!* But after walking with the sangha for about one week a miracle occurred—his swelling went down, his legs healed and he could walk easily again. Br. Giac Thanh was very surprised and he exclaimed, "Huh! The old man is scary!" We all have a little child in us no matter how old we are, and that inner child is innocent and uniquely beautiful.

### The song of immortality

In 2001 during Thay's teaching tour in China, we received the news that Br. Giac Thanh had passed away. Thay and the brothers and sisters held a memorial service on the bus because the tour schedule was so busy. In his last years, Br. Giac Thanh was appointed by Thay to be the abbot of Deer Park Monastery. He was a superb abbot, working during the day and lying down to rest in the evening. He wore a dialysis bag for twelve hours. Everyone loved him so much.

Deer Park Monastery is in Southern California. For some unknown reason, when Br. Giac Thanh went there to be the abbot, he started to wear his sanghati again. "At every point, be sovereign of

yourself. Wherever you stand, be your true person.” (Master Linji-隨處作主, 立處皆真). Depending on the place, the situation, and the people, Br. Giac Thanh knew how to respond appropriately. Everything is manifestation. For him, holding on or letting go, he was free. A free person is not caught in any form or sign, not even in “signlessness.” In the Diamond Sutra it says-*Subhuti, if you think that the Tathagata realizes the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind and does not need to use all the signs, you are wrong. Subhuti, do not think in that way.*

At Deer Park Monastery on the side of the mountain, a memorial stupa was erected for Br. Giac Thanh and in the heart of it is engraved a posthumous poem written for him by Thay.

*That you are a virtuous one is already heard by everyone,  
the work of a true practitioner has been accomplished.  
When your stupa has just been raised on the hillside,  
the sound of children’s laughter will already be heard.*

Br. Giac Thanh was truly a hero, a great man. He had accomplished the most worthy deed of a

practitioner—the career of awakening. He built his stupa not with stones but with liberation, awakening, solidity, and freedom, and we continue to benefit from them. That stupa is also his sangha. In the years since Br. Giac Thanh passed away, many young people, both Vietnamese and American, have come to practise and ordain at Deer Park Monastery. They are all his continuation. The laughter of innocence, joy, and freedom still echoes in those endless skies.

There are many who can recount more wonderful moments with Br. Giac Thanh, more so than I. Whenever I sit down to make a pot of tea, I remember him through the vivid Dharma sounds that resonate in my mind and the warm cups of tea he taught me to drink with awareness. “Ha! See?” Br. Giac Thanh is still there in each of us, teasing us and drinking tea with us. “Ha! Ha! Ha!”

*With my deepest respect  
to my beloved elder Brother Giac Thanh,  
Chan Phap Niem ☸*



# Celebrating life

SISTER CHÂN DIỆU NGHIÊM (JINA) & SISTER CHÂN TỪ NGHIÊM (ELENI)

*Sister Dieu Nghiem (also known as Sr. Jina) arrived in Plum Village in 1990. She ordained as a monastic in Japan in the Soto Zen tradition. Sr. Jina was the abbess of Lower Hamlet from 1998 to 2014. Sister Tu Nghiem (also known as Sr. Eleni) first came from America as a lay friend in 1990 and ordained in 1991.*

*We asked our beloved elders to share some of their memories of the early days of Plum Village with us, and about the beginnings of the Plum Village basic practices, and their lives in the fledgling community.*

mothers and fathers, the children, were happy and harmonious together.

My parents were both children of immigrants, so they had the experience of speaking their parents' native language and learning English later on, so maybe they transmitted to me a sense of feeling comfortable with other cultures. I was used to this double culture. The adjustments were not so difficult, and the Vietnamese culture I found was gentle and very respectful. I remember how Thay greeted the father of Br. Phap Ung. Thay stood up from the table, and when (Br. Phap Ung's) father came into the room, Thay went up to him, (as he was older than Thay in age), and greeted him in the appropriate way. I was just so touched by Thay continuing to keep the value of addressing the parents of his disciples in a respectful way.

## Life in community

**Sr. Tu Nghiem:** It was such an eye-opening experience for me (to live in a Vietnamese community in rural France), coming from Manhattan—a city with big concrete apartment buildings. It was a totally different experience, and I appreciated so much the way the Vietnamese





Thay always loved to hear Vietnamese songs, so after a Dharma talk or before walking meditation he'd invite one of the brothers or sisters to come up and sing. Another time for singing together was after our meals. There were just two long tables where the whole sangha sat. Thay was at the head, Sr. Chan Khong next to him, and then the attendants. We ate our meal mindfully in silence, and then after the meal, it was time for singing and the plates were left on the table. It was really relaxed. Thay really encouraged music and singing as part of our monastic life.

As I look at the name Plum Village, I see it was truly a village. When I had the opportunity to go to Vietnam, I recognized that this is what a village is. Thay brought this way of living, the feeling of family, this spirit, to Plum Village. We called each other Su Chi (older sister) and Su Em (younger sister/brother) and Su Ong (father).

**Sr. Jina:** When I just arrived in Plum Village, everything seemed to be more or less organised. When there was working meditation there was a gathering and they said, "Oh the toilets need to be cleaned, who wants to clean the toilets? Yes, I'll clean the toilets! The meditation hall needs to be set up... Yes!" Everybody just volunteered to do the work. I didn't mind that it was not organised in every

detail, I thought it was very nice to have this organic kind of feeling.

One of the things in Plum Village that I really appreciate is that whenever there is something to celebrate, we celebrate it. Even if we've never heard of that celebration before, but you have, you tell us what it is about and how we do it and we'll do it. So I hope that we keep this Plum Village tradition. Thay was really encouraging of that. Celebrate life! That's why we have the Daffodil Festival, Plum Blossom Festival, Full Moon Festival, all those things.

### The teacher-student relationship

**Sr. Tu Nghiem:** In the early days we were all beginners in the practice, brand new, one year to two years old. There was no mentoring. Thay had his room in Lower Hamlet and he would call people into his room. His attendant would say, "Thay wants to see you," and you'd go into his room. So that's how he would train us.

In those days he was training the abess and abbot. They were called into Thay's room, and the rest of us were left with freedom. Some were being trained to be his attendant, so they went into his room and learned to prepare tea. I have so much respect for Thay starting a monastic sangha with beginners. We were practically lay people, and Thay was teaching us how to be attendants, how to be abbots and abbesses. When Thay would learn about the difficulties in the sangha, he would give the next Dharma talk based on those difficulties.

I was accepted, and for me that was enough. In the year 2001, I was able to be Thay's attendant for one day at Deer Park Monastery (in the United States). The experience was so funny! "You can be Thay's attendant this evening," they told me. I had no training so they told me what to do carry Thay's bag, where to place his shoes in the meditation hall, etc. While attending Thay I left my shoes there in the mudroom during the Dharma talk, but when it ended, Thay left by the opposite door. Thay left in his slippers, and I had to follow Thay in my bare feet! And then I think the brothers and sisters came to rescue me.

**Sr. Jina:** I was very impressed by the calmness that Thay radiated. He was not in any way affected by whatever was happening around him. In the 21-Day Retreat it was all very organised and the Summer Retreat was very organic and Thay moved so naturally through both. I thought, this is very beautiful to see, in the midst of a very lively group of

people, there was Thay, so naturally moving around, happy. So my first impression was of his stability and clarity.

## Dharma talks

**Sr. Tu Nghiem:** What is now the Lower Hamlet dining room was very small back then. Thay would come in and give the Dharma talk. In the back of this room there was a ceramic divider, not completely to the ceiling but halfway, like a little wall, and then ceramic tiles. Behind this were stove burners to cook! So towards the end of Thay's Dharma talk we would *sniff, sniff*, smell that the sisters had started to cook. What was so beautiful about Thay in those days and our simple lives was that it was natural.

We already had the chiming clock in the dining hall. It would chime every fifteen minutes. Thay would stop, we'd all breathe, and it was very peaceful. Then Thay would continue with the Dharma talk. In those days it was Br. Nguyen Hai who was the cameraman. It's amazing how they've preserved these early teachings. In those days Thay used a cassette recorder, and they'd have to stop and put in a new cassette and continue.

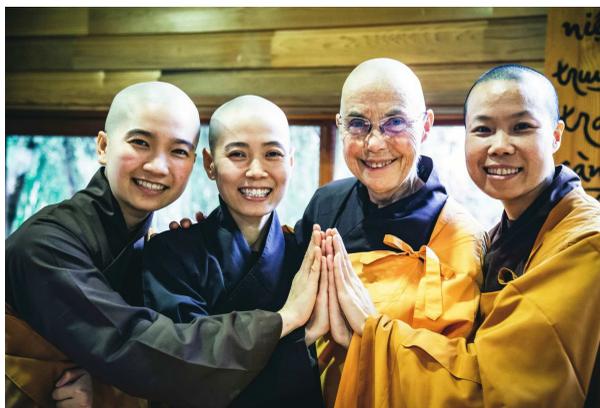
**Sr. Jina:** Thay's teachings were very clear. With certain teachings that one can say in a particular way, Thay just said, "This is it." We listened to Thay, we tried to understand and even if we didn't understand, it was just being in Thay's presence. That was enough and I had already been so nourished by the 21 Day Retreat (after my arrival) I thought, I have at least three years material (to practice with).

(When the talks were in Vietnamese), Sr. Chan Khong used to translate and I enjoyed listening to Sr. Chan Khong very much because you also get side information, then you have a better context! It was very alive, I really enjoyed that.

In the 21 Day Retreat and the Summer Retreat, Thay was addressing a lot of issues that were happening in the sangha, like in the lay sangha, family issues, and also from the questions of the retreatants. During my first Winter Retreat, I thought, oh now we really hear the scholar speaking, and that's also what I was looking for. In the winter it was really study time.

## Care packages for Vietnam

**Sr. Tu Nghiem:** We wrapped care packages to send to Vietnam during the early days of the Hungry Children's Program, in the early 1990s. We would go



From left: Srs. Lien Chieu, Khuong Y, Dieu Nghiem, Trien N.

to the pharmacy and buy over-the-counter medicines like paracetamol or Tylenol, general medicines that did not need a prescription. We put them into little boxes with a letter. The letter would be written in a way like someone from Plum Village was writing to a friend in Vietnam. Our identity was never revealed because in those days you could not provide information to the government that it was coming from Thich Nhat Hanh or Plum Village. So these little care packages contained a beautiful letter, saying, "I hope your family is well," encouraging them to be creative and to receive the gift that we, as their friend, were offering. Now I learned that they would sell the medicines on the black market to buy rice. The care packages were sent very often, maybe every week. It was such an important part of the early history of Plum Village engaged Buddhism – to help Vietnam after the war, because there was a lot of poverty.

## Christmas

**Sr. Tu Nghiem:** At Christmas we would go to the Hermitage and gather in Thay's library. There was a little Christmas tree on Thay's table, and underneath there were a couple of packages. When Thay received Christmas presents, he would open them very mindfully, and if it was a box of cookies or dried fruit, Thay would always share it with us. This was his practice, that he shared with the sangha. That really moved me, how he wanted to have all his children enjoy his gift.

Sometimes we were allowed to bring food to Thay on a tray. And once I remember Thay was cooking scrambled tofu for us. You know, it was so wonderful to see Thay cooking. He had on his winter sweater, a thick woollen sweater from Denmark, and he would be there at the stove cooking for all of us. It was so wonderful, so very caring for his disciples. I sat there in silence because I never knew what to say. At

the table, Thay would share his food, and the plates were so small, just two, three pieces of tofu. He would take one and then share it with everyone. I thought, how can he survive, taking such little food?



Sr. Tu Nghiem - center right

### Evolution of the basic Plum Village practices—Tea meditation

**Sr. Tu Nghiem:** In 1990-91, we lived in Lower Hamlet. Every Sunday afternoon, there would be a tea meditation (for everyone, lay and monastic) in the Red Candle Meditation Hall. Thay and Sr. Chan Khong would come sometimes, and during the years when Br. Giac Thanh was in Upper Hamlet, he would come and be the tea master. It was a very zen experience. Br. Giac Thanh would bring poems from the Vietnamese poets. It was a time for sharing poetry, a very creative time, very relaxed.

Br. Giac Thanh was, I believe, the master of relaxation. He spoke very slowly and gently. He read poetry with a lot of feeling and meaning, and then he would translate it into English if it was a Vietnamese poem. There was an opportunity to share songs. In those days we sang Vietnamese songs from the collection of Vietnamese songs in the book. There was also sharing about how we were doing.

### Continuing our teacher and reinventing the practice

**Sr. Tu Nghiem:** Something I valued so much in Thay and I want to continue is the path of the Bodhisattva Sadaparibhuta, which is always finding the best in people and letting them know they have these good qualities. Thay always believed in this. He once mentioned a sutra from the Buddha that says if someone has only one eye, you protect that one eye. That means the practitioner is weak but still has an aspiration. Protect that aspiration – don't be so harsh. Thay always had so much compassion. His understanding was immense.

People came with so-called mental illnesses and Thay would say let them stay and practice. No pressure was put on them. We just asked them to come to sitting if they could, or walking meditation, and eat with us. And they would stay around a week. I remember Thay said the collective energy of mindfulness, compassion, and kindness, and the culture of gentleness would help that person. That was Thay's way in the early days of letting the sangha be a village where everyone could come and be here. I remember Thay's qualities of deep looking, great compassion and understanding, and always looking for the best in people, giving them a chance.

Now we have also become a training center for monastics. We've become the Institute of Higher Buddhist Studies and we are in a digital world. But I think it's good to maintain the values of early Vietnam, the culture, the food, the poetry, the Lunar New Year celebrations. There are brothers and sisters also interested in neuroscience, deep ecology, and that's Thay's Engaged Buddhism. I think all of it can be part of Plum Village.

**Sr. Jina:** Thay was always reinventing, renewing. Are we also renewing? Is there any practice that we think could be renewed? There may be some kind of practices that have lost their shine a little bit.

Thay was always practicing walking meditation, from the very beginning, even before there was a sangha. (I remember one day) I was attending Thay, in the sense that if Thay needed anything I would do it, Thay didn't have an attendant as such. I would walk behind Thay from the meditation hall in the Upper Hamlet to Thay's hut to see if Thay needed anything, and Thay said something to me as we were walking and I just kept quiet. It was not a question but I didn't give a counter remark or start a conversation or continue the conversation because I was walking and I thought well, we're walking, why should I say something? And Thay stopped and said, "Do you want to stop while we're talking?", "Yes, Thay." So we walked and then we talked in the hut, and from then on when you walked, you walked, when you wanted to talk, you stopped. That was a new practice that came in.

### Keeping the essence of Plum Village

**Sr. Tu Nghiem:** I think there are several levels and aspects to this. Thay wanted to create a monastic sangha, and an international fourfold sangha. So I think this is so important for the future of Plum Village, to keep the balance, that it remain

international and fourfold – that means the nuns and laywomen and the monks and laymen are all part of the Plum Village community.

The essence of Plum Village is to continue to share the practices of mindfulness in as simple a form as possible, to meet the needs of people around the world, of different cultures, of different religions, and to present it in a way that's understandable and acceptable by people anywhere. We keep the simplicity of the teachings, the basic teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the

Eightfold Path, and keep them accessible to beginners in the practice.

Also, we keep our tradition, we don't dilute it. We keep the Vietnamese heritage, the lineage, the culture, to learn from. We want to learn from the beauty of Vietnamese culture, its gentleness, friendliness, and acceptance of newcomers. That's what impressed me in the early days, the beauty of the flower arrangements, the tea meditations. And the Western bands, the monastics with their drums, their electric guitars, we can have all that. I think it's important because it reflects the world now. ☸



# Working on “The Tet Times”

BROTHER CHÂN PHÁP HỘI

*Brother Phap Hoi has been connected with the Plum Village newsletter for many years. This year’s newsletter editorial team had the chance to sit down with him to listen to him recount some memorable moments. The following is an excerpt from the interview.*

## Memorable moments

The Plum Village newsletter’s editorial team works to create a plate of spiritual food to offer to the world. Many people respect Thay, wish to learn Thay’s teachings, and at the same time are interested in knowing about the sangha’s activities during the past year. Thay always placed great importance on this spiritual food. In fact, Thay was the chief editor, and a very careful and serious one, of the annual newsletter for many years. Along the way, Thay has shown us many things about how to create this kind of spiritual food.

I was fortunate enough to be involved with the newsletter from early on. After ordaining in 1997, I followed in the footsteps of Brothers Phap An, Phap Kham, and other elder sisters and brothers in assisting Thay with the 1998 newsletter. I felt that Thay expended a great deal of energy and spirit on each article, editing word-by-word and phrase-by-phrase. This helped us to understand the newsletter’s essence and how to express the Plum Village style.

Thay was very happy that the newsletter only published positive, high quality news and was not interspersed with advertising. The content came not only from Thay but also from the insights of the practice of his monastic and lay disciples. Therefore, the newsletter expressed, from many different angles, insights on happiness in the practice, how the sangha was contributing to the world, and also contained archival material: accounts of Thay’s teaching tours, or the first steps on a new land to continue the spiritual ancestors there, or new ways of applying the practice... were all recorded. These later became key elements in documenting the formation, development and history of Plum Village.

The publication of the newsletter has become a tradition that many people look forward to and is lovingly called by its familiar name “The Tet Times.”<sup>7</sup> Thay hoped for it to be a gift for the Lunar New Year, so we usually published it before Tet, in time to print and post to everyone. The editorial team therefore was also under some time pressure.



From left: Brs. Phap Son, P. Hai, P. Khai, P. Hoi, P. Kien

Thay was very active and open to new and more effective ways of working. Even though the newsletter is only published once a year, it is of very high quality. Its content carries the flavor of Zen as well as realistically describing the process and results of Plum Village’s socially engaged actions. Thay placed a great deal of energy into calling for support for charitable work. It also shows that practitioners are not only focused on our practice but also help and contribute to the world.

I had written a short article before I ordained about my happiness living in the sangha. The article was very naive, just listing my joys of being immersed in Plum Village life. I described how we practiced, what my room was like, how I lived, how happy I was with it, and an anecdote about a cat that could not bear the winter cold and sought warmth in my room every night. Br. Phap An also had the creative idea to publish a Shining Light letter, which had been given to me by the sangha, but with the name disguised. Back then, the vivid realities of sangha life were often reflected in the newsletter in that way.

7. *Tet* is the Vietnamese word for the Lunar New Year celebrated by many Asian and international communities around the world.

Through the process of creating the newsletter, the editorial team had the chance to learn from Thay and to be with Thay. Thay was a very professional editor and an excellent one. There were times we were under pressure and our energy was no longer fresh. We did not recognize this, but Thay did. Even though it was close to the deadline, Thay still said, "Now, let's take a break. Don't do anymore. Let Thay fry rice for everyone." Work was never as important as the practice of Thay's disciples. Working with Thay was not just about learning editorial skills, it was also learning how to take care of ourselves and how to be happy while working. That was the important thing. We can also apply this spirit to working with Thay's books. Those who had the opportunity to work with Thay on his books and the newsletter learned much about how to express our spiritual life through them.

When I came to Plum Village, I brought with me a new Vietnamese font software. The font was very beautiful and easier to use with computers. At that time in Plum Village we were using a very old Apple Macintosh. The Vietnamese font in it was usable but had many limitations. Thay was designing the *Daily Chanting Book* using the old font. The lay friend in charge of the computer suggested installing the new font. Sr. Thoai Nghiem volunteered to re-type all the sutras using the new font and she had to do so quickly, therefore even though there were still many

errors, she had to overlook them in order for the text to be converted into the new style. Back then computers did not have font conversion systems like they do now and we still needed many humans to correct the grammar and spelling. I am from the North of Vietnam where the Vietnamese was very standardized, so I am quite comfortable with this kind of work, which Thay called "worm catching."

Thay taught us what words to use so that the language was in keeping with Plum Village principles. Not every word could be used. Thay himself paid great attention to that. Even though Thay had a deep mastery of language, literature, and Vietnamese culture, he was always willing to accept and learn from his disciples new ways of using language. I saw that as a disciple, I benefited greatly from Thay and Thay was also always at the forefront of learning along with his disciples.

Thay was not afraid of using the dictionary. With words that carried different meanings, Thay went in search of their roots and their specific definitions to ensure that they were used correctly. At times, Thay was very insistent on using the meaning he wanted even though people could not understand it yet. For example the word *awakening* in Vietnamese is *tỉnh thức*. When Thay returned to Vietnam after many years he discovered that due to typing or copying errors, many people understood it as *tính thức*



Thay giving a Dharma talk, 1987

(consciousness) and interpreted it accordingly, leading to misunderstandings.

Sometimes I thought I understood what Thay's intention was, but it turned out to be otherwise. One year, Tet was approaching and the sangha was joyfully making preparations. A small group and myself joined Thay to work on the newsletter. Thay edited the articles with all his heart whereas I, being young, wanting to play and waning in interest, worked quickly and half-heartedly. Normally Thay only signed "nh" on the draft manuscripts. That day after returning from an outing, I received a manuscript with his full signature, "Thich Nhat Hanh." I was very surprised and scared because I understood then that Thay took even the drafts very seriously. I am the only person to have ever received Thay's full signature on a draft manuscript. I tried to understand the meaning behind it—I was not working wholeheartedly and I was reminded of it. Thay could go over one article eight to ten times, refusing to ignore any errors if they were still there. At the time I was still busy with playing and did not work wholeheartedly. Later on, the incident became a memory between teacher and disciple. Perhaps this will go down in Plum Village history as a "one and only" occurrence.

I always collected the manuscripts with Thay's signature and stored them in the Plum Village archive. Later on, I had to leave France for visa reasons and was away for twelve years. The sangha went through so many changes during that time, including to the storage areas, and I was not able to find the manuscripts again.

In the past I also collected the draft calligraphies of the parallel verses that Thay wrote (on oblong wooden plaques) for the meditation halls of each hamlet. Thay worked on the parallel verses wholeheartedly, carefully balancing the words and verses. They were outstanding and admired by everyone. In terms of form, Thay also had to practice to write beautifully. Thay would first try it out on a piece of paper to see if there was the right amount of space between the words and in the

surrounding margins. Then Thay wrote each word on a piece of paper, positioned the paper on the wooden plaque, and took a photo of each word. I was able to collect these drafts. They were sometimes more valuable than the final versions because they were unique, whereas the final versions could be reprinted in their hundreds and thousands. I was very interested in the drafts because I could feel Thay's heart, energy, and reverence in every detail. Although some words required more space than others, Thay could always balance them out wonderfully. Therefore, while working with Thay on books and the newsletter, I learned and grew a great deal. At the same time, I knew that I was not yet able to fulfill Thay's wishes for me.



Later on I stopped working on books so that the opportunity could be given to others, and I worked in other areas of the sangha. Once a sister, after compiling one of Thay's books, brought it to him to edit. Afterwards she asked Br. Phap Niem and me, why had she not received any praise from Thay this time? The two of us laughed and told her it was fine; it was a chance for Thay to train us to be happy while working with the books and to see it as a part of our practice. Thay often praised us when we first began our work. But afterwards we had to know how to work happily with whatever Thay had entrusted to us, and not to wait for praise before we could be happy. According to the practice transmitted to us by Thay, we must have happiness during our work and not wait until its completion. *That is the essence of the practice; it is not merely about the work.* ☪

# The Emerald Stream Flows On

SISTER CHÂN THOẠI NGHIÊM

*Forty years of Plum Village, forty-five issues of the Plum Village Newsletter (“Newsletter”). From a few folded pages of Thay’s writings sent to the family and friends of Plum Village as a Tet (Lunar New Year) greeting to a thick journal, colorful both in content and form, it has been one long journey. The intimate words about life in the “village” within those first letters have transformed into articles and sharings with contributions from five continents. Though still bearing the name “Lá Thư Làng Mai” (literally meaning “The Plum Village Letters”), the latter is no longer in letter form. The current editorial team wanted me to write a few lines about the early days when I had the chance to work with Thay. I agreed right away. The months and years that have passed appeared clearly in my mind, but I did not know how to begin.*



The printing press - Thay’s “buffalo”

## In-house newsletter

The *Newsletter* began in 1983. I was ordained ten years after that when I started to help Thay and Sister Chan Khong with creating the *Newsletter*. While working, I only knew the part that I was working on directly with Thay. I did not know what the others were doing because Thay divided the work into many parts and each of us helped him in one area. At the time, Thay took charge of most of the work. Thay was the chief editor; Sr. Chan Khong assisted; I typed, laid out the pages, and checked for spelling errors.

From the first year when Plum Village still had the name “Persimmon Village,” the *Newsletter* was literally a letter from the “villagers” to other villagers—telling stories of village happenings during the past year, and always with a postscript: “*This is a private letter. Please do not publish it in the press.*”

The first newsletter was only two pages long and written by Sr. Chan Khong, who at the time was still a lay member of the Order of Interbeing. It was written by her because she was the one who had bought the land and opened Plum Village. The following letter was a report from a lay elder brother in the Order—Chon Le, whose lay name is Le Nguyen Thieu. He was living as a long-term resident at the Village. The third newsletter in 1984 still had the postscript: “*This third Persimmon Village Newsletter is an in-house publication. Please do not release it to the press. With deep gratitude.*” Because it contained internal news, both the format and the content were very intimate. The readers were family and friends of the Village.

The *Newsletter* is a plate of spiritual food, offered every year coupled with the parallel verses on red paper. It was a new year’s greeting and a message about the practice. The year I started to help Thay, the *Newsletter* was already far richer in content. The main article was usually a Dharma talk or a piece written by Thay. Then there was a report from Sr. Chan Khong documenting all the happenings in Plum Village for the past year as well as Thay’s teaching tours. She also wrote about the flood relief activities and the programs to help the hungry children in Vietnam (later becoming the “Love and Understanding Program”).

The following section introduced Thay’s books which had been newly published by La Boi Press, or the cassette tapes of Thay’s talks that were released at Ms. Tinh Thuy’s bookshop, in Vietnam, during the year. The rest of the newsletter contained contributions from friends of the Village. Thay sometimes chose a letter sent to him by lay friends that he felt would be beneficial for the readers. For example, a letter from a prisoner in the U.S. who, thanks to reading Thay’s book, learned how to apply

the practice while being in prison, or letters from Thay's disciples about their practice.

I remember as we entered late autumn and early winter, Thay started to call on all of his students to write a contribution. One year, there were probably too few articles, so Thay gave us topics and then handed out pens and paper for us to write with, on the spot, while he walked around like an exam supervisor. At that time there were only a dozen or so monastics, filling up the "examination room." We had to write about our practice—no one dared to refuse. But if we wrote something, we knew it might "unfortunately" be published. I remember sitting there the whole time without putting much down on paper.

### "Newsletter wrapping"

At the Hermitage, there is a room with a printing press which was used for printing the early books of La Boi Press. Anyone who was newly ordained went to the Hermitage to be introduced to the room by Thay. I have an image of Thay placing four benches into a rectangle and arranging each newly printed page of the newsletter, stacked by order, on the benches. Then Thay went on walking meditation around the benches and collected one sheet of paper from each stack, straightened the collection, then stapled it. After watching Thay's "demonstration," we practiced to do the same.



from right to left: Thay with Venerable Minh Cảnh and Venerable Minh Nghĩa

Every year, printing the newsletter coincided with the day the sangha wrapped earth-cakes. So one side wrapped earth-cakes while the other side "wrapped" newsletters. It was very exciting and lively. One person collected the pages; another person took the pile, one person stapled it, then it went to another person who folded the pile in half and slid in the red-papered parallel verses. (In later

years they were not only red but many other colors). It was stapled again and then the postal address was glued on. As our family and friends were all over the world, there was one person just to sort the mail by continent, because different stamps were needed. After sticking on the stamps, the newsletters were put in a box for Sr. Chan Khong to post the next day in time for Tet.

Later on, the *Newsletter* became thicker and could not be folded in half anymore, so we put them in large envelopes. It wasn't until 2002 that the *Newsletter* started to have a cover. The reason was that the cover had to be printed in color—This was too expensive, and the treasurer hesitated. But in 2002 we were commemorating "The Day I turned Twenty"! I don't know how Thay managed to persuade the treasurer, but in the end, the 2002 *Plum Village Newsletter* manifested with the front and back covers printed in color on both sides. The colored covers continued from then on. Of course, with the new covers, the fun of folding the newsletters disappeared because the printing agent did all of that work. We had to design the double pages and the printing agent printed them on large paper to fit our design. In those years, we did not yet have the advanced design software we have now, so we still did many things by hand.

### An historical document

When Thay asked me to take on the work of selecting articles for publication, he told me that the *Newsletter* is a document which archives the process and development of the Plum Village community. Therefore, no matter how busy she was, Sr. Chan Khong always wrote about the year's activities, Thay's teaching tours, and the relief programs in Vietnam. Every year, Thay chose one or two of his representative Dharma talks to help the "villagers" practice. The achievements or newly published books from the year were also recorded. My "Mountain Lion" articles were a personal log of how a young monastic grows in the practice in Plum Village. Plum Village is not just in France now, but also in all the places where there are centers practicing in the Plum Village tradition.

Once a younger sibling said to me with a frown: "Reading the *Newsletter* is like reading reference material, it's so dry!" Another one complained: "Only one voice, one content, I already know the ending without reading it." I smiled. This is not an art magazine for many "hundreds of flowers to bloom." This is not a "playground" for scribblers. The articles selected need to be based upon the

practice and on real transformation that can benefit the readers.



One younger sibling wrote very well, but Thay did not allow us to publish their article because they did not practice what they wrote. Thay did not want to ruin their path of practice. Some articles were written with a pseudonym, and Thay asked me to convince the writers to use their Dharma name before the article could be published. I believe that Thay wanted to teach us to be responsible for what we write. ***As practitioners, everything must be clear and transparent, especially when we are recording our own history.*** Some articles about the teacher-student relationship were very moving, but too personal. They were not published because it could easily create the misunderstanding that Thay, even though a Zen master, was unfair and biased. The truth is, Thay had a particular way of teaching each of his disciples and each one was loved and cherished by him.

### Sowing faith

I remember the first time I read the *Newsletter* and came to the reports of Thay's U.S. tours, I was stunned by the spectacular number of people attending retreats in the hundreds and thousands. But it also made me feel uncomfortable. I was a firm believer that the wise ones cannot be long hidden.<sup>8</sup> I was completely in awe of Thay as I read about the tours. Reading the numbers however, I wondered if it was necessary to report on them in such telling detail? But I dared not say anything. It was not until two years after I was ordained and I could follow Thay on his teaching tours in the U.S. that I understood.

During the tour, before the retreat started, we had a chance to go on an outing with Thay. An "outing" meant not going to the retreat venue but to a bookstore. Wherever Thay went, he visited

bookstores and plant nurseries. It was a large bookstore displaying Thay's books on the shelves. Near the entrance, I saw a flyer prepared by the organizing team who had advertised Thay's retreats in English. Having the opportunity to be close to Thay, I dared to ask him why we had to publicize the retreats in bookstores like that. Fortunately Thay is very compassionate. When I asked this foolish question, which seemed to be questioning Thay, he simply looked at me and replied: "My dear, people are really suffering. Sometimes even just one chance to meet us, to come to a retreat, can save their lives. So when we are here, we let them know. Otherwise after reading a book, they would not know where to find us." I quietly nodded.

During the retreat I heard the retreatants crying and sharing their suffering, as well as their happiness after being part of the retreat. Then I understood and loved Thay so much. I saw that Thay is compassionate and very selfless. I, on the other hand, kept getting stuck in the comparing mind and that's why I reacted with a big ego. Slowly I understood, when I heard Thay teaching, that in the mass media no one talks about the good news, like how many people are happy, how many have transformed after attending a retreat; there is only an excess of bad news about violence and hatred. The work of a teacher and their students is to sow the seeds of faith widely in order to balance those negative energies. The *Newsletter* is there to reflect the reality that there *are* many people who are fortunate enough to know how to live a happy and peaceful life, no matter if there is also suffering. Those numbers are no longer a boast. They represent trust that a kind heart and a wholesome life still exist, even though they may pale in comparison to the suffering faced by humanity.

### Drink your tea, my dear

I cannot talk about the *Newsletter* without mentioning those hard-working final days to publish in time for Tet. Somehow we were always late in starting our work and nearing the end, we went to Thay's "office" to work together and format the layout according to Thay's ideas. My technical capacity was just to "copy and paste" and I had a tiny bit of experience from working on the *Buddhist Youth Newsletter*. In those years, that was sufficient for the time being. To tell the truth, sometimes I even cut and pasted by hand! Later on, more technically skilled novice brothers came along, and

8. The idea being that if you are wise, people will find you by themselves.

the equipment was also more modern, so I no longer worked on the layouts.

Anyone who has worked in editing knows that no matter how careful you were from the start, when you read over again, you always found errors—Thay called them “the worms.” For one stack of papers I had to flip back and forth “catching worms” until my eyes were bleary. After working for a while, Thay would always stop to invite his students to join him for walking meditation, or brought a cup of hot tea right to us and said: “Drink your tea, my dear.” Then, teacher and students talked a little about things unrelated to the newsletter in front of us.

I was very foolish then. There I was, drinking tea with Thay, but my happiness of being in his presence was very small. I could only relax for about ten minutes and then my mind would drift to the newsletter and our conversation was also carried in that direction. Thay laughed, patted my head and went out, letting me continue to “keep my nose to the grindstone.” Perhaps the mantra Thay used the most with me was “Drink your tea, my dear” because I used to drink very little water or tea.

As for the chance to go on walking meditation with Thay, I was a little more “grateful.” I love the garden in the Hermitage, no matter the season. From time to time Thay would stop and share an anecdote with me. Anyone who has walked with Thay knows that the energy of peace and ease emanating from him allows one to truly make each step “without needing to arrive anywhere.” Just walking one round I was refilled with enough energy to continue the work.

I usually tried to finish the newsletter a few days before Tet so that Sr. Chan Khong could bring it to the printing agent as scheduled. I put aside all the New Year preparations—apart from attending the sitting meditations—and hugged the computer day and night. Despite that, every year we still worked until the last minute and hoped for a little more time to read it over one more time. Because every time after printing, I always caught a few more “worms” that were inexplicably missed.

One year on the night before the newsletter went to print, I found a few technical errors—“big, fat worms.” I cranked up the pace and by the time I shut down the computer, it was three in the morning. I took a car and drove to the Hermitage with another sister as my second body. It was a very cold winter night. We parked the car outside so as not to wake Thay and crept into the Hermitage. We came to the

plant glasshouse, held our breaths while opening the sliding door, put the newsletter stack in there, gently slid the door back and crept out the gates. Phew! It was like being thieves!

### **Presentation**

Thay is a professional editor so he was very particular in choosing the font. He usually used only one font from the beginning to the end so as not to confuse the readers’ eyes. One year, a younger brother helped with the layout and used many different fonts. I spoke to him, but he would not listen. In the end I had to sit down and reformat all the articles and of course, that also affected the distribution of paragraphs and pages. It took us a whole extra week to finish.

Thay did not make flashy titles either. Usually I asked him to write one line of calligraphy for the title and that was enough. I felt very glad when Thay was ready to help. For each title he wrote several calligraphies with different styles for us to choose from. Later the technology was more advanced and the younger siblings were also more colorful. And because the layout was done on a computer without having to print the drafts (in the past I was afraid to waste ink), the designs became more eye-catching, but it somewhat lost a little of the original simplicity. There was one younger sibling who liked to make the background stand out and chose white text on black, which was very painful for the eyes to read. I could understand that the younger ones loved to design and to be creative, but unintentionally, the result made it difficult for the readers to focus on the content.

One person even cut out sentences and words so the article could fit within the frames of their design. It was too late by the time I found out. I begged them to correct it, but when the newsletter was printed, it was still the same. I could only apologize when the author blamed me. While working on the newsletter, I often met with blame and anger from others, but I had to keep going. Besides, without the younger siblings who had the technical skills, the newsletter could not be completed in time. Therefore, each person lent a hand; the spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood is the most important thing.

### **Continuation**

I worked on the newsletter with Thay until 2000, and then I went to the Deer Park Monastery in the U.S. Being far away, I no longer had to be on the editorial

team, so I took to the stage for New Year's performances and enjoyed the festivities to my heart's content. I remember my happiness and fulfillment when, for the first time, I held a new copy of the newsletter (not edited by me) to read. Each article was wonderful, each one unique. While working on the editorial team, I had to read the articles over and over again in order to edit them or correct spelling errors. Then I lost the pleasure of enjoying the newsletter as a fresh experience. But when I was far away from Plum Village, reading the articles about Plum Village filled me with a sense of familiarity. I was grateful to the brothers and sisters who had helped Thay to bring the *Newsletter* to life.

I learned a great deal while working with Thay because he is so careful; attending to each comma, each full stop. Every time I read the manuscripts edited by Thay, I learned how to make sentences more concise and clear, how to use simple and precise words, and to be more grammatically correct. After a year in Deer Park, I returned to France and continued on the *Newsletter* with Thay. He brought out a lot of material and "obliged" me to select and edit the articles myself. I had to make more decisions and not just help to correct spelling or technical errors. Around October, Thay called for submissions. This time, he announced in front of the sangha that the submissions were to come to me. I was stunned and very embarrassed.

In 2005, I left France to go and help establish the Prajna Monastery in Vietnam. The *Plum Village Newsletter* continued to be "born" regularly, increasingly rich in both content and form. The younger brothers and sisters who came after me were technically skilled and had better Vietnamese, so Thay had more helpers.

In 2010 when I returned to France, I thought I had been "released." I asked Thay (just to be sure) to allow me to come out of the editorial team. Thay was silent. Then Thay announced to the sangha that I was taking care of that year's *Newsletter* (Thay gave me such a heart attack!). Not daring to bargain with Thay, I invited other younger siblings to join the team. The year after, I had a list of suggestions for Thay's approval and to announce to the sangha. Thay nodded. The day the list was announced, I was feeling excited when I heard my name brought up as if I was the responsible person. I knew Thay was training his student, but I still felt pressured. How many years have I celebrated Tet accompanied by worries about the newsletter? Was there ever a year when I was free to sit down and wrap earth-cakes with the sangha (in Plum Village)?

Then when Thay got sick, I invited younger brothers and sisters who had the skills to join the editorial team and announced this to the sangha. Gradually these young ones took on the key roles and managed the work by themselves each year. My only responsibility was to call for submissions (which was late every year). The pressure of creating the newsletter was shouldered by the sangha. The editorial team grew stronger and stronger. There were many articles to choose from. The team started to create an English edition for the younger, international monastics. But the *Newsletter* still has the spirit of an in-house publication, the spirit of Plum Village. So don't anyone "complain": *Why only one voice, one content, one stream...?*

Thay will also be smiling because this continuation of his will always be present and grow in ever more wonderful ways. ☺



Part of the 2021 Newsletter Team

# Safe Harbor

SISTER CHÂN TUỆ NGHIÊM

My dear younger siblings,

The day I came to Plum Village thirty years ago, you had just turned one. You cannot imagine what Plum Village was like, or what I was like as a twenty-two-year-old young woman, can you? You would ask, *Why did you come to Plum Village when there were so few people here and the living conditions so simple? What made you choose Plum Village as a safe harbor in which to live the life of a monastic?* Thirty years is a long time, but it also passes by swiftly.

I came to Plum Village during the Summer Retreat of 1992. Plum Village was celebrating its tenth anniversary and it still went by the name of “Persimmon Village.” My first impression was—*I had returned to my homeland of Vietnam.* Though I had grown up in the U.S. since I was ten, I felt that I had never truly integrated into the environment and society there. I was not recognized as American because of my black hair and yellow skin.

## A sense of belonging

Coming to Plum Village that year, I became acquainted with many young Vietnamese people who had also grown up in the West. Perhaps everyone felt the same way as I did, and therefore when we came together we could completely accept one another. Everyone opened their hearts to help, support, and love each other. The atmosphere in Plum Village, Thay’s Dharma talks, and the presence of the brothers and sisters had created a truly wholesome and pure environment filled with serenity and love. In just a week, our group of young people had become close friends. I have been nourished by that love and friendship throughout these 30 years. Here is my true home because it is here that I have found love, humanity, acceptance, joy, safety, and teachings to help me embrace difficulties and live in kindness.

They liked to see young people, whether young men or young women, wearing the traditional Vietnamese long robe. We had many opportunities to wear the long robe during the week-while listening to Thay’s Dharma talk, during tea

meditation, or various ceremonies. You know what my dear? It was the first time in my life to wear the long robe regularly like that. After lunch and dinner, the young friends gathered around under the two oak trees of Lower Hamlet by the bamboo grove. Every day I was nourished and grew a little through the songs, zen music, sparkling laughter, and friendship. After one month I went back to the U.S. with joy and warmth in my heart. I knew I had a beautiful and wholesome path and what’s more, there were such lovely and kind friends from Europe and America walking along it with me.



I decided to come back to Plum Village to live for one year. I had just graduated from university and it was a time for me to explore the world before pursuing further studies. I returned just before the Winter Retreat. There was a stark difference between the summer and winter. This time there were only about 15 brothers and sisters here and a few lay friends. I was the only young person in Lower Hamlet. The air was cold, the rain wet, and the mud muddy. My friends were not there, there was no TV, no movies, no internet, and no being busy in order to avoid facing myself. I had a very hard time getting through this period. There was sufficient space and conditions for some deeply embedded pain and suffering from the past to manifest. I had no choice but to find ways to alleviate my pain and suffering.

Fortunately, Thay's teachings, the love of the sisters and of my blood brother, Brother Phap Dang, enabled me to have the courage to come back to myself, embrace and look into my mind.

One element that helped me greatly was nature, Mother Earth. Apart from mealtimes, resting, sleeping, and sitting meditation, I spent all day in nature to be with the trees, the sky and the earth. Nature became a dear friend that helped me to have the joy and strength needed to face my inner pain.

Plum Village was still very poor then. The houses were simple and shabby. I slept in a building that was used for drying tobacco in the past. The building had red brick walls and a cement floor. Our beds were just a plank of wood on four bricks. If you wanted to use the toilet in the middle of a cold night, you had to go outside. There was no hot water in the bathroom. A hot shower was deemed a miracle and a great happiness! Can you imagine that the one thing I always cherished and was grateful for was the central heating in this building? There were other houses that only had a small wood-fired stove in the room for heating. When the firewood ran out in the night, those rooms were as cold as the outdoors.



From left: Sr. Dinh Nghiem, Sr. Tue Nghiem, Sr. Gai Nghiem

Although there were only a dozen or so brothers and sisters, the atmosphere was warm and cozy, like a family. We sang before walking meditation and after the meals, we often gathered to drink a fragrant cup of tea, to sing, recite poetry, laugh and share stories. Whatever the sangha activity was, everyone was present. Despite being poor, Plum Village was rich with love, brotherhood and sisterhood and friendship. My heart continued to open. I treasured each day, treasured the opportunity to go back to a simple, wholesome life where we had the time to renew ourselves. This way of life made me feel fulfilled, as if I was realizing a long-awaited dream.

## The eyes of the practice

After spending one year in Plum Village, I went back to the United States. It felt as if I had lived on top of a high mountain, away from the world for a year. Going home was like descending the mountain to enter a life full of woe and trouble. But this time, my eyes were bright to see the things I had not seen before or took for granted as the norm.

The first thing I saw was that everyone was working to amass money. That seemed to be everyone's mode of seeking happiness. Consumption created so much waste for Mother Earth and few noticed it. The second thing I saw was that everyone had difficulties and suffering but they did not know how to handle them. They only looked for ways to escape and forget, causing so much pain for themselves and their loved ones. I also saw the difficulties my blood sisters and brothers encountered in their relationships with their spouses and children. Meanwhile, my elder brother who had become a monk lived joyfully and was helping many people to touch happiness. The simple and profound life of a monastic in Plum Village was my path, my direction. That was why I decided to return to Plum Village and ask to become a nun.

## Walking the monastic path

Thirty years is a long journey. Looking back, I have gone through many stages of change both in myself and within the Plum Village community. I remember that before embarking on the spiritual life, I also had fears and worries. *Will I be happy and walk this path fully for life?* I looked at my brother and at Thay—two people who were walking solidly, happy, and helping to alleviate the suffering of many others. That gave me the firm conviction to enter a new life as a young monastic.

There were certainly ups and downs in my monastic life. But those times also helped me to realize that my purpose of becoming a nun was exactly to handle my inner difficulties, to understand their roots and transform them. There were moments when I saw that I was still weak in the face of emotional relationships. I struggled with my mind, but I made the clear determination that I had ordained to be free from emotional entanglements, so that I could cultivate a Buddha's love in my heart. Gradually I saw that the noble purpose of monastic life is to transform suffering, to come into the light of happiness and freedom, and to become a Dharma instrument capable of helping others see a beautiful and wholesome path. Looking back, I see that the

difficulties were the food that strengthened and nurtured my beginner's mind. They helped me touch a spaciousness within and a deeper understanding of myself.

The difficulties were there, but at the same time, joy, happiness, and peace were also always present. Every day I grew as a nun amidst the nourishing and wholesome songs, poems, gathas, nature, laughter, and brotherhood and sisterhood. What more does one need? I already had what I dreamt of for my life. I no longer needed to wander here and there to search for happiness. Happiness and peace are tangible qualities I can touch and savor each day. Slowly, my age-old difficulties were transformed without my knowing.

The longer I live in the sangha, the more I see how I metamorphose. The more I practice, the more I see wonders manifesting around and within me. The more I practice, the more I understand things that were mere theories to me before.

### **Touching grief, touching interbeing**

The death of my mother was the event that shook me the most in my life. Mom had already been ill for six years. Her body grew weaker and weaker and lost the ability to function normally. When mom was passing away, I felt it was time for her to let go of that aged and diseased body. I knew she was being continued by her children and grandchildren. However, when mom left, I still felt a void in my heart—I will never see her form, hear her voice, or be able to hug her and touch her physically again.

Suddenly, I felt a great loss and an intense grief. I had already been trained, since first coming to Plum Village, that only by embracing the feeling of loss and grief could I understand, calm, and transform it. Those trainings had become a bell of mindfulness, helping me to come back to ease and transform my loss and grief. When I returned to myself with the energy of mindfulness in each breath, I recognized the truth that my mother was present in me. I could be in touch with her. *Mom is here. Mom is always here.* We are the continuation of our mother through our virtues and habits. We just need to return to the breath, to the body, and to the present moment to see our mother in us. This is a truth, the truth of interbeing. Mother and child are one. Child is a continuation of mother.

When I touched this truth, the grief and sense of loss gradually transformed. Whenever I felt uneasy, I came back to the body and the breath, silently calling, "Mom, oh dear mom," and my mother was there right away to love and help me face the mind of uneasiness. I realized that I am practicing for myself and at the same time practicing for my mom. Seeing the interbeing between mother and child is the gateway for me to arrive at the insight of my interbeing with everyone, with the cosmos.

My dear younger one, if we can taste the insight of non-self and interbeing through our own body and mind, then we can taste happiness and great freedom right here and right now. *That is the true path of a monastic.* ☸



# With time, everything transforms

SISTER CHÂN ĐOAN NGHIÊM



from left: Sr. Giải Nghiêm, Sr. Đoàn N., Sr. Tuệ N., Sr. Viên Quang, and Sr. Thuần N.

## Dear sister, when you first came to Plum Village, what left the strongest impression on you?

Poor and desolate! My family had known about Plum Village for a long time and often described it to me, so I already had some ideas about it. When I first came to Plum Village in the winter of 1989, all I saw were simple stone and brick houses and some unfinished buildings. Looking around, everything was so plain, not at all what I had expected. I was a little surprised to see how poor Plum Village was. The Dharma Nectar Hall (of Lower Hamlet) only had a roof and steel frames, without walls. A building with bare stone walls served as the dining room. This was also the room where Thay gave his Dharma talks and a storage for firewood. When it rained, we had to use pots and basins to catch the water from the leaks.

## So what has made you stay till now?

It is because I truly want to walk this path. In the beginning, I came to Plum Village out of curiosity. My sisters and nieces talked a lot about Plum Village, so I wanted to find out for myself. When I saw people attending the schedule, I just followed them. I didn't really want to learn anything yet.

Fortunately that year, Thay was writing *Old Path, White Clouds* and teaching on it in the Winter Retreat. I felt like Thay was recounting stories about the Buddha and his disciples as well as their way of life. I really liked it. The stories showed me that there was a way of life different from the conventional one that I knew. In fact, I did not know what I wanted then. There was nothing in society that touched me or appealed to me. I was always brooding and did not see a way out.

Then I heard the teaching on the blind turtle. This was the essential key for my decision to ordain as a monastic. In that teaching, the Buddha taught that it is very difficult to have the chance to be born a human, more so to encounter the Dharma, and even more so to become a monastic, and even rarer to become enlightened.

While listening, I ticked off the difficult parts that I had already gone through and I saw that I had not yet done the part about becoming a monastic. So I decided to ordain, because I didn't want to be a blind turtle taking hundreds of years to be lucky enough to poke its head through a hole in a piece of wood floating on the ocean surface. I wanted to give monastic life a try. Since I did not know anything about spiritual life and really wanted to explore it,

whatever Thay taught, I followed to the letter. For example, I learned the gatha about sweeping the floor by heart and recited it out loud when I swept the floor. For each line, I made one sweep—totally concentrated! I took Thay’s words to heart because I felt I was a “newbie” in this way of life.

### **When you were Thay’s attendant, did you have fun? Did Thay teach you how to be an attendant?**

Thay didn’t teach me how to be an attendant. In 1990, right after my ordination, Thay went on a U.S. teaching tour. Before leaving, Thay gave me a copy of the *Commentary on Trainings for Novices* by Venerable Thich Hanh Tru. Thay really treasured this old, yellowing book. He said that he himself used this very book to practise as a new novice. Hearing that, I also treasured the book. I bought some transparent sticky plastic to cover the already frayed and torn book. However, though I read the commentary, I didn’t pay much attention to its teachings. It wasn’t until the end of 1992 that I had a chance to attend Thay for the first time.

That day, the snow was very thick on the road, so we were unable to drive. After the meal to say farewell to the old year, Thay had to stay back in Lower Hamlet in the “Hoa Cau” room (Areca Palm Flowers). The sisters told me to attend Thay. I hurried to take care of the firewood to warm up the room. When that was done, I went back to my room and began to flip through the novice trainings commentary. By that stage, how could anyone possibly sit down and memorize a chapter on “Attending Your Teacher”?!

I sat with that chapter almost the whole night. I had a lot of “concerns,” because the book said that

we “should not go to sleep before our teacher and should rise before our teacher.” That alone was enough to make me panic! I wondered, *What time does Thay go to sleep? What time does he rise?* Questions kept popping up as I read paragraph after paragraph. So that night, I didn’t dare to go to sleep before Thay. I had to run past his room to see if the lights were off before I dared to go to bed. My room was in the Red Candle Building while Thay’s was in the Purple Cloud Building. That night, despite the newly laid thick layers of snow, I kept going back and forth checking for the lights in Thay’s room. In summary, I did not sleep for almost the whole night. I stayed up, memorizing the steps on taking care of one’s teacher—whatever the book said, I would do just the same.

I didn’t know what time Thay would rise the next morning. I thought that Thay was a Zen master, so for sure he would rise as early as the masters in the Zen stories I often read about. At three in the morning, I ran over to his room. I walked on tippy toes, and “tapped lightly with nails” on the door instead of knocking because in the commentary it said to “tap lightly with your nails,” so that was exactly what I did! But how could Thay hear a sound that was even quieter than a mosquito buzzing around his ears? How could the sound of fingernails tapping penetrate the thick stone wall and the wooden door? As I did not hear Thay’s response, I had to give up and go back to my room.

So I kept running back and forth between the two buildings from three until eight in the morning! By that time, I was out of patience! I didn’t bother to tap with my fingernails any more, instead, I used my fingertips to knock on the door. Still, I did not hear any response from Thay. I started to knock harder—nothing from Thay.



I was so nervous—had something happened to Thay? In the commentary, it said that we shouldn't go into our teacher's room without being invited. I was beside myself. I looked through the keyhole to see if there was any light. If there was light, that meant Thay was up. Yet through the keyhole, I only saw darkness. Luckily back then, all of Thay's students wore wooden clogs. At first I went barefoot as I was afraid of disturbing Thay. But by then I had put the clogs back on and clop-clopped to his door. As soon as I knocked lightly on the door, I heard Thay's voice, "Come in." Thank Goodness! How happy I was!

In my head I already had a list of what needed to be done that I had learned from the *Commentary on Trainings for Novices*. Upon entering Thay's room, I gently closed the door and scanned the room. Thay was still in bed, listening to the morning news (Thay told me this), so I couldn't make his bed. My eyes went around the room to see if there was a chamber pot, which was also mentioned in the book. I followed the book exactly and completely forgot that Thay's room had a toilet next to it, so why would he need a chamber pot? Not seeing a chamber pot, I turned to the wooden stove, fed it some firewood, then boiled water for Thay to soak his feet.

I was so absorbed in carrying out "the list of things to do while attending Thay" that I didn't pay any attention to Thay. Suddenly I heard some movement behind me, I turned and saw that Thay was standing up. As soon as Thay stood up, I jumped over to fold his blanket. Then I put up his hammock because Thay liked lying in the hammock in his room. After brushing his teeth, Thay lay down in the hammock. I turned to make tea, then brought a hot water basin for Thay so he could soak his feet while sipping tea. When there was nothing else to do, I came around to sit by Thay's hammock and waited to see what he would tell me to do next. The very first thing Thay said to me was, "When I have some time, I will teach you how to be an attendant."



However, in the end, Thay did not teach me how to be an attendant. I think he said it at the time because he saw that I was making too much of a fuss.

Back then, I was very naive! After each Winter Retreat, Thay took his monastic children to visit a snowy mountain. According to the novice training commentary, "Attending your teacher, when crossing a river or a waterway, you must find out where it is deep and where it is shallow in order to make sure that your teacher can cross it safely." But there was no waterway or river there, only snow. From time to time you can miss your footing in the snow. I thought that Thay might slip so every time I saw some snow, I would overtake Thay so that I could check the path ahead for him. I kept walking in front of Thay and stamping at the snow to see how deep or shallow it was. Thay said, "Doan Nghiem, it's ok, don't worry my dear, I can walk."

And that's not all! Then there is the story about holding an umbrella for Thay.

The commentary says that while walking with our teacher, we should not step on their shadow. So while walking with Thay, I didn't look at him, but only at his shadow to avoid stepping on it. Thay walked slowly. Often on the way out, his shadow was on one side, but on the way back, the sun and his shadow had gone to the other side. So following behind him, I also switched positions. From time to time Thay wanted to stop and talk to his attendant behind him. When he turned one way I was there; a moment later I had changed position, he turned and I wasn't there anymore!

Looking back at my memories of those early days, when I first ordained, and of being an attendant, I feel very happy to see how simple my mind was. I completely let go of conventional ways of thinking. Whatever I was taught, I applied it. I never questioned Thay.

**We have heard that in the early days, you had to do everything from chopping wood, driving a plough tractor, to fixing electrical problems because there were so few people. What was it like?**

During my time the rotation team system was already in place, but there was only one person per team. It was really fun! In my first year as a novice, cooking in the Summer Retreat was my challenge. The sangha only had two or three sisters at the time

and each had their own responsibilities. In the summer of 1990, we invited Aunty Tam (Sister Chan Khong's elder blood sister) to come and cook and I was her "gofer." There were only two of us cooking for the whole 30 days of the retreat. My job was cleaning and washing the pots in the kitchen, and chopping vegetables for Aunty Tam. I also covered the job of washing pots after the retreatants had finished serving their food. Back then, the only thing I knew how to cook was rice. There were only Vietnamese people in Lower Hamlet so there was rice for all three meals. It's thanks to that Summer that I learned how to cook. When the retreat was over, we returned to our rotation. One person cooked per day. Everyday was a festival! In those days, Plum Village didn't have many retreats like we do now. There was only the Summer Retreat and the Winter Retreat, organized when Thay was at home (and not while away on teaching tours).

When Thay went on teaching tours in the U.S. or around Europe, we listened to Thay's talks from the Summer Retreat because during the summer, we all had to do mindful service and could not attend the Dharma talks. There were no videotapes yet, only cassette tapes. Activities were very simple. We had morning and evening sitting and chanting, like we do now. However, there were two sessions of sitting meditation interspersed with slow walking meditation in between. At the end of the second sitting, we sat down to chant the sutras. In the past, the *Daily Chanting Book* didn't have as many chants as it does now.

Daily mindful service revolved around the plum orchard. We did everything from A to Z: trimming, fertilizing, and other chores. Just a handful of brothers and sisters did all the work; we didn't hire anyone to help us. There were more than a thousand plum trees so we worked on them the whole year round. But it was a lot of fun because the whole "family" went out to the plum orchard and while working we talked and played together.



Back then, formal meals only happened in the summer. We had to wear our sanghati, but anyway it only happened once a summer. Life was simple back then with few activities. We didn't listen to many Dharma talks, except during the three months Winter Retreat. It seemed like we played more.

In order to save expenses, Thay told me to give a hand to the masons to help repair the buildings. I learned how to lay bricks, pour concrete, and install all kinds of insulation in the ceiling... I didn't know French so I did whatever the masons showed me to do. When it was time to pull the electrical lines into the Dharma Nectar Hall (in Lower Hamlet) or for the Sitting Still Hut (in Upper Hamlet), Br. Phap Lu (still called "Anh Hoang" then) and I did it together. We did almost everything ourselves. In winter, it was cold, so we collected discarded wood chips from sawmills to heat up our rooms and reserved the firewood we bought for Thay, the meditation hall, and the study room where we listened to Dharma talks.

The wood chips burned very fast and strong, but left no charcoal so at midnight our rooms were freezing and our blankets also went cold. It felt like we were warming up the blankets. I couldn't bear getting out of bed in the morning. That was one of the reasons for my laziness going to sitting meditation. I don't know who it was that reported it to Thay. When Thay came to Lower Hamlet, he told me quietly, "My dear, you can take your sleeping bag to sitting meditation and you can sleep in the meditation hall if you need to." Back then, *nobody* took a sleeping bag to sitting meditation, but Thay allowed me to do it.

### **Can you please share with us about the teacher-student relationship between you and Thay and how Thay took care of you and taught you?**

Thay took very good care of his monastic children. Thay really cared that I had ordained young and by myself and he was afraid that my mind would not be solid enough. Sr. Chan Tu, a sister who had ordained before me, had left just a few months after her ordination, so Thay was worried that I might leave as well. When Thay was not on teaching tours, he often came to Lower Hamlet to spend time and have a meal with us. We were only five sisters then: Sr. Chan Khong, Sr. Chan Duc, Sr. Chan Vi, Sr. Thanh Luong (who came from another temple) and myself. It was very nice that Thay sat with us to eat. Sometimes Thay taught us songs.

It is thanks to Thay that I know how to sing. I used to say, "I will do anything you teach me to do, but please don't ask me to sing." I don't like singing. So Thay kept asking me to sing. No matter how badly I sang Thay kept asking. Never ever say you dislike something in front of Thay! Then, I started to sing on my own, and Thay caught me at it one day! He proudly told everyone about it. After that, Thay stopped asking me to sing, seeing that he had already succeeded.

When Plum Village got its first Macintosh computer, Thay gave me the handwritten manuscript of his commentary on the *Diamond Sutra* to type out. I still remember that I used the font "Binh Minh." Before that, Thay had typed everything with a typewriter. When we got the computer, Thay was so happy and asked me to learn how to use it so that I could type up his books.

When I first ordained, I was very shy. I rarely opened my mouth, to the point that Br. Phap Dang said, "It seems that Sr. Doan Nghiem doesn't say more than ten words in a sentence." When I did speak, I said only a few words so it sounded a bit curt. When Thay gave me his handwritten manuscripts, he said, "Learn to pay attention to the way Thay writes and edits. You have to read all the parts Thay has crossed out and ask the question, "Why?" So I just asked for the sake of asking without knowing why Thay crossed out this word and

replaced it with another. Asking, without ever receiving an answer. Over time, I could slowly understand and was able to make differentiations. Only with direct experience can we understand. With each correction, the writing was improved. That is what I learned and treasured most while working on books with Thay.

Thay never reprimanded me, even though I know that many people complained to Thay about me. I don't know why I cried so easily in the first few years of my monastic life. Whenever someone "informed" Thay about me, Thay called me to the Hermitage. Upon arrival, as I opened the door, there was Thay in his long robe, sitting solemnly in the middle of the room waiting for me to come in. As soon as I bowed to Thay and sat down, I started to cry, so how could Thay reprimand me? I don't know why I cried. I thought about my hot temper, my inability to express my feelings, my rough words... If I had heard more, I would have been lost even further in my thoughts, so Thay said nothing. That's what I thought anyway.

With more time in the practice, I could feel and appreciate Thay's love for me, and I want to continue Thay in this regard: to love and not reprimand my younger ones. I think everyone needs an opportunity to change. I have changed, so I trust that my younger ones will change also. ☸



# Don't Cover Your Monastic Life with Bells and Incense

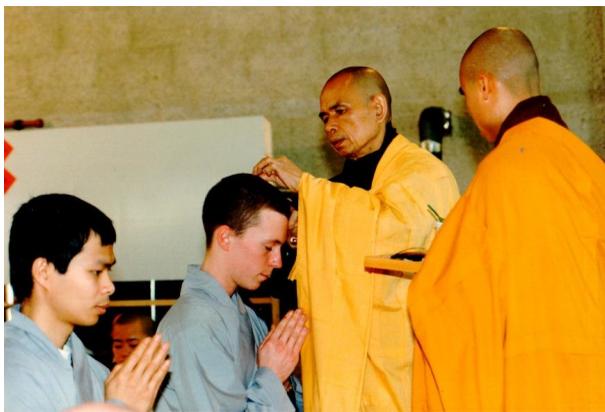
BROTHER CHÂN PHÁP HẢI

*Brother Chan Phap Hai is an elder in the Plum Village tradition. In this interview excerpt from the budding Mountain Spring Monastery near Sydney, he shares with his younger monastic siblings his experiences, challenges, growing insights and lifesavers through 25 years of living in the Dharma and the sangha.*

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## The spirit of experimentation in the early days of Plum Village

When I first arrived in 1996 I was touched by the joy and enthusiasm that everybody had, even with the very simple conditions at the time. For example, when travelling from Upper Hamlet to New Hamlet, we did not have enough transport, so many of us would sit on the floor in the back of the shopping van, on blankets.



Br. Phap Hai ordaining as a novice

When I ordained as a novice, the community was small – around fifteen brothers – and the majority of us were of a similar age, so we had a lot of energy. I remember when we planted the trees and dug out the lotus pond in the middle of Upper Hamlet, Br. Phap Ung and Br. Phap Hien (Michael C.) ran jumping into the pond in their short robes, playing in the mud. There were many simple joys like that. Many trees that now provide shade around Upper Hamlet were planted as small saplings by the brothers on their ordination anniversaries. Going through everything together in such a small sangha fostered a sense of closeness.

We did not yet have a designated monks' building. The current one was built in 2002. We used to live in the Stone and Bamboo buildings, the Turtle Lodge and Dharma Breeze Hut, as well as in the rooms behind the kitchen. During large retreats like the Summer Retreat, the brothers would move out to tents, or consolidate in a few rooms, and some of our sisters as well as the guests would move into our rooms.

Being a small and young sangha, there was a lot less organisation, which gave room for a certain amount of experimentation to try different practices. For example, the practice of Shining Light did not exist in its current form for the first few years that I was in Plum Village. Before we began this practice, in the ceremony to close the Winter Rains' Retreat we would make a formal request, "If you have seen, heard, or suspected something about my practice, please share with us." Then the elder, usually Br. Giac Thanh, replied, "You've all practised well, but you could do better next year. Please touch the earth three times." After a couple of years Thay began to give teachings about how we should renew this practice and not just do it as a form. The first few Shining Light sessions we had were a little intense, because we had not yet understood deeply how to engage with this practice. Of course, we are still learning, even after twenty years. At the time, we also didn't need to be present, in which case we just received a letter. We quickly discovered that the Shining Light practice was more effective and strengthening for the person and for the sangha as a whole if we were present.

Other practices have disappeared, like fast walking meditation. One time, Thay said to us, "If you don't sweat once a day, you are not my disciple." Thay wanted to encourage everyone to exercise and to jog once a day. After one of our trips to China, Thay proposed that the sangha incorporate fast walking meditation into our practice schedule. So Br. Phap Niem and Br. Phap Do bulldozed a path around the linden tree in Upper Hamlet, put down some white gravel, and Thay suggested that we would do fast walking Chinese style before sitting meditation

in the morning. We began this practice in the winter. As everyone knows, the winter in France is usually wet and cold. So often the back of our robes would be wet and white with flecks of mud from the wet gravel.

At one point, Thay suggested for every hamlet to have a scale at the end of the table to weigh our food. We would serve our food, weigh our bowl, and take note of how much we took. One time Thay noticed I was not doing it and Thay said to me, “Br. Phap Hai, you need to be like a river, not like a drop of water.” I replied, “Thay, a kilo of potatoes is very different from a kilo of lettuce.” Thay replied, “You think too much, Br. Phap Hai.”



### Not feeling ready is a gift

We did not have all the classes and the structure that we have today. We learned mostly by observing and doing. Classes are wonderful, important and needed. At the same time the greatest learning we can ever have is in our everyday life. We do not discover the heart of the Dharma through books or classes. Those are about the Dharma, but they are not the Dharma. This is the difference between Dharma as lists, techniques, and concepts, and Dharma as a lived reality.

When I was a novice, we were lucky enough to have a Fine Manners class with Br. Giac Thanh, who offered what I think is the most important advice that I ever got in my monastic life, “What I want to share with you most of all is: don’t cover your monastic life with a whole lot of bells and incense.” What a beautiful encouragement for us not to hide behind anything, but to bring ourselves fully to our practice and to offer what we have, even if we think it is not much.

Today I hear some of the young ones say, “I’m not ready.” Honestly, after twenty-five years, I really still do not feel ready. Even now, giving a Dharma talk, I

always feel like I have nothing much of value to share. Maybe if I felt ready, there would be a problem. Not feeling ready is a gift. We just show up in the best way we can and offer what we have. Nobody ever gave me classes on how to give a Dharma talk. I just learned by doing.

Thay also had different emphases from time to time. At one time he would ask us to give spontaneous teachings. In the middle of walking meditation or another activity, he might ask, “Sr. Kinh Nghiem, offer us a sutra,” and the person would then need to share an invitation to practise from a place of aliveness and spontaneity. There was no time to prepare, we just had to do it. It was nerve-racking, but also a lot of fun.

### Strong medicine from Thay

When I was a young monk, I suffered a lot. One time, I shared with Thay a very deep pain that I was carrying. Thay drank his tea, looked out the window and then he coughed. As he was coughing, I thought, *Uh oh*. (When he used to cough like that, we knew that we were going to get the hammer.) Thay put down his cup, turned to me and said, “Novice Phap Hai, why did you come to Thay and ask questions that you already know the answers to? Go and do it!” That is all the teaching I got! So I stood up, bowed, and walked out. I had hoped Thay would say something like “There there, poor you,” etc., therefore I felt a bit angry with Thay. As I came out of Thay’s room, as a twenty-two year old, I remember kicking the gravel around the driveway in New Hamlet. For about two Dharma talks whenever Thay caught my eye, he would smile lightly. I am ashamed to tell you that it actually took me a couple of weeks to realise what Thay had offered me. Thay would always point to the capacity in you and water your confidence in your own ability to transform. The reality was, I did know exactly what I needed to do. I just didn’t want to do it. Thay knew this and offered what I needed most in that moment and in my life of practice: *confidence in my capacity to be able to understand and resolve issues myself*. That was the strongest and most precious teaching I ever received from my teacher and I am deeply grateful. That was when Thay really became my teacher, not just a faraway figure that I would listen to at a Dharma talk or attend, without any real relationship.

Whilst others can help and support us, ultimately, as practitioners, we ourselves need to be able to look deeply and understand our situation to be able to really transform our suffering. Thay gave us those tools.

## Big challenges in the early days

One of the challenges I faced growing up in the sangha was learning how to ask for and receive support. I came from a family environment in which I had to be very responsible in order to survive, so I had a tendency to be a bit too responsible and not want to communicate what was really going on inside. I also did not know how to take advantage of the presence of my elder brothers or sisters. The sangha's Shining Light and guidance helped me to realise that my real contribution and real transformation was not in volunteering for many things, but something else entirely. I had to learn to be one element of the sangha rather than taking over, even if I thought I was helping. This is a bit like the difference between being a soloist and playing in a band. Of course, this is a lifetime's journey and I still have a lot to learn in this area.

Another challenge was my distinctly direct Australian communication style. Australians show respect and closeness to those we care about by being very direct, and have a self- and other-deprecating sense of humour. This comes from the

background of the difficult environment of Australia—droughts, floods, fires—needing to make light of it and to come together as a collective. For example, last year a flood washed out both roads into and out of this mountain, leaving us cut off from supplies for ten days. The local people began joking around, downplaying it, “Oh, it's a bit bloody wet, hey mate?!” I had that tendency coming to Plum Village. If somebody was too serious or emotional about something, I would respond in this way. For many other cultures, this feels rude, which meant I had a lot of Beginning Anews. I needed to learn and adapt. Coming back to Australia I had to go through reverse culture shock.

## Lifesavers

The biggest lifesaver of my monastic life is something that many do not enjoy at all, and that is my Shining Light letters. A few years ago I went through a situation where my whole world fell apart and for a brief moment I felt that the world or the sangha would be a better place without me in it. It was very difficult to see any good qualities in myself.



I think we all have these moments. In that challenging moment, I reached for my Shining Light letters. I have accumulated a lot over the past quarter of a century. I read each of them and saw how clearly the sangha as a whole saw me. Not only did the sangha accept me, but actually loved me for who I am. In reading those letters, I felt as if the sangha was saying to me, “We see you, we see the Dharma you are meant to bring, and you are important to us.” Being seen and feeling this deep connection is something very precious. It honestly saved my life. I recommend that you do it.

Twenty years ago I had a dream in which Thay came up behind me, put his two hands on my shoulders and said, “Br. Phap Hai, is it Yes or is it No?” In the dream I turned to Thay and said, “It is Yes, Thay.” That dream has always remained with me. Whenever I go through a difficult moment, this is the other lifesaver I have: the practice to say “Yes” to whatever the situation is and have the mindset of “I am here and available. I will do what I can.”

## Tapping into the insight of Thay

A few years ago in a monastic retreat in Magnolia Grove, a couple of us were having tea together. In that conversation, we were discussing, “What do you feel Thay asked you to do or what was the invitation that Thay offered to you?” It was a very beautiful conversation. Reflecting on it, I felt that Thay transmitted something unique to each of us. When we come together, there is a beautiful flowering. What Thay shared with me was, “If you're doing the same thing in twenty years, you will have failed.” I hold that. Of course, Thay was not talking about the outer forms of the practice but how I, for example, relate to my brothers and sisters or to practices such as mindfulness of breathing. It was an invitation to go a little bit more deeply and to not be afraid of unpacking the riches that Thay has already offered us.

Over the years when our community offers teachings, I have witnessed people being blown away by teachings that often seem quite ordinary to us but are rarely taught in other lineages. Thay is an extraordinary teacher and has offered us so much in an incredibly condensed form, in the talks on Thursdays and Sundays and through his way of life. For example, while I was giving a weekend retreat on the Four Nutriments, a very well-known Theravadin sutra scholar and teacher approached me, saying: “Did Thich Nhat Hanh teach this in Plum Village? We only teach this in the context of quite focused

meditation retreats for advanced practitioners.” In Plum Village of course, we consider it one of the most essential teachings of the Buddha and Thay offered us many teachings on the Four Nutriments. I really feel that our job as practitioners and Dharma teachers is to unpack these riches, to keep exploring and developing them and offering them to the world.

### The role of elders

I ordained when I was twenty-one years old and this year I turned forty-six. There are young monastics who were born after I had already become a monk. Wow! From being a young community in physical and Dharma age, our community is now beginning to consider what it means to be an elder. I like to ask myself, “What does it mean to be a resource, to take care, to hold space and not dominate, to not get caught up in so much administration but to really try to listen and care for the young ones?” I think of our role as elders much like being the banks of the river, helping to support the flow of the river and trying not to block it. While we support the flow of the river, we are also being shaped by it.

What I really want to share with you is that even though we may have different ways of showing it, all your elders care deeply for the young ones and want to offer you the best conditions we can.

### Developing spiritual friendships

A while back I had the chance to mentor aspirants and young novices at Deer Park Monastery in the U.S.. They asked me for some advice on how to connect with the elders since sometimes they felt a bit distant. If we see the sangha as a garden, like Thay shared in the book *Joyfully Together*, then as a young monastic the most wonderful thing we can do is walk under the shade of these tall trees who are our elders and rest against their trunk. Soon enough, you will also have younger brothers and sisters to whom you will be offering support and care and guidance.

Good friendship in Buddhism means more than just associating with people that share our interests or have similar outlooks. It means actively seeking out companions to whom we can look for guidance and instruction.

A good mentor or elder from time to time will hopefully share things that we disagree with or we see differently, and in those moments we should

know that we have indeed met a good and kind friend, since they will help us to grow in some way.

Our relationship with each other as elders and juniors is very much a reciprocal one. I encourage each of you to actively build spiritual friendships with your elders, taking every opportunity to naturally approach them, drink tea and connect with them, especially if they are different from you. You will then discover many amazing things about them. They will offer you many deep gifts. Most of all, if you build a Dharma friendship with them, you will discover that they are human. That will give you confidence in your Dharma because you will see the unique nature of the Dharma body and Dharma expression of each one—and then, most importantly, you will begin to see it in yourself.



Lamp Transmission, 2003

So please, do not underestimate the importance of this relationship between elders and juniors. Do not take this special gift for granted. It is one of the most precious transmissions of monastic culture. If we cultivate it properly by allowing ourselves to be challenged and supported by the sangha, welcoming confusion and doubt, joy, vulnerability, confidence, and guidance, then we will generate within ourselves all of the tools we need in order to go very far on the path. If you find yourself too busy in work or planning for retreats, those are the times that you should find time to hang out with your mentor or elders. Please make time in your day, and space in your mind to do so.

May these simple words from the heart of your elder brother be of use to you on your path both now and for a long time in the future. Please treasure every moment of the sangha just as it is right now. In a few years you will look back with much fondness on this time and understand it for the gift that it is.

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# HARVESTING THE FRUITS



# Light Up a Candle

BROTHER CHÂN PHÁP ẮN

## Arriving at Plum Village

*Dear Brother, could you please share with us your early experiences in Plum Village?*

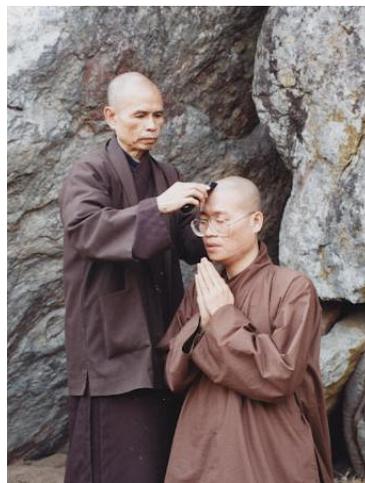
In July 1991, I wrote a letter to Thay asking to become a monk. At the time, I was working at the research institute of a petroleum company called ACCO. Only after I finished writing the letter did I then inform my group of close friends. One after another, they took turns to call me, trying to persuade me not to ordain. They told me that it would be such a waste if I became a monk. My more than 28 years of study would be of no use if I did not serve society, contributing the knowledge I had gained. If my current work environment was not so nourishing for me, I could always go back to teaching at universities. I am someone who usually listens to advice from friends. After reflecting on it some more, I decided not to send the letter to Thay.

I then started working at MIT as a teaching assistant while continuing my own research. But after working there for a while, I still could not find much inspiration. By the New Year's Day of 1992, I felt strongly that I must become a monk! I sent Thay the letter I had written in July, 1991. Then Thay asked Sister Chan Khong to call me. After enquiring about my background and my wish to become a monastic, she said, "Plum Village is in a muddy place, in the middle of nowhere. Life is very tough here. Can you bear it? You have a career now. If you are ordained, you have to give it all up. Can you accept that?" I replied, "I am ordaining just to ordain. No matter the conditions, I will not change my mind." Sr. Chan Khong said, "If so, you should make arrangements to come here immediately." On the eve of March 26, I left the U.S. for Plum Village.

Brother Hoang (who later became Br. Phap Lu) picked me up in a blue van. There were not many vans at that time in Plum Village and they were all old. That blue van was still in use more than ten years later. The afternoon of March 31, I set foot for the first time in Lower Hamlet. Thay was waiting there to have lunch with me and after that, brought me to Upper Hamlet. It was a very beautiful memory.

In Upper Hamlet, Thay asked the brothers if they had prepared a room for me. The brothers said yes. Then Thay walked me to my room. "Prepared" meant a room with a bed made of a piece of plywood on four bricks—nothing else. At that time, anyone who came to Plum Village brought with them a sleeping bag. Sr. Chan Khong also advised me to bring one of my own. I stayed in one of the two rooms in the Bamboo Building, now the bookshop in Upper Hamlet. The walls were made of stones stacked on top of each other and were plastered with clay. Because of age, the clay was cracked in many places. Sleeping at night, I could feel the wind on my cheeks and sometimes, even my hair froze if it got too cold. Plum Village was like that then. The facilities were very basic and scant.

Despite the difficult living environment, I always kept my aspiration. I made the vow that no matter how challenging the circumstances were—even if I had to beg for food, to be homeless, I would keep going in order to understand what true enlightenment is, what liberation is.



## The predestined relationship between teacher and disciple

*Why did you choose Thay as your teacher?*

I had heard of Thay since I was young. On my older sister's birthday in 1967 or '68, my father gave her the book *A Rose For Your Pocket* as a gift. But at that time I was too young, maybe only six or seven years old. I read the book but I did not understand it

at all. Later, in the first few years after moving to the U.S., I read it. Then in 1983, when my father came to the U.S., one of his friends sent him the book *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. I read it and began to practice. I remember practicing walking meditation from one building to another on my university campus, counting the steps, just as Thay taught in the book. I tried to follow exactly the guidelines given in the book, but I forced my breathing so much that I was exhausted and almost could not breathe.

In the autumn of 1985 while I was studying in California, Thay came to the U.S. for a retreat in Austin. My whole family joined that retreat. My parents dearly love and respect Thay. Then in 1988, I joined another retreat in Southern California. That was the year Sr. Chan Khong ordained on Vulture Peak.

From when I was a high-school student until I became a monk, I had read many books and listened to many teachings about meditation from different Zen masters. But only when I encountered Thay's book *Vấn đề nhận thức trong Duy thức học* (*Consciousness in the Manifestation Only School*) that I intuitively knew—here was my teacher! The more I practiced, the more I felt that the conditions that allowed me to meet Thay had been sown many lifetimes ago.

In the past, I thought that I was choosing this teacher or that teacher, that I liked this temple or that temple. But in the end, all phenomena come together due to conditions. The first few days in Upper Hamlet, I often dreamt about Thay practicing sitting meditation. He sat very straight and in a regal way. I could feel that the connection between us went very deep. I have many memories with Thay that really nourish me.

I remember during my first days at Plum Village, I asked many questions. At first, Thay was happy when I posed questions. However, after he saw that it was a habit of mine, he stopped giving me answers and left me to practice. That was very wonderful. I came here with all kinds of questions that no one could give me a final answer to. What I needed to do was to practice, and with time, the answers would come by themselves.

### The work of sangha building

***You were present during the very early years of Plum Village, witnessing the changes and growth of the sangha. Was the journey of sangha building tough? Have you ever felt exhausted? What helped you to continue preserving and growing the sangha?***

I recall in Thay's Dharma talk before the ordination of the "Fish" family in 1993, he said true practitioners are like mango flowers and fish eggs. A mango tree can give many flowers but only a few can ripen into fruits. The same is true for fish eggs. It takes hundreds or thousands of fish eggs for a few fish to make it. It is a truth, a pointer, reminding me that the life of practice is not an easy one. When our brothers and sisters traverse their obstacles and challenges, we should simply love them and never judge or criticize. Whether they are still in the monastic sangha or have already left, we must love them.

The life of practice is difficult. If we are still practicing, it means we are very fortunate, that we have merit. That merit is like something we had saved from years of working and thanks to it, even when we do not work we still have something to live on. This precious merit will sustain us on the long journey of a practice life. That is what is meant by "cultivating both merit and insight."



During the early days of the European Institute of Applied Buddhism (EIAB), I applied an “Honor System” way of operating that is based on self-respect. It is what I had learned during my studies at the California Institute of Technology ( ). I understood that this training is based on the love and progress of each individual. We learn out of love and the need to understand, not out of any sense of pressure. That is why Caltech gave rise to many smart and gifted students. I try to build sangha by elevating the spirit of self-discipline. Self-discipline here does not mean being loose and unruly. It means self-discipline within the frames of rules and routines, in the spirit of the precepts and fine manners and following the sangha schedule. A growing tree needs space around it so it can absorb nutrients and air. Likewise, I give a lot of freedom to the brothers and sisters to fulfill their wishes.

Even though we have become a member of a community, we still have private aspects of our life and I respect that privacy. As for the communal aspects, we need to build them and contribute to them to create a common space for everyone to practice and live in. That common space is very important. Building sangha is to build a common space.

We should not have an idea of a perfect sangha. Sanghas since the Buddha’s time have had this or that issue and sanghas in times to come will also be like that. That is suchness, reality as it is. Looking into it, we see that things manifest when conditions

are sufficient, and they hide when conditions are no longer sufficient. I also base my work of sangha-building on that principle. We do our utmost—what manifests will be the fruit of many generations of causes and conditions.

There were golden times when the sangha was strong and Thay went on many teaching tours. That may be the blooming of a lotus that has gathered together conditions of many lifetimes. After blooming, it returns to the mud. This has always been the case. Our sangha will also one day return to the mud. This is the truth of impermanence. It will be hidden in the mud, waiting for conditions to change amidst the miraculous course of life, waiting to form the next flower.

When we look at life this way, we open our hearts to accept it. Whatever we do, we do so with all our heart. Whatever the sangha can do, it does; be it joyful or not, be it successful or not. The important thing is that the Dharma continues to flow. The teachings and practices must flow continuously because that is what can change the sangha and change life. We ourselves have to be the living Dharma, we have to change. To practice is to face ourselves, to face our unwholesome habits in order to transform them. It is not about looking at the unwholesome habits of others. We see that when we can do this, then we can wish the same for others. As long as we cannot change ourselves, do not expect to change others. I believe that is the best way to build the sangha.



## **Serving and practicing are one**

***Dear brother, please share with us your insights on the relationship between practicing and serving.***

To practice is to open our hearts to give rise to selflessness, loving kindness, and a deeper awareness of life. Those are the elements of spirituality for a practitioner. That is why it is very difficult to practice! So much more difficult than writing a doctoral thesis. To change a course of action, a habit, requires a great deal of determination. Changing ourselves is no easy feat.

Only when we serve in a way that nourishes love and opens the heart is it true serving. When we work, our habit energies manifest and we have a chance to practice with them. If we just sit in our study room—no one approaches us, no one makes us angry or sad—what is there for us to practice with? If no one suffers, how can love arise in our heart? When we join the schedule, practice Dharma sharing, listen to and be in touch with suffering, we can open our hearts to share with people around us. In those moments love manifests and grows in us and that is how we practice. In this way, serving is also practicing.

In my first year as Thay's attendant, he never allowed me to stay back and attend to him during meals. He said, "Leave the food for me and go out to be with the lay friends. They really need our presence." Sometimes I came out a bit late and only a few lay friends were left. But I still sat there to be present for them. Thay also encouraged me to join

Dharma sharings. When we make sacrifices or dedicate ourselves to someone else's welfare, we naturally come to understand and free ourselves more. It is not only by taking care of ourselves that we can realize freedom. When a candle is burning, its light touches everything in its vicinity. The hottest part is the candle wick and that heat returns to melt the wax, allowing the candle to continue to burn and shine. We are the same. When we serve others, when we bring all our energy to shine light in the darkness, that energy will come back and melt the "wax" in us. We become a free person thanks to serving. That is why to practice is not just to take care of ourselves, but also to serve. This is selflessness, this is humanity. We will find that then we are the one who receives the most.

If a candle is not lit, it is not truly a candle, but only a block of wax. A candle needs to be lit and in the action of burning, it becomes a real candle. A true practitioner is the same. We have our true nature, our purpose, and our action. We have already found our form in that of a practitioner. But if we cannot radiate the energy of peace and happiness to help others change their lives, then we only have the form, we are only the wax. We need to turn the wax into light. The path of service is what creates the elements of a practitioner. From wax we become light and are no longer just wax. That is why in Plum Village, we practice while we work. If we do not practice while working, we are not a true practitioner. To practice or not, it is up to us! ☸

# Chicken and egg

BROTHER CHÂN PHÁP ỨNG

## The love of the ancestors

The never-broken transmission of the love between teacher and disciple, through many generations, including the World-Honored One, is real. I have received our grandfather teacher's love for Thay, his disciple, in a way that I can feel. It manifested during a retreat that was very difficult for me.

At that time I had only practised for four or five years and my practice was not yet stable. The sangha nominated me and another novice brother to lead a retreat in Germany. It was a five-day retreat for Vietnamese and German people. The retreatants shared their deep suffering and some even expressed suicidal thoughts. I cried during a Dharma talk knowing my strength of practice was still weak. I was like a lost child who cried to seek help from the spiritual energy of our ancestral teachers.

The retreat somehow unfolded wonderfully. During the ceremony to express gratitude to the Three Jewels, as I touched the earth with the sangha, I suddenly felt that without my knowing it, our grandfather teacher was there supporting me throughout the whole retreat. In that moment, all the stress, all the worries dissolved. I felt our grandfather teacher's love in its entirety. That love was received by Thay and passed on to me. Grandfather teacher held me in his heart. That love made me light, strong, and filled with humility.

After the retreat we held a Day of Mindfulness for Vietnamese and German people. The walking meditation took place under a beautiful autumn sun. I held the hand of a young Vietnamese child who walked and played, kicking up the leaves. As the one leading the walking meditation, I held my posture upright and solemn. Suddenly I thought: *Why don't I let myself play a little with my feet and the leaves?* My body and mind opened at that thought and I could be myself. I did not need to be tense. I heard Thay's voice from the depths of my heart: *Thay does not ask for anything more. Thay just wants you to be happy.* I was very grateful for that voice.

## Transcending time

Through that experience, I realized that the stories between our grandfather teacher and Thay are manifesting in a very real way. When Thay was still a novice monk at the root temple, one day, both teacher and disciple were working together. After working a while in the heat, our grandfather teacher, wearing his conical hat, straightened up. He was tired and sweating profusely from working. Turning around to look at Thay, he said, "I'm quite tired. I guess when I die I will stop being tired." Often we believe that when we die we will leave behind our loved ones and go to another world; we will no longer be held back by the things of this world and we are free. That is why we say, "I'm tired. When I die I will stop being tired." Thay did not understand his teacher's words. He was still only a novice. Grandfather teacher looked at him again and said, "But if I die, then *who* will be tired?" The word *who* here is very important. Grandfather teacher saw very clearly, just as we do, that the love between teacher and disciple transcends time. Grandfather teacher had the insight of interbeing; he was not limited by life and death. That is why grandfather teacher is always present with Thay and with his descendants for this life and for lives to come. It is thanks to that ceaseless continuation and transmission that we are still cradled by the love and care of generations of ancestral teachers.



## A philosophical question?

Thay received that saying like a koan from his teacher, and with his meditation practice over the years, finally broke through it like a chick hatching from an egg. In the West there is a seemingly very philosophical question—*Which came first, the chicken or the egg?* But when we ask which came first, we are in fact caught in the idea that the chicken and the egg are two separate entities. According to the

insight of Buddhism, there is a very intimate relationship between the chicken and the egg that cannot be separated or divided. The chicken and the egg are present at the same time and are in each other. That is called “no birth” in Buddhist terms. The chicken manifests from the egg, the egg manifests from the chicken. This is no birth and no death.

Thay has put this insight into practice: *I have arrived, I am home. In the here and in the now. The door of no birth is already open.* For Thay, that insight is very clear and he has nourished it and transmitted it to so many people around the world, both monastic and lay. It is thanks to that insight that we can practise to have true love, true peace, and true happiness. Our true home is here, is now, is everywhere.

### The interpenetration of the now

When we are alive, we train ourselves to live in the present moment, in our true home. When we die, we also die in the present moment, in our true home. It is with this insight that Thay was able to dwell in the present moment. This moment is beyond time. This moment contains the three times—past, present, and future. With periodic impermanence<sup>9</sup>, we have witnessed what we temporarily call the “death” of Thay. The reality however, is that Thay’s ability to dwell in mindfulness, concentration, and insight will continue to help him be truly present in the here, in the now, and in his true home. This is why Thay is here for us, for now and for lifetimes to come. This is also why the Buddhas and ancestral teachers are always here for us and we know that the lineage has never been and will never be broken. This is the insight of interbeing.

I remember one time, a sister encountered many difficulties and wanted to return to lay life. Thay could not help her and I saw he also suffered. During one Dharma talk, Thay said, “My child, Thay will be there for you for a thousand lifetimes.” “A thousand lifetimes” is just a customary way to speak about time. It means Thay is always present for you, now and forever. Thay has that insight and the ability to dwell in mindfulness, concentration, and insight. We are receiving the heritage of the Buddhas, the ancestral teachers, and of Thay. We are each in some aspect their continuation.



Lamp Transmission at the EIAB, 2020

### Finding Thay now

Now that Thay has passed away, where can we be in touch with Thay? The answer is—in every breath, in every step, in each one of us, right in the present moment and right in the midst of life. We should not think that Thay has entered nirvana and is somewhere else or that Thay will be born again in another form. Those thoughts are just conventional views. The view transmitted to us by Thay is that he is present right here, right now, in life, and in all of us. Thay has repeated it countless times for us to carve that insight into our hearts and bones. It is expressed in the poem *Please Call Me By My True Names*. Thay’s true name is also bird, ant, this person, that person, and the insight of inclusiveness. Thay is life, Thay is here, Thay is in all manifestations of suffering and happiness. He has never been born and has never died. If we are able to maintain that insight then we will always have Thay. Along with the Buddhas and ancestral teachers of countless generations, Thay will continue to lead us on the path of practice. ☸

9. There is momentary impermanence and periodic impermanence. Momentary impermanence is the constant changing of our cells, our feelings and loved ones, like a river with the same name but the water in it is constantly changing. Periodic impermanence is like the changing stages of our life, childhood, teen years, adulthood, old age, and death.

# Peace and Happiness walk hand in hand

SISTER CHÂN GIÁC NGHIÊM

Thinking of Plum Village in its early days is like opening a sacred and wonderful book where peace and happiness walk hand in hand.

## Arriving in Plum Village

Let's imagine a path in the countryside bordered on the right by oak trees with thick trunks, looking like large legs, or as Thay would have said, like a herd of elephants welcoming us. On the left, the path leads to a very large field where there is a farm. A young linden tree stands near the entrance to the buildings. There is also a large barn, which in the future, miraculously becomes a big meditation hall.

The building that follows shelters our Teacher: Thay on the first floor and his monastic children below, sharing the premises. The entrance opens into a small living room, furnished soberly, with a fireplace. This is where Thay will welcome me for our first meeting in Plum Village.

Facing the staircase leading upstairs is an alcove enclosed by a curtain, a shared room with four very simple beds. The place is offering me some rest: four bricks high, a wooden plank for the bed base, a yoga mat, a small pillow, and a light blanket. I cannot find words to express the joy I feel when I see this great simplicity. On each side of the entrance, two rooms protect the numerous joyful Vietnamese families. The laughter of their children delights our hearts.



Just opposite the entrance another stone building conceals the heart of the community: the living room (*salle à vivre*), which simultaneously serves as a dining room, kitchen, and meeting place. This is where our dear Thay prepares tea with great simplicity, which he then offers to us with a gesture of great gentleness. I am impressed by the deep

mindfulness in the gestures of our teacher. At this time — I did not know what mindfulness was — I discovered: it is the beauty of full awareness. *Thay is true, Thay is love.*

At the end of the room, a door opens into a small meditation room where a fireplace serves as an altar. Here the whole community gathers to meditate. There, all is happiness. Another door opens onto a vast field with a white cloud of wild carrot flowers interwoven with the sky-blue flowers of chicory, just like the Milky Way. I secretly think: *God has laid his finger on this precious earth. I have arrived, I am home.* Thay is there, his attentive presence pervades the garden, Thay removes the wilted flowers at the end of each day, and waters the plants with care.



Under the oak trees in Lower Hamlet

On arrival, I met Thay and Sister Cao Fleurette in the garden. This was in 1985. Sister Fleurette had long hair and beautiful eyes, like the eyes of a deer—full of understanding and love. Since then, I have been growing slowly next to these two wonderful trees.

It was a reunion. I had had the joy of meeting them a few months earlier in Lyon, at the home of Dr. Do Trong Le, an acupuncturist friend who invited me to come to his house to listen to the first teaching that our teacher was giving in French. At that time I was desperately looking for a teacher to help me on my spiritual path. A profound encounter took place during the teaching when Thay held a sheet of white paper in front of him and said, "In this sheet of paper lies the whole universe." I was filled with joy, I had found the teacher I was looking for, the one who

could understand me. The Dharma door was wide open.

When I reread *Old Path White Clouds*, I always feel great emotion when Thay writes about Sujata searching for the Buddha in the early morning, and the moment they meet each other. My spiritual life resumed its course in peace.

One day during this first retreat, I did not participate in the walking meditation around Upper Hamlet. Instead, I sat under the linden tree to write. At the end of the walking meditation, Thay approached me gently and asked me in a friendly manner:

— “What are you doing, Sister Elisabeth?”

— “Dear Thay, since I met you, I have been applying your teachings in the hospital where I work with my patients. I have a very busy life and I don’t have time to write about these practices, so today I have chosen to take the time to write about them. Please forgive me.”

— “Carry on and offer me your work,” said our teacher.

From then on, all the mindfulness practices I applied while working in the hospital were written down and offered to Thay as well as to the head of the department of the hospital where I was practising. Seeing the results with the patients, he generously gave me *carte blanche* to practise mindfulness! It was in 1985. Such happiness!

### Working in peace

Every day we had some working meditation with the sangha. At that time, Thay printed his teachings and then placed the pages of the future book on a table.

With mindfulness, we walked slowly around the table, collecting the sheets of paper one by one, following our breathing and our steps, before placing at the end of the table the united sheets awaiting to be turned into a book. Then we started again, with smiling faces, to give birth to the next book.

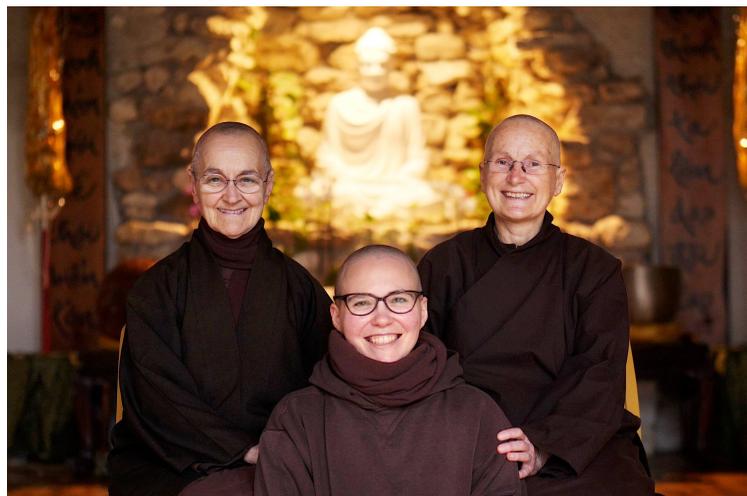
*With one step I breathe in, I take a sheet of paper,  
With one step I breathe out, I smile.  
With one step I breathe in, a book will be born,  
With one step I breathe out, I smile.*

This is an amazing experience from my early practice. I really enjoyed working meditation with the community. Everyone participated, including Thay. One morning a young woman came up to me and asked me to cut some bread, “in mindfulness,” she added seriously. *I breathe in, here’s the bread, I breathe out (Heavens, how do you cut bread in mindfulness?), no breathe out.*

Huge doubt arose in me... With this on-going question: *What does it mean to cut bread in mindfulness?* The lady came back a while later, nothing had happened... She kindly liberated me from my frozen state of mind. When the intellect dominates, doubt appears.

PLUM VILLAGE IS FULL OF FOND MEMORIES.

*Teaching,  
sitting in Peace,  
at the feet of Thay,  
in the shade of the great venerable oaks  
in Lower Hamlet.  
Brown heads, blond heads,  
turned towards the light,  
the Nectar of Dharma  
trickles down. ☪*



Sr. Giac Nghiem (left), Sr. Trang Khuong Am (center), Sr. Dao Nghiem

# Dharma Banquet

BROTHER CHÂN MINH HY

## Where is the Dharma?

There is an anecdote about an occasion at the Tu Dam Temple in Vietnam, when the monks were about to put their sanghati robe on for the precepts recitation ceremony, and Venerable Thien Sieu asked, “Do you know why we say, ‘The Dharma is deep and wonderful?’” Pausing for a few moments, he continued, “Because it is here, right in front of you.”

I heard this anecdote when the Venerable Abbot of Bao Lam Temple recounted it to us at Dieu Tram Nunnery. This question has stayed with me ever since—*How can the wonderful and deep Dharma be right in front of us? Why can't I see it? Is it because there are many things around that are so ordinary that I am unable to see it?*

At banquets, we often offer special dishes. If a meal only has rice and green vegetables, we cannot call it a banquet since they are eaten every day, every week, every month, the whole year round, and throughout our whole life. But there are people who cannot bear it if they don't have rice, even just for one or two days. If that is so, then rice and green vegetables are not ordinary. They are in fact special because almost everyone can eat them and many cannot live without these staples. “Special dishes” at banquets are special, but they can only be eaten occasionally. We cannot eat them every day like the way we eat rice. As the Vietnamese proverb says, *No one loves us like rice does.*

The teachings of the Buddha are the same. There are Dharma doors that we practice every day and we come to find them very ordinary. But the truth is, they are very special because irrespective of place or situation, they can be easily practiced by everyone.

## Finding depth and gratitude here and now

When learning and practicing profound meditations such as impermanence, non-self, emptiness, signlessness, aimlessness, or interbeing, we need to be able to maintain them with solidity and freedom during daily life. Our steps and mindful breathing

must be able to reflect and also to nourish the powerful energy source of these meditations.



Br. Minh Hy leading walking meditation in Upper Hamlet

We need to develop this way of looking. Each step, each breath, each time we relax is not an ordinary practice but a very special one, as it is able to carry within itself the profound insights of meditation.

Perhaps rice and boiled vegetables have become ordinary due to the way we eat them, especially if we haven't yet been able to appreciate that “a grain of rice is a jade stone from heaven” (Vietnamese proverb). If you allow yourself to look into the bowl of rice in your hands with appreciation, then gratitude and happiness will be born in your heart right in that moment. With just one breath, happiness will come very quickly. You will smile and know that you are very fortunate.

*“Beings all over the earth  
are struggling to live.  
I aspire to practice deeply  
so all may have enough to eat.”  
—Gatha “Before Eating,” Stepping into Freedom*

In this way, there are things that are very familiar, but they never become out of date. Each step, each in-breath and out-breath, each bowl of rice can become a banquet if our heart is filled with gratitude.

### **Offering beauty**

One time, Thay’s attendants noticed that Thay was a little different. After giving a Dharma talk Thay came back to his hut, drank a cup of tea, took his straw hat and went directly for walking meditation whereas usually he would rest a little longer. Upon arriving at the gathering place, Thay bowed to the sangha and led the walk. Everything unfolded without delay. With light and free steps, Thay led the sangha to the Sixteen Buddhas, his favorite place, where he liked to stop and rest during walking meditation. As soon as the sangha sat down, the

church bells rang. The attendant looked at Thay who had a very bright smile on his face. It turned out that there was a delegation of monks from another country visiting Plum Village. That was the first time they had come to Upper Hamlet and joined the practice of walking meditation. Therefore, Thay wanted to offer them a moment of miracle. Thay was very pleased with that moment, as everything happened just at the right time. It is not only with good tea or delicious food that we can treat our guests.

A beautiful moment can help the happiness in people’s hearts grow bigger. Such a moment is a banquet that we can offer our beloved ones many times a day. But first of all, we need to have the ability to perceive, to feel, and to offer ourselves such banquets. If we do not know how to drink tea, how can we offer our friends a good cup of tea? It is very difficult for a busy person to treat others to a relaxing and free moment.

Have you treated yourself today with any happy moments? ☪



# Meditation Songs

SISTER CHÂN QUY NGHIÊM

I thought that meditation songs were a new Dharma door of Plum Village. But in fact, it is a long-standing Zen tradition that Plum Village has applied creatively and widely so that people now, especially young people, can easily come in touch with the Buddha's teachings to be more aware of the meaning of their life, and to live in a more wholesome, beautiful, and rich way.

In the Zen tradition, the monks and nuns chant sutras while inviting bells, fish drums, and other Dharma instruments. Now I realize that chanting is a form of meditation song—a way to help us absorb the teachings of the Buddha. The words of the sutras are like drops of nectar that fall gently on the soil of the mind, germinating the good seeds, watering them so they may grow, bear fruit, and bring beauty to our lives.

When I first came to Plum Village, France, in the Summer of 1987, I heard a recording of the song “Your consciousness is like the sun shining” by the singer Ha Than (a well known Vietnamese singer of meditation songs). I was deeply moved, as if I had been asleep and had just woken up. The Buddha said we suffer because we do not see the path. There are tens of thousands of paths in life. If we are not fortunate enough to meet the Buddha to show us the way, we could easily be lost.

So each meditation song is like a sutra, a finger of the Buddha showing us the way to peace. “Fortunately, there is a compassionate hand everywhere in the world, reaching out to help you.” If we do not practice for our consciousness to shine like the sun, it is hard for us to see the Buddha's guiding finger, and to be determined to follow in his footsteps and cross to the shore of freedom.

The words and music of a meditation song must be gentle and well blended, like the mind of the Buddha. It must be able to wake us up so that we are no longer in a slumber, no longer writhing in suffering. I love to sing the song “Breathing in, Breathing out” in many languages as a way to remind myself to wake up, to come back and take care of my body and mind before doing or saying anything. This way, I can avoid making mistakes that bring suffering to myself and to others.



Chanting before Dharma talk, 1991

I practice to consciously breathe in and out along with the song, like how Thay taught us, to calm the body and mind, to be fresh like a flower, solid as a mountain, still like a serene lake, and vast as the sky so nothing can disturb me. The one who sings and the one who listens must truly *be* what they are singing and listening to, so that the good seeds in them can be watered, grow strong, and offer flowers and sweet fruit for themselves and others.

Therefore, the one who sings meditation songs and the one who listens are very important. If the singer and the listener are not practicing, it is hard to convey and receive the meaning of the meditation song; all its effects would be lost, no matter how melodic the music or how elegant the words. Likewise, no matter how practical or beneficial the teachings of the Buddha, or how supremely awakened the Buddha is, if there is not a solid sangha that is practicing sincerely, it would be hard to come in touch with the authentic teachings and with the Buddha. That is why the King Pasenadi said to the Buddha, “When I look into your sangha and see the solidity and peace of each of your disciples, my faith in you grows.”

I believe that each meditation song, in its true sense, should carry the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. If the one who sings has a solid practice and a voice and comportment that are rich with the flavor of Zen, then perhaps only one song is enough to inspire the listeners to practice. The listeners would wish to sing that meditation song in their daily life in order to transform their suffering, rediscover the joy of living, and have greater trust in themselves and in life. ☪

# a Thousand years of returning

BROTHER CHÂN NGUYỄN TỊNH



*Brother Nguyễn Tịnh was ordained in 2000 in Vietnam. In 2014, he decided to join the Plum Village sangha in Upper Hamlet. He is one of our senior Dharma teachers and is much loved for his gentle, humble bearing and for his love of poetry. In recent years he has spent much of his time as an attendant to Thay.*

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## **Excerpts from a practice journal**

Nov 3, 2015

### **Let me also be present**

Today is a Monastic Day. I went quite early to the Hermitage so I could walk on the grounds. A few brown robes were already there, each enjoying the serenity. Thay was away for health treatment in the U.S. and had yet to return. Three more days and it would be a full year since I first arrived in Plum Village.

The sun was rising. I sat by a tree next to Phuong Khe—the Fragrant Creek. It was the rainy season so the creek was in full flow, and sitting there, I could listen to its murmur. I closed my eyes and followed my breathing. The morning sun embraced me.

In recent days my mind has been filled with desolation, as if I had just set foot on a cold, deserted island in order to face myself alone and find the answers for my life. Somewhere in me was a flicker of guilt as I seemed indifferent to all I had. Did I really need to choose my own path and leave behind

all the hope and trust that so many had bestowed on me and had wished for me to fulfill? Images of Kim Son Temple, where I ordained and studied for fourteen years, kept coming back like howling waves tormenting my five skandhas. Phrases I had heard before and thought had nothing to do with me were now arising: *Have I left behind my teacher and ancestral teachers? Did I turn my back on my roots? Have I taken for granted the relationships in my life before this? Should I go back to my old life?*

During sitting meditation, these thoughts continued to emerge, rocking me and confining me in an invisible room. I called on Thay, placing my attention on his solid, peaceful, and courageous energy that was protecting me.

In that same moment, the image of a carp leaping the dragon gate, majestic yet unmistakably lonely, suddenly appeared in my mind. The carp leaps with all its might in order to transform into a dragon. That leap can give it a sense of loss as it leaves behind the lake, the rocks, the moss, and all the things that are familiar to the life of a carp. This loss is also a turning point. If it can leap to the other side and become a dragon, the carp of old would see that it really has lost nothing. Although there is no longer the need for moss or rock holes to make a home or for old familiar things, the carp of old does not look down on them. It still occasionally visits the old places and finds them even more beautiful, seen through the eyes of a dragon.

That moment passed as fast as lightning. I held fast to the breath and nourished the image deeply in my mind. I saw that I could bring along both my land ancestors and spiritual ancestors from Kim Son Temple. The answer came without a doubt: I am not letting others down, I am not betraying them, I am not running away; I am just doing what I need to do. I do so for myself, for the aspiration to strengthen my old relationships with the Buddhist Association, with my teacher and the ancestral teachers, and with the temple that gave me spiritual birth. If I do it well, then my return will be beautiful. That's when I realized that I no longer felt smothered by the old customs that had once confined and overpowered me. I am establishing sovereignty over my spiritual path, unlimited by existing conventions. I know what I lack and I am on my way to making a beautiful foundation which is what I hunger for.

I opened my eyes. Tears streamed down my cheeks. The sun was already high. I smiled, my heart filled with gratitude. In the heart of the Fragrant Creek, I saw myself more clearly. I was so delighted to find that I had touched an inner freedom and no longer clung to the usual material and emotional comforts. I did not look down upon them, nor feel averse towards them. It is just that I found I no longer fit that way of life. I joined my palms, bowed, and got up to walk to the old cedars. Encountering my elder Brother Phap Ung, I smiled, bowed to him, and felt deeply grateful for the energy of the sangha.

All afternoon, I sat in meditation in a corner of the old wooden barn to deepen that insight. By the time I stepped outside, the sangha had just finished

playing games and were exchanging gifts. If I had not had the opportunity to sit, walk, work, drink tea, or eat, right in the midst of the sangha every day for the past year, I know it would have been very difficult to encounter a miraculous moment like this.

*Mar 10, 2016*

### **The day of return**

I received the surprising news that I would soon have an opportunity to be Thay's attendant. Having the great fortune to be near Thay, I learned from the lessons he transmitted. At each meal, Thay brought each spoonful of food to his mouth with utter attention, care, and enjoyment. Mindfulness had become his life. Thay enjoyed each sip of tea with tranquility. Observing and enjoying nature, Thay had become a free person, with nothing to do, and nowhere to go. One bud of white champaca blooms and for Thay, it is a miracle. I loved so much every time I saw Thay taking his left hand to care for and wake up his right hand. Thay sat at his desk and with his left hand held a calligraphy brush to draw circle after circle, smiling. A flower bloomed on the page, it bloomed in Thay's heart, and in the hearts of each of us.

*Mar 25, 2016*

### **Sixteenth day attending Thay**

Like the ancestral teachers of the past, Thay is also transmitting the living Dharma day and night: you support my feet, for you I walk; you offer medicine, for you I drink it; you bring me rice, for you I eat it; you are disrespectful, I reprimand you for your sake;



you make me tea, for you I reach out to receive it; you want to learn, for you I teach; you bring me the chamber pot, for you I urinate; you want to learn impermanence, for you I am ill. Try asking me if I have transmitted the *Mind Seal* to you. Has anyone let anyone down?

I could feel this during my time as an attendant. Thay is also ill for the sangha, for Plum Village, so that his monastic children have a chance to grow. Thay bears bodily pain each day, and he has the time to watch life springing up. If that is not a miracle, if that is not a living teaching, then what is? If we are not able to receive these concrete lessons from Thay, how can we continue to ask for more? Thay's strength is still emanating from his eyes.

I remember the second morning of the "Gratitude" Great Precepts Transmission Ceremony, Thay was staying at the Sitting Still Hut and woke early to drink tea. Thay indicated to us, his two attendants, to put on our long robes and push him in his wheelchair to view the moon. I pushed the wheelchair along a path near the Upper Hamlet bell tower. The morning moon was full and bright. Thay sat still, enjoying the moon, and often raised his hand to show us the way to be in deeper contact with the moon. Entering the Still Water Meditation Hall, Thay looked around a little at the decorations, then continued to view the moon and show it to us. After that, Thay agreed to visit the Transformation Hall.

The venerable monks were at breakfast and Thay joined them. Thay ate very mindfully, carefully and decisively bringing each spoonful of food to his mouth. His eyes were as bright as the eyes I had met in Thailand in 2013. Thay's eyes and bearing led Venerable Giac Quang to tears. After breakfast Thay returned to the Sitting Still Hut. The sun was just appearing. Thay saw it and pointed it out to everyone, then invited the venerables to watch the sun rise in his hut. The scene was glorious.

*Apr 5, 2016*

### **Twenty-seventh day attending Thay**

Asleep in the heart of the Hermitage, I dreamt of a young boy of ten who was poor and sick. The boy knew he had to take a special train to go somewhere and then he would find the life he was meant to live. He had to go, but he did not have any money. Carrying a bag containing a few items, he chose his moment to hide in a dark, cramped cargo hold. The train started and meandered through the plains, hills, and wild ancient forests.

The train passed through a dark tunnel and suddenly the boy heard words in his mind like torrential rain pouring down and he felt so sad. In the rear view mirror, he saw that he was truly a lone walker with no friends, no family, without a word of solace or sympathy from anyone. Prior to this for some unknown reason, all his friends had scattered in different directions. Perhaps some were also alone on an express train headed for another destination, surely just as lonely. The boy was sad, but he did not cry.

The majesty of the sky, the forest, and the trees called the boy back to their beauty. He could not sit still in the dark. A voice from the depths of his heart was calling out to him, moving him. He looked out the door, and even put his head outside to see the view as the train passed through forests and valleys. He completely forgot that he might be discovered, and was happy just looking.

The train slowed down without stopping and the wind no longer whistled. The train driver's side window opened and the boy could clearly see the gentle and cheerful face of the driver. Through the rear view mirror, the driver's eyes turned in the direction of the boy. He was paralyzed with fear that he would be found and kicked off the train! But in that moment, the driver smiled an all too familiar smile which echoed in the boy's subconscious. The boy knew that he was safe and that he would arrive where he needed to go. The driver even winked and nodded at the boy and he suddenly spoke a sentence, or a line from a poem: "We always love and care for urchins like you."

I woke up with tears in my eyes, and cried deeply and like a child. The tears were like drops of water from the fragrant well at Kim Son Temple, once drunk by a young novice monk. Thay's image had replaced that of the train driver. My heart called out, "O Thay, my dear teacher."

Something about the dream shook my five skandhas fiercely. I felt like the poor, ragged child who was searching for the most precious thing in his life, and I had been allowed to board the train home. The one driving the train had accepted me with a noble and virtuous smile. I was no longer a stranger, no longer the one who carried so much guilt on the journey home. For a thousand lifetimes, I have been that poor, sick child. For a thousand lifetimes, Thay has been that driver, bringing me back to a safe and peaceful place where I can find all that I have ever sought, so that I could truly be me. A dream is not

just a dream. For me, the dream contained my entire heritage and path.

### **The call to enter the stream**

One afternoon I was walking from Son Ha to Upper Hamlet. The horizon was ablaze with the changing colours and falling leaves of the forest, and golden leaves carpeted the path. I saw a small tuft of grass and some new leaves that I had not noticed before, though I have trodden this path countless times. Suddenly, I understood why Thay taught us again and again about breathing and walking, about the beauty of the legendary path, or sang praises of the purple bamboo and the blue sky, or showed us the miracle of a single leaf.

When I used to listen to his Dharma talks or read his books or hear stories about Thay from my brothers, I often wondered, *What is it about those*

*things that Thay never tires of reminding his disciples?* That day, seeing the grass and new leaves on a well-trodden path, I smiled. I realized that I had found with my own eyes the beauty and mystery of these seemingly ordinary things. Having seen it once, I can offer myself once again that way of looking. These simple discoveries have nurtured my joy of practicing, nurtured my gratitude for Thay's insights, which have been adapted to the times, and nurtured my faith in the sangha's ability to receive and transmit the ceaseless flow of the spiritual river.

*A thousand autumns pave  
the leaf strewn path.*

*One plum branch blossoms,  
the fragrance of sandalwood incense  
infuses each ancient brush stroke. ☪*



# Poems

SISTER CHÂN ĐÀO NGHIÊM

*A rose in my hand, my heart wide open, I walk.  
Each step is imprinted in the earth,  
sending messages of peace to the whole universe.  
Determined, I make the request  
to dedicate my life to relieving suffering.  
Bowing to you, my teacher, I offer you a rose,  
a symbol of love in my being.  
I am determined to continue to walk this way,  
opening my arms to life,  
opening my heart to others,  
opening my eyes to truly see,  
letting my senses reveal their magnificence.  
My mind is calm and serene.  
My life is simple and in harmony with the  
whole universe.  
I cultivate the garden of my heart,  
joy, peace, and love  
so that I can offer her flowers to all beings.  
My mind is open.  
Living in the present moment, I have no regrets  
or thoughts of the future.  
I am filled with enthusiasm and practice with all my heart.  
Every day I recognise everything that life gives me  
as a wonderful gift and am filled with gratitude.  
On the ocean of life I undergo many transformations.  
Great serenity and joy are present.  
The beauty of nature, the changing color of the clouds,  
the smile of a child, the magic of life.  
Gratitude in my heart for all my ancestors,  
for all they have accomplished,  
allowing me to be what I am today.  
Gratitude for the beauty of life.*

Written in 2003.

A week before we ordain, we have a ceremony formally requesting to receive the ten novice precepts. During this ceremony we offer a rose to Thay and to our spiritual ancestors. This poem expresses how I felt during that ceremony, my deep aspiration and the love in my being.



*At the death of my ancestors I shed tears of despair  
With mindfulness they have become a source of  
happiness  
where I stop to drink.  
In the silence I listen to the soft murmur of her melody  
And in letting go I discover, with joy, Life.  
In my steps I found my father  
A river became my mother  
My sister opened my heart and made my fear disappear  
My brother welcomed me to his land  
And shared his hell  
Near him I understood true humility  
To touch serenity.*

This poem was written as an offering to all my ancestors, spiritual and genetic when I received the lamp transmission to become a Dharma teacher in 2011. Thay's teachings have helped me to heal the suffering that I carried from seeing the suffering and experiencing the loss of many members of my family.

A cup of steaming tea  
a lighted candle  
a pen writing these lines  
a dream from a few years ago  
written at the bottom of a letter  
that comes true  
"a cup of tea in your company"  
a cup of tea filled with clouds  
your legacy.



*A hand that protects  
A hand that caresses  
A hand that loves  
A hand that guides us  
A hand that shows us the way  
The hand of our ancestors  
The hand of our teacher  
A hand of love  
A hand that supports  
A hand that inspires  
A hand of poetry  
A hand that contains the whole cosmos  
A hand filled with clouds, stars, cups of tea  
A hand that has known despair, hate, discrimination, fear  
A hand that prays  
A hand that unites  
A hand filled with faith  
A hand that welcomes  
A hand that embraces  
A hand that shares  
A hand that relieves  
A hand passed down through the generations  
Thank you Beloved Thay  
Recognising your hand  
Recognising that there is no separation  
You are in me  
I am in you  
Your hand continues through millions of hands.*

This poem was written in December 2016 for Thay.

I was always very moved when I watched Thay's hands, the way that Thay held his cup of tea, opened a door, placed his hand on our heads and how Thay gave us teachings using the example of his hands.

*Snow falling, Autumn!  
Embarking on a journey  
of silence and joy.*

This poem was written in November, 2002 when I was living in upstate New York and dreaming about traveling to Plum Village to meet Thay. I had started reading books written by Thay in 2000 and came for my first retreat in Plum Village in February 2002.

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*To distant lands I left,  
walking step by step on life's path.  
With simple words written on white paper  
you called me at a certain time.  
I found you in the land of my ancestors  
and the day your gaze penetrated my being,  
deep in my heart, I recognised you.  
Since that magical moment,  
time no longer exists  
and my life has become millions of lives.  
All the flowers sway gently and smile at me.  
Your diamond eyes cut and sever  
all the ties that keep me tied,  
one by one with the greatest tenderness  
helping me to reach the place in my heart  
that has eternally existed.  
Thank you my beloved teacher.*

When I made my decision to ordain in May 2003, I wrote this poem. The first time I saw Thay I knew Thay was the teacher I had been searching for, for all my life. I had left France in 1982 to live in a spiritual community in the USA and Canada. I did not return to live in France until 2003 when I was ordained in the Plum Village tradition. ☸

# Thirteen Years of Monastic Life: Taking Stock

SISTER CHÂN TRÌ NGHIÊM

On a cold and windy yet bright and sunny day on March 8, 2009, Thay put his hand on my head, gave me his blessing, snipped a lock of my hair, presided over the ceremony while I took my vows and gifted me with the enduring legacy of my wonderful Dharma name: Adornment with True Holding. With this, I was officially born into the Golden Lotus family, along with nine others in the Still Water Meditation Hall of Upper Hamlet, Plum Village. Thirty-six Vietnamese siblings were born into monastic life at the same time in Tu Hieu Temple, Hue. This year, those of us still in robes celebrate thirteen years of monastic life. How time flies!

A year later, to mark our first anniversary and for the sake of posterity, one sister suggested we record the most memorable experiences of our first year in a little red imitation leather notebook she provided, which, rather unfortunately, disappeared shortly after and I have never seen it since. So much for recording the key moments of our monastic infancy for posterity! Yes, this was *before* the time when all memories were automatically saved to the cloud.

Yet, even without a record, I can still remember the feel of my account: it gushed with enthusiasm. I loved everything about my new monastic life. I loved my newly acquired extended family of hundreds from so many different cultures and continents. I loved our community of practitioners from around the globe. I loved the yearly schedule of retreats – with people from near and far, all seeking change in their lives. I loved the brotherhood and sisterhood, the walks and picnics we went on in the French countryside in springtime, treading softly on fresh, spongy grass dotted with a myriad of golden dandelions and tiny white daisies between rows of budding vineyards. I even remember loving the mid-summer Health Retreat—a fasting and hiking endurance test! We hiked along country roads with our resident health guru, Brother Phap Lu, in the scorching heat of August, our feet slowly dragging as our hot and thirsty, food-deprived and weakened bodies pushed on towards our destination. I clearly remember one conversation we had, passing by some rows of blackberry briars, “So how is monastic

life treating you?” Br. Phap Lu inquired knowingly. “Well, I think I am still in the honeymoon phase,” I replied, afraid this may not have been quite the answer he was expecting. “Good!” he shot back. “Stay there!”



With Thay after the novice ordination

With or without the sound advice of Br. Phap Lu in those early days, my honeymoon phase went on to last a solid twelve more years.

## **Volition: the recipe for longevity**

What has kept me on the path till now? The sangha’s love and my volition. My deep desire and determination to heal my own ancestral suffering, to break the cycle of intergenerational trauma, to transform my accumulated afflictions and to cultivate peace, joy, love and freedom in this lifetime, and to help as many others as I can along the way.

I do not know where this courage and determination came from, but I see it requires something of a warrior spirit—a willingness to face

difficulties and suffering and not to run away from them. It requires a deep conviction and faith in the path in order to stay the course and overcome the many challenges that we inevitably encounter in monastic life. The more I practice, the more I recognize my shortcomings and difficulties. Alongside all the positive seeds that I am happy to embrace and call my own, I carry more problematic seeds deep within me that I try to avoid, and pretend are not mine. Sooner or later though, they manifest, and I must face them. Seeds of fear. Seeds of discrimination. Seeds of judgment. Seeds of anger. Seeds of doubt. And seeds of despair. The path of awakening inevitably leads us down this road and there is no escape.

### **The importance of a sense of belonging**

I was born as the youngest child into a small nuclear family of five—my parents, my two elder siblings and I. We lived in a small country town, far away from grandparents and relatives in the city. I rarely saw my grandparents. I barely knew my three cousins. My sense of family was small and tenuous. This all changed dramatically when I was ordained. Quite unexpectedly, my “family” suddenly expanded and multiplied.

First, I was born into an ordination family of forty-six. The ten of us who were in Plum Village, France, would sit together for lunch on monastic days and share deeply about what was going on in our hearts. Then, I shared a room with three other sisters and no matter how often we changed rooms, there were always three other sisters and sometimes even four, all crowded head-to-toe into tiny rooms—an inescapable experience of togetherness!

With the act of shaving my head, I suddenly belonged to so many different families. The family of my room-mates, my cooking rotation, the Care Taking Council, and our little family of mentees, all gathered together around our wise and compassionate mentor for weekly sessions of deep sharing, laughter, and sometimes tears. Next came the retreat organizing teams and Dharma sharing families. The “ten directions” family of brothers and sisters were a group loosely defined by the fact that we all spoke English. Many were from the West, but as our sangha demographic changed, we were joined by siblings from Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, and other Asian countries, as well as the occasional Vietnamese sibling or those who had grown up in the West. The “ten directions” group of Advent enthusiasts in the weeks before Christmas, the Plum Village monastic choir, and finally, the blood

relatives of my monastic brothers and sisters who, by default, became my siblings and parents, too.

Families within families within families—a never-ending network of connections. So many opportunities to belong. I felt rich and blessed. I enjoyed a sense of belonging and community I had not known before in my life. Day by day I became lighter and more joyful. I started to glow as the light of love, compassion and acceptance in me grew.

### **The joys of siblinghood**

I loved my international sangha of brothers and sisters in Plum Village. Everybody was so helpful, friendly, welcoming, accepting, kind, and smiling. I felt accepted and embraced by everyone. I made many mistakes and was unskilful many times, but I was always forgiven and accepted. I felt there was love and respect and an openness in our community; an acceptance of difference.

When I ordained, there were about 40 sisters in Lower Hamlet, eight of whom were from Western countries. Because we shared a common language and similar cultures, I bonded with them naturally and easily. We spent a lot of time together, going for walks, eating meals together, singing and playing music or even dancing to traditional French folk music on the slippery wooden floor of the Dharma Nectar Hall, amid peals of laughter as we struggled to master the rapid steps and turns.

For many years, on lazy days in cold winter months, we would huddle around the stove in the Dharma Nectar Hall to eat breakfast, talk, laugh, and share stories, forever hoping the fire’s feeble heat would eventually warm our freezing limbs.

In warmer months, we would gravitate to the Old Bell Tower for picnic lunches, sharing goodies that friends or family had sent. The same group would gather behind the Dharma Nectar Hall every June as we celebrated my birthday amid an abundance of happy faces, small gifts, green leaves and grasses and delicate wildflowers. It was an exciting, joy-filled time of discovery and bonding with a wonderful family of inspiring and engaged Western nuns—I felt happy, loved, and embraced. I felt I belonged.

### **Taking up a new challenge**

Twelve happy years passed without any major challenges. In March 2019, I moved to Magnolia Grove Monastery in Mississippi, USA, in order to explore life in a smaller, Vietnamese-speaking

community. Not many understood this choice, but I wanted to deepen my practice, learn more about community life and immerse myself in Vietnamese language and culture. At the same time, this was an opportunity to reconnect with my own cultural roots. While not exactly the same, American culture has many things in common with my original Australian heritage. It was the first time in almost forty years that I had lived in an English-speaking environment, having left Australia when I was only twenty-two to move to Switzerland. I enjoyed the ease of connection with our U.S. friends, and felt the excitement of a new beginning.

Magnolia Grove Monastery stands on 120 acres of wooded land and sprawling lawns. The woods are home to squirrels, raccoons, possums, deer, rabbits, armadillos, and birds of all kinds, including the ever-present ravens with their distinctive, plaintive calls, striking turkey vultures and majestic eagles. By day, the woods echo with the sound of red-crested woodpeckers and at night the hooting of owls. In springtime, birds of all colours hop about on our lawns and nestle in our trees: amongst others brown thrashers, blue jays, flaming red cardinals, and brilliant southern yellow finches.

Although numbers fluctuate, the Magnolia sangha is a small and cozy family of about 20 sisters and, until recently, 10 brothers. All the sisters live together in one house, which has the comforting feel of a family home. It was a wonderful new experience for me to discover our extended family of local American and Vietnamese friends who support our sangha—they visit regularly and nourish us with their generous smiles, helping hands, and the tasty dishes they offer. In my first year here, we went for day trips to nearby Sardis Lake and were taken out on friends' boats. We picnicked, swam in the lake, went for walks along the beach, napped in hammocks slung between pine trees, played music and built brotherhood and sisterhood. Once again, I felt a wonderful sense of family and belonging.

Then along came COVID-19. Suddenly my world constricted.

### **COVID-19 changed everything**

In order to protect the health of our sangha, we closed our center to the public in March 2020. We remained closed for more than a year until July 2021. After two months of welcoming guests and a smaller-than-usual summer retreat, the Delta variant arrived, so we decided to close the monastery again.

My heart sank. I missed the contact with our lay friends. Although I had helped with many online retreats and weekly practice sessions throughout the year, it did not satisfy my deep aspiration to help all beings cross to the other shore!

For the first time in my monastic life, I began to question my sense of purpose.

### **The importance of a sense of purpose**

As for many others, the last two years of closures and lockdowns left their mark on me. Five months spent (unvaccinated) in a small house in Houston, Texas, added to my sense of disconnection and isolation. Occasional Zoom calls, online retreats and weekly online sessions alleviated some of my felt sense of isolation but did not fulfil my need for more human contact and face to face interaction.

Existential questions began to arise: *Who* am I and what am I here for if our monastery is closed?

If I cannot be in contact with lay friends, how can I realize my deep aspiration—and help realize our teacher's aspiration—of healing the world? Of bringing Buddhism to the West? Of facilitating a collective awakening?

For the first time in my monastic life I felt deeply challenged and alone.

### **An endangered species?**

When I ordained, there were about forty Western brothers and sisters older than me in the sangha – roughly twenty of each. I never questioned their existence, and never imagined that one day they might not be there. It seemed so normal, and I took them for granted, the way a child naively thinks its parents will never die.

Over the years, though, I witnessed the departure of so many Western siblings – both older and younger. It was often excruciatingly painful for me but with time I came to accept that this was not the right path for everyone and certainly not an easy path for anyone, no matter what their origin.

Right now, above me in ordination age there are only eight other Western sisters and about ten Western sisters who come after me, in our worldwide Sangha of about four hundred nuns. Two thirds of all Western sisters have left our sangha. I have begun to feel that Western nuns have become an endangered species, soon to become extinct.

Why is this so? What are the conducive conditions for Western women to want to ordain into our community, and then what are the “sufficient conditions” for them to stay? I realize the answer varies for each individual—everyone is different and has a different story, a different background, different needs, and is in a different place in their lives—however, I continue to hold this question in my heart.

### **Taking stock**

Looking back at my monastic life and reflecting on what has kept me here so far, I see there are a number of reasons, not just one.

My strong volition, yes. My Bodhicitta, yes. But also, my good-enough health. My outgoing nature. My joy of connecting with others. My ability to see the beauty in all people and cultures and accept differences, accept otherness. My resilience. My capacity to tolerate frustration and slowness of change. My faith in the practice, my faith in our teacher and in our community. My love and gratitude towards the sangha in general and towards my siblings in particular.

However, without an open, welcoming, and compassionate sangha this would not be enough. Without the unconditional love of the sangha, I could not grow and flourish. The sangha is truly a bright and radiant jewel. Collectively, the sangha can provide what most individuals cannot: true love—spiritual friendship, compassion, loving kindness,

equanimity and inclusiveness. To this list our teacher added reverence and trust, and I would like to add: space and time. The sangha has given me space and time to be, to grow, to become, to learn, to transform.

### **The joy of monastic life**

Recently I found myself talking about the trials and tribulations of monastic life to a guest who had expressed interest in pursuing a monastic path. Once more, I found myself gushing with enthusiasm. “Where else can you focus exclusively on what is most important to you in life?” I asked rhetorically and then, true to form, answered for them.

The sangha is made of a collection of individuals, and just as no one individual is perfect, the sangha is also not perfect. We all have our blind spots, our areas of resistance, our unhealed traumas, oftentimes passed on to us by our ancestors and society, and the sangha is no different. Is practising in the sangha enough to be happy? Enough to transform our afflictions? Are conditions sufficient for us to grow and heal? To flourish?

For myself, I have found that the practice of mindfulness as transmitted by our extraordinarily accomplished and compassionate teacher, embedded in an open, evolving, loving and supportive monastic community, was the way to achieve everything I was seeking in life. Till today, I still hold this to be true, and feel incredibly blessed. My gratitude overflows. ☸



# “No Escape!” Retreat

SISTER CHÂN TRĂNG TAM MUỘI

## A year in lockdown with very elderly parents

I stood in the hallway, one hand placed lightly on the banister, and breathed slowly.

Suddenly, I heard the thumping steps of two young girls galloping and laughing up and down the stairs. I saw Dad standing in the hall calling upstairs, and heard sounds of cooking from the kitchen, Mum preparing lunch. Standing in the heart of the now empty house, our family home for sixty years, I said goodbye and left the spirits of the place to play on.

It had been a long journey. *Rewind 18 months to Spring 2019.* I receive yet another urgent call to come home. My father, ninety-six, blind, with failing health may be dying. Over the years I had been preparing myself for their passing and I knew the importance of “Don’t wait.” With deep gratitude for the support of the Lower Hamlet sisters, I left for England. Thankfully Dad rallied once again, but it was not to last. With the UK and France going into full Covid lockdown, I stayed on and was thus able to enjoy two more months by his side. Dad died peacefully in his own bed on a beautiful May morning with the family all around him, Mum holding his hand. Minutes after my father’s last breath Mum said, with relief, “Well, if that’s what dying’s like, it’s not so bad.”

A carer had shared with me how the family can take care of the body in a respectful and nourishing way. First, my elder sister and I requested to help the nurse mindfully and lovingly wash his body and dress him in his best pyjamas. We asked to keep Dad’s body at home for another day. I surrounded his body with fresh May flowers from the garden that he and Mum had grown and tended for over 60 years: rose petals were strewn over the bed, lily of the valley placed at his head.

To sit with his body was a wonderful experience. In England the old traditions have been lost and most people want death to leave the house immediately. The close family visited and we were able to sit around Dad and recall our happy memories to honour his life. Mum also had quiet time to say her goodbyes, so essential because they had been married for almost seventy years. When

she finally decided that she was definitely going to attend the funeral, on leaving the house in a wheelchair, she was moved to see the whole street gathered to greet and applaud her.



Sr. Tam Muoi with her ninety-nine-year-old Mum, Peggy

Later when the ceremonies were completed, I had to decide when to return to Plum Village. I felt deeply conflicted because on the one hand how could I leave my Mum to mourn alone, even if she had a wonderful live-in carer to take care of her personal needs? On the other hand, as any of her carers could tell you, Mum is not an easy woman and the idea of staying with her for an extended period was, frankly, scary.

*Rewind many years!* At sixteen I had gladly left home for “Swinging” London, first to attend ballet school, then art school. I was a rebellious teenager; it was 1972 and I needed SPACE! Later, after my studies in fashion design, I increased the distance, moving to Paris to work as a designer. But no geographical distance was ever enough to heal the unease. I could not bear to be in the same room as my mother. However, a wholesome inner voice advised me “this is not good.”

Ten years of Freudian analysis ensued, years rich with learning and insight; the veils of misperception began to fall. But it was when I engaged with Plum Village practice in 1998 that deeper healing began, first as a lay practitioner and then as a monastic.

**Practice:** Centring Mum and Dad, letting go of the child’s need for the parents’ attention and instead, developing curiosity about *their* lives, encouraging and listening to *their* stories and thus validating their

lives especially as they grew older. This change of dynamic completely transformed our relationship. I learnt about what had conditioned them (education, family, economic situation, the collective consciousness of their epoch) and their often challenging life circumstances as well as their joys. I experienced what Thay has often taught us, that healing becomes possible through understanding, and then compassion and forgiveness emerge naturally without effort. I saw my parents and myself as vulnerable beings, all doing our best, and a strong connection of love grew in my heart.

However, the idea of being locked down with Mum indefinitely was way beyond my comfort zone! But in meditation I gave space to a small, quiet voice that wanted to offer love and support to the only mother I have, who had cared for me as a child and also to relieve my sister who had been caring for my parents for many years, albeit from a distance. On telling my sister these thoughts, she exclaimed, “What a sacrifice!” But the only sacrifice was the intention to make caring for Mum sacred, a part of my practice. Easy to say, difficult to do! The home I had run away from, fifty years before, now sent phantoms and ghosts to haunt me. My intention was to stay present and stay put. But how?

**Practice:** A checklist: Am I taking care of my freshness, solidity, and joy? To my surprise I slipped into a regular daily schedule starting the day with meditation to digest and investigate the latest emotional storm which came from around and inside me. To cultivate joy, each day, rain or shine, I walked in the nearby forest where I had played as a child, taking refuge in the ancient oak trees—our ancestors—giving them a long hug. Every morning I worked in the garden, accompanied by the robins who had also accompanied Dad. Before dark, I cycled along the beautiful country lanes of Hampshire, empty now during lockdown. By Zoom, I facilitated Dharma sharing families for all of the Plum Village online retreats and supported the UK Sangha. With all this joy I had enough solidity to offer my presence to Mum.

I was also inspired by the Five Invitations of Frank Ostaseski, founder of the San Francisco Zen Hospice for the Dying, a practitioner who has spent his whole career accompanying the dying:

- Don’t wait (at ninety-eight, Mum won’t be here long, so it’s now or never)
- Welcome everything, push away nothing (this gave me courage)

- Bring your whole self to the experience (even my vulnerability, especially my vulnerability)
- Find a place of rest in the middle of things (sitting and breathing with Mum)
- Cultivate “don’t know mind” (it’s OK to not know how long I’ll be here.)

Even though Mum was frail, tired, bedridden, and very old, sometimes I felt like I was trapped with a dangerous, unpredictable wild animal. I felt like the artist Joseph Beuys who in 1974 as an art “happening” lived in his studio with a wild coyote. I allowed the old fears to gradually come up and saw that they originated from childhood, never knowing how Mum would react, or what mood she might be in when I came home from school. Later we found out that she had periodically suffered from bouts of depression. This, combined with her inability to either recognise or take care of her emotions made an unsafe and threatening emotional environment in which to grow up.

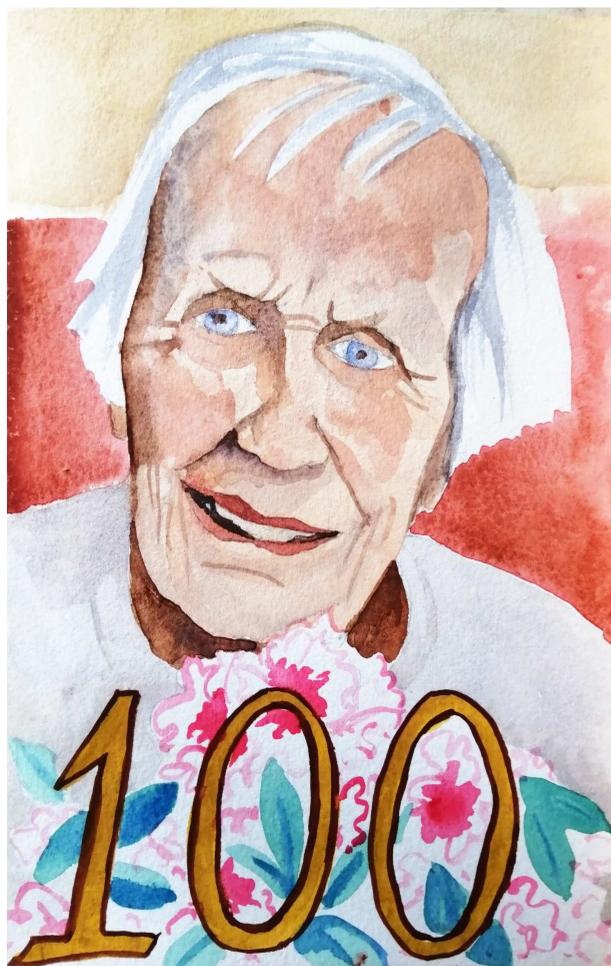
Now, towards the end of her life, Mum would often say things which were rough and hard to hear but my practice was to simply stay present, even if my heart was racing, my stomach churning, and I just wanted to run, like I had always done in the past.

**Practice:** After coming back to my breath and feeling the earth solid under my feet, I would imagine what she might be feeling and reply, “Are you angry? Or tired? Or frustrated?” and to my amazement she would pause and then agree, “Yes, I *am* angry ...” and we would be able to slowly talk it through, carefully putting her strong emotions into words. In a short while, calm was restored, hands held, a hug. It was as if I were lending her my nervous system. I was stunned, we had traversed a difficulty that when I was a child, would have caused her to stop talking to the whole family for several days. For a child these were violent and frightening periods of silence. As a child, I would think “It must be my fault, I must be bad.”

Practicing self-compassion for having safely navigated the latest emotional challenge, I took care of my inner child, hers and mine, both of whom had certainly suffered from emotional neglect, though not with intention. I felt compassion for Mum’s frustration, how much she must have suffered through her incapacity to communicate. I felt deep gratitude for Thay, who has enabled me to become my own loving parent. Breathing in, “May I allow Mum to be exactly who she is,” breathing out, “may

you, Mum, feel safe, may you live and die with ease.” And then I would remember to congratulate myself, tapping myself on the shoulder, saying “Well done, Tam Muoi, survived again!”

One of the highlights of my stay was finding an old box containing 200 letters that Dad had written to Mum when he had TB. He was diagnosed just five years after they married, and my mother found herself alone taking care of my three-year-old sister, far from any family members. He wrote to her every day even though Mum visited him twice a week! I offered to read the letters to her, although I felt nervous entering into their intimacy. But she replied, “Oh yes, then he will be here with us.” So after each meal, I would read a few letters. It was a real gift, to discover the sensitive, affectionate man who could write so tenderly. It was lovely to read his enthusiastic dreaming of “another infant” (me!) and of his love for my sister, for whom he made wooden and basketwork toys whilst in the sanatorium.



Portrait Sr. Tam Muoi painted for her Mum's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday

My “No Escape” retreat would not have been possible without the support of many carers and nurses who were coming in and out throughout the day. We had two principle live-in carers who alternated, three weeks on, three weeks off, Charity from Essex and Zimbabwe, and Marian from London and Uganda. It was a real privilege for me to share my life with these women, supporting each other, or dancing round the kitchen as we cooked together. Not only are they excellent professional carers but we became friends, supporting each other through Mum's ups, but particularly her downs. Many times, I or they would come back to the kitchen having been roundly scolded by Mum, and we would be there for each other with a hug or a hilarious reflection to bring back a smile. As they shared more about their lives, I was humbled by their capacity for joy, sacrifice, and resilience, especially as they navigate the challenges of being Black in Britain.

Seven months on, it seemed that Mum was not going to die a few months after Dad (as everyone had thought), and that she really had her eye on getting to a hundred (like her cousin Edith), which was still ten months away. I started to think about returning to Plum Village. I had a dream where I was making a delicious meal. I opened the lid of the saucepan to check on the dish and happily exclaimed “It's cooked!” Waking up, I felt a deep sense of fulfilment that lasted for several days. I felt *I* was cooked, it was time to go home.

*Fast forward* to two weeks after Mum's very happy hundredth birthday party. My sister urged me to phone Mum. On WhatsApp I saw Mum's beautiful face, tired now, eyes half closed, no longer needing to speak, but smiling as I expressed my love and encouraged her to let go and take a deep, long, much deserved rest. She never woke up, she died in her sleep that night.

The day before her funeral, I was able to sit a long while with her body and place a bouquet of flowers in her hands. This is the poem that came to me, which I read out during her service.

## Contemplation on Mum's body

*Your two hands  
Now folded in peace upon your chest  
Were once working tirelessly,  
Caring for family, caressing a child's feverish brow,  
Laundering, chopping the veg,  
Making the tea.  
Or typing furiously,  
Or with hands plunged in warm earth  
Tending your beloved garden.  
Now, fingers and joints are gnarled like the ancient oaks  
of Sheet.*

*Crooked feet, once strode boldly across fields  
And lightly skimmed the dancefloor in the arms of Dad,  
quickstepping.*

*Barefoot, we wandered together through Indian temples  
And hand in hand, paddled along the English shore.*

*Breasts, become flat and empty,  
Once plumply suckled two tiny infants  
Whilst you sang to them  
sweet lullabies of love.*

*Your eyes, clear and twinkling  
of Wedgewood blue, laughing.  
Gazing on the Queen's card  
received for your one hundred years lived fully,  
You said  
"I am so lucky!"*

*Now, your body like old leaves of tea,  
Used up and discarded.*

*But we, amongst many,  
Have drunk your tea, your essence.  
You are in each one of us.  
We are your continuation.*



Gold tasselled 100<sup>th</sup> birthday card from the Queen of England

## Epilogue

As we emptied the house, my whole life was unravelling before me, held in old photos and worn objects, loved and well used. Each cupboard, box or tin opened, more treasures were revealed, and then in their turn, let go of.

Waking on the morning of leaving for Plum Village, I felt a deep sense of closure. My parents once more together, their ashes buried in Sheet village churchyard. All is well. ☪

# HANDS REACHING OUT



# Thầy's dream

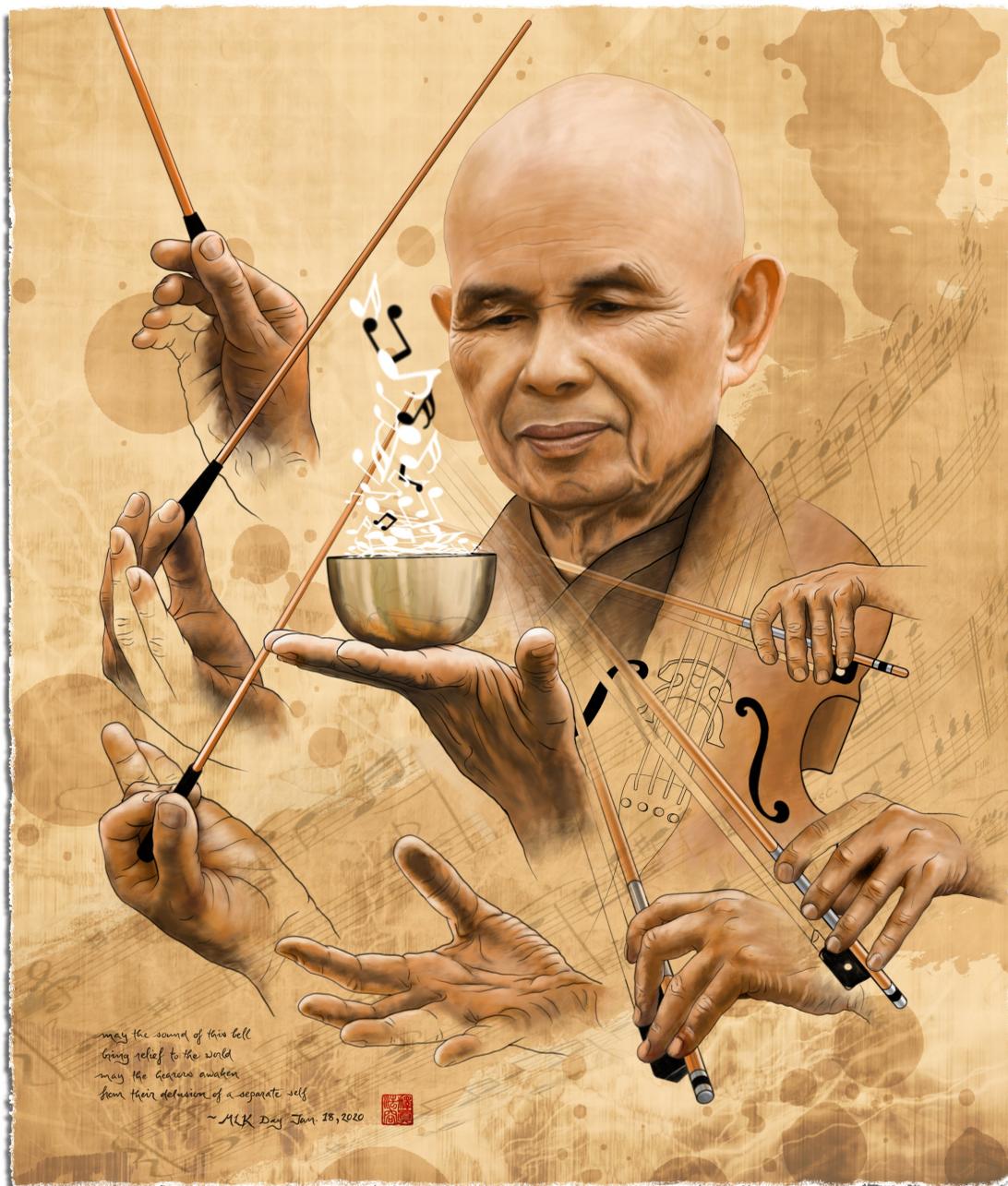
BROTHER CHÂN PHÁP DUNG

## The convergence of dreams

Dear friends on the path,

I hope you enjoy this digital painting that was inspired by Thầy's account of his dream, in which he was a music student who had to perform in front of a university audience. I began envisioning it one

morning after waking up from my own dream in which Thầy invited a bell to help us all come back to the present moment. As he invited the bell, his hands moved around it in a cinematographic way with multiple hands merging in and out of each other, with some hands holding various musical instruments.



Original artwork by Br. Pháp Dung

In the days I was drawing this, the violent riot at the United States Capitol occurred on January 6, 2021. America once more saw the ugly side of itself again. I felt sad for the people who were tasked to help lead and unite the divided people of this nation. So this artistic exploration became a healing activity for me, a kind of balm for my heart from the mental ache that I was feeling for our human family. Focusing on Thay's life and all the suffering and division that he managed to overcome, I felt more determined than ever to help realize his dream of building mindful communities where people from all walks of life can live harmoniously together even with differences of opinion, values, and approaches.

I kept this image from my dream and the resounding of the bell in my heart throughout the day, stopping periodically while walking, eating, or sitting to breathe and remember what is most important. I prayed for the people of this land, from the urban coasts to the rugged mountains and across the rural central valleys. I projected the energy of this serene bell to everyone who may have been feeling left out for whatever reason, that their hearts could be calm, their minds find some space, and their spirits feel some relief from all the hate, blame, and wrong perceptions of separation.

### **Thay's dream**

Many years ago in a Dharma talk, Thay shared about this dream in which he was a student in a prestigious music school. It was time for the finals and everyone had to perform with their instruments in front of an audience. Thay was a little nervous in the dream because he had never learned how to play any musical instruments, so he did not know how he could pass this final test.

When it was time, Thay stood at the podium with his hands in his pockets. He stared into the audience, calmly following his breathing; suddenly he felt in his pocket the cold metallic surface of the mini bell that he normally brought with him wherever he went. He had been taught to use this bell at the temple and realized in that moment that this bell was also a musical instrument. Thay took out the bell, raised it to the audience and invited a sound as he had done his whole life. The sound of the bell resonating throughout the auditorium brought peace and serenity to everyone who heard it.

As the moment ended in the dream, Thay shared that he turned to the side of the stage to look for his teacher. Thay felt excited in the dream that he would be able to see his teacher, but as his teacher



was about to enter into view, Thay woke up. Even so, in his heart he somehow knew who his teacher must have been. Throughout the years, I have heard Thay share this story, always leaving the ending open as an invitation for us to all imagine and discover for ourselves who the "teacher" must have been. It is my favorite part of his account because it allows us to participate and finish the story ourselves. Maybe that is why I have internalized the story and it manifested in my dream.

### **Community of awakening**

I finished this drawing on MLK (Martin Luther King Jr.) Day, at the end of our lazy days on January 18, and so I dedicated it to the spiritual friendship between Thay and Dr. King and their mutual vision of building a global "beloved community" where we see each other as siblings of one family. I penned at the bottom of the drawing a few lines that I adapted from the bell gatha.

*May the sound of this bell bring relief to the world.  
May the hearers awaken from their delusion of a  
separate self.*

### **A medicine for our time**

As I write in this moment, I think of Thay's legacy of renewing Buddhist practices and all the effort he put into introducing to the world the meaning and practice of inviting and listening to the sound of the bell. I cannot imagine how many Dharma talks our teacher must have given on this topic. The simple act of stopping everything that we are doing when we hear the bell being invited, including our thinking and conversations, and returning all of our attention to our conscious breathing was invented or adapted by our teacher. Before that, in the temples, the bell did not have this explicit function or significance. Thay formulated this practice as a medicine for our times, an antidote to our modern

culture of running and grasping and our inability to be fully present to what is happening in the present moment, caught in our constant over-thinking.

Thay has even expanded this practice of listening to the bell and applied it to include the sound of the clock chiming. In almost every Plum Village practice center, you will find a chiming clock installed in the dining hall that sounds every fifteen or thirty minutes. Practitioners are asked to stop all their activities when they hear the chime and to come back and pay attention to their breathing for a few in and out breaths. We are taught to close our eyes and to silently recite this gatha: *Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home*, and recognize the present moment and the wonder of simply being alive.

### **An invitation**

At this moment, I invite everyone to continue Thay's legacy by maintaining this practice of listening to the sound of the bell in your own home, workplace, or wherever you may be. You may like to install a chiming clock in your living room or kitchen to remind you to stop. You may install a digital

mindfulness bell on your laptop or smartphone and program it to sound periodically, to help you stop during your busy day. When you stop, close your eyes, recite the gatha, and come back to your "true home," envisioning all of us breathing together throughout this land and around this planet, creating a collective energy of peace and kindness, and connecting us all in a moment of interbeing. This is not a practice of magic or romanticized imagination; it has a real potential to bring immediate benefit to ourselves, to those near, and to everyone that may randomly cross our mental field and may not even be in our awareness. No energy is ever lost. No ripples in the pond are without some effect, some retribution. No mental intention of kindness and acceptance will be lost. I invite everyone to help us maintain this collective field of good-will as opposed to ill-will, of heart force instead of aggression, no matter what or who confronts us, and together we can support one another on our path to build the beloved community, to bring change, and contribute to our collective awakening.

*Sincerely,*  
*Brother Phap Dung* ☸



# Two Leaves at the Tip of the Branch

BROTHER CHÂN PHÁP LINH



Br. Phap Dung (left), Br. Phap Linh

## Living interbeing, joy, and non-fear at COP26

Do you remember the moment you went from being aware that nature was being damaged and destroyed, to deciding that you would take action to stop the destruction?

One of the most sacred places for me as a child was a certain forest in the hills, near where we lived, in the North of England. In the autumn, we would go there as a family to pick mushrooms, and these are some of my happiest childhood memories. It was a wild and beautiful wood in a deep, twisting valley, carved by a loud, rushing torrent. Some of the best places to find mushrooms were mossy banks so steep you had to hang on to the grass with your hands not to go tumbling down the ravine. We never saw anyone else in that wood—it felt like it was our very own special place. We would come home with baskets overflowing with delicious mushrooms—chanterelles, horns of plenty, hedgehog mushrooms, and of course, the majestic cèpes! I vividly remember the pure and simple joy of discovering hidden patches of mushrooms under the fallen leaves, nestled down deep in the thick moss.

One year we went back there and half the wood was gone. On one side of the valley, every single tree had been chopped down and dragged away. What

was left looked like a battlefield. Even the side that had not been cut felt damaged, as if the trees were in mourning. Where the forest had been felled, the earth was torn-scarred with the tracks of giant machines. The whole forest felt diminished, broken and vulnerable. I felt so angry and confused. Why would anyone do this? Why would anyone destroy this magical cathedral of green and leave behind a wasteland?

Looking back, I think this was one of those pivotal moments when I went from being aware that nature was being damaged and destroyed, to making the determination to take action and stop the destruction. I was determined to try to find a way for us to live without cutting off the very branch we were sitting on. The first time I heard the term “global warming,” I was around twelve years old, and since then, my whole life has been lived with an awareness of the rapidly accelerating pace of desecration of our earth. For years I struggled to see how I could make a difference in the face of such a gigantic threat, and I was convinced that we were in fact doomed as a civilisation. It was only when I met Thay and the sangha that I started to see a path forward.

We know that our climate is now rapidly changing and we may already have irreversibly disrupted the delicate balance of conditions that allowed us to flourish as a species over the last 12,000 years. We are already seeing the effects of climate stress in many parts of the world, which make life more difficult, especially for those on the edge of poverty. This is happening now.

This is in large part why I became a monk. I could see that for humanity, the years of being able to take and take from Mother Earth would soon be coming to an end. The only question for me was how to act *now*, knowing what was to come.

As I spent more time with the monks and nuns in Plum Village, and listening to Thay’s teaching, I started to imagine what the world would be like if there were more people in it who were trained like them; people trained in the art of peace—who would not take sides in a conflict, who would share their

last morsel of food, who would bring the balm of love and forgiveness to a situation of anger and fear, and who would know how to help people heal from the scars of trauma in its many forms. Perhaps more than all of that, I started to see the power of a group of people trained in the art of living as a community.

That has always been very clear that it is the applied insight of interbeing, that can help our civilisation to change from its current course of destruction. We know that it is the prajnaparamita insight of emptiness that can cut through the bonds of our suffering—the suffering that binds us to a way of life driven by competition and selfishness. But sometimes that insight seems far away, abstract or impractical—I used to think of it as something that could only be realised after many decades of practice, or even something that I could not attain in this life. But now, and especially after going to Glasgow, I see that we are already living this insight, which is built into the very fabric of our life as a community. It is this applied insight that we can offer to the world.

#### **TED Countdown**

In October, Brother Phap Huu, Sister Lang Nghiem, Sister Hien Nghiem, and I attended the TED Countdown event in Edinburgh. It was an event

designed to inspire and prepare people for the COP26, UN Climate Summit in Glasgow, which would take place a couple of weeks later. When we returned to Plum Village, we were all focussed on rejoining the annual Rains' Retreat. But so many people had been touched by the presence of the monastics in Edinburgh, especially by Sr. Hien Nghiem's TED talk, that they then wanted to invite us to Glasgow as well. We quickly re-assessed the situation and found a way for two of us to represent the sangha at this historic event.

Suddenly I was faced with the prospect of going to COP26, and to be honest it was quite scary. What would we say? What did we really have to offer? Would we really be able to help? I had no idea. We didn't even really know what we would be doing there. But at the same time, I was on fire with the aspiration that had been in my heart since I was a little boy—I had been searching my whole life for a way to help avert the present and future crises that we face, and now we had an opportunity to contribute.

#### **My grandfather's lawn**

Another memory—every summer when I went to visit my grandparents in France, one of my favourite things to do was to lie down in the long grass,



Sr. Hien Nghiem speaking at the TED Countdown Summit, 15 October 2021. Photo: Ryan Lash

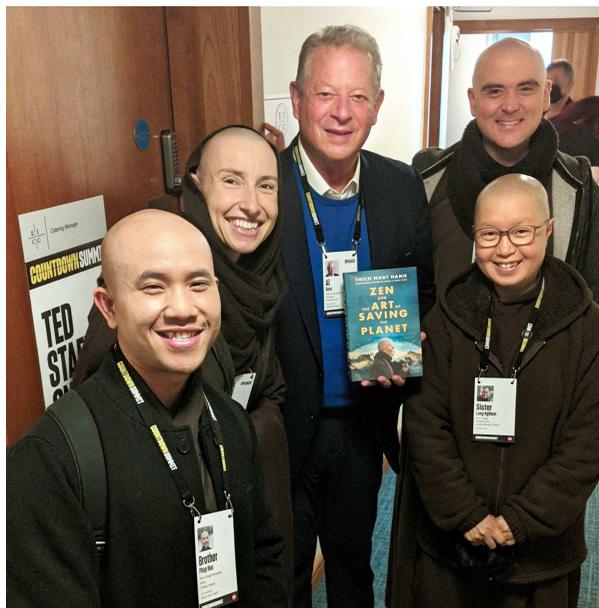
completely motionless, and just look. I would disappear into the weird and wonderful world of the colourful, shiny, metallic bugs, and big scary spiders with their bright yellow stripes; the drab grey grasshoppers, whose iridescent blue and red wings would only become visible when they were startled into jumping and fluttering to a new perch. But every time my grandfather mowed the grass, this rich and diverse world was destroyed. I never stopped trying to persuade him to let nature take its course and allow the field to grow and grow, undisturbed—to become a wild place again, full of life and wonder.

### COP26—Invoking the sangha

Just a few short days later I found myself in Glasgow, reunited with my mentor, teacher, elder brother and true friend on the path, Br. Phap Dung. It was such a joy to reconnect and share our excitement about what flavour of Dharma we wanted to offer—we stayed up late, sharing back and forth, and laughing a lot. In Edinburgh I had noticed that what touched people the most was seeing the way we operated as an organism—as one body. And as we talked, it became more and more clear that this was what we had confidence in: our practice of sangha interbeing-ness, our brotherhood and sisterhood. The world is being destroyed by individualism, competition and greed, and the medicine is the living insight of interbeing. So we made the determination to do our best to embody this insight, and to constantly take refuge in the felt, embodied sense of connection with our brothers and sisters, our teacher, our ancestors and the earth. We were determined not to be there as separate selves, but as two leaves at the tip of the branch, knowing that in truth we were much more than what can be seen with the eyes. We were not just two brothers, we were the whole tree, the roots, and the mycelial network which connects the whole forest. Any time I did not know what to say or do, I would do my best to light up this awareness, connecting myself with the Sangha—with the brothers and sisters, with Thay, with spiritual ancestors, and with Mother Earth herself—then everything became easier.

Sharing with the delegates at the conference, we were so happy to discover that the insight of interbeing and interdependence is also growing stronger in the world. Actually, in the environmental movement, almost everyone knows that this is the way forward, but what I started to see was that for many, this insight remains at the intellectual level and does not translate into their way of life. They

understand the principle of interbeing, but they are still living as a separate self, as an individual who has to make a living, make a reputation for themselves—a career and an identity. But the good news is that when they see a practical example of how the insight can be applied, they get it right away. You just have to scratch the surface, and they are ready to transform. That's the good news!



Meeting with Al Gore, former Vice President of the U.S.

### Practising applied interbeing

My greatest joy during those days in Glasgow was to see that Thay has given us everything we need to help these people take the next step. In the sangha, we are trained to live together and to rely on each other, and interbeing is alive at every level of our teaching and practice. All we need to do to transmit the insight of interbeing is to be ourselves! One thing people noticed was that they could not figure out who was the boss. They knew that Br. Phap Dung is the elder brother, so at first, they thought I was there to work out the logistics and he would do all the talking. But we did not operate like that. Every evening we would be cooking our Dharma, discussing what we felt had worked, reflecting on what we could still fine-tune, and just sharing our insights. The next day, it did not matter which mouth the insight came out of—there wasn't the feeling of "Hey, you used *my* line—that was *my* insight," it was truly like we were one body with two mouths. We were operating as one and everyone could feel that. We were not doing anything special; it is just how we are trained in Plum Village, and what a contrast that makes with how most of the world operates. It really wakes people up. They start to see how interbeing is not just a concept but something that we can live.

One morning when I woke up, I could not stop smiling. I was lit up with gratitude to Thay—I felt so grateful that we have something to offer and it works! Thay has prepared everything so perfectly. He has offered us ways to teach and to practice which help right away. That is truly the greatest happiness. I later shared this simple insight with Br. Phap Dung, and in the sharing, the joy grew and grew, reflected back and forth between us.

That simple joy was also part of what we were offering. So many people are overwhelmed with despair and anxiety, especially in the environmental movement. They know more than most of us how bad things really are and the more they know, the worse it seems. At COP26, there was a very strong collective feeling of “Time is running out,” and “It’s probably too late already.” Again and again, we would meet people, and within a few seconds they would break down in tears—not because they were sad, but because they could see and feel our joy, and the presence and joy of the Sangha through us. They could see that we were actually living the solution they sought and that immediately gave them hope. Our joy became their joy and they were able to continue their work in a new way. They were crying tears of relief, because now they could see that living in the insight of interbeing is something possible, not just a dream for the future.

They were touched also by our (relative) non-fear of their suffering. We are all trained to listen to the suffering of others, so when people would share their suffering with us, we (mostly!) didn’t feel overwhelmed by it, and we knew (at least a little bit) how to help them to embrace it. And this is something that can only come from having faced some of our own suffering.

Every tiny step of transformation we have made on the path is directly connected with what we can offer to others. Every time we’ve been able to embrace some of our own sadness and confusion, every time we’ve been able to take a breath or two and soften a feeling of pain instead of reacting,

every time we’ve been able to breathe through our anxiety or victimhood and liberate ourselves from it, even just a tiny bit—manifests as non-fear and confidence when we are with someone who is suffering. We know that it is possible to transform our own pain, that is why we know that it is also possible for someone else. The other person can feel that, and when they feel that non-fear from us, they already get some relief.



*The New York Times* Climate Hub: Returning to the Heartwood.  
Photo ©Craig Gibson. November 9, 2021

### **The value of transformation**

Our own transformation is the offering and as a sangha we have a lot to offer because all of us are walking that path, and all of us have been able to transform something, even if sometimes it feels like it’s not enough, and even though we still suffer now and then. Collectively, we transmit the lived experience of the transformation of suffering—the knowledge that it is possible—and *that*, more than anything else, is what the world needs right now.

In Glasgow, both Br. Phap Dung and I felt so lucky that we get to do this work in this life—that we get to make a difference, just by living as a cell of the Sangha body. It is truly a great fortune, given the awareness of suffering in the world, and the awareness that the suffering may increase greatly in the coming years, to realise that we can do something, and that as a sangha, we can do a lot. ☸

# May the Smiles from Our Hearts

SISTER CHÂN TỪ NGHIÊM

## MAY THE SMILES FROM OUR HEARTS

*May the smiles from our hearts  
pierce through the clouds  
of our confusion.*

*May the smiles from our hearts  
reach you  
continuing your path  
with courage and freedom.*

*May the smiles from our hearts  
melt all your obstacles  
so you can serve all beings  
with peace and wisdom*

*Let the smiles from our hearts  
encourage you on and on,  
like the sun  
shining everywhere  
with warmth and freedom*

## A POEM FOR THE NEW YEAR

*Be a source of love  
for them, who are sad  
and lonely, without homes.  
Little things will do,  
and tenderness.*

*Be a source of love  
for them,  
and for us  
treading the path  
of uncertainty  
under skies  
of darkness  
and light.*

*Offer your compassionate hands  
to everyone, everyone,  
everywhere.*



## THERE IS THE LETTING GO

*There is the letting go  
of the song in our hearts  
we have kept so long.*

*There is the letting go  
that the trees know  
so well, when  
their leaves fly and fall.*

*There is the letting go  
and wishing you well  
as streams of life  
flow forward  
leaving spaces  
of memories behind.*

*There is the letting go  
which is all of life  
disappearing  
and reappearing  
with the colors and sounds of spring.*

This poem was written after the Be-In on 4 December 2021 when we were together with many Sisters who would be leaving New Hamlet in a few days to visit their families in Vietnam, and then move on to other practice centers. We sang songs to one another and shared from our hearts the beautiful experiences we had at New Hamlet.

It was also the anniversary day of my little brother's passing away in 1994. I remember his qualities of courage and freedom. The letting go is part of being able to continue to live after experiencing the death of a beloved one.

## THEIR FLOWERS HAVE FALLEN

*Their flowers have fallen  
but the leaves of the orchid plant  
are firm and strong,  
spreading their arms of greenness  
to the east and west.*

*Their stems are thin and wobbly  
attached to wooden sticks  
with pins,  
yet tiny green buds  
are pushing through  
on the branches,  
like little lights of hope:  
life continues  
and will blossom again.*

This poem was written to my orchid plant as I witnessed its changing, impermanent nature over the past two months. Impermanence can also be the continuation of life, and we are filled with happiness and joy on seeing this. The flowers have fallen, yet the tiny buds sing the song of life continuing without end. ☪



# The Environment – What Can We Do?

BROTHER CHÂN TRỜI ĐẠI ĐẠO

## Workshops on the environment

I love Mother Earth, and I cannot look at documentaries on the environmental crisis without feeling despair and powerlessness. It was with this backdrop that a chain of events happened which empowered me not to give up hope but to do what we can, where we are, with what we have got, to help Mother Earth. Perhaps Mother Earth can be a verb as well as a noun, perhaps we have to nurture and care for the land that is looking up at us needing our love.

During the Rains' Retreat of 2019, we had a series of workshops on the environment to see how we could reduce our carbon footprint and recycling, which completely changed the way I saw rubbish. We started looking at the amount of waste we were exporting out of the monastery. The mindset we had at the time was to take everything to the recycling centre by van. We didn't give much thought to what happened to it next. It became someone else's problem.

The workshops showed us what happened next, and so we saw that vast amounts of things are not recycled but are buried in the earth in huge pits. Even things that are recycled are not processed locally but are transported on to other larger plants, creating more carbon. We also watched a documentary about a Japanese town that had achieved zero waste through the collective efforts of the whole community. They had succeeded in building a collective recycling centre that tried to re-use everything. Therefore it seemed clear that by looking into what we could process here ourselves we would reduce transport by fossil fuel burning vehicles and reduce the amount of stuff buried in the earth.

When we study the 12 links of dependent co-arising, we realise that through ignorance, things are seen as separate formations without interrelations between them. We see a log on the fire but not the chainsaw that cut it up or the fossil fuels burnt in that cutting. We see a tee-shirt but not the amount of water used to make it. It is also easy for us to get rid of things and not concern ourselves with what will become of them or our planet. Can we see



Br. Dai Dao with his cardboard logs

the future of the packaging of items we order online or buy in the shop?

## Harvesting rainwater

One of the workshops focused on water and how much water we use unnecessarily. Our revolution began right there. I began to notice that we had several large rainwater collectors lying around and not being used. Little by little we started connecting them to gutters and before long we had five rainwater collectors harvesting a total of 2,500 litres of rainwater. It cost us almost nothing, just our labour since we had pipes salvaged from reconstruction projects.

But once the containers were full we could not harvest any more rainwater next time it rained. Around the same time we started to buy cooking oil in 25-litre plastic containers and they eventually started arriving in the recycling barn. So we began cleaning them and filling them from the rainwater

collectors. Our rainwater tanks became rain cows that we could endlessly milk.

What are we doing with all that water? If you are planting trees it is very convenient to have many portable containers of water. Also we have an outside tap next to the monastic residence. Son Ha is at the bottom of a hill and gets very muddy when the rains come. The brothers were using this outside tap to wash the mud off their boots. So we put one rainwater collector there with a tap to clean our boots so we save on tapwater.

Two other collectors were set up to take the runoff rainwater from our barn roof. We use this to process the waste cardboard and to water the flowers in the garden.



'Tetrapots'

### Driving less

When we looked at the waste we were driving in our van to the local recycling centre, we found that it was mostly cardboard and glass. Not only were we driving them to the recycling centre while burning diesel, but they were also not being processed there. So it would all go on another fossil fuel burning journey to a larger processing centre. I like cycling and decided to cycle the glass to the nearby bottle bank in Puyguilhem at the top of the hill. This is good for my health, good for the environment, and

empowering me to feel that I am doing something to help.

### Composting and making cardboard logs

To make compost, we shred some of the cardboard by hand, add it to weed or grass cuttings, and store it in empty rice sacks (of which we have a regular supply from the kitchen). Witnessing this alchemy of turning grass and cardboard, seeing the red worms come, and eventually seeing the pile transformed into dark brown compost is very fulfilling.

To make a "log," the waste paper and unglassy cardboard are cut up and soaked in rainwater before being pulped, mixed with sawdust from our woodwork area and compressed into logs for the fire. It can be difficult sometimes to get everyone on board with the idea that separating sawdust from other floor sweepings is helping the environment. But patience pays off. We made the log press from an old car jack and bits of scrap metal.

At first the logs were too long so they either bent over, or comically slumped in the drying process. Actually when I think back, the very first ones I made were so small it took too much effort to make them for the end result, so that's why I started making them longer. In addition they were so fragile while still wet that I broke many just turning them over through their drying stage. Gradually we found the best length to diameter ratio to make them efficient to make and able to manoeuvre and dry naturally in the wind and sun. The learning and correcting process was frustrating but also empowering.

This synergy of rainwater harvesting and cardboard, sawdust and garden waste recycling turns a lot of waste into useful things, keeps us warm and helps us grow trees and plants. We also reduce the amount of wooden logs we need and thereby the amount of chainsaw use and less smoke particles from our chimneys. The seasons affect everything so it's harder to make compost in midwinter as there is no green stuff to mix in and the temperature is cold. Making logs is a good alternative.

### Repurposing containers—introducing the tetrapot

For two years we struggled to find a solution for the vast numbers of tetrapaks from vegan milk we were putting into our yellow recycling bags, taking up a third of the volume. We cannot crush them as the recycling centre can only process them uncrushed.

From time to time I would try to think of a solution to this issue—sometimes quite laughable ideas, but always in vain. I kept this situation in the back of my mind waiting for an answer to come.

One day we were invited to help plant pumpkin seeds on our organic farm. We were planting the seeds into fragile unrecyclable black plastic pots. They kept breaking as we put the compost in. There was the solution! If we cut a tetrapak in half and make a hole in the bottom half we have two planting pots, which we had been buying, and they can be used more than once. The Happy farmers were keen to try it as an experiment and so a new life was given to the thousands of tetrapaks we use every year. We are also using them to plant many trees. The tetrapot was born!

With every project there are teething problems. We have to clean the pots really thoroughly as rodents are attracted to traces of milk in the pots and are very happy to munch big holes in the sides of our pots. As for all the lids they are the subject of a future recycling project.

### **From waste to resource**

What we are discovering is that once we start to look at things not as waste but as a potential resource, we create the conditions for finding what that resource

will be useful for. It has been hugely empowering to see what we, a small community, can do for the environment using only what we have to hand. The revolution continues.

It is clear to me that we need to separate more things in bins. Our ability to repurpose waste revolves around it being separated. This is unpopular as it means we have to think more about where to put each waste item. However, it is the only way we have found to practise recycling and repurposing. Our online shop for example has to send all its products by mail. So we started a new bin just for cardboard envelopes and bubblewrap envelopes. Now that all goes to the online shop for re-use. Without the extra bin it's not possible.

We are lucky in our community to have many different functions: farm, office, shop, etc. But wherever we live we are part of a wider community where these functions also exist. We receive wooden crates from vegetable farmers for example. Originally I cut them up with a table saw to make kindling for the fire. Then a brother suggested taking them to a local grower. So now we take them to a local market garden for re-use. So some things are repurposed here and some outside. We just keep looking out for opportunities and the mind of recycling develops naturally. ☺



# Happy Farmers Change the World

MICK MCEVOY

## Ten years of organic, regenerative farming in Plum Village

In 2012, three lay practitioners and three Plum Village monastics joined forces to set out to realize our collective dream to grow fresh organic fruit and vegetables to feed the Plum Village community. Over the course of 2013, they made the first steps—laying the groundwork for the development of a small organic vegetable farm at West Lake, just down the hill from Upper Hamlet. The Happy Farm project is the concrete expression of Thay's vision of meditation engaged with action in the area of sustainable and ethical food production.

The project now has three plots. The original farm in Upper Hamlet/Son Ha, one in Lower Hamlet, and one in New Hamlet.

The Happy Farmers hope to demonstrate that productivity, environmental sustainability and personal happiness do not have to be in conflict, but are three essential pillars that can strengthen each other.

## The aims of the Happy Farm

*To grow healthy organic vegetables for the Plum Village community*

The Happy Farm method is an intensive method, growing a lot of vegetables on a small scale, combining classical organic farming methods with permaculture elements.

The main aim is to nourish the soil and to grow vegetables organically by using natural soil amendments, organic fertilizer and natural pesticides, crop rotation, green manure, cultivating the soil in ways that preserve the delicate soil ecosystem, mulching, companion planting and more. We also try to take care of the surrounding habitat, and to provide good conditions for pollinating insects to flourish.

A variety of vegetables are grown in each hamlet. They are especially cultivated to supplement the food bought for the Spring and the Summer Retreat. The Summer Retreat in July is usually (depending on



from left 2: Andrea, 4: Stuart Watson, 9: Jonas

conditions) attended by more than 1,000 people per week.

We know that modern agriculture, which feeds the world, unfortunately is an industrial system. There are many extra elements that are really unnecessary and not so good for our health or for Mother Earth. We are very concerned with the concept and application of interbeing as Thich Nhat Hanh teaches. We care for the 'more than human being' life that is here on the land. The soil is very alive, we try to have respect and reverence for the soil, as well as respect and reverence for the humans that are eating the food that we produce. That's why we even go beyond organic.



Daniel Dermitzel



Br Phap Dung

***To train people in applying the principles of mindfulness in a working environment***

Spiritual cultivation and mindfulness training are essential aspects of the Happy Farm. It is a training

ground for applying the principles of mindfulness in a working environment.

The farmers practice to farm as a family, a spiritual community, taking care of each other's wellbeing and spiritual growth. We begin each work day with a short sitting meditation, followed by a check-in where each person shares how they are at the moment. We can share our joys and offer support to anyone going through something difficult. We also enjoy working in silence for certain periods, using the breath to anchor ourselves in the present moment, stopping to listen to the bell throughout the day, and having regular team sharings. Sharing responsibilities, we also learn from each other and enjoy many joyful moments. The farmers from the different farms benefit from each other's experience, meet for work exchanges and spend time together.

We observe the Five Mindfulness Trainings and the Six Harmonies while striving to find a balance between practicing deeply and getting the work done.

We have a core team who live as a Happy Farm family within the monastery as well as being part of the wider community. Also, at different times of the year we welcome shorter-term volunteers. It's a skill and a challenge to live in community because there are many joys, but also many challenges. We talk so much about harmony and community in Plum Village. It's a messy but beautiful journey of working and living together.

Happy farmers are not fundamentalists in happiness: all emotions are welcome, all human experience is welcome in our inner landscapes. It's about bringing that onto the land, into the working environment, with the stresses and pressures that we all experience, into the team dynamic, the family dynamic and learning to communicate and to listen to another's needs. This is the idea of mindful living in day-to-day life.

***Education in growing organic food, sustainability, and mindfulness practice***

The project exists also to inspire and to educate people in a pedagogical way, with learning by doing rather than a more theoretical or classroom-based form of learning. People who come to the farm for the one year program go through the whole cycle of seasons from seed to plate and beyond. They go away after the year with the skills to start growing some of their own food or set up their own projects,

which many people have done in different parts of the world.

## The Happy Farms

### Upper Hamlet

In 2013 the first Happy Farm was founded in Upper Hamlet. It was the realization of a long-held wish to produce local, seasonal, organic vegetables within Plum Village and to go in the direction of sustainability and food security for the Plum Village community.

There is around one acre of land in cultivation comprising more than forty beds, 35 metres long and 1.2 metres wide, and a large polytunnel greenhouse with 6 beds, each 27 metres long. These are used for the main annual crops, and in addition, there are other plots for perennials: herbs, berries, and asparagus. Each year we also plant some fruit and nut trees with the aim of eventually having a food forest.

The farm continues to grow and flourish in beautiful and unexpected ways. Since the farm began, we produce an average of around 8,000 kilograms of organic produce each year, worth approximately €30,000.

Every year the Upper Hamlet farm hosts about 500 children during the Summer Family Retreat. During Plum Village's annual Wake Up Earth Retreat, about 500 young adults get to get their hands mindfully dirty on the farm. We started to offer Happy Farm Experience Weeks in 2018.

### Lower Hamlet

In 2016, the Happy Farm in Lower Hamlet was started with fourteen beds and a small herb garden. This was expanded in 2017. In the first year, more than 1,000 kilograms of vegetables were harvested. The food grown is offered to the Lower Hamlet sangha. They have hosted several Happy Experience Weeks for lay women and couples who have come from all over the world to participate. They have also offered many children and retreatants a chance to be close to nature and discover the wonder of growing your own food with love.

In 2021, the Lower Hamlet Happy Farm was moved to new land (about 50 meters away) and great care was taken to move the rich soil that had been carefully cultivated from the previous years, to the new location.

### New Hamlet

The New Hamlet Happy Farm manifested the most recently. Although it officially began in the spring of 2017, gardening and farming in New Hamlet was started many years before by Sr. Bao Nghiem who had a green thumb and planted many different kinds of vegetables in the greenhouses and outdoors. We also had a horticultural garden before it became part of the Happy Farm. The first sister in charge of the Happy Farm was Sr. Nguyet Nghiem who received a lot of support from the Happy Farm brothers in Upper Hamlet. Slowly, three long-term friends joined the team and one of them is now in training to become a nun and continues to support the Happy Farm.



Mick McEvoy

### Looking forwards

During the pandemic, we haven't been able to host guests and that has given myself and the community around the Happy Farm the opportunity to step back and really reflect on what is its real meaning and purpose. We have moved away from getting caught up with wanting to cultivate just a little bit more, to offer just a little bit more food. We have come to realize that it's not about the carrots, but about collective awakening. It's coming back to the spirit

of our mindfulness practice, our spiritual practice, our practice as a family, siblinghood, manifesting joy, manifesting harmony and having fun—bringing the element of play into the farm.

More and more now it becomes clear as the farm matures, that we are in such a beautiful setting; we have mature oak forest on one side with a beautiful wetland on the other. We are very fortunate. We also have a very species-rich grassland and a wildflower grassland. The existing ecology and the ‘more than human beings’ that we share the land with, are showing themselves every year as the site develops and maybe actually has healed a little from when we first made an intervention onto the land as farmers.

The community in Upper Hamlet has acquired more land, which is old agricultural land adjacent to the farm with pockets of mature, native forest. Together with the monastic community and residential community, we have a plan for what we call “rewilding” some of that land. The fields that were cultivated every year, that were tilled, that gave copious amounts of wheat, sunflowers, and other crops are now just healing. The soil is healing. It’s closing over and going from wildflower meadows in the first few years to the first few oaks and elms. Field maples, wild roses, blackberries, they’re all re-manifesting in these fields.

Most of the rewilding will be done through natural regeneration, relying on the earth’s capacity to heal herself. This forest will actually come from the existing pockets of woodland and seed itself. It has already begun to happen. The wild animals, the ‘more than humans’ that share the land, like the

numerous wild boar, are like ecological engineers for us, they use their tusks and their nose to break open the soil leaving bare patches of soil where the seeds of many of these pioneer tree species are rooting in. We’re helping nature, for example, by excluding the deer that graze off some of this regeneration, but we’re doing it in partnership and letting Mother Nature take the lead. Our role as human beings is to get out of Mother Nature’s way and help only when needed.

When Plum Village reopens, opportunities will manifest for ecological retreats where we can bring our mindfulness practice onto these lands. Guests will be able to plant more native trees to restore the ecosystem and be a part of that healing.

Further down the road we have the potential to develop a portion of land for what we call agroforestry. That’s an old style of forestry that exists in places like Spain traditionally, with cereal crops growing in avenues between trees like walnuts, hazelnuts, apricots, or apples and many more combinations. So the two coexist. We will probably partner with the farmers in the region. Again, it’s all in the spirit of organic cultivation. We could even grow soya for our homemade tofu and wheat, spelt, or rye for our own bread baked in wood-fired ovens! We want to complete the circle a little more and produce more here for our community, in our community. This long-term project will be done in the spirit of bringing greater reverence for beings that we share the land with, to bring this spirit further into our collective consciousness on the farm and in the community. ☪



# Healing the Healers

DR. ELLI WEISBAUM

*Dr. Elli Weisbaum is an assistant professor at the University of Toronto, who attended her first retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh at the age of ten. She has worked internationally facilitating mindfulness workshops and retreats within the sectors of education, healthcare, and business. She is a member of the Order of Interbeing and a co-founder/facilitator of the Wake Up Toronto Sangha. Dr. Weisbaum's ongoing collaborations with the Plum Village community focus on translating mindfulness into daily life in order to build inclusive and sustainable communities.*



## **My first retreat as a ten-year-old**

My parents and I attended our first family retreat with Thay and the sangha in 1998 at the OMEGA Institute in New York State. Before going on this retreat, my mom had read several of Thay's books. From this, she had begun integrating some of Thay's teachings into her work as a visiting artist in high schools. My dad is a physician and had his own medical practice. As a family we were interested in exploring more about the practice of mindfulness so we all agreed to go on a new adventure and attend Thay's next North American retreat!

Our very first impression of the monastic community was quite memorable. As we drove up to

the retreat centre, several sisters were walking along the grass near a pond. We had never seen or met a Buddhist monastic before. The image was beautiful. A light breeze was gently blowing their robes and they were smiling as they slowly walked. Then, suddenly, some large geese started honking and running towards them! The sisters immediately started running away from the geese, but rather than panicking or being frightened, they began laughing as they ran. My parents and I also began laughing and my mom turned to me and said, "I think we are home."

After this experience, we attended the family retreat each year that Thay and the sangha came to North America, so I had the joy growing up attending Plum Village's children's program and then the teens' program. Happily, not long after I graduated from the teens' program, Thay and the sangha started the Wake Up Movement for "young adults" and I had the opportunity to participate in the 2011 East Coast Wake Up Tour. On this tour, a group of monastics and lay friends in their twenties and thirties traveled to universities across the East Coast of the United States (including Yale, Harvard, and Brown). I have continued to practise closely with the sangha, becoming a member of the Order of Interbeing in 2015. I am a founding member of the Wake Up Toronto Sangha and currently part of the North American Wake Up Care Taking Council.

## **Inspiration to bring the Plum Village practice into healthcare settings**

A few specific life experiences played a role in my interest to research the application of mindfulness in healthcare settings: 1) Growing up with a father who was a physician; 2) An interest in caring for caregivers (having been close to many teachers growing up with my mom working as an artist in elementary/high-schools); and 3) Experiencing my own illness and subsequent hospital stay/admission when I was fifteen years old.

I was hospitalized after a combination of viruses triggered an autoimmune response that overactivated my immune system. The first night I was in the hospital, the doctors told me and my parents that they did not know if I would make it

through the night. Through this first night, and over the course of my hospital stay – which included a seemingly never-ending battery of tests – my family drew upon many of the Plum Village practices to support us. For example, during procedures we would sing Plum Village songs and come home to our breathing. Each morning during hospital rounds, I would be asked about the parts of my body that were in pain. After this, my mom would guide me through a deep relaxation practice so that I would also spend time each morning sending gratitude and love to my body. The practice of deep relaxation (sometimes called a body scan) also helped me become aware of the parts my body that were free of pain, even if this was just my left pinky toe. Since my hospital experience, I have been asked when I began using the practice of mindfulness to heal. My answer is that through mindfulness, we can begin to heal at the very same time that we become ill; mindfulness and healing are not separate, and there is no need to wait.

My interest in bringing mindfulness to healthcare was furthered during my master's degree, which focused on integrating mindfulness and Thay's teachings into the education sector, along with my time as the international coordinator for Wake Up schools (an initiative to support the cultivation of mindfulness in educational settings). Through my graduate studies I was introduced to the scientific literature about burnout amongst caring professions, particularly educators and clinicians.

These different life experiences led me to be interested in exploring how healthcare and occupational environments could be spaces where clinicians could flourish and thrive, rather than burn out. I was particularly inspired by a conversation Thay had with the dean of the School of Public Health at Harvard. During this conversation Thay proposed that everyone who is part of a community of health should learn how to live in such a way that the environment of the healthcare practitioner is also healthy. Thay suggested that how healthcare practitioners eat, walk and work could create an environment filled with joy and happiness, so that the health community itself was an instrument of healthy change. Thay proposed that this kind of environment would benefit the health of everyone in the community, including patients, families, clinicians, and administrators.

From my own lived experience growing up with Thay's teachings, along with researching their

integration into education settings, I had already begun the work of considering how to bridge the knowledge streams of science and Dharma. From these experiences, I knew that these two knowledge streams had the potential to be complementary. I also knew that there were questions and challenges about how to present the Dharma in a way that was acceptable and accessible within the healthcare setting. My novel background as both an academic researcher and long-term practitioner with Plum Village offered me a unique perspective and access to the teachings that I hoped could be of service to both the international healthcare community and the Plum Village community. Combined with my aspiration to further develop my skills as a researcher and continue my academic learning journey, along with a gentle push from one of my mentors in Toronto, Michele Chaban, I decided to apply to the PhD program at the University of Toronto with the aim to study the impact of mindfulness on physician wellbeing.

## Challenges

There is growing interest within the sector of healthcare to address systemic issues such as burnout. Mindfulness has been recommended across the literature as one potentially effective modality. While the evidence-base for mindfulness has generated interest, there are significant challenges when attempting to address systemic change within healthcare delivery systems. These challenges include practical concerns and skepticism about integrating knowledge from outside the dominant cultural system in relation to acceptability, applicability, and feasibility. There are also barriers that stem from long-standing social and cultural elements embedded within the context of medical culture. Based on the existing literature, along with data generated from the physicians who participated in my PhD research study, these socially and culturally embedded barriers include competition, perfectionism, individualism, demanding workloads and higher value placed on "achievement" and "success" than "self-care" and "work/life balance."

To overcome these challenges, I drew upon the very same bodies of knowledge which could be seen to have fostered these barriers—being the traditions of science and the Dharma. On the scientific end, I drew upon the academic tradition of evidence and rigour to build a high-quality research study that would be acceptable to the scientific community and culture of medicine. Simultaneously, I took

refuge in Thay, the sangha, and my own practice. In particular, I took inspiration from Thay's many years of perseverance in the face of great challenge and difficulty. Over the course of working on my PhD, I would return to writings and talks from Thay for inspiration. As I wrote my dissertation, I would sometimes imagine him peering over my shoulder, encouraging me to keep going no matter how tired I felt or how challenging the work was. It is in this spirit that my 400-page dissertation begins with the following quote from Thay:

*“Meditators since the beginning of time have known that they must use their own eyes and the language of their own times to express their insight. Wisdom is a living stream, not an icon to be preserved in a museum. Only when a practitioner finds the spring of wisdom in his or her own life can it flow to future generations. Keeping the torch of wisdom glowing is the work of all of us who know how to clear a path through the forest in order to walk on ahead.”* –The Sun My Heart p. viii

This quote provided ongoing encouragement throughout my PhD journey. In addition to encouragement, this quote—along with many other invitations across Thay's body of work to update and integrate the Dharma—provided me with a sense of permission from Thay to innovate and add my own voice to the ongoing adaptation and application of the Dharma. Taking refuge in the sangha also manifested in a very pragmatic way through the establishment of a Monastic Advisory Committee, which I formally set up as part of my PhD process.

### **Support and collaboration with Thay and Plum Village**

I begin this section with a deep bow of gratitude to the Plum Village monastic community, who have been a meaningful support across so much of my life. Every retreat, teaching tour, online Dharma talk, recording on the Plum Village app, etc. have been made possible by the incredible humans who have chosen to walk the monastic path. To support my PhD research study, a Plum Village Monastic Advisory Committee was established. The members included Br. Phap Dung, Br. Phap Huu, Br. Phap Linh and Sr. Hien Nghiem. They were invited to provide feedback across all phases of the research study, including program development/implementation, data analysis and final thesis write up—along with collaboration on future publications. Their feedback helped to guide the study and ground the work in the teachings and language of Thay and the Plum Village community.



Sr. Kaira Jewel, Thay, Elli Weisbaum, 2013

### **Mindfulness in healthcare: a brief history and overview of my research study**

The popularity and application of mindfulness in contemporary settings has been growing across key sectors of society, including healthcare, education, the workplace, and the law. Within the scientific literature, mindfulness is credited as having a wide range of potential health benefits, including reduced anxiety and stress, along with increased wellbeing, self-regulation, cognitive performance, emotional-regulation, motor skills, academic performance, empathy, and greater connection between brain regions associated with “prosocial behaviours” such as compassion. Within the context of healthcare, programs—often called Mindfulness-Based Interventions—have been researched and delivered to patient populations. These include mindfulness programs developed for patients with chronic pain, patients relapsing in depression, cancer patients, adolescents with chronic illness, and people in recovery from addiction. To date, none of the published mindfulness-based interventions have been explicitly/primarily based on Thay's teachings. Therefore, my research aspires to contribute an innovative and novel approach to the field of healthcare, while simultaneously supporting the work and teachings of the wider Plum village community.

### **A brief overview of my PhD research study**

My PhD research study was conducted with 45 physicians from across different specialties (e.g. surgery, emergency department, family medicine etc.) who participated in a five-week mindfulness training program delivered at a hospital in Toronto, Canada. The program was called the “Applied Mindfulness Training Program for Medical Personnel” or AMP-MP for short. I developed this

program based on my training and practice with Thay and the Plum Village community. The program was facilitated by two long-term Plum Village practitioners who are both registered clinicians, David Viafora and Dagmara Urbanowicz. I was present at each session as a “participant observer” to take research field notes and help with administrative support. Following the completion of the program, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with twenty-eight of the physicians. Analysis of the interviews showed that participants’ experience of mindfulness benefitted their personal sense of wellbeing, along with enhancing their interactions with their patients, colleagues, and administrators. The participants describe Thay’s teachings as well liked/enjoyable/practical and highly applicable to their daily life.

I am deeply grateful to each participant for sharing their experience and stories with me. As I write this reflection, I am reminded of one surgeon in particular who, during the first session, expressed that they did not believe in this “mindfulness stuff,” and then in their post-program interview stated that they “fell in love with the bell” and had considered “stealing the bell” at the end of the program, so they could invite it for their colleagues before their next surgery. Below are some direct quotes from the study participants which illustrate, in their own words, their experience of the practice.

*“I found the awareness of breath especially helpful. I’ve been operating almost every day the past month and it gets stressful and the days are really long and fast-*

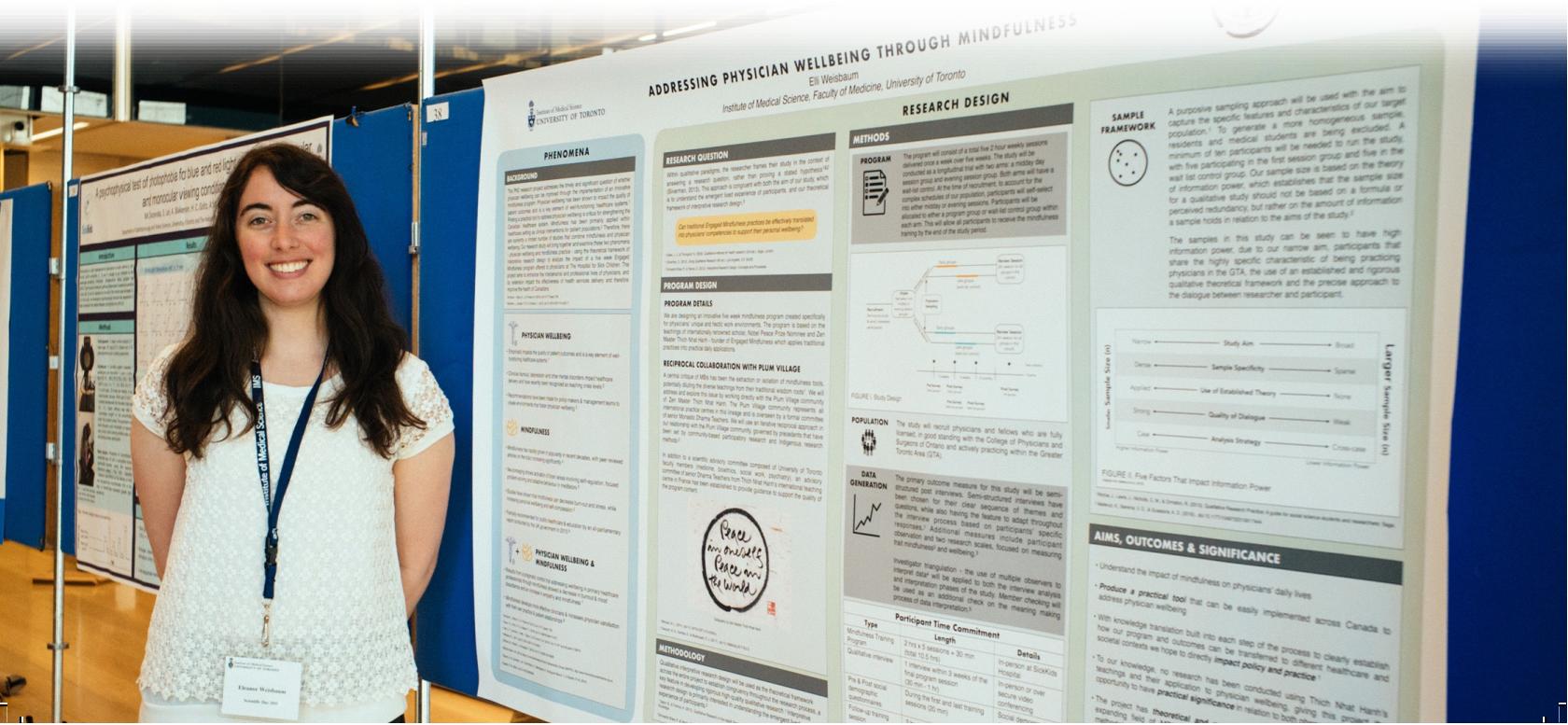
*paced and we don’t really stop to eat or do anything. I found just taking the few minutes to breathe between patients really helpful just to clear my head and then quickly move on to the next patient.” —Ophthalmologist*

*“I think I will definitely continue it because I find that my day is going more smoothly and I end up with a happier day and so that means I come home happier. So, I don’t bring back all of the frustration and stuff that was happening through the day. I think, those deep breaths in between patients, the mindful walking that I can do is great.” —Rheumatologist*

*“I spoke about the breathing, so you come back to your mindful breathing and it helps you to cope with almost every situation. Like, you have that interaction with a patient. So, you can immediately react or you can just pause when you feel it; if you pause and you take a breath and you do it twice, it gives you some time to think. And then if you’re relaxed, it immediately gives you the way to react differently, better.” —Surgeon*

### No beginning, no end

There is so much more that could be shared about the integration of Thay’s work into healthcare. Happily, we know from Thay that by looking deeply we can see there is no beginning or end. So, while in the historical dimension this article is concluding, my deep aspiration is to continue working and collaborating with the Plum Village monastic and lay communities to bring the practice into healthcare settings, to cultivate a healthy and compassionate society. ☸



**ADDRESSING PHYSICIAN WELLBEING THROUGH MINDFULNESS**  
Eli Weisbaum  
Institute of Medical Science, Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto

#### PHENOMENA

**BACKGROUND**  
The health care profession is the most stressful occupation in Canada. The high-stress environment is a result of the increasing demand for services and the limited resources available. This leads to burnout, which is a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion. Burnout is a result of chronic stress and is characterized by feelings of helplessness, cynicism, and decreased motivation. Mindfulness is a practice that has been shown to reduce stress and improve well-being. This research aims to explore the impact of mindfulness on physician well-being.

**PHYSICIAN WELLBEING**  
Physician well-being is a state of being that is characterized by a sense of purpose, meaning, and fulfillment. It is a state of being that is characterized by a sense of purpose, meaning, and fulfillment. It is a state of being that is characterized by a sense of purpose, meaning, and fulfillment.

**KNOWLEDGE**  
Mindfulness is a practice that has been shown to reduce stress and improve well-being. This research aims to explore the impact of mindfulness on physician well-being.

**PHYSICIAN WELLBEING & MINDFULNESS**  
Mindfulness is a practice that has been shown to reduce stress and improve well-being. This research aims to explore the impact of mindfulness on physician well-being.

#### RESEARCH QUESTION

What is the impact of mindfulness on physician well-being? This research aims to explore the impact of mindfulness on physician well-being.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**  
This research is a qualitative study that uses semi-structured interviews to explore the impact of mindfulness on physician well-being.

**PROGRAM DESIGN**  
The program is a mindfulness program that is based on the teachings of Thay. It is a program that is based on the teachings of Thay.

**RESEARCH COLLABORATION WITH PLUM VILLAGE**  
This research is a collaboration with Plum Village. Plum Village is a Buddhist community that has been shown to have a positive impact on well-being.

**METHODOLOGY**  
This research uses semi-structured interviews to explore the impact of mindfulness on physician well-being.

#### RESEARCH DESIGN

**PROGRAM**  
The program is a mindfulness program that is based on the teachings of Thay. It is a program that is based on the teachings of Thay.

**POPULATION**  
The study will include physicians and fellows who are fully licensed, in good standing with the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario and actively practicing within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

**DATA GENERATION**  
The primary outcome measure for this study will be semi-structured post-interviews. Semi-structured interviews have been chosen for their clear sequence of themes and questions, while also having the feature to adapt throughout responses. Additional measures include participant observation and two research notes, focused on measuring that mindfulness and well-being.

**Participant Time Commitment**

Type	Length	Details
Medicine Training Program	2 hrs x 9 sessions + 30 min	In-person at St. Michael's hospital
Qualitative Interview	1 hr	In-person or over the phone
Pre-Post Survey	10-15 min	Online survey
Participant Training	1 hr	Online survey

#### SAMPLE FRAMEWORK

A purposive sampling approach will be used with the aim to capture the specific features and characteristics of our target population. To generate a more homogeneous sample, participants will be recruited from a single site. The study will include participants in the first session group and five in the wait list control group. Our sample size is based on the theory of information power, which establishes that the sample size for a qualitative study should not be based on a formula or perceived redundancy, but rather on the amount of information a sample holds in relation to the aims of the study.

The samples in this study can be seen to have high information power, due to our narrow aim, participants share the highly specific characteristics of being practicing physicians in the GTA, the use of an established and rigorous qualitative theoretical framework and the precise approach to the dialogue between researcher and participant.

**FIGURE 1: Five Factors that Impact Information Power**

1. Narrow Sample Size (N)  
2. Specificity of Sample  
3. Use of Established Theory  
4. Quality of Dialogue  
5. Analysis Strategy

**AIMS, OUTCOMES & SIGNIFICANCE**

- Understand the impact of mindfulness on physicians' daily lives
- Produce a practical tool that can be easily implemented across Canada to address physician well-being
- With knowledge translation built into each step of the process to clearly establish findings and their application to physician well-being, giving this project the opportunity to have practical significance in relation to both research and practice
- To our knowledge, no research has been conducted using Thay's teachings and their application to physician well-being, giving this project the opportunity to have practical significance in relation to both research and practice
- The project has theoretical and practical significance in relation to both research and practice

# Thay's Vision for Wake Up Schools

BROTHER CHÂN PHÁP LƯU & ORLAITH O'SULLIVAN

*Br. Phap Luu has been involved in Wake Up Schools since its inception in 2012.*

*Orlaith (also known as "Orla") is a member of the Order of Interbeing and the International Coordinator of Wake Up Schools. She has founded two sanghas in Dublin, one for adults and one for families, and teaches how to build happier communities.*

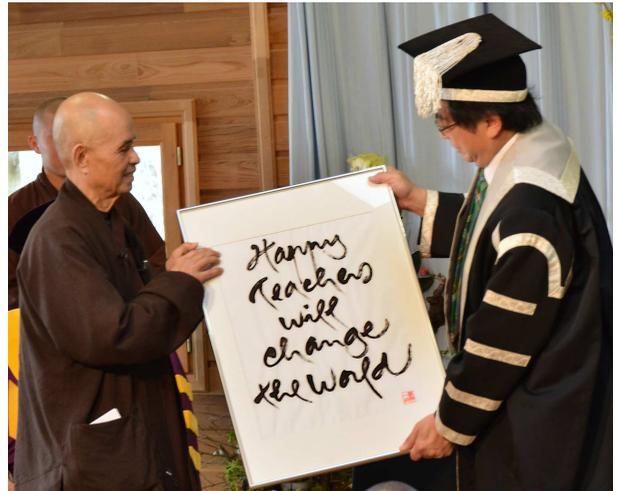
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Thay, one of the first monks to include elements of Western science and philosophy in the monastic curriculum, has always been curious about *how we learn and how we can live together.*

## Roots in Vietnam at war

In the '60s during the American War in Vietnam, Thay, along with Sister Chan Khong, created the School of Youth and Social Service to train young volunteer teachers to go into the countryside to work with the children of farmers, while their parents were out in the rice fields. These volunteers would go into the villages without any money and just play with the children at first. Eventually they would start teaching them simple lessons and offer the children a cup of soy milk each for lunch. Over time they gained the trust of the villagers; eventually one of the villagers might even offer their house during the day as a schoolhouse. The trust grew as the people saw that the volunteers weren't trying to impose any ideology on them, or convince them to be on one side of the war or the other. They were just coming to help. At that point, the people in the town would often pool their resources to build a simple school.

This movement, begun during the wartime, continues today in Vietnam with the Love and Understanding Humanitarian Relief Program. Sr. Chan Khong and her many helpers, along with the Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation, support teachers working in very remote areas of Vietnam where they don't yet have a school. Usually, after a few years, once the basic educational system is established, the government follows by coming in and building proper schools. So Thay has been training teachers since he was a young monk and Dharma teacher. This work makes up the deep roots of Wake Up Schools.



## Coming to the West

After Thay was granted political asylum in the West, he and Sr. Chan Khong began to build a community here in France—first in and near Paris, and eventually, in 1982, in what became Plum Village in the Dordogne. In its earliest days, Plum Village was a place for education—not only for mindfulness but also for the transmission of Vietnamese culture and values to overseas Vietnamese and their children. In the '90s, after the monastic community started to grow in Plum Village, Thay made efforts to bring these experiments in education out to the wider public. Thay inspired teachers to bring mindfulness practice into their classrooms—especially Richard Brady, a North American maths teacher in a Quaker School near Washington, D.C. and now a senior Dharma teacher in our tradition.

Richard seeded an educational network called the Mindfulness in Education Network ([mindfuled.org](http://mindfuled.org)), which continues today to connect teachers online, and to organize a gathering of teachers once each year. Through this, a movement of mindfulness in education began to build.

In 2008, as Thay prepared for a tour in India, senior Dharma teacher Shantum Seth, the main organizer of the tour, asked Thay what would be the main theme of the tour. Thay told him he wanted to focus on education: How can we help our teachers and their students to take care of their emotions—especially difficult emotions? That is what has been

missing in the modern educational system. They had the insight that mindful breathing could help, so Shantum organized a nationwide retreat for teachers in India, where Thay taught about mindfulness in the classroom.

At the time, in France, the President was calling for schools to institute a class in ethics, but there was a lot of debate about what would be taught in that ethics class. Thay said that he had an idea: that when the children learn to breathe mindfully, stop, and come back to their body to see what is going on inside of them, they would get in touch with the good qualities that they have inside themselves and learn how to cultivate them. They also have an opportunity to look inside to see how their anger, sadness, and fear are nourished by their way of thinking. Just by looking deeply, we can actually live a more ethical life. Thay called this Applied Ethics, which became the basis—the ethical foundation—for what we now call *Wake Up Schools*.

### Developing training for teachers

Then we started doing more and more retreats for educators in Asia, Europe, and North America. We had done a number of short programs in schools in England, America, India, Indonesia, and all around the world, but we learned that what actually sticks and has a greater impact is the personal transformation that a teacher can experience on a five, six or seven-day retreat. After a number of these retreats, teachers asked us for something they could take home with them to continue to practice and deepen what they had learned, so we started thinking about how to develop training materials.

Br. Phap Dung, Sr. Chau Nghiem, Br. Phap Lai, Br. Phap Luu, Br. Phap Linh, along with other monastics, worked with Professor Katherine Weare, Elli Weisbaum, Yvonne Mazurek, and others to develop, over a few years, a manual for professional teachers that would cover the basic Plum Village practices. This became the book *Happy Teachers Change the World: A Guide for Cultivating Mindfulness in Education*, which is now the textbook training manual for Wake Up Schools. It includes the personal experiences of hundreds of teachers who have applied Plum Village practices in their classrooms and daily lives. The book is not just theory but the fruit of applied practice.

Beyond offering retreats for teachers, we developed a one-year training program—modeled on the training program for core members of the Order of Interbeing—that we call the *Happy Teachers Training Program*. Over the past six years, teachers in North America, as well as France, Italy, Germany, and Spain, have gone through this program. The teachers began by undergoing a one-year mentorship with an established Plum Village Dharma teacher and teachers who have already completed the program (“Happy Teachers”), under the auspices of Plum Village and run by the Order of Interbeing in each country. Nowadays, as the program has grown and because we want it to be community-based, this mentorship program has evolved so that each group of trainees forms their own educators’ sangha. See <sup>10</sup>.

By a “happy teacher” Thay means you. Being a “happy teacher” doesn’t mean you’re happy all the

10. <https://wakeupschools.org/what-we-offer/training/>



time; it means you know how to take care of yourself in order to generate happiness. They would draw a circle with an arrow pointing inwards and tell us, “The way out is in.” If we are first able to take care of ourselves as a teacher, then we learn how to take care of our family, our colleagues and also our students, and then the parents of the students and so on. In this way the circle expands outward.

If the first person doesn’t know how to take care of themselves, then they cannot help other people to take care of themselves. That’s why in Wake Up Schools we always say that the practice starts with ourselves—the teachers. You have to transform yourself first.

### The Three Pillars of Wake Up Schools

The first pillar of Wake Up Schools is embodiment: we need to embody the practice as teachers. We begin by helping the teachers to touch freedom, joy and happiness in a retreat. When a teacher touches that freedom, and transforms themselves, their interest deepens. Quite naturally, they will want to share their experience with others. Their colleagues and family ask, “How is it that you seem so much lighter, that you look so much happier? What did you do?”



Dharma School in the UK, 2016

This touches on the second pillar of Wake Up Schools: service. Service means that we’re in this to change the world, not to just make a living for ourselves, to make a profit or a business out of mindfulness. The teaching is something that we offer freely, and that spirit infuses everything about Wake Up Schools. Our direction is to transform the whole school community. Starting with ourselves, we expand our circle of influence to our family, our colleagues, our students, and administration. By

transforming the school, we arrive at transformation at the level of society.

This creates a precious opportunity to build community, the third pillar of Wake Up Schools. This is something that we do well; centers in the Plum Village tradition around the world make up living, breathing communities. For us mindfulness is a path, not a tool. We are here not just to transmit a technique. It’s a path—a whole way of living—that we walk together and not alone. Our international community is made up of people from many different backgrounds and cultures—European, North American, Asian—all living together year round, practicing sitting meditation, walking meditation, and eating meditation together. Community is built into our DNA. So expanding that into schools—including teachers, their families, and their students is quite natural.

### Current initiatives

When we practice, we also do it as a community. The *Happy Teachers Sangha*<sup>11</sup>—which includes members from Japan, Russia, France, Germany, North America, the Philippines, the Netherlands, Kenya, and Brazil—is a concrete manifestation of this. Teachers come together online to share their happiness and suffering with each other, so that they can deepen their understanding and support one another. We currently have one global Happy Teachers Sangha and one specifically for North America.

Being a mindful teacher today is to be an activist, transforming society at the root. To support this we held an International Wake Up Schools Retreat and Gathering Online, from Friday 25 to Sunday 27 February 2022. This was an opportunity for teachers to connect with each other, refresh their personal practice, and work together to develop curricula for students—a weekend to pause and reflect on what it means to be a mindful teacher amidst our colleagues and administrators. As our monastic practice centers reopen post-pandemic, we continue to provide a thriving community for teachers to come back to, a refuge, when they feel fatigued or burnt out. They know they can always come back here and the community continues to be a place of practice.

Recently the work of Wake Up Schools was featured in a new evidence-based guide published by The Mindfulness Initiative. *Implementing Mindfulness in Schools: An Evidence-Based Guide*<sup>12</sup> is a

11. See <https://wakeupschools.org/happy-teachers-sangha/>.

12. See <https://wakeupschools.org/wake-up-schools-featured-in-new-evidence-based-guide/>.

comprehensive guide written by Professor Katherine Weare and Adrian Bethune after extensive consultation with an expert steering group, including our International Co-ordinator, Dr. Orlaith O’Sullivan. The guide highlights the importance of whole-school engagement and of adopting a long-term approach to infusing the school with mindfulness.

### Blossoms of the Wake Up Schools network



Br. Phap Luu leading an activity in Uganda<sup>13</sup>

In January of 2019, Br. Phap Dung, Sr. Hien Hạnh, Sr. Thanh Nghiem, Br. Phap Luu, Sr. Thao Nghiem, Br. Bao Tang, and Br. Pham Hanh brought Wake Up Schools to Uganda. Most of the 250 or so teachers were Catholic—they even held a Catholic mass every day during the retreat. This was a new environment for us because we’re used to teaching in the more

secular parts of the West. But there was really no obstacle. We went there to teach mindfulness, how to understand your mind: how do you get to know difficult emotions directly and understand what kind of nutriment gives rise to them. People there got that everyone needs this—it’s a kind of teaching that every human being really needs to live happy and healthy lives. Now the teachers are bringing their experience of deep transformation back to their schools and sharing it as more compassionate teachers with their colleagues and students. This trip was filmed by Wouter Verhoeven of Evermind Media and is being made into a documentary.<sup>14</sup>

During the pandemic, Wake Up Schools offered webinars to support healthcare workers in Vietnam, including a workshop hosted with the Center for Healthcare Improvement Research and the Oxford University Clinical Research Unit (OUCRU).

Staff from the Hospital of Tropical Disease (Bệnh viện Bệnh nhiệt đới Trung ương) in Hanoi and Chợ Rẫy Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City—two hospitals that have been at the front line in Vietnam’s effort to contain and to treat COVID-19—participated. The webinar is now available for their healthcare staff of 30,000 people.

We also offered two webinars in Vietnam to support teachers and parents as schools reopened. On Sunday May 3, 2020, as schools were about to reopen, we supported an online seminar for educators and parents called “2020 Noble Semester—Học kỳ cao quý,”<sup>15</sup> which included teachings by Sr. Boi Nghiem of Magnolia Grove Monastery.

One week later, on April 12, 2020, Wake Up Schools held a workshop for Vietnamese educators.<sup>16</sup> More than one hundred teachers from universities, colleges, high schools, and kindergartens joined the workshop. The guest speakers included university lecturers, high school academic board members, and a psychology counselor. They shared about the educational challenges as well as the opportunities of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this workshop, Orlaith O’Sullivan and Lê Thị Mỹ Hằng from Wake Up Schools introduced the practice of mindfulness so that educators could experience more peace and learn how to take care of strong emotions.

13. Photos kindly provided by Evermind Media

14. See <https://evermind.media/happy-teachers-change-africa>.

15. See <https://youtu.be/WVHVwZa4wK8>.

16. See <https://youtu.be/8xgcrSzs0A>.

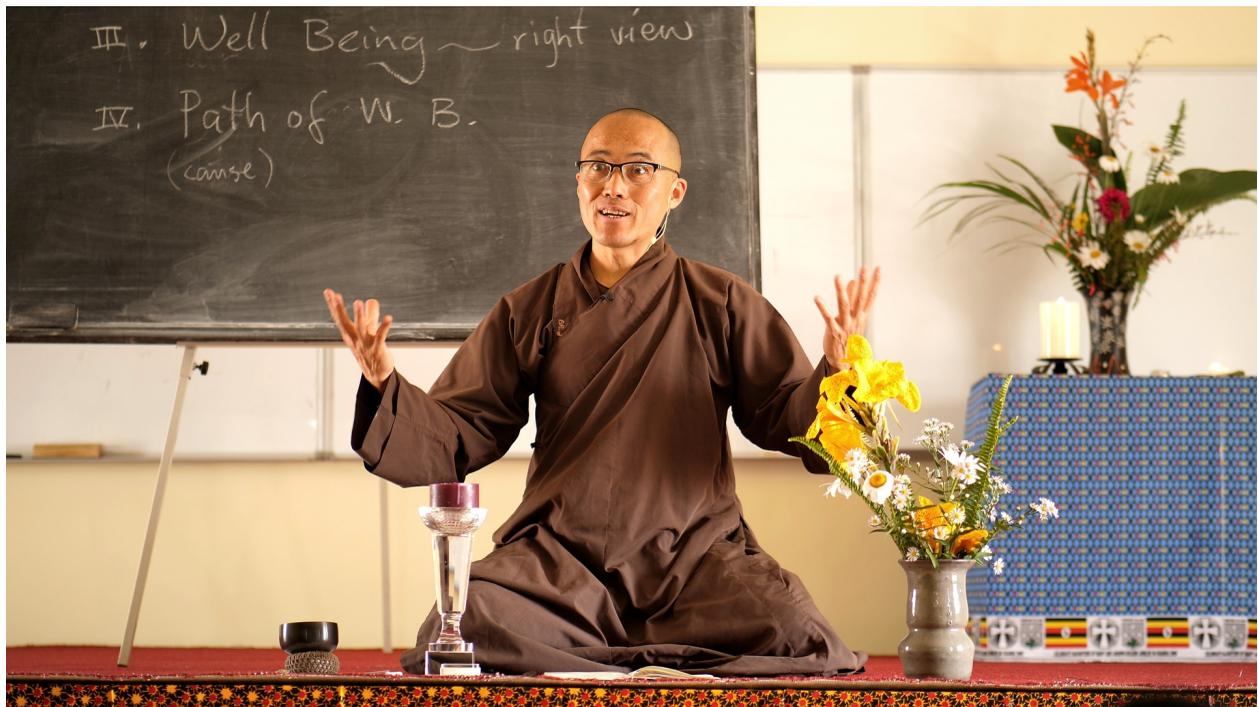
On March 20, 2021, Wake Up Schools was awarded the 2021 Laureate for Education<sup>17</sup> by the World Happiness Foundation (WHF) and the United Nations University for Peace. The award was presented as part of World Happiness Week, a week-long international festival to energize wellbeing and happiness for all.

The Education award recognizes a community which improves the education sector by bringing greater happiness and well-being to students and families. The award was presented by founder and president of the World Happiness Foundation, Luis Gallardo. He described Wake Up Schools as a 'remarkable' community, saying, "What you are doing is so remarkable. Everybody knows Thich Nhat Hanh and the Plum Village community are building this sense of belonging so that we can create a more mindful, more peaceful and more positive world. You are a true example of what it means to create a world with more happiness, more consciousness and freedom for all."

Luis expressed his appreciation for our sangha building: "The ways that you bring all these teachers together, creating a secure base, that is so important for teachers. You are masters." Earlier that day, the Happy Teachers Sangha had met as part of the World Happiness Week, offering teachers from around the world an opportunity to connect, care for themselves, and experience the practice.

On Tuesday 20 April 2021, Wake Up Schools took part in a Mind & Life Europe (MLE) webcast, part of a series exploring mindfulness in education. The webcast drew together voices from the third MLE webcast series titled "Emerging and Challenging Areas and Next Steps for Contemplative Education."

In all these events we remind teachers: happiness is possible. We have to say it because many people don't believe it. Happiness is possible.  
Now. *cs*



17. See <https://worldhappiness.foundation/awards/laureates/laureates-2021/>.

# Free at School

AN INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD BRADY

*Richard (True Dharma Bridge) is a retired high school maths teacher, and a lay Dharma teacher in the Plum Village tradition. He is also a retreat leader, writer, educational consultant, and coordinator of the Wake Up Schools Level II Program in North America and he recently wrote a book titled Walking the Teacher's Path with Mindfulness—Stories for Reflection and Action. This is an excerpt from a longer interview of Richard conducted by Kaira Jewel Lingo in August 2021. See [youtu.be/o68kYh2N\\_U4](https://youtu.be/o68kYh2N_U4).*



Richard and Kaira Jewel

## Finding the path of mindfulness

**Can you tell us some stories about how you found the path of mindfulness and how it has changed you?**

In 1987 I found Thay's book *The Miracle of Mindfulness* and started reading it. When I read the first story, about how to have unlimited time for yourself, I realized I wanted to bring this book into my maths classes and read it to my students. I was certain they would get much benefit from it. The students have so much work and there is so much pressure on them that having unlimited time for themselves would be the greatest gift I could possibly give them.

Everyday I began maths class by reading from the book. When I finished, my students said they would like another book, so I read *The Sun, My Heart*, which was kind of the sequel. For me it was like reading science fiction. I didn't know anyone who lived their life the way Thay described, and I didn't know how one could go about beginning to live that way. At the end of the year, the seniors went off to do their special projects and came back to report on them. I was touched by one of the seniors who reported on his two weeks at a Zen center in Washington, DC, where he went every day to meditate and to help out. He returned to school so invigorated; he was just beaming. The audience had an opportunity for a Q&A about his report. A student asked, "Chris, I can see that your life has been changed by your experience and that you spent a lot of time sitting on a cushion. Can you tell us any other



way in which your life is different?” Chris thought for a minute and then replied, “There are many ways my life has been affected by my mindfulness practice. Most of them are very subtle and difficult to put into words, but I can tell you that I am less angry.” When I heard this, I thought, “Here is my teacher!” And I said to Chris, “I need to do what you’ve been doing. I need to begin a meditation practice.”

That was the beginning of what led me to attend a retreat with Thay. Everything after that unfolded in a way that felt deeply right. It seemed fated.

### **Bringing mindfulness to students**

***Can you share more about how, as you were beginning to walk this path, you began to bring meditation into your community and classroom and also about the effects of sharing mindfulness with your students?***

When I met Thay and began my personal meditation practice, I was not ready to bring the practice into the Quaker school where I was teaching. I did not see an opening for doing that. My own mindfulness practice was still very young. I focused my attention primarily on developing it. A few years later a new course was set up and required for all ninth grade students for one semester. Discovering that it had a unit on health, I went to the teacher who was teaching the course and asked if I could offer one lesson on stress-reduction. When she said yes, I developed a lesson plan for teaching the 9<sup>th</sup> graders. I would have them for only 45 minutes. I knew whatever I did needed to be memorable. What were the students really interested in? I remembered Frank McCourt’s book *Teacher Man* (a book about the life of a teacher in inner city public schools), where he suggested that his high school students were interested in sex and food. When I thought about the teenagers I’d be teaching, I added one more thing: they were deeply interested in themselves. They were fourteen-year-olds trying to figure out who they were. What about introducing them to their minds?

The mind is often a part of ourselves that we don’t know much about. We know how to use it, but we don’t know what is happening inside when we do. So I invited my students to do an experiment, watching whatever happened in their minds for five minutes. I compared the mind to a stage where different things would come on to make an appearance. They’d be there for a while and then leave. When we talked together about what they might see on their stages, they ended up realizing

they might become aware of feelings, thoughts, sensations from the outer world and internal bodily sensations.

The students were prepared to just notice things as they appeared. I asked them if they thought there could be more than one thing on their stage at the same time. Students generally thought it might be possible but they weren’t sure. I then asked them whether their stage might be empty for part of the time. Very few thought that was possible. So we experimented by watching our minds and then shared experiences. When I asked how many had negative thoughts or feelings during the five minutes, almost everyone had. Most of these thoughts had to do with things that had yet to happen or had already happened, maybe a problem with a friend or parent and, occasionally, a problem with what was happening right in the moment as they didn’t like what they were doing. I went on to talk about how what’s going on in your mind affects the kind of life you’re living.

If many negative things are happening in your mind, it might be kind of a downer to be paying attention to them unless you can do something about it. So I said, “There is something you can do about it!” and together we all did this short guided Plum Village meditation:

*Breathing in, I see myself as a flower,  
Breathing out, I feel fresh.  
Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain,  
Breathing out, I feel solid.*

The idea that their minds were having a powerful influence on their lives was planted and also that there was something they could do to make their minds more hospitable and positive.

When students returned years later, some talked about remembering something I had read to them in class from Thich Nhat Hanh’s writing. Others remembered something I had talked about in the stress-reduction class. I was becoming aware that stress-reduction was not just a matter of school-related pressure; it was also the whole world starting to get stressed. I could see that mindfulness could become an extremely important tool, a way of coping, and an aide to doing more than just coping with the kind of world we were all moving into.

In my last two years of teaching, I took the step of getting permission from the school principal to begin every one of my classes with five minutes of mindfulness. Sometimes we read a short poem or

story having wisdom and intelligence from Thay or another teacher or poet. There was also weekly free writing where we all just recorded whatever was in our minds for five minutes. It was a revolutionary experience for many of the students. They wrote to me at the end of the year to tell me about important breakthroughs or things they had learned, sometimes from themselves, in the course of these writing meditations.



## **Mindfulness and mathematics**

### ***How did you connect mindfulness with maths in your teaching?***

Connecting mindfulness with maths was initially quite a challenge because maths focuses on analyzing and getting answers. It's oriented towards an endpoint. Mindfulness, on the other hand, is about being present in the moment to whatever is there. What was important to me at this point in my teaching was that students learn how to sit with a problem even though they didn't have an answer for it or even have a method to solve it—just sit with it without feeling they were going to be penalized if they didn't end up with an answer.

In fact, I would sometimes ask them, “What questions do you have as you look at this problem—what comes to your mind?” I wanted them to learn to reflect, to see that they could just sit with something and have questions occur to them. This was not an easy transition for students used to coming up with answers but unfamiliar with coming up with questions.

It seemed to me that I was much more successful in my maths classes at giving students a way to understand themselves better, even if they didn't understand mathematics a lot better right away. We did five minutes of mindfulness practice before starting our work. My students would then work in

groups of four. The focus they had while working with each other, the attention they paid, and the group discussions were more productive as a result of their having had a chance to settle in and get out on paper things that were bothering them as they left their last class or an interaction in the hall.

Before taking tests, I invited students to do five minutes of meditation. The first half of the meditation focused on how you were feeling and what you were thinking as you went into the test. As there may have been a number of students who were not feeling comfortable or confident, I wanted to give them the message that there was nothing wrong with those feelings. They were completely understandable in light of the amount of studying they'd done or how they did on their last test. My message was, “It's okay; it's not something that needs to take over your life for the next 45 minutes.”

Next we would turn our attention to something mathematical we had done in our life that we felt proud of or happy about. It might be when we learned to count to ten, solved a hard problem, or finally understood a difficult concept. We closed our eyes, and sat with that feeling, knowing that we have in us many positive experiences with maths which are there even if we also have feelings of concern right now. If during the test they reached a point where they started to blank out or something similar, I asked them to just close their eyes and go back to that moment that they had thought of earlier when they felt very happy with mathematics and their relationship to it.

## **The aspiration to help teachers**

### ***What is your aspiration in sharing mindfulness with educators, especially in this wonderful new book? What are you hoping educators will come away with from a retreat or from reading this book?***

At my high school I was in the position of being the only teacher with a mindfulness practice who found skillful ways of sharing mindfulness with students. I now see that the most important ways I shared mindfulness with my students were the changes in my own approach to teaching. The fact was, I now took my time, and I asked students to take their time with what they were doing.

Eventually I began courses by giving students five minutes to eat a single raisin. We talked about how to eat the raisin and bring our full awareness to what was happening. I suggested that was how I wanted them to do their homework, not to rush

through it in order to finish the assignment, but to spend 30-40 minutes on their homework even if they didn't finish it. The way they did it was more important than how much they did.

In writing my book, I wanted to give teachers a sense of their own agency in choosing what they conveyed to students. I did this by telling stories about how I grew as a teacher. While these stories were particular to me, each one is followed by three or four questions for readers to contemplate and reflect on. My hope for the book is that teachers will begin to spend more time reflecting on their own lives. My goal isn't to tell teachers what to do when they get to their classroom. It's to encourage them to develop their own mindfulness practice. Once teachers experience mindfulness and begin to really feel at home with it and ready to share it, they'll find ways to do so that are organic and work for their students.

I recently wrote an exercise called "Free at Work." It was for anyone who works, and for teachers in particular, to help them meditate on their experience of working and their experience of freedom or lack of freedom and begin to see that most of the barriers to feeling free at work are

internal barriers. If teachers start to practice in a way which enables them to have a different relationship with the so-called barriers inside of themselves, the kind of teaching they are doing will be greatly affected and likely become much more powerful. That's what I want for teachers to get from the book.

### Connecting teachers

The Mindfulness in Education Network has over a thousand members all over the world. They are focused on young people of different ages, on different subjects, on higher education, the arts, yoga, etc., using all kinds of different approaches. As an early leader in this field, I would often get questions from other teachers asking me for advice on how to deal with a problem involving mindfulness. I could answer only a few of the questions from my own experience. When I knew I didn't have a very helpful response for a particular question, I would invite the person who'd submitted it to me to go to the Mindfulness in Education Network website, join the listserv, and post their question. It was surprising and wonderful to see the wisdom that was available to answer the questions.

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Educators together at the Morning Sun Mindfulness Center in New Hampshire

# Walking the Path of Compassion

BROTHER CHÂN TRỜI ĐẠO BI

As a young person, I did not know what I wanted in life. I did not have a path. When I heard that Thay was coming to Indonesia in 2010, I immediately signed up for the retreat. After the retreat, I felt that I saw the path I wanted to embark on—yes, I wanted to become a monk! My parents didn't support me, but after seeing my transformation, they understood that this path would bring me happiness. They asked me to finish my studies; I also thought it was a good idea. It gave me time to reflect on my aspiration, to see if this path would help me find meaning in my life.

After that 2010 retreat, some young people decided to establish Wake Up Indonesia. Then in 2013, some of us from Wake Up Indonesia went to the Wake Up Retreat led by Thay in Thailand. It was there that I saw Thay's calligraphy that read: *You have seen the path. Do not fear anymore.* I was moved to tears. I recognized the fear that I may not see Thay again. The calligraphy was like encouraging words from Thay, comforting me, letting me know that it is more important to see the path than to see Thay personally.

## The path of compassion

I received a lineage name, Chan Troi Dao Bi, which means "True Sky over the Path of Compassion". It reminds me that my practice is to see the path of compassion. "The Path of Compassion" is one of my favorite chapters in the book *Old Path White Clouds*. It tells the story of when Siddhartha and Yasodhara were social workers, Yasodhara was overwhelmed by grief when a young child she had tended to died. Siddhartha tried to console her but he could not because he had not yet found the path. Only after Siddhartha became awakened was he able to show the path of understanding and compassion to others.

I feel very fortunate that Thay has pointed out the path for me. I have many wounds from my time working as a social worker. Knowing that I am on the path of healing already brings me happiness. The pain from the wounds comes up from time to time, but I have learned how to be with it, to understand it. Thay taught us that understanding suffering is the way to generate compassion. I now see my wounds

as ingredients to grow compassion and non-fear. It is like a guided meditation for myself: *Breathing in, you have seen the path. Breathing out, do not fear anymore.*



Wake Up and Family Retreat, Thailand, 2013



Online Dharma sharing. Brs. Duc Pho, Dao Bi: top second left

This practice has helped me overcome my regret of not being able to see Thay anymore. I regretted that I did not ordain earlier and have the chance to receive Thay's direct guidance. I came to Plum Village in 2015 when Thay was no longer able to speak. Sometimes I dream of talking with Thay, and it makes me very happy.

I feel grateful to have been born into the spiritual life and to learn so much from Thay. Thay continued teaching in non-verbal ways. When he joined walking meditation in a wheelchair, he would pick up a leaf and with a playful gesture, made everyone laugh. Just by pointing at the sky, trees, flowers, and the wonders of life, Thay helped people touch simple joy. Sometimes when we stopped during walking meditation, Thay would pat or hug his disciples, and I felt as if he was patting and hugging all of us.

### Seeing Thay and the path with signless eyes

One time I saw Thay in his wheelchair when we were practicing walking meditation in Lower Hamlet. We were on opposite sides of the lotus pond and a branch blocked my view. I moved left and right, trying to see Thay. I asked myself, *Where is Thay?* Then I realized that I was still caught in Thay's form, I was not yet able to see Thay with the eyes of signlessness.

In one of Thay's letters, he said, "Thay and his disciples feel every day that they have the Buddha practicing sitting meditation, eating meditation, and walking meditation with them. For us, Buddha is not a distant image from the past but a living reality, which we can see with the insight of signlessness." Sometimes I feel that Thay is practicing with us even though he is not physically here. Whenever I come back to my breathing, I feel that Thay and the Buddha are very close to me. If I am not aware of my breathing, they are far away from me.

I often ask myself: *Have I really seen the path?* This question always accompanies me. I still have a lot of fear and sorrow, and a part of me feels that it is difficult to really have non-fear. The practice of listening to the bell helps me in these situations. When I recite the gatha, "Listening to the bell, I feel my afflictions begin to dissolve," I see that day by day, my fear and sorrow slowly dissolve.

### Wake Up is a precious gem of the Plum Village tradition

Plum Village attracts many young people because Thay and the sangha have been able to renew Buddhism in a way that is relevant to young people. The Wake Up sanghas are Dharma doors for many young people.

During the Wake Up Ambassadors Retreat in 2018, we established the "European Wake Up CTC." We called it "OOMPH" because it sounds more fun! We decided it stands for "Organism for Optimizing Many People's Happiness." It is not an organization, but an organism. When the Wake Up ambassadors have a place of refuge, they are able to optimize their own happiness, then bring that happiness to the people in their sanghas.

Every month, we continue to deepen our connection and friendship. Usually we have online gatherings on Thursday or Sunday evenings, which are lazy evenings in Plum Village after the Days of Mindfulness. Sometimes I feel tired, but when I join the online gatherings, I feel as if I am coming home and spending time with the family in the living room, and asking, "How is everybody doing?" or "How was your day?" The lay members share their difficulties, both personal and in their Wake Up sanghas, and the monastic members also share our difficulties, so we create mutual support and siblinghood. We also have fun together—play online games, sing, and dance!



In the chant *Praising the Buddha*, I very much like the line *May the sangha practice diligently showing love and concern for one and all. Just as for our very own family.* It moves me as it reflects my deep aspiration to practice in a way that shows love and concern for young people, the human family, and all beings. It's a lot of fun to practice with young people and to show others that when we practice we don't have to be too serious!

### **Thay and the Buddha have shown us the path**

When the Buddha was dying, Venerable Ananda had not yet attained enlightenment. Ananda was weeping and the Buddha tried to comfort him, "Don't be so sad Ananda. The Tathagata has reminded you that all dharmas are impermanent. With birth, there is death; with arising, there is dissolving; with coming together, there is separation. How can there be birth without death? How can there be arising without dissolving? How can there be coming together without separation? Ananda, you have cared for me with all your heart for many years. You have devoted all your efforts to

helping me and I am most grateful to you. Your merit is great, Ananda, but you can go even farther. If you make just a little more effort, you can overcome birth and death. You can attain freedom and transcend every sorrow. I know you can do that, and that is what would make me the most happy."

Reading this in *Old Path White Clouds* always gives me faith that we can be enlightened without the presence of an awakened one. Venerable Ananda was able to see the path and attain his spiritual goal after the Buddha passed into nirvana. It gives me faith and hope that we can attain freedom and transcend every sorrow after Thay continues in another form. Thay's passing has given us an opportunity to make a little more effort to overcome birth and death.

Thay has shown the path to me and many people. My deep aspiration is to continue to walk on this path and to help other people see this path. I know this is what would make Thay most happy. ☸



# Taking Care of the Sangha

BROTHER CHÂN PHÁP KHÂM

*Brother Phap Kham ordained as Thay's disciple in 1987. Since 2005, he has been practicing, teaching, and taking care of the sangha as a senior Dharma teacher in Asia. Currently he resides in the Asian Institute of Applied Buddhism, Hong Kong.*

In *Old Path White Clouds*, Thay taught that the *harmony of views* means to exchange and share understanding and knowledge with each other, and not to hide understanding only for oneself. In this way, everyone can learn and understand together. He encouraged the sangha to share our views with each other.

## Listening to the sangha

Thay always listened to suggestions from the sangha. The sangha consulted with Thay, and he also consulted with the sangha when dealing with various matters. The Caretaking Council (CTC, *ban chăm sóc* in Vietnamese; also formerly known as *ban điều hành* - "Executive Council") was born in this spirit. In April 1999, Thay asked the sangha for ideas on how to organize sangha life so that studying and practicing could bring more happiness. Some brothers and sisters gave suggestions to Thay. He then asked the sangha to review these suggestions. This article documents the birth of the Caretaking Council.

The Plum Village monastic sangha was established in November 1988 with the ordination of Sisters Chân Không, Chân Đức, and Chân Vị. In 1991 there were three monks and nine nuns, which grew to five monks and eleven nuns in 1992, and ten monks and thirteen nuns in 1993. The number of monastics increased slowly. By April 1999, a total of forty monks and forty-five nuns were ordained with Thay.

Brother Nguyen Hai was appointed abbot of Dharma Cloud Temple (Upper Hamlet) in 1996; Sr. Trung Chinh was appointed abbess of Loving Kindness Temple (New Hamlet) in 1996, and Sr. Dieu Nghiem the abbess of Dharma Nectar Temple (Lower Hamlet) in 1998. Around that time in Vermont, Plum Village established Maple Forest Monastery for monks with Br. Giac Thanh as the abbot, and the

Green Mountain Dharma Center for nuns with Sr. Chan Duc as the abbess.

Back then, the abbots and abbesses coordinated various work in the sangha with the help of the work coordinators. The number of non-Vietnamese brothers and sisters had grown greatly and different understandings of monastic life and ways of living due to culture had emerged. The "Vietnamese" monastics back then were all overseas Vietnamese who had lived in the West, mostly from the US, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the UK. They were more or less bridging two cultures. Right from the start, the Plum Village monastic sangha was not purely "Vietnamese" in terms of living style or ways of practice. Those with multicultural skills were more likely to adapt to the Plum Village environment.

## The sangha as a miniature society

Difficulties prevalent in society are also there in the sangha. Monks and nuns are people who are committed to following a path of liberation. The difference is the environment of practice. That may be why we have more opportunities to identify our difficulties, and to sooner and more smoothly find ways of transformation than if we remained in a lay environment.

Around spring 1999, there were disagreements about how to live the monastic life amongst some brothers in the Upper Hamlet. I do not know if Thay was also concerned about anything on the sisters' side. Thay convened a meeting in New Hamlet with all three hamlets. He listened to each brother and sister's views about the ordination of Westerners, how the sangha handled the disrobing of some monastics, the relationship amongst elder brothers and/or elder sisters, and a few other things. Thay encouraged everyone to speak out about everything that was happening in the sangha for the community to look into together. During the meeting, Thay asked what percentage of harmony the brothers and sisters expected the sangha to have. Br. Nguyen Hai said about 80 percent. Thay smiled and said that was a little too high—about 60 percent harmony is good enough. That speaks to the fact that having different opinions is normal in life and in the sangha. It is

important to accept differing opinions and come to the best possible solution together.

After that morning's meeting, Thay asked for the opinion of the elder brothers and sisters on an organizational model that might be more appropriate for a growing multicultural monastic community. That night, I, then still a novice monk, went to Br. Phap An's room for a chat. Since my ordination in February 1998, Br. Phap Hoi and I often came to Br. Phap An's room to work on computer-related things. The three of us had helped set up the computer systems and internet network for Plum Village. We often worked together on Lazy Days or during our free time. Br. Phap An asked me if I had any ideas. Before becoming a monk, I had already come to Plum Village regularly, and had helped to organize Thay's teaching tours in the Northeastern U.S.. I was also a community activist outside of my daily job, so was quite familiar with organizational models.

I said that it was possible to organize the monastic community according to the city management model, which includes a mayor and a city council with members representing different localities. In this model, the abbot is like the mayor while the Caretaking Council (CTC), containing representatives of the sangha from Dharma teachers to bhikshu/bhikshuni and novices, is equivalent to the city council. The abbot or abbess, which at that

time was appointed by Thay, had a longer office-term. The sangha appointed the members of the CTC and they would have two-year terms or serve multiple terms, with representatives from the western monastics.

Br. Phap An presented the idea to Thay and Thay called together the Upper Hamlet Bhikshu Council to consider the proposal. After a few days of discussion, Thay and the sangha agreed with the idea. The first CTC was established. The members were Br. Phap Ung (Dharma teacher), Brothers Phap Hien, Phap Son, Phap Hoi, and novices Phap Minh and I. In that first council, half the members were of Vietnamese origin (Br. Phap Ung, Br. Phap Hoi and I) and half were of Western origin (Br. Phap Hien, Br. Phap Son and Br. Phap Minh).

Initially, the Vietnamese name for the council was *Ban Điều Hành*. But Br. Phap Hien said it did not translate very well into English—the *Executive Council*, so he proposed to change the name to *Caretaking Council*, which translated into Vietnamese as *Ban Chăm Sóc*. The two names were used interchangeably until 2003 when we officially settled on *Caretaking Council*.

Son Ha (Foot of the Mountain Temple) was established around that time and Thay asked two elder bhikshus, Br. Giac Vien and Br. Thong Tang, to lead the practice there with the support of Br.



Upper Hamlet sangha, summer 1998

Ananda (from Laos) and myself. I felt the name *Executive Council* was not so appropriate because of the two senior teachers. We can “take care” of the two elders, but how can we “manage” them? Besides, no one can manage others, they can only take care of themselves; caring for the people and caring for the work. For example, the phrase “current members take care of new members” is much better than “current members manage new members.”

The CTC is based on the principle that members can contribute their talents and services to the sangha. The sangha is their playground. Apart from the practice, there are many people in the sangha with specialized skills in a variety of areas such as administration, information technology, cuisine, horticulture, journalism, etc.

### Discovering talents

In the 2013 Annual Rains’ Retreat, Plum Village Thailand organized skills workshops for young monks and nuns who took care of the children, teenagers, and youth (Wake Up) programs. Sr. Toai Nghiem (mother of Br. Phap Lam, Phap Anh, and Sr. Loc Nghiem) asked whether there could be workshops for older monks and nuns. An essential skills training class was then opened for the brothers and sisters responsible for the meditation hall, cleaning, cooking, gardening, and recycling, etc., who often guided retreatants during service meditation. It is not only those in the children’s program, teens’ program, or giving Dharma talks who are “instructing.” Everyone has the skills and ability to contribute to the sangha. As the Vietnamese proverb goes—*engaging people is like utilizing wood*—the CTC needs to discover and allow those talents to manifest.

How the CTC runs and its relationship with the Dharma Teacher Council and the abbot or abbess is described in Thay’s book *Joyfully Together*. The CTC is like a country’s Council of Ministers, which includes the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, and other ministers. The work coordinator is like the Minister of Labor, ensuring that everyday tasks are delegated and that no one is “unemployed.” Ministries are like specialized departments, such as Finance, Guest Office, Foreign Affairs, Visas, etc., while the Dharma Teaching Council has the main role of guiding the study and practice. The abbot’s main role, or more broadly the Abbot’s Office because it includes the deputy abbot and assistants,

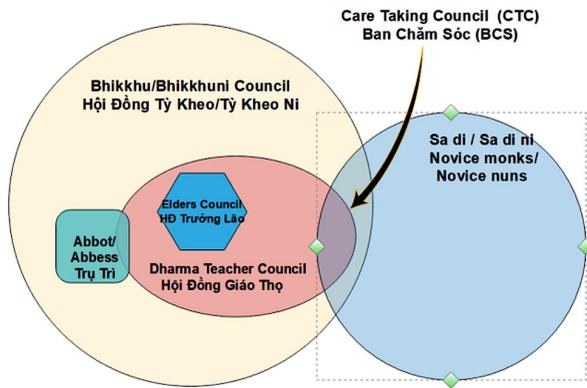
is to take care of the spiritual life and internal affairs of the sangha. As Thay said, “The abbot is someone who can be approached by anyone.”

Thay often compared the role of the abbot to that of the Queen of England. The Queen does not run the country—that is the role of the Prime Minister—but she is loved and trusted by the people. Dharma teachers can join different departments or committees to help the sangha and have the opportunity to be close to and to train the younger monastics. When the three branches of the CTC, the Dharma Teacher Council, and the Abbot’s Office work with clear roles and responsibilities and mutually support each other in a spirit of harmony, the practices and activities in the sangha can flow very smoothly.

The basic model of the relationship between the CTC, the Dharma Teacher Council and the Abbot Office is shown below. The Bhikshu/Bhikshuni Council is like the parliament, making policies and bringing proposals for the whole sangha. It appointed the CTC and authorized CTC to carry out assigned tasks.



In those days, there was a tendency to think that the young monastics in the CTC were appointed for training purposes. This led to the requirement that CTC decisions had to be approved by the two other councils. It created more work and took away the CTC’s decision-making sovereignty. The three branches had already stated the issues that required joint decision and the CTC was authorized to carry out work that did not require further approval. The important thing was for the Bhikshu/Bhikshuni Council to appoint responsible and skilled people to positions in the CTC. In principle, the CTC should know clearly what its responsibilities are, and whom to consult when needed.



Thay mentioned the role of elder monks and nuns in the Council of Elders, which combines the traditions of seniority and democracy. Members of the Council of Elders were usually senior Dharma teachers. This Council's role was to give advice on sangha affairs and help to resolve matters that need the virtue of the sangha, as the Buddha taught in the *Seven Methods of Ending a Dispute* and the *Seven Methods of Non-Regression*. If there were matters that needed immediate resolution and it was not possible to convene a Bhikkhu/Bhikkhuni meeting, representatives from the Council of Elders, the CTC and the abbot could consult with each other to make a decision.

On one occasion, the Upper Hamlet was hosting a Thursday Day of Mindfulness. The weather was beautiful, so the CTC proposed to have a picnic lunch. They did not know about that decision because no one had come to ask him for permission. They asked the sangha to eat in the meditation hall as usual. In this case, the CTC could have done better. The schedule of mindfulness days was decided and fixed by all three hamlets. To make changes, it was necessary to first consult with the Dharma teachers, the abbot, and the CTC. If there was an agreement, then the next step would have been to ask for permission from Thay and if Thay agreed, then it could be changed. The CTC was (and still is) authorized to organize the day of mindfulness, but not to change the schedule.

The spirit of “harmony of views” has inspired and given rise to rich and diverse programs of study and activities for the sangha. Programs such as the Happy Farm and the Wake-Up Movement also came about based on the ideas of sangha members. The establishment of the Caretaking Council is just one of those contributions. There remain many opportunities to creatively contribute to the sangha.

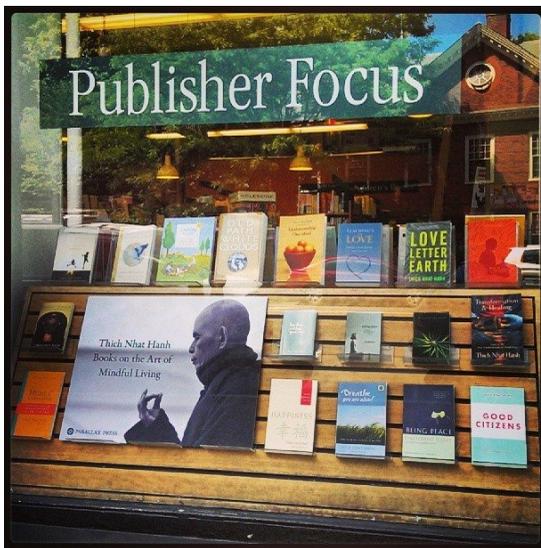
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# Parallax Press and the Journey to Plum Village through Books

HISAE MATSUDA & TERRY BARBER

*In 1986, four years after the founding of Plum Village, Thay and some of his North American students published the book *Being Peace* in Berkeley, California, and founded Parallax Press, the publishing house of the Plum Village community in the United States. Its mission is “to contribute to collective insight and awakening, bringing about a more joyful, healthy, and compassionate society,” and make the Plum Village teachings accessible worldwide. Thirty-six years and more than 335 books later, Parallax Press keeps Thay’s books in print and brings out twelve new works a year, which are distributed by Penguin Random House and available in bookshops everywhere. Current publisher Hisae Matsuda sat down with editorial director and lay Dharma teacher Terry Barber, the longest-serving member of the publishing team, to talk about how their lives have been enriched through reading and working on Thay’s books.*



**Hisae:** How did you first come to Plum Village?

— **Terry:** In 1991, my studies and work were ending and I was ready for a change. For years I had been reading books about Buddhism and wanted to live in a temple or practice center. I knew that for my life to move forward I needed the support of a daily schedule and practice community. One day someone put a copy of *Being Peace* into my hands and said, “I

think you will like this!” and so I learned about Thay. I thought, “If it’s possible, I’d like to go to Thay’s practice center.” Soon after, I had the chance to attend his public talk in Los Angeles and a Day of Mindfulness at a retreat for environmentalists in Malibu. I was moved to hear Thay address matters of social injustice; at that time it was the police beating of Rodney King, which had happened a few months before and was still in the news. I came to Plum Village in April 1992, hoping to stay indefinitely.

**Hisae, how did you meet Thay and come to Plum Village?**

— **Hisae:** My introduction to Thay was also in the early 1990s through books, and my first book was also *Being Peace*, followed by *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. The books lit a fire in me. I have such a debt of gratitude to the editors of Thay’s first English books. In England, where I lived then, Thay’s books were brought out by Judith Kendra at Rider Books—Judith is now a member of our board.

But it took me a long time, twenty-five years in fact, to set foot in Plum Village, France. In 1993, I was living in London with my husband and two little children, who were then just three and two years old. I was looking for a retreat that I could go to, to gain some peace of mind. But there were no Buddhist retreats that allowed children—most were very kid-unfriendly. Then I heard that Thay was coming to England, and I was relieved and amazed that children were not only allowed to attend, but welcomed! I signed up and my two children and I went on retreat with Thay in the countryside outside London. We had our first experience of walking meditation alongside a Zen master. Sr. Chan Duc was the facilitator of my Dharma sharing family, and I still remember everything she said. Thay and Sr. Chan Duc left a very deep impression in me, but the serene way of life they modeled seemed inaccessible to me at that time. My life took many twists and turns, and I didn’t go to Plum Village, France, until June 2018, after joining Parallax. The beauty of the place was exactly as I’d imagined, only even more so.

***Terry, what were your first impressions and experiences of life in Plum Village?***

— **Terry:** I loved the peace and beauty of the land and the hum of monastery life. The residential sangha was small, with 12 to 15 monks and nuns and five or six laypeople. At mealtimes in the Lower Hamlet, we all fit around one big square table. Thay would sometimes join us, bringing a sweetness, informality, and a feeling of family. On my arrival I was told I could only stay for a week, since the three-week June retreat was about to begin. In the end, perhaps because of my enthusiasm for pot washing, I was asked if I'd like to stay on to help prepare rooms and staff the retreat. Listening to Thay's Dharma talks, my heart felt completely open, as though I'd been waiting to hear those words all my life.

I stayed on as staff for the Summer Retreat and was lucky to be in the Lower Hamlet where the Vietnamese families stayed and created a real community (non-Vietnamese retreatants and families stayed in the Upper Hamlet). There seemed to be so much happiness and freedom in just being together, interacting, living, and eating in a Vietnamese way. After dinner the songbooks came out. I don't have words to describe the beauty and penetrating effect of the Vietnamese songs; many had been written by Thay. At summer's end came the first-ever plum harvest—not a commercial success! We were a crew of four or five laypeople who'd stayed on after the retreat. We were led by a friendly, well-intentioned local farmer who, knowing only grapes, was inexperienced with plums, even though they were a common local crop. Most of the plums we picked rotted in the heat before they got to the drying house. It was discouraging but, doubtless through the efforts of Sr. Chan Khong, systems were put in place to ensure more efficient future harvests. It was enjoyable and tiring work, shaking the trees, gathering the plums from the ground, eating the sun-warmed fruit from the trees, and bringing buckets-full back to the kitchen for the sisters to make plum jam. To stay on for winter, I had to write a letter to Thay, asking to be a resident. Somehow I was accepted. I stayed for six years in Plum Village, and then for three years at Green Mountain Dharma Center in Vermont.

I'm always moved by Thay's dedication to creating environments where people can find peace and healing, connect with nature and community, have the chance to look deeply, and learn ways to handle suffering and touch seeds of happiness and well-being.

***How did you come to be at Parallax, Terry?***

— **Terry:** While living in Plum Village and Green Mountain, I'd sometimes visit my family in California and spend time in the Parallax office, where I continued my work of transcribing Thay's Dharma talks. In spring 2001, my father entered his last illness and I went home to be with him. He passed away at the end of the year. I needed dental work and a job to pay for it, and Parallax seemed the logical place to apply. I began a few months later, packing and shipping book orders.

***How did you come to work at Parallax, Hisae?***

— **Hisae:** In 2016, I was at another press close to Parallax in Berkeley, and when the opportunity came up to join Parallax's editorial team, I couldn't say no. Even though it was a big leap of faith to leave my position, and I knew from the beginning that there would be challenges, Parallax offered an irresistible opportunity—to try to bring my values and inner spiritual life and my outer work together. One month into the new job, my son, Leo, took his own life on the day after the 2016 US election. It broke my heart. Somehow I struggled on for a while, but then I had to stop everything. During that hiatus, I had the time to go on retreat again, this time to Plum Village, finally. There, I began to find ways to heal and come back to life.

I was always so grateful to you, Terry, and to everyone at Parallax for holding the space for me to come back. I don't think many workplaces have such a strong feeling of a sangha, that sense of acceptance and support.

***Terry, what are the changes you've seen at Parallax over the years and what are your aspirations for its future?***

— **Terry:** Bridging distance, time zones, and ways of life between a monastery in France and a publishing office in California has always held challenges. It's been heartening to see the Plum Village and Parallax sanghas mature over the years, and to see the next generation of Plum Village teachers emerge and become authors. Significant changes have come with you, Hisae, as publisher. A publishing professional whose heart is with Thay's teachings and the Plum Village community is just what Parallax needed. From the outset you've dedicated yourself to growing a more integrated relationship with Plum Village and their editorial team. Parallax has become a tighter, more professional and transparent operation with a happy, caring staff who work together as a team. You have a keen sensibility for which books are appropriate for Parallax to

publish, and you've acquired and edited some wonderful books. You've also ensured we're regularly publishing Thay's scholarly works on our Palm Leaves imprint. I'd like to see the press continue in this same direction, helping to preserve Thay's legacy, collaborating with Plum Village, and serving the international community with nourishing books.

At Plum Village I found a tradition to be rooted in and a way ahead. At Parallax—as so many people meet Thay through books—I've found a place where I can play a small role in making the Plum Village teachings more widely available, helping us as individuals and as a global community to navigate the times we're in.

***What are your aspirations for Parallax, Hisae?***

— **Hisae:** My wish when I became publisher was to recognize what is most precious about our editorial program: the unique relationship with the Plum Village teachings, which are so alive in the world today and being shared in so many ways by Thay's students, who are now teachers in their own right. Reading a book is a very personal experience that affects you deeply for several days and may even change your life. Books by monastic and lay authors can help us face, embrace, and transform the suffering of our times, from personal and family trauma to social exclusion to war and environmental destruction, which are not unrelated to one another, of course. It is time for us to show how Thay's approach to peace—his inclusivity and

nondiscrimination—is changing the world today, in ways large and small.

I want to continue putting processes in place and build the kind of strong (but flexible) backbone a small press needs to have continued success. When there's trust, even really difficult things can fall into place; without it, even the smallest things can become obstacles. To build that trust, we have to practice.

I hope Parallax will be the publishing company that, according to legend, Thay imagined in his meetings with the Parallax staff before my time: operating harmoniously like the bees and reaching and helping diverse audiences with books on authentic mindfulness practice. The Plum Village editorial team has been such a source of wisdom and support. I'm gladdened by the work of Sister Chan Duc and her team, bringing out Thay's previously unpublished books on the Palm Leaves Press imprint. Readers really seem to like the new books and want to go deeper.

Many who now enter the Plum Village tradition may never have met Thay, yet they can absorb the teachings through all the different forms of media Plum Village now offers. The Dharma teachers ordained by Thay are transmitting the teachings to the current generation of practitioners with courage, love, and integrity. We are so happy to be part of this community and to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of Plum Village in 2022. ☸



Plum Village editors with Parallax staff, 2019

# TENDING THE GARDEN



# Collecting Gum Nuts

SISTER CHÂN TRĂNG MAI THÔN

*A Journal from the Land Down Under*

## Arriving in Australia

Dearest respected Thay,

My sister and I were returning to Nhap Luu, our Plum Village Practice Centre in Melbourne, Australia, on a rather cold evening. Welcoming us along the way was a wombat running in front of our car, at a safe distance, lit up by the headlights. The sister who had picked us up had to slow down and wait for him to waddle to the side of the road. Everyone hoped that he would turn to look at us so we could see his face (most of us in the car had never seen a wombat before), yet he just kept running. That didn't stop our excitement from spotting a wombat for the first time.

Getting out of the car, the cold air hit my face and woke me up. For the first two weeks in Australia, we were quarantined in a hotel in Perth. We only found out upon arrival that for the whole time, we were not allowed to put even one foot out of a 16-square-metre room. My lungs really welcomed the cold air—such good food for my respiratory system!

We made really good use of the two weeks by applying the practice of dwelling in the present moment, recognizing conditions of happiness, connecting with the local sangha, and using the opportunity to understand each other more.

## Familiarity and unfamiliarity

Stream Entering Monastery (“Nhap Luu” in Vietnamese) was relocated to Porcupine Ridge, a green and quiet town, in June 2021, just before the 3-month Rains’ Retreat. When we arrived, there were only five sisters, including Sister Trung Chinh, who had joined for the 3-month retreat. After that she would return to Deer Park Monastery in California for the Great Ordination Ceremony. And so, including us two newcomers, the monastery only has six sisters in residence.

The first few days after arrival, I had a sense of both familiarity and unfamiliarity. There were quite a few things that were different from New Hamlet (Plum Village, France), where I had stayed and



Sr. Trang Mai Thon - third from the right

practised for many years: the washing machine, the kitchen, the dining hall, the recycling bin, and the sangha size, which are all so small compared to the size of things in Plum Village, France. In short, there were so many things that I had to get used to. Here in Australia, one more unfamiliar thing is that when you go to town everyone speaks ... English. The first few weeks, when friendly Australians said “Hello” to me, I habitually responded “Bonjour!” Then suddenly I realized where I was and a little embarrassment kicked in.

On the familiar side, the size of the land here at the monastery is a bit like New Hamlet, although it is more hilly. The land is not too big—just enough space for me to enjoy and for a “little aging person” to climb up those little hills without their legs getting too tired. The schedule, practices, and activities here are maintained regularly, which helped me to fit in right away without any effort.

Fortunately, after arriving, we were still able to join the last few weeks of the Rains’ Retreat. The

schedule was consistently maintained despite the bitterly cold winter weather. Every morning, lay people joined our sitting meditation and chanting via Zoom, except on Mondays. After Sr. Sinh Nghiem came here, she also led Qigong exercises on Zoom after the morning session. In the beginning she only intended to do it for her parents and herself, but many people joined in so it eventually became quite popular. Now she has been able to organize a group of monastics and lay friends to lead the Qigong exercises every morning.

### **The gift**

Nature here is very generous. Kangaroos visit our green lawn around the nuns' residence every morning and evening (though there have been fewer visits when we have more people here and in summer). Spring is when all species try everything possible to ensure their continuation. There are several small ponds in the precinct of the monastery—an ideal environment for the wild ducks to raise their youngsters. Observing the ducks parenting their young, we gradually recognised them individually. I could recognise some childless couples, childless groups, a lonely and childless single duck, and a single mother duck with five ducklings.

I paid particular attention to a couple with four ducklings because they claimed the whole grassy area around the nuns' residence. They allowed the sisters to come quite close, but not the other ducks which they would chase off right away. The way they took care of their young was very interesting. The parents simply followed their ducklings wherever they went. They would be there to observe and protect. When other ducks approached them (surprisingly the childless ones tried to do it all the time and I suspected that they wanted to abduct other people's, no, other ducks' children), and if it was still safe enough, the parent ducks would go between the strangers and the kids without doing anything else. They would then gently walk in the opposite direction, and the ducklings would just naturally follow them. Only when the naive ducklings were too busy eating and unknowingly moved toward "the enemy" would the parents then chase the strangers away.

Sometimes while observing the lively wildlife around here, we merged with it without knowing. It was so nourishing and healing for us. One time, a sister was filming an echidna who was looking for food when suddenly, the echidna looked up at her and walked towards her, eventually putting its snout

in the gap between her toes. She had to jump away! What kind of food could one find there, I wondered?

### **One heart**

Although there are only a few sisters here, the schedule and practices are no different from New Hamlet. We have been able to maintain a few basic practices that I have loved since my novice time. For example at lunch time, after the Five Contemplations have been read, if we are late, we do not come into the dining hall but wait until the two sounds of the bell at the end of the meal are invited. That way we all try to come on time.

A few weeks after our arrival, we had an online retreat. Covid-19 was still very active Australia-wide. We couldn't offer our retreats in-person, one for Vietnamese speakers and another for English speakers, as originally planned. So we did an online retreat in two languages.

It was the very first time a Plum Village online retreat was held in Australia, the first time Nhap Luu led one, and the first time we hosted one at the new premises. We were not sure of our capacity—for example, how strong the Wifi was – so we decided to limit the number of attendees to between 100 and 110. In the beginning, we thought it would not be so popular, so we asked the Plum Village websites (Vietnamese and English) to publicise it. But so many people from Japan, China, South Africa, etc. registered that many Australians ended up missing out. They expressed their sadness and we felt a little bad. Even so, we didn't want to receive more people because we were unsure about the Wifi capacity.

The six sisters here tried to cover everything: organizing, registration, giving Dharma talks, facilitating Dharma sharings, offering total relaxation, giving workshops, and running the daily rotation in the monastery, including cooking. Yet, the retreat happened very smoothly and successfully. We are thankful to our lay friends for their technical support and translations. Many fruits of the practice have been shared by our retreatants and published on nhaplou.org to inspire others. We feel very lucky to be able to join this flowing stream.

### **Nourishing**

Spring in the land of kangaroos starts in October. Looking at each flower, each leaf from their budding till they fully flourish, I can see how wondrous the vitality of nature is. I don't know why I enjoy young leaves so much. I enjoy them even more than I enjoy

flowers. In Australia, most of the land is desert. Rainfall is scarce. Seeing the young leaves shooting out in early spring, I have a lot of gratitude in my heart. The green colour of the leaves here is different from the green of the leaves in Europe. They are not lush, but a little “austere.” They are beautiful in their austerity because they carry within themselves perseverance, resilience, and patience. They have to be self-sufficient in a way. Over countless generations, they have learned to become narrower, thick, and tough to preserve water. They work hard to help the root system to nourish the tree. Without them, the tree wouldn’t be able to survive.

Last year New Hamlet launched a tree-planting program to replace some dead plum trees with young almond trees. Each sister sponsored one, two, or more almond trees (to water and care for them) for the first year of planting. The New Hamlet Care Taking Council prepared name tags with beautiful ribbons for us to tie on the trees that we sponsored. After planting the trees and tying our name tags on, we certainly felt close to the trees, as if the trees had somehow become our own children. Sometimes I saw brown robes in the plum orchard and I knew that the sisters were visiting their trees. Some sisters even brought along a water bottle or two during walking meditation for their trees, really pampering them. I was no exception.

I visited my tree, talked to it, and put a few branches around it to stop the neighbour’s goats and sheep from nibbling on it. I was thrilled when spring came. The weather was warm enough for some young green leaves to come out. One day, upon visiting my tree, I saw its young leaves had been eaten by insects—only some skinny leaf skeletons were left. As soon as I saw it, I knew that the tree would not be able to make it. I was sad, but I couldn’t do much as the tree was still very young and the leaves were not able to regrow.



I thought about my bodhicitta. At the beginning of time, it started as a cell. After countless generations, it became a seed, germinated, and sprouted. Maybe right now, my bodhicitta (and that of some of my siblings) is still at this stage, still a young bud. Probably it needs to go through many other stages or lifetimes to become as strong, solid, and powerful as Master Empty Cloud’s, Thay’s, or other great figures in the meditation circle. However, the presence of those young buds is still very wondrous. Without the young buds, there will never be leaves, never be flowers. Young buds are extremely important because if the young buds are eaten up, as my almond tree’s leaves were, then there’ll be no hope for the survival of the tree, not to mention the possibility of the tree to root deeply.

Daily practices and protocols that seem to be insignificant, in fact, are effective insect repellents to prevent the young leaves from being eaten, leading to the death of the tree. Isn’t that right, dear Thay? Wisdom that has been accumulated over thousands of years by countless generations of high monks and nuns is inconceivable and inexpressible.

Here in my new environment, consistent and diligent daily practices are our protection. Without them, with just a few monastics, we wouldn’t be able to walk the long path.

### Letting go

Prior to joining the sangha here, we reminded each other to open ourselves to new experiences. Don’t keep saying “In New Hamlet, it was like this, or like that.” Yet sometimes we still catch ourselves saying that exact phrase.

In Australia, there are smooth barked gum trees. In the summer, they shed their bark. This bark shedding is called “decortication” and is a normal thing to see. The trees need to shed their bark in long strips in order to grow. These strips get caught between the branches, dry up, and wait for strong winds to fall down. We collect them for our winter wood heater. During walking meditation, I see that the trees, after shedding their bark, reveal a new smooth young skin. I feel like I’m receiving a Dharma talk about letting go. The bigger the tree, the longer the strips of bark. This decortication process is non-stop. The tree can only grow when the outer skin breaks into strips and falls down.

What I have known, learned, experienced, and done can easily become a citadel in which I hide. I

then face the possibility of losing an opportunity to decorticate in order to grow.

### Daily life

He is sixteen. Last Christmas and New Year holiday he was sent to Nhap Luu to stay with the sisters. His parents and younger brother visit him once a week. In Australia, the school holiday at the end of the year lasts six weeks. His family planned to send him here for six weeks, but the sisters cautiously told him to try for two weeks to begin with.

Apparently, he is a gaming addict. After the school holiday he will go into the final year of high school. He is very smart yet without direction in his life. Prior to coming to the monastery, he prepared himself to just join the sisters at meal times and mindful service. Other than these, he would not be there for sitting meditation, walking meditation, or have any contact with the sisters. In the beginning, he responded reluctantly when asked. Not even one week later, he was already chatting, smiling, and laughing with the sisters. He started joining in with the walking and sitting meditation. In a Dharma sharing session, he said that the sisters are “normal,” not as he had thought. He still has a long way to go, but his face is brighter and lighter, his steps are dragging less. That is indeed a success.

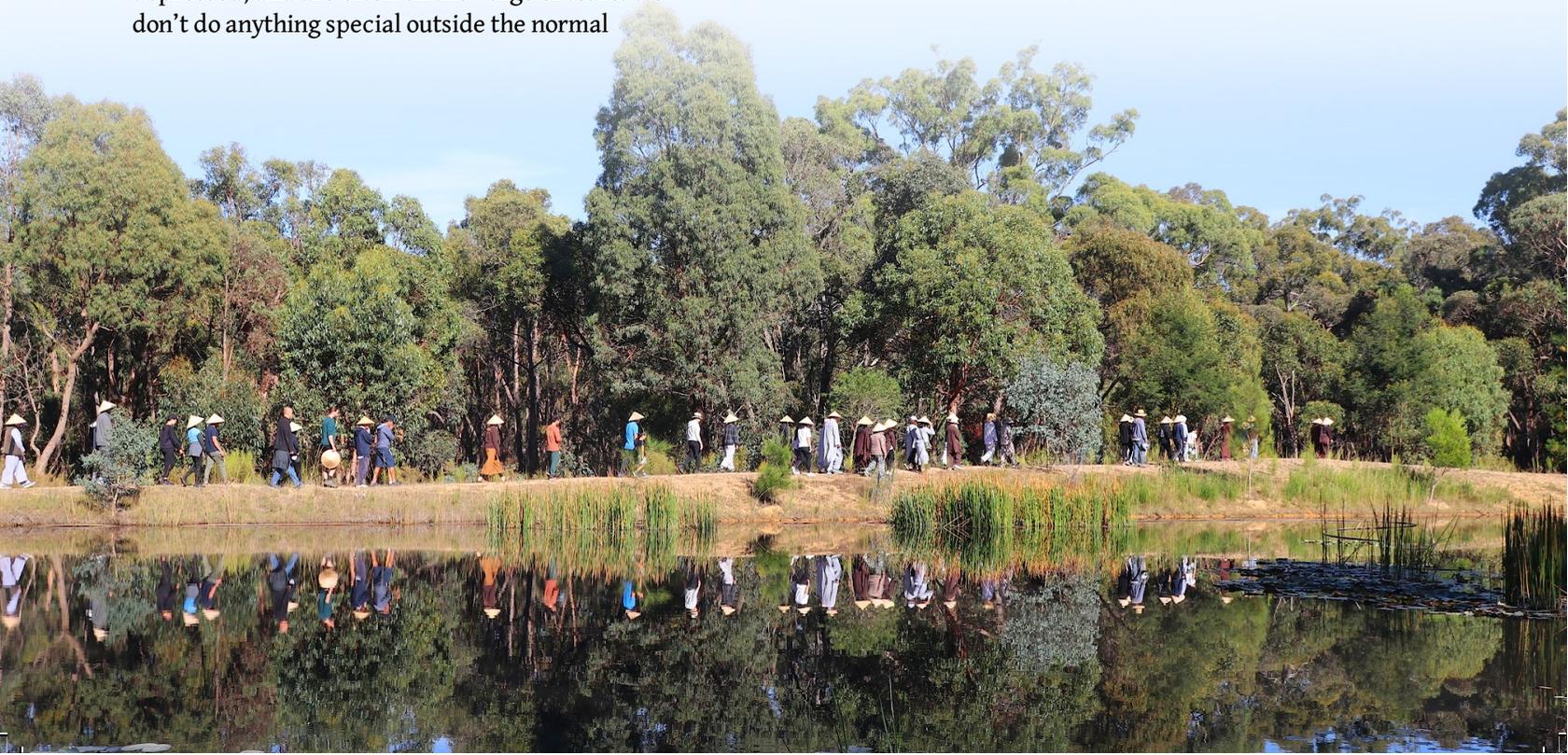
Dear Thay, these stories of transformation of the lay people who join us in the practice are similar across Plum Village centres everywhere. Stream Entering Monastery is no exception.

When people first come here, they look sad and depressed, and are often on the verge of tears. We don't do anything special outside the normal

schedule: sitting and walking meditation, guided meditation, etc. These things we do year in and year out. Yet just after a few days of practice, they already look different. When they come back, they bring with them their friends and partners. We know that just living our daily life in the monastery is enough to generate the good, the true, and the beautiful.

It is said that when people get old, they live on their memories. Whether they are good memories or not, they still live on them. I wonder if it is different for an “old monastic.” I reckon it isn't. A younger monastic sister of mine asked, “What is it like for you here in Nhap Luu? Is it too cold for you?” I told her, “As I know this is the place where I am going to live, I will befriend the cold, the hot, and whatever is here.” I am living here, in the present moment. I am producing a beautiful presence, so that when I get old, really old, I will not go against the norm, which is to live on my memories, but they will be beautiful memories.

From the day I was ordained to become Thay's monastic disciple, I have been living wholeheartedly as such. Looking back on my days, months, and years as a monastic, I would like to follow Venerable Ahimsa in saying, “Since the day I was born in the noble Dharma, I regularly dwell happily in the present moment. By that merit, by the time I live on my memories, may I be able to recount my past days, months, and years as well as my days, months, and years to come with a lot of joy, beauty, and wholesomeness.” ☸



# Engaging with Suffering in the Present Moment

BROTHER CHÂN TRỜI BẢO TẠNG

I feel privileged to have Thay as my teacher and to have the opportunity to be fully trained as a monastic in the Plum Village monastic order. I have learned a lot since I arrived in Plum Village in October 2009. I left behind my professional life in Indonesia and aspired to live a contemplative life with a very inspiring teacher and a very engaged practice community. I have been learning and relearning many things such as meditation, the way to love and to reconcile with myself and my blood family, community living, monastic training, applied Buddhism, and how to engage with the world outside of the monastery.

I am happy that my community is turning 40, because it is capable of continuing the legacy of our teacher, Thay, and of creating peace through the path of understanding and love in many aspects of life: youth, families, leaders, teachers, health, science, climate and social injustice. I have been enjoying the many teachings given by our elder monastic siblings and I am inspired by how they bring their deep insight into society.

Since the Wake Up Retreat in 2016, I have been part of a Plum Village community who call themselves the “Rainbow Family.” It consists of people with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations, LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning, Intersex, Asexual and also includes the diverse spectrums of gender and orientation). People who identify as LGBTQIA+, until today, still live with different degrees of suffering. These range from discrimination from the unconscious judgements of family and society, to living under the threat of death by law in many countries. Meanwhile, they are simply doing their best to be beautiful, to be themselves, and to love each other. As a Rainbow monastic, at the beginning, it was also very hard for me to practice “Be beautiful, be myself” because the Rainbow Family has not yet been fully accepted in the collective consciousness of humans. Seeing the suffering in the rainbow community, I felt the urge to come out, to offer my practice and my presence, with my aspiration to learn together and to understand more deeply.

## The Rainbow Family of Plum Village



## Joyfully together as a Rainbow Family

Today we have many “Rainbow Families” around the world, such as the sangha Queer Paris and Marseille in France, Rainbow UK, Rainbow Ireland, Rainbow Sangha Indonesia, Chrysanthemum, and Cosmic Body sanghas in the United States, and International LGBTQIA+ Sangha. All of these communities are spaces for practicing mindfulness in the Plum Village tradition and a refuge for lay and monastic practitioners that identify as LGBTQIA+. Some monastic siblings and I have participated in many of these sanghas’ activities. It is very inspiring to see people of all ages with very diverse gender and sexual orientations come together to share the practice, enjoy each other’s transformation, and nourish each other, whether in-person or online.



Rainbow lay practitioners, Order of Interbeing members and monastics work hand in hand to build a spiritual family. Family is a safe space and a refuge. There are many allies who also come and help to build the community because they have been supporting their loved ones, their fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, cousins, friends ... who might be suffering because they identify themselves as LGBTQIA+ and face discrimination.

I have been able to participate in multiple LGBTQIA+ retreats in Plum Village, in EIAB, in Montagne du Dharma, and in online retreats. Every retreat or Dharma sharing always brings healing to people, lay or monastics. This is because everyone of us faces more or less the same difficulty in being ourselves and being happy.

## Watering the seeds of awareness in the monastic community

For me, continuous right diligence is necessary to water the seeds of understanding, compassion, and awareness, so that there is more understanding in

our monastic community about LGBTQIA+ concerns. I really hope we shall continue to be a refuge for this family.

During the 2021 Rains’ Retreat, I was invited to offer a workshop on “Understanding LGBTQIA+” on a Monastic Day. It was a very joyful moment. More than 60 monastics came with their open hearts, with the aspiration to understand and find ways to support the LGBTQIA+ practitioners. I was touched by the presence and curiosity of my monastic siblings.

In the bhikshu community, there have been several sharings on this topic with the same spirit of openness. Upper Hamlet, where I live now, has been very supportive in allowing a Rainbow Dharma sharing once a month. This is with the full support of the Upper Hamlet Dharma Teacher Council, who has witnessed the struggles we sometimes experienced in making such a Dharma sharing possible.

## Deep looking

Human beings, when we find ourselves different from the majority, and see that people in our environment do not show acceptance and understanding, can find life very tough. This is especially so for young people (children and teenagers) who have never received any information that it is fine to be different. They have to figure out alone what is happening to them, and at the same time, to face their family and society that may not be very kind to them. Out of despair and pain, many take their own lives or suffer alone for a very long time. I, myself, went through that kind of shock when I discovered that I was not heterosexual, until my school teachers told me that it was fine and that I could still love and be loved like everybody else, and that I would be fine. Without these people, I would not have been able to find peace in myself, especially since I am from Indonesia.

I have been asking myself why I want to be engaged with the Rainbow community, and I have not been able to find the exact answer, as I am not a LGBTQIA+ activist. What is clear is that I have the aspiration to relieve suffering and contribute to the growth of humanity. The Plum Village Rainbow Family is a safe space for Rainbow practitioners, lay and monastic. It is where we can share who we are and how we are without external pressures. The community provides the space where we can look deeply into ourselves and also into what is happening in society.

LGBTQIA+ people are not the enemies of anyone. We are just unfamiliar friends to family and society. This is the insight that I have in my practice. This has given me the freedom to allow people to be homophobic, to allow people to have prejudice, and to allow them to take their time to transform. The existence of the Rainbow Family will help to transform homophobia and prejudice, especially within the Plum Village Community worldwide. Our Teacher always taught us to take care of ourselves first, so the Plum Village community needs to transform itself first before we can reach out fully to others. The existence of the Rainbow Family also familiarizes it to many people. This will bring peace and happiness to oneself, family, and society.

### Planting seeds for future generations

My aspiration, as a Rainbow monk, is first to live a life of freedom and help others do the same. We all have Buddha nature, we all have beauty within us. I would like to see Rainbow people live happily and free and love according to who they are. I also would like to support my Rainbow monastic siblings to live happily and free as monastics, to be able to practice the precepts and cultivate merit and virtue so that we can continue the legacy of the Buddha and our teacher, Thay.

In Plum Village I have had the chance to study the classical Vinaya, both Pali and Chinese translated into English. Surprisingly I discovered that in the time of the Buddha, the topic of gender

was part of sangha life. I came across a paragraph in the Vinaya<sup>18</sup> stating that when a monk who had been ordained as a bhikshu for some time, became a woman, the Buddha said that she should join the bhikshuni sangha and keep her place in order of ordination. The same happened for a bhikshuni who became a man. I felt light at heart because a man can be female and a woman can be male and it does not mean that that person has to be expelled from the sangha. These accounts give me confidence in the Buddha's teaching, in his community, and also in the inclusiveness of the Plum Village monastic community.

When I contemplate the future Plum Village monastic community, I would love to see that we will continue to practice the monastic mindfulness trainings (Pratimoksha), mindful breathing and walking, to build togetherness and siblinghood. To be a community that continues to contribute peace and healing to society and transform suffering. To be a community that has more diversity in terms of nationalities, ethnicities, people of color, gender, and diverse sexual orientations.

One day, LGBTQIA+ people will be familiar friends to ourselves, our family, society, nation and the world. And in the end, we will not need the labels anymore because we are just humans—not seen to be different from anyone else. This is my deep aspiration. ☸



18. Dharmaguptaka Vinaya: Ordination Skandhaka, part 5. Taisho Vol. 22 pp. 812-816, Bodhi.

# Advent: Preserving a Beautiful Tradition

SISTER CHÂN TRĂNG BỒ ĐỀ

## Discovering Christmas

When I was little, at Christmas time all the streets in my hometown were strewn with twinkling lights and Christmas trees—plastic, but beautiful. The quiet church near my home came alive with joy. Even though I didn't know about Christmas, I was still very happy because I could wander the streets at night, looking at this and that. I never had the courage to step foot in a church, except for one time when curiosity got the better of me, and the only reason was: I am a Buddhist. There seemed to be a line dividing church and temple. My parents and grandparents all agreed that a Buddhist should not go to a church. It would be an act of impiety. So that idea was firmly planted in the heads of all the children in my family.

When I came to Dieu Tram nunnery, I had more chances to enjoy the Christmas spirit. From decorating the meditation hall, practising performances, preparing “Secret Santa” gifts ... to the moment when all my roommates gathered to unwrap gifts: it was so joyful, lively, and warm. I did wonder why we celebrated Christmas in the temple. The idea sown in me as a child was still there and as far as I knew, we were the only temple that celebrated Christmas. I asked an older sister about it. She replied that it was a way of integrating cultures.

Christmas in the West is as significant as the Lunar New Year in the East. It is an occasion for families to gather and offer mutual words of appreciation, as well as send their peaceful prayers

to the world. “Later when you go to Plum Village, France, or other centres in the West, you will see the Christmas spirit more clearly.” “The Christmas spirit?” I was a little confused. But my heart was already full of joy because I received many gifts, so I did not ask any more.

My impression of Christmas at that time was only of joy and liveliness. It wasn't until I came to Plum Village, France, saw the lighting of candles during formal lunch and listened to the Christmas carols that I came in touch with another aspect of the Christmas spirit, one that is tranquil and peaceful. I also learned a new term: *Advent*, something completely foreign to me because it had never been organised in Dieu Tram.

## A cozy Advent

I did not attend Advent in my first two years as I felt it was not suited to me. This year, I gave myself an opportunity to experience it directly. One big motivation for me was that the event was held at Toad Skin Hut (in Son Ha Temple), a place I rarely have a chance to visit. I do not know why but in my heart there is a strange love for this place. Just thinking about going there already made me happy. As I sat in the hut, feeling the warmth from the fireplace and listening to the conversations and laughter of brothers and sisters around me, I came back to myself.

Coming back to myself, the sound of chatter around me became pleasant. Sometimes absolute silence does not come from sitting meditation. Even



amidst hustle and bustle, when we know how to come back to ourselves, it is the place where we can be in touch with our true self. Darkness had started to roam. Looking out, I could see nothing but windblown raindrops against the window. Night had descended. Night is where the darkest evil can arise, but also where the most sacred and pure are born. Night can be a vehicle to bring people straight to hell, or give wings for prayers to reach the stars. At that moment, everyone sang and lit the second candle of Advent.

### Prayers for the world

The Christmas carols became more solemn in the silence of the night, opening the way for all to return to the deepest beauty of the soul. Closing my eyes, I relaxed to let the refreshing music sink forever into my heart. Amidst that peace, it was as if every unwholesome thought had to dissolve. People's hearts became as clear as the morning dew, as holy as the baby Jesus. The candlelight flickered and danced, carrying afar the prayers of the brothers and sisters.

*"I pray for peace for all the victims of Covid in Vietnam and around the world."*

*"I wish safety for the Afghanistan refugees that are suffering due to war."*

Following suit, I joined my palms, introduced my name and spoke out the wish in my heart:

*"I wish for those who are displaced to be able to return home and enjoy moments of happiness just like our's now."*

After some moments of silence, the brothers and sisters began to recount joyful memories of Christmas. Almost everyone had more or less memories related to a character called "Father Christmas." Listening is a chance for me to see more clearly the face of my siblings and to know a little more about those I rarely speak with. Living in a large sangha, connection is often no more than stopping to join palms in greeting, smile, and then pass by. Most opportunities for communication and interactions are through a bridge called *work*. Even with the elder and younger sisters I am living with, sometimes I am surprised to realize that I have never really looked carefully at them or been truly present for them. I am merely recognizing and distinguishing my sisters by their names.

After living for a while in the monastery, I also



Sr. Trang Dieu Vien (left), Sr. Trang Bo De

started to love the tranquil and peaceful life. That tranquility helps me see my mind more clearly and nourishes my inner peace. But when I start to form the thought, *I like the quiet, noise is too tiring*, a wall goes up between the world and myself, limiting the precious opportunities to be with my brothers and sisters. At those times when I find myself "too lazy to play," I often think of our elder-Brother Minh Hy.

Br. Minh Hy is very playful. He is always present with an open and friendly heart. That evening when he arrived in the rain, I couldn't contain my surprise, "Brother, you also come to Advent?" "Sure!" he replied, as naturally as the hungry eat and the thirsty drink. The image that lingers in my mind is of Br. Minh Hy holding a songbook; his mouth uttering the melody and lyrics while his eyes struggled to open to stay awake. "Brother, are you sleepy?" Catching my cheeky smile, rather than answering, he pretended to open his eyes even wider. At that moment, I understood: *To play without needing to play is truly to play.*

My first impression of Advent was so beautiful that when a sister asked me, "How was your first Advent?" without hesitation I replied, "Fun and nourishing!" "Will you go again?" "Yes, for sure," I nodded firmly.

## Beginner's mind, free mind

This first experience helped me to unravel my preconceptions about the event, and taught me a lesson about being cautious with my perceptions. If I do not know something, I should not rush to judge it, but give myself time to experience it, to discover the reality. An event itself is indeterminate. It is those who attend and organize the event that give it its colours. Advent is beautiful because of its spiritual elements. We brothers and sisters must preserve those elements if we wish to preserve the beauty and soul of Advent in Plum Village. But what are those spiritual elements, and how do we preserve them?

The cloud in the tea I drank this morning reminds me that the most accurate answer does not come from the intellect, or from the outside; it comes from the heart of everyone.

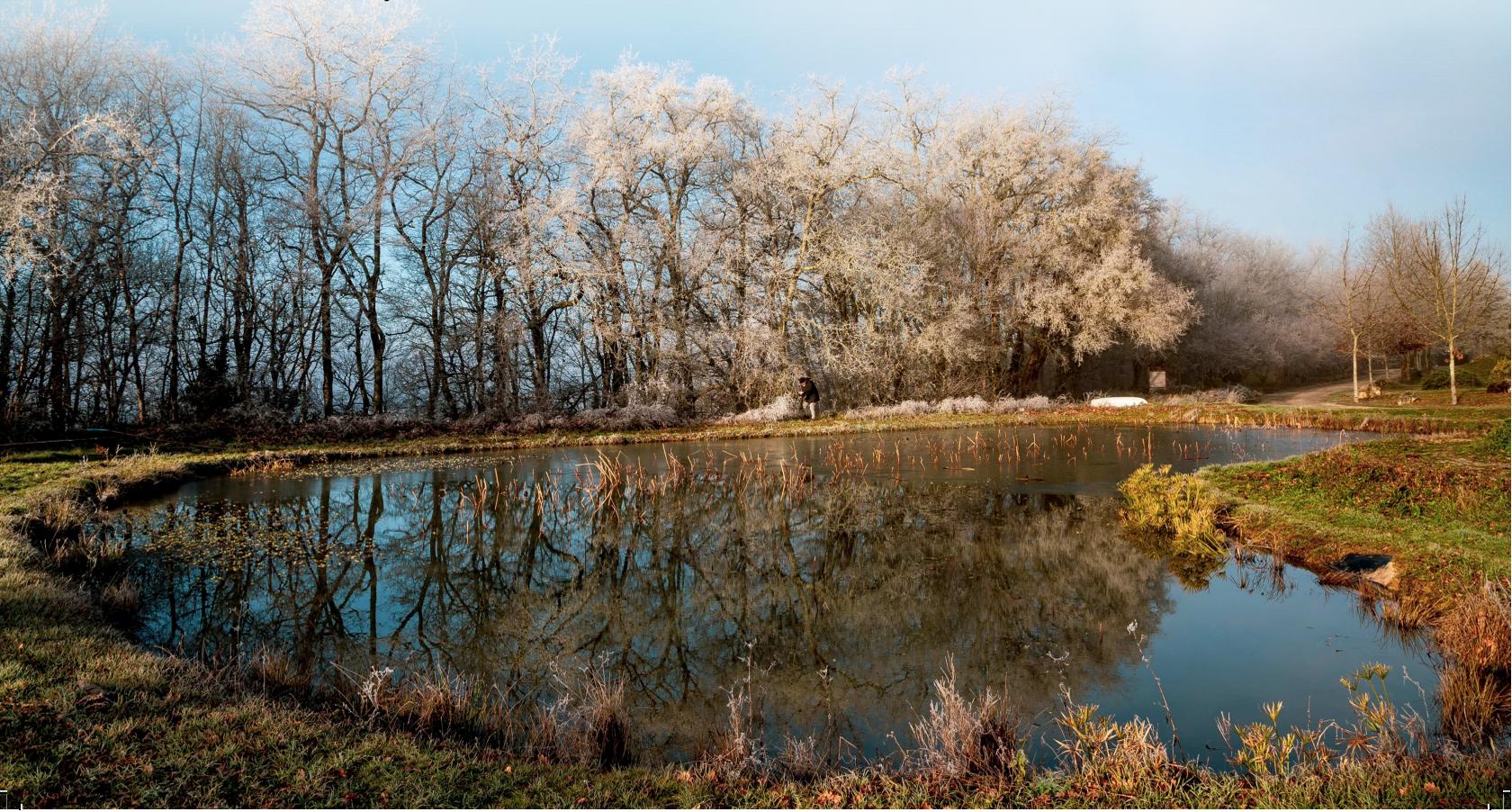
While listening quietly to the Bible reading that evening, images of Jesus as a baby or bearing the cross, which I had seen since childhood floated to my mind's surface. Every image was beautiful. The lines on his face were as gentle as the lines sculptors often use to express the Buddha's boundless love. Buddha is beautiful and Jesus is beautiful. You are both udumbara flowers that bloomed in the darkness of humanity. In that moment, I felt I had finally broken free from a narrow cage that has held so many generations captive. I am freeing my grandparents and parents from the idea of being a "Buddhist." I am stretching my wings to soar higher and farther in the vast sky of the mind.

## A Buddhist Christmas

Thinking of Thay, my heart warms. Thay opened the door for Buddhism's essence to enter the West and at the same time, allowed Buddhists to discover the beauty of spiritual traditions in the West. Thanks to Thay, our generation is receiving a rich heritage of various spiritual flows—each beautiful, each worthy of respect.

It was almost nine o'clock. "Dear sister, it's time to go home," I whispered to my elder sister. "Umm, we will go after this song." A funny thought popped up in my mind: *Why are we like Cinderellas?* The New Hamlet always leaves a little earlier than the other hamlets because we live a little further. If one sister stands up, all of us gather our things, say goodbye in unison and head out for the van as if it would turn into a pumpkin if we do not return in time. Gradually I have also adapted to this rhythm and am trained in those agile movements. It's quite fun being Cinderella. Knowing that I do not have much time, I cherish every moment and am wholeheartedly present. So when "it's time to go" was said, I stood up and stepped out calmly. For me, what is important is *not how long* we are present, but *how* we are present.

The van quickly rolled home. I secretly hoped that next year more Cinderellas from New Hamlet would attend Advent. Together, let us preserve this beautiful tradition for future generations of sisters and brothers. ☪



# Are 1,000 Buddhas Enough?

BROTHER CHÂN TRỜI ĐẠO QUANG

During the Rains' Retreat 2021, my brothers would often see me mixing a grayish dust with water in an old pot and then pouring the mixture into a small blue bucket. Eventually, I would return to the monastic residence with something in my hands, much to their curiosity. I did this every day for the 90-days of the Rains' Retreat.

## My mission

I was pouring cement Buddhas every day during the 90-Day Rains' Retreat. I set out to make ninety Buddhas, one on each day of the retreat and to give them to our lay friends as a gift at the end of it. I decided to do this because I love Buddha statues. I just have fun with the mud and a mold I made to cast the Buddhas. When I take a Buddha statue out of the mold, I have a very happy feeling. It's a bit like becoming a father. I am very focused on the job and my mind comes to rest. At the end of each day I hold a Buddha statue in my hands and I take it back to the residence feeling very satisfied. I really enjoy it.

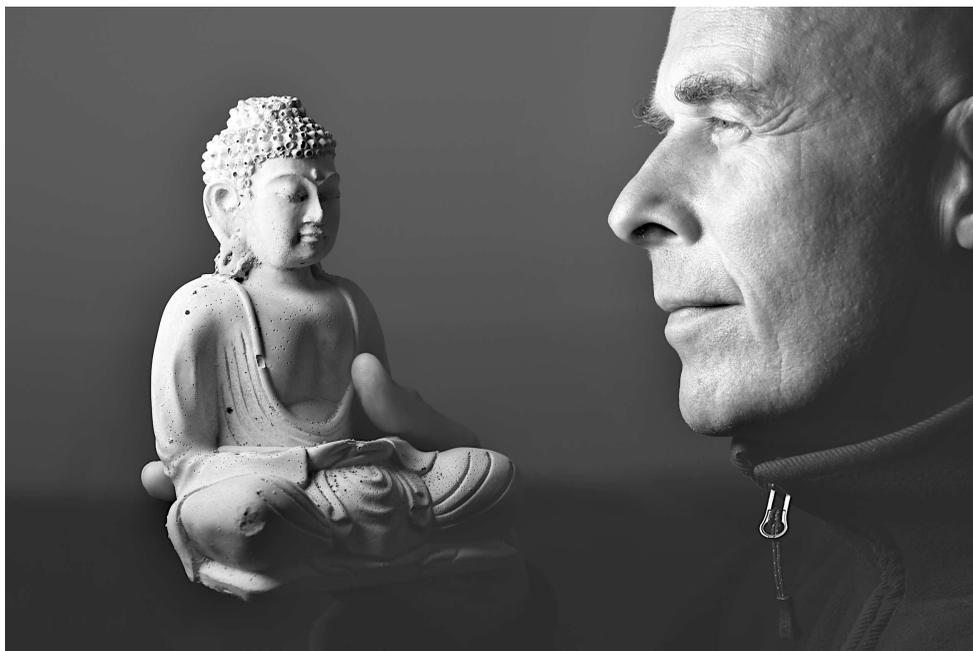
## Giving away Buddha statues

I decided to give the Buddhas away as whenever I see one, I calm down and start smiling.

Automatically! I have also observed that many other people have a similar experience. So, the idea to make Buddha statues and to give them away was born in me. I want more people to see Buddhas and feel happy. In these difficult times with contact restrictions and mask requirements, this action can help to put a smile on people's faces. Actually, I would love to have one for everyone. To give each person a Buddha, to be able to see that they are happy for a moment. I am sure if there were more Buddha statues in the world, more people would feel happy and behave more peacefully. I have set out to make 100,000 Buddha statues. Let's see if I can do it in this life. In any case, it cannot be achieved with my current resources, but let's see what happens, maybe there will be a solution!

## Would you like a Buddha statue from Br. Dao Quang?

One day when you come to Plum Village, please look for me. You don't need to give me anything. You can give the Buddha a nice home or give it away as a present to a loved one. They are weather and frost proof. If you don't like the color, you can also paint it. ☸



# All Is Joy!

BROTHER CHÂN TRỜI ĐỨC HIỀN

Beep, beep, beep, it's 5:00 am!

I woke up this morning, cradled by the song of both rain and wind, which have been playing for the last few hours, relieving the trees of their last autumn leaves.

I love the feeling of being instantly connected to the vitality of the elements as soon as I open my eyes. I smile...

## A gentle awareness of pain

My body feels rather painful. I have a very bad cold and have been coughing for a few weeks already. Medical diagnosis reveals that bacteria have found their way into my lungs. The antibiotic treatment gives me headaches and flu-like symptoms, especially at night. It is due to the toxins released by the bacteria when they are eliminated. I know these sensations very well because I have been there before, especially with Lyme disease. I am very tempted to stay in bed. I can see a part of me that wants to rebel against suffering, as if I could strike against life itself! I smile...

Experience also tells me that if I surrender to that resistance, I run the risk of extracting myself from the stream of life, to start dwelling in drowsiness and open the door to complaining. I am aware that this door inside me is not totally closed and that it is not the right time to venture that way.

So I connect again to the song of the rain, and especially to my brother's presence in the room, who is slowly waking from sleep. I know this morning routine perfectly and it is reassuring. It brings me into a comforting and familiar space. His gestures are very gentle, and I fully benefit from the energy of mindfulness he manifests as he moves through the room.

While the water boils in the kettle, I settle into my breathing to carefully contemplate the pain that holds my head in a vice. Being an observer allows me to put this gruelling sensation into some kind of perspective. I then feel like an explorer who, without bias, discovers what simply is, curious to taste the experience that is manifesting. I clearly see that I am not locked inside this sensation, that it is limited

in space, and that everything around it breathes like a vast living ocean. I smile...

In the same way, I connect to the impermanence of all things, knowing from experience that this pain will eventually end. My trust in the capacity of life to evolve and transform, allows me to ease considerably out of the influence of the pain that has a hold over my whole brain; an invitation for me to, once again, cultivate patience—a quality which has never been one of my strong points.



I also intensify my awareness of the tricks of the mind, which is trying to weave a narrative of complaints, a victim strategy to sublimate a deep feeling of powerlessness. Instead, I take root in the soil of my vulnerability, where the most genuine seeds flourish. I smile.

Illuminated by candles, we drink tea. The soft warmth of the cup between my two hands spreads throughout my whole body. I become available again, well established in the present moment and I taste the quality of this inner silence. I still perceive the pain but my level of reactivity towards it has lessened. I am well on the way to reclaiming my inner freedom. I smile.

## **The vastness within**

Then I go out for a fifteen-minute walk before going to the meditation hall. The cool air strikes me and I let the deliciously humid morning breeze caress my face. A moment of grace! I love feeling so small amidst immensity, humbly walking as if carried by Mother Earth. Then I feel myself being beyond the apparent limits of this body and mind. What seemed only a moment ago so narrowly constrained by physical pain appears now to be but a temporary undulation on the fabric of the universe. I smile.

Then I surrender a little more to what appears to me very concretely as the dimension of non-self, of bigger than self. I let myself be penetrated by this vastness that allows me to breathe spaciouly. Relaxed and present in each of my steps, I realize anew that I have the freedom to choose my way of viewing this path of incarnation. Either I remain conditioned by form, irremediably identified with this manifestation of a self, or I take refuge in what is larger, let myself be and smile to the mystery of existence. Then the spontaneous dynamic of *I am* releases itself without control or limitations, and generates a multitude of creative momentums.

I was caught in the net of separation, identification and need for recognition for so many years, that this discernment propels me instantly into joy. Living every event as an opportunity to celebrate life is pure magic. An owl hoots on my right side, another one answers from the depths of darkness. I smile.

## **Carried by the sangha**

I hear the sound of the Great Bell and the chanting of the brother in the distance, inviting us to the meditation hall, like a call in the night, encouraging all the lost souls to unify in prayer. With tenderness, I notice all the moving shadows slowly gathering towards this place of spiritual communion. I feel carried by a siblinghood that shares the same aspiration: cultivating the energy of mindfulness to embrace all that is, without discrimination, with understanding and love. I smile...

I reach the old stone barn which has been marvelously transformed into a meditation hall by the brothers who have tread this path before us. I stop for a moment to contemplate the stained glass, illuminated by a few candles from the inside. I enter the hall gently and bow before the altar. Some of the brothers are already sitting on their cushions. The

quiet atmosphere of dedication instantly immerses me in a sacred dimension.

In turn, I sit on my cushion, delicately adjusting my posture. I spontaneously settle into my breath and let a big smile of contentment arise on my face. I feel so supported by this diligent practice energy. I smile...

Well! The headache is still there! What a powerful mindfulness bell! No doubt, it brings me back to my body. My mind was already gone, exploring thousands of territories. Thank you.

## **Being with collective and ancestral suffering**

A sudden thought: *How many of us on this planet are suffering at this very moment (humans, animals, plants, minerals)?* A dizzying contemplation which clutches at my heart, and reveals the meaning and the need for our commitment. I take refuge in the dimension of interbeing. I am fully aware that this practice of welcoming everything that is, without condition, without rejecting anything from the experience, instantly benefits all beings. I take root in this equanimity to connect better to the world. My true power dwells inside me and it is my responsibility to take care of it like a gardener, but also like a guardian. I take the vow to cultivate appropriate attention at all times, so that I can discern what is good for me, for all beings and for Mother Earth. I commit to taking care of my thoughts, words, and actions, knowing they are energetic imprints that impact the present and will be transmitted to future generations. I smile.

Then, I feel propelled into the past, by the contact with my genetic ancestors. Many of them were submerged by the waves of suffering that washed over their hearts. I see the faces of my father and my maternal grandfather who weren't able to resist their suicidal urges after my mother died in an accident.

A few weeks ago, I had the inner experience of my father's suicide, moment by moment. An intensely realistic sensory experience, out of time and space. Fortunately, that morning I was feeling deeply peaceful and rooted.

*I am one with my dad, swallowed by a storm of suffering, loaded with feelings of loss, absence, and despair. I feel his powerlessness and his call to put an end to his unbearable emotional torture. Nothing can appease him, he can only resort to ultimate relief; it is the only choice he sees. I feel the abyss of sadness that leads him to*

*grab his weapon, with calm and determination, and apply it to his temple. I can also feel the metal of the gun on my skin, cold as ice.*

For him, there was no other way. For me, it is different. I am immensely fortunate to have discovered the miracle of mindfulness. I smile.

### **Gratitude and connection**

A rush of gratitude washes over me, like a rising tide! A wave of soft and gentle warmth runs through my body. I become acutely aware of how blessed I am to be sitting in meditation in this enveloping matrix of stone, built by our mason ancestors, in the company of fellow practitioners, and to have the capacity to greet what manifests in me. I rely on the collective energy of practice as I offer my contemplation to all beings. I receive and give at the very same time. I give my support and am supported by the power of our commitment to face the reality of what appears in every second. I connect to the determination of each of my brothers and sisters to walk in truth on the path of liberation.

My heart sings. Thank you Thay, thank you to the past, present, and future generations for cultivating and transmitting beauty, wisdom, discipline, and the qualities inherent to the path of awakening. I smile.

The bell is invited. I stretch, rub my knees tenderly, and delicately open my eyes. The headache

is almost gone. Wonderful! We prepare to touch the earth. The text invites us to contemplate no-birth and no-death. I am touched by this synchronicity with the universe, which always offers me what I need. It is up to me to develop my availability and my capacity to fully receive what is offered. I smile.

### **Manifestation is joy**

Touching the earth, I honestly assess my relationship to illness, aging, and death. Trusting my breath, I anchor my body and observe my physical sensations and feelings.

There is a lot of space, my breathing is spacious. A light quivering breeze caresses my cells; an intense perception of peace and emptiness conveys absolute abundance. A creative silence breathing the spark of life forever.

A dance of wavicles (wave-particles), without goal and without form, just an elusive movement. There, free from the grip of time and space, all fears dissolve. In the firmament of original love all manifestation is pure joy. I smile.

I exit the meditation hall. The horizon quietly dons its morning blue, highlighted with a light orange hue. Despite the rain, the sun is about to pierce the thick layer of clouds. A rainbow, maybe? I smile.

*Brother Kindness (Duc Hien), December 2021 ☸*



# I Have a Dream

BROTHER CHÂN TRỜI ĐỨC NIÊM

*This article is dedicated to and inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and his spiritual brother and friend, our beloved teacher, Thay.*

## The challenge we face

Last summer, while in quarantine in Turtle Lodge after a home visit, there was a night when I could not sleep. I woke up in the middle of the night, gripped by fear and worry. I practiced deep belly breathing and tried to embrace my fear tenderly. In the previous days I had been reading some articles about the climate crisis.

The new Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report (IPCC), which had just come out, says unequivocally that we need to keep the average global temperature increase below 1.5 °C to avoid catastrophic climate consequences. At our current rate of emissions, in only six or seven years we will have used up the global carbon budget. Scientists have calculated this: If we emit more emissions and use up this carbon budget, the chances of reaching certain tipping points and thus accelerating further climate heating beyond human control are very high. Once we reach a tipping point we cannot go back and 'fix' it. So we should stay within the 1.5 °C target.

We can understand the current situation better with this metaphor: Spaceship Earth is like a big container ship that is heading full speed towards a hidden iceberg. However, the surface of the vast ocean is rather calm—only if we look deeply, will we see the iceberg. If we continue as we are now, we will hit the iceberg and sink. Because the ship is very large, it needs some time to change course. But if we turn the ship's driving wheel too sharply and abruptly, then the ship might sink as well due to social collapse and unrest. This means there remains only a small, narrow window of time and path in which the ship can change course smoothly.

## Dreams and reflections

While I was lying wide awake in the middle of the night and breathing deeply, a voice in me was saying: *This is not acceptable, we cannot continue like this anymore. We need to do something now.* I sat up and started to write down some ideas and reflections

that have been cooking in me for a while. When I finally did put down on paper what was in my heart and store consciousness, I felt that my heart was much lighter and more at peace. My experience is that allowing myself to cultivate a vision and dreams has helped me to see a path forward and gives me hope, energy and inspiration. In this article I would like to share with you some of these dreams and reflections and some ways in which we are living this dream already. I hope that it inspires and nourishes you as well.

## A vision of hope

*I have a dream. I have a dream that one day people of all different religious, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, of different ages, colors and genders will come together and unite. That we will join hands and join forces because we see and feel that there is something more important and precious than our individual and national interests that unites us all: peace, justice, siblinghood, and the future of our beautiful blue planet.*



Sr. Tue Nghiem (left), Br. Troi Duc Niem

*I have a dream that the seeds of compassion and awakening sown by the Buddha, Thay, and our spiritual ancestors will continue to sprout and fully blossom like jewelled lotus flowers in the hearts of millions of people and that the vision and dream of Thay will be realized: A collective global awakening. Thay reminds us, "We have*

*to wake up together. And if we wake up together, then we have a chance.”*

*I have a dream that Mother Earth will again be clothed in her beautiful green mantle as humans plant billions of trees, restoring the abundance and the wonders of life. Many people around the world have this aspiration and are already helping deserts to become oases of green, lush trees, sustainable for farming again.*

*I have a dream that on billions of rooftops, town halls, churches, and meditation halls around the globe, glimmering solar panels will radiate and spread the warmth and light of Father Sun into our homes, along with wind turbines on the green land and the blue sea, totally replacing fossil fuels.*

*I have a dream that everywhere in the world small ‘Happy Farms’ and other kinds of intentional communities will sprout, harvesting not only delicious and fresh vegetables, but also the fruits of the practice, bringing forth the happiness and togetherness of people working and living in communities.*



Children on the Happy Farm

### **Mindful community–green community**

We can celebrate the fact that in Plum Village we have been able to realize many aspects of this dream in the past 40 years : Thay has helped his brother, Dr. King, to make their dream of the “Beloved Community” a living reality. Thay has built a beautiful, diverse, and vibrant international community where people from various cultural and religious backgrounds have found their spiritual home and begun to explore new ways of living together. We have been practicing to be vegan since 2007 and have planted many trees. During the last Rains’ Retreat we planted more than two hundred trees in a single day in New Hamlet – working and planting trees together as a fourfold sangha has brought a lot of joy, nourishment and fulfillment to me. In Deer Park Monastery we have drawn power from solar panels since the early 2000s and in Upper

Hamlet we will also install solar panels soon. Over many years volunteers and hundreds of children in the Summer Retreats have been nourished by our Happy Farms, getting in touch with nature and harvesting red tomatoes, golden corn, and blackberries with their own hands. One of Plum Village’s important contributions is that we show the world how it is possible to live a happy and fulfilled life without much consumption, money, or comforts. Seeing the joy, love, and harmony among our siblings helps people to realize that another way of life is possible. This gives people inspiration and strength to change their lives.

I am living my dream of building a beloved community here every day. Being here gives me the chance to learn and deepen my experiences in community building: In sangha meetings I learn more about the art of reaching a collective decision and insight, how to communicate, to contribute and let go of ideas. I have a chance to bring people together and to help organize activities, like the Activist Retreat, workshops or Dharma sharings about Mother Earth. It was wonderful to witness the deep connections, sincere dedication, and joy of the retreatants and monastics from different centers during the “Action from the Heart” online retreat. We have started a Wake Up Earth Holder Sangha, where we watch Thay’s talks about the environment and practice Dharma sharing. Building siblinghood, playing together and at the same time engaging with the topics and increasing our collective awareness gives me a lot of nourishment and joy.

### **Holding the problem**

One way I am watering the seeds of insight is by reading books by climate leaders and thinkers like Joanna Macy, Naomi Klein, and Thay. In his new book *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*, Thay shares about the importance of community building and global ethics. I also keep my awareness alive by listening to the podcast “Outrage + Optimism” by Christiana Figueres, a student of Thay and the architect of the Paris Climate Agreement. It is very inspiring to hear from many people around the world, and helps me feel more connected with the global climate movement that demands an end to fossil fuels.

For centuries our economies have been running on fossil fuels. The oil, gas, and coal industries are so deeply linked with the political and economic system that it is very difficult to untie this knot of greed, profit-seeking, and lobbying. I believe that only intense public pressure and a broad, diverse,

yet unified movement will be powerful enough to end the use of fossil fuels in time and to realize a swift and fair transition of our system. Thay has been very clear and outspoken about these roots of the environmental crisis for a long time now. Addressing the leaders at COP15 (in Copenhagen, 2009) he said, “We need to subsidise renewable energies and heavily tax fossil fuels. It is possible to have 100 percent renewable energy by 2030.” What would Thay say now to world leaders and activists, if he were able to speak out?

A question that comes up for me is: How can we spread the harmony, experiences, and wisdom of our sangha building to other communities, organizations and faith groups? What can we do to help the beloved community manifest not only in one tradition, but in many, and – more importantly – across traditions? I try to keep this koan alive in my heart, *Given that we only have a few more years left to start changing the course of spaceship Earth, what can we do to help the collective global awakening manifest a little more quickly and widely?*

### **Embracing overwhelm**

Many of us are aware that the climate crisis is an important challenge we face. Has this awareness – that the actions or non-actions of the next few years will very likely determine the fate of humanity – penetrated deeply into our consciousness yet? I think many of us – including me – do not feel the urgency and pain of this crisis deeply every day. It can be quite overwhelming. I feel that *manas* (an aspect of our consciousness that seeks pleasure and avoids pain), wants to avoid suffering in the present moment. That is one reason why our mind tells us that the crisis is not *that* urgent and we still have enough time, or helps us find ways to avoid the topic altogether with psychological barriers like cognitive dissonance, distance, denial, doomism. We run the risk of fooling ourselves, individually and collectively. Insights and awakening are impermanent, so we need to put some effort into keeping this awareness alive every day and to help more and more people to wake up. I have the hope that we can have regular sessions of “heart-storming” (Thay used this term in a Dharma talk on March 1<sup>st</sup> 2003), to share about our dreams and aspirations and to look deeply as a sangha into what we can do to contribute locally and globally.

### **Bells of awakening**

*I have a dream that one day many different spiritual and faith traditions, humanitarian groups and NGOs will*

*come together to co-create and follow a code of Global Ethics similar to the Five Mindfulness Trainings. I am convinced that this can serve as a connecting element between different groups and be a foundation and inspiration for a new movement.*



*I have a dream that many climate justice, science, and spiritual leaders and organisations will come together to form the most diverse, colorful, and non-violent movement in history, uniting behind one goal: to stay below 1.5° C by ending the era of fossil fuel consumption and creating a just, inclusive, peaceful, and regenerative world society on a green and healthy planet.*

*I have a dream that bells of mindfulness, of awakening, climate justice and peace will sound everywhere in the world, from every hill top, in every town, from countless temples and churches, and in many people’s hearts.*

*I have a dream that people of different faiths in many villages and cities around the world will come together to listen to these bells of mindfulness, stopping to pray, practice, and recite the global ethics trainings together, and listen deeply to each other. Listening to each other’s suffering, joy, and insights into what we can contribute to transform this crisis, and then acting together to make it happen.*

*I have a dream that more and more people every day will realize that this planet Earth is the Kingdom of God, is the Pure Land, is a most precious jewel of the cosmos, and that they fall in love deeply with Mother Earth and find true peace in their hearts.*

### **Living and being peace**

We can celebrate the fact that in Plum Village we have been able to contribute to this dream in the past forty years. Thay and the sangha have transmitted the Five Mindfulness Trainings to hundreds of thousands of practitioners worldwide. These trainings are a powerful and timely contribution to a global ethic. Thay has also helped

to formulate the UNESCO Manifesto 2000 that was signed by 70 million people.

I saw Thay for the first time twenty years ago in Germany. He shared about the Kingdom of God being available in the here and the now. Having been raised Christian, I was touched deeply by his teaching and especially by his way of being. This was a real eye-opener as I realized that it was indeed possible to touch the Kingdom of God in this life and on this beautiful planet. Thay's shining example of *being* peace is an immense contribution to the world.

We are so lucky that we can continue Thay's ways and dreams. Every day I go for mindful walks in the forest and hills surrounding Upper Hamlet, getting in touch with the beauty and miracles of Mother Earth. After breakfast I walk to Thenac through the old path at the edge of the hill overlooking the golden vineyards, the deer forest and a little blue lake, enjoying the magical morning mist and glorious sunrise. The many shades of red, pink, and orange are reflected in the clouds in the wide sky and are so beautiful. This nourishes and refreshes my body and soul deeply. I also learn more ways to take better care of the fear and pain inside that is partly related to some individual and collective trauma. I practice to take time to contemplate it and not to run away. I notice that by doing this more space, peace, and acceptance are slowly growing in me.

### **Children of the future**

*I have a dream that one day the children and young people of this planet can go out and play freely together*

*in the green parks and car-free alleys of the cities and villages, without fear or worries about the future, without feeling the heavy burden of eco-anxiety and depression on their shoulders.*

*I have a dream that one day all children of the world will be able to sit down together at the table of siblinghood in peace and freedom, looking towards a bright future on a beautiful, green, healthy planet.*

*I have a dream today—that as a sangha, along with many spiritual, climate activist and other groups, will sit together as one global beloved community on the hill of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and look back on the winding road up the mountain of challenges and say, “It is good, we have managed to climb the mountain together and fight and unite for an inclusive, peaceful, and regenerative 1.5 °C world and we have been able to create it with harmony, love, and siblinghood.”*

This is my hope and prayer:

*Let the bells of freedom, mindfulness, peace, and awakening ring in every being across the universe.  
Let the bells of awakening, strength and wisdom ring in the minds and hearts of the young generations, because they feel the urgency keenly and have the most determination, imagination, and fierceness to stand up for a green, just, and regenerative world.  
Let the bells of awakening, freedom, and love ring in the hearts of every being so that the symphonic harmony, strength, and beauty of the bells touch their hearts deeply and a collective global awakening will manifest widely and powerfully at last. ☸*



# Happiness, where are you?

BROTHER CHÂN TRỜI RUỘNG ĐỨC

## Why I am here

Time passes by so quickly. Entering the third year of life as a novice, looking again at my bodhicitta, I ask myself, why am I here? Am I waking up a little more everyday? In the past I gave food, medicine, clothes, and provided accommodation to people who were in need. I thought they would feel happy and satisfied once they had received help, but the reality was not like that—what I offered only helped them in part. After they had received material support, they were still not happy and continued to wait for assistance, so we had to continue to look for ways to help them. At that time I didn't know how to practice and so I created a burden for myself. When I saw that they were unhappy, I also became unhappy. I started to ask myself—why is it like this?

After practicing in Plum Village, I noticed that my joy and happiness are increasing a little more each day. I am learning to listen more to the voice in myself and learning to understand myself. I aspire to take care of my inner garden and discover more about my life.

This time last year, my father passed away. My mother and siblings needed my presence and support, so I went back to Malaysia to visit them. I am very grateful to the sangha for this opportunity. During my visit, I could feel that the outside environment was tempting me, but also that people's lives were full of pressure and challenges. After a few weeks away from the monastery, I missed the sangha. Even though I practiced morning and evening sitting meditation and walking meditation everyday, it was still easy for me to be carried away by the energy surrounding me. Because of this, I had to keep reminding myself again and again to come back to myself.

## Adjusting to community life in the monastery

A few months ago, I moved to Son Ha Temple ("Foot of the Mountain Temple" near the Upper Hamlet). In the beginning, living there was not easy for me, especially when I did not know how to take care of myself. But thanks to the guidance and support of

my mentors Brother Nguyen Tinh and Brother Phap Ao, I have been learning ways to take care of myself suffering. I don't know where I would be without them. I realized that it is easier to practice together with the sangha than to practice alone and that it is crucial to be nourished by the sangha's collective energy and to take refuge in the sangha. The sangha and its practice can help me purify my body and mind every day. No matter how difficult or challenging life may be, the sangha is there to support me.



from left: Brs. Duc Tru, Ruong Duc, Dong Tri, Aggapanno, Phap Khoi

Son Ha is quite damp and cold compared to the Upper Hamlet. When winter came, my room became very cold. My mentor never uses the heater and I wished to learn his way of living. Thanks to his example and way of training, my body slowly began to accept the environment. My mentor knows that I am afraid of the cold. He kindly suggested that I change to a thicker quilt and the problem of keeping warm when sleeping was solved. I can now sleep peacefully at night. Sometimes I would think to myself: *Right this moment, there are many people, especially children, who are living in abject poverty, who do not have enough clothes for the winter. I am very lucky to have enough clothes to wear and to continue to practice.*

Living in the sangha, I have many chances to practice—like inviting the great temple bell, chanting the morning chant, leading walking meditation, and offering guided sitting meditation. I am a shy person. But thanks to these opportunities, I am

slowly overcoming my shyness. This brings me a lot of courage in the practice.

### The Dharma garden

Working in the greenhouse has been a most wonderful gift for me during the last Rains' Retreat. At first I thought working in the greenhouse is to offer vegetables to the sangha, but actually this is not the main purpose.

When we started working, my mentor Br. Phap Ao first cut the grass with a strimmer, and Br. Nguyen Tinh and I used tools to remove the weeds. We began to loosen the soil and create rectangular beds. We watered the soil and left it to be nourished by the water. Dry soil cannot absorb water easily, so it took a long time for the water to soak in. Br. Phap Ao just smiled and said to me, "Just keep watering it every day." Oh! It sounded like he wanted to tell me something, but what?

After working in the greenhouse for just two days, I had already let go of much stress and tension in my body and mind. After a few days of watering, we used chicken manure to fertilize the soil and by now, the soil could absorb the water easily.

My mentors started sowing seeds and told me to keep watering them every day. A few days later, the seeds began to sprout. Then, seedlings started to grow. My mentors transferred some seedlings to another place where there was more space for them to grow.

### The seedlings and the weeds

During one afternoon of mindful service, while I watered the seedlings wholeheartedly, I suddenly realized that the seedlings were smiling at me. Oh... how wonderful! It was the first time I could see this clearly. For me this was a very precious moment. I believe it is also what my mentors wanted to show me.



When the seedlings began to grow into vegetables, the weeds also gradually grew alongside them. I kept watering the vegetables but did not take care of the weeds. One morning while drinking tea with my mentor, he smiled and said to me, "You only know how to water the vegetables." Then I realized that at the same time as I'm watering the vegetables, I have to also take care of the weeds.

One afternoon while weeding with Br. Nguyen Tinh, I found that I could not uproot all of the weeds because their roots were entangled with the roots of the vegetables, which were not yet strong. I could only trim the weeds above ground. Br. Nguyen Tinh looked at me, smiled, and said that maybe you need to wait for the vegetables to be strong enough before you can uproot the weeds. I listened and waited patiently for the vegetables to grow stronger.

Autumn was coming to an end. The arugula plants were about to die, so I uprooted them together with the weeds. I noticed that the stems of the vegetables and the roots of the weeds mingled in many places. I separated them all and replanted the arugula. After a few days, new leaves started to sprout. I was so happy! I asked myself, *can I do the same thing with my suffering?*

### Mindfulness of slugs

One afternoon while harvesting vegetables, Br. Phap Ao told me that starting from that day, I would have to come here to catch slugs early every morning and evening. The holes in the vegetables were the traces left by slugs after they enjoyed the leaves. After hearing this, I felt very curious—*is there any relationship between the slugs and my life?* Starting from that day, almost every morning and evening, I stepped into the greenhouse to find the answer. After I caught more than one thousand slugs, I still did not have the answer.

During sitting meditation one night, while following my breathing, an image of the slugs appeared in front of me. I thought it may be the message my mentor wanted to convey to me, but I wanted to confirm whether it was true. That night I stayed in the greenhouse for two-and-a-half hours to catch the slugs. Not long after, I saw something I had not seen before. I felt great joy. Yes, this is it!

### Work and practice are not two

Working in the greenhouse is not separate from my practice. Every time I take care of the greenhouse, I am also taking care of myself and others. Whatever

happens in the greenhouse also happens to me and this is what my mentors wished for me to practice. I need to find my own way to cultivate joy and happiness in daily life, to water the wholesome seeds within me and to take care of the unwholesome seeds when they manifest. I can always come back to myself to listen to the voices in me and to understand a little more about them. They are my little friends within and have been with me for a long time. In the past I did not know they were there and I always neglected them. When they came, I had a tendency to reject them and to try to escape because the feeling was so unpleasant. Now I know that I have to recognize, identify, and spend time with them when they arise, to express my love and care for them. By doing this, I build a relationship with them. I am starting to understand a little more about myself and my parents – about why they suffered in the past. The suffering I have now is also their suffering. They have been carrying it for a long time, and it is up to me to practice and transform for them.

### **Looking into the roots**

My suffering has a lot to do with the thoughts I produce every day. I tend to perceive things in a negative way and am not always open to the views of others. Sometimes I feel others have to follow my way; my speech becomes unmindful and those people may suffer. That is my habit energy. Once the distorted views in me are in contact with other negative mental formations, they bring about an unpleasant feeling. This affects a part of my body and makes me feel uncomfortable. If I am not aware, the distorted views and negative mental formations will keep feeding each other, and I suffer day and night. Once I recognize my perceptions and can stop, I have a chance to ask myself, *Am I sure?*

With appropriate attention, the negative energies are taken care of by mindfulness and compassion. When the positive energies are taking place, they bring me a pleasant feeling and my way

of looking at things is also led in a positive way. I need to keep practicing in my daily life to discover more about myself. There is no end to the process. I see how important it is to take refuge in mentors because they know what nourishment and practice are most important for me now.

### **Precious moments**

I am still young in the practice and I treasure the guidance and support of my mentors and the sangha. Every morning I offer happiness to my mentor while we enjoy a cup of tea and listen to the bird songs. This is also an opportunity for me to ask questions about the practice. To me, these are very precious moments in my life.

I used to think that happiness lies somewhere else and that I needed to pursue it away from home. But when I did that and was still unhappy, I continued to look for another kind of “happiness.”

One morning while drinking tea in silence with my mentor, I realized that happiness is in the here and now. Gratitude, joy, and peace are all in this moment. It is already happiness. What else could I wish for? How lucky I am to be a monk and to practice together with the sangha here. They and our elder brothers and sisters established Plum Village and went through many challenges. I cherish my life here and the conditions made possible by Thay and the sangha.

### **Continuing the journey**

Recently I received two koans from my mentor. The first one is, “The lizard and the frog can help to eat some but not all of the slugs. Why is that?” The second one is, “Why do slugs only eat the vegetables and not the weeds?” These two koans are insights from my mentor. He has thrown them to me, but I am still cooking them and I hope to tell you more in the future. ☸

# Mirror, Mirror on the Wall...

BROTHER CHÂN TRỜI THIÊN CHÍ



Br. Thien Chi with his mother after his novice ordination

Shortly after the pandemic began, my mother told me that she felt lonely. I called her every week – even twice a week – during that time, but that was clearly not enough. Since I knew my mom loves mirrors, I decided to craft a gift for her: an enchanting, miraculous mirror that would speak with Thay’s voice to comfort her. I wanted it to look creative, old and a little mysterious, with a classic oval shape. Imagining it lit up a Buddha’s smile in my chest. I thought, *Yes! The glass should spill out of the mirror frame and reveal the gatha for looking into the mirror.* With this fire of inspiration, immense determination, power and sweet excitement began to circulate in my body. It was easy to find some recycled materials and get started. But soon the difficulties began to overwhelm me.

Firstly, building the frame was not easy – it took me months. I did not know how to attach the clay to the wooden backboard, and the shape I envisioned was rather complicated, with many minute details and bent inward like a bow. I put in a lot of effort, but it did not work out well. Eventually I had to let go of the project. Despair spread through me.

After a break of about two months, I stumbled across some wire mesh that I could use as a skeleton for the clay, in combination with small particles attached with nails. My optimism returned, and new creativity sprang back to life. My rhythm was slower now, but in time the shape of the mirror began to reveal itself. As I worked, I realised that I could

neither plan the time to completion, nor the outcome. In fact I began to think—*Am I making the mirror or is the mirror using me as a condition to manifest?*

When the clay had finally dried, starting the painting was a great joy. However, the colors did not turn out quite right. Jokingly, a brother told me with a big smile, “You know Br. Thien Chi, the mirror looks a bit like something out of a horror movie.” Fortunately, one of our lay friends, who is a professional antique restorer, helped me make the frame more genuine.

When my mother eventually opened the big package by mail from France, she was so happy and excited. I thought to myself, *If only I could see her face when she unwraps it and sees the mirror. Her smile is worth all my effort.* The mirror now enjoys a sunny spot in my mother’s bedroom, spreading Thay’s words bathed in light all over the room—“True beauty is a heart that loves and a mind that is wide open” is what it reads in Bulgarian. ☪



# Hello Attachment, You Are My Friend

SISTER CHÂN TRĂNG HIỀN NHÂN

Dear respected Thay, dear noble sangha,

This year, as we are celebrating forty years of Plum Village, I am just turning three years old as a monastic. I am like a tiny tree just learning to absorb the warmth and the light of the sun, and Plum Village is the great forest in which I gently grow. This past year, we have adorned Lower Hamlet with several new jewels, as if beautifying her for a great celebration of a special birthday.

## The flowing of the sangha

We planted 150 trees, made a new, vast and spacious walking path, moved the Happy Farm, and what used to be a parking lot in front of the Big Meditation Hall is now an inviting garden, protected by the shade of the poplar trees with their gentle songs in the wind, colorful with many flowers and tender with newly planted trees. At the same time, we also rejoice in their full growth, the many treasures offered by Thay and the sangha from the past 40 years: The cathedral of the poplar forest, the lotus pond, the plum orchard, and the many trees planted along the paths.

Thus, old and new stand together in harmony, complete each other in beauty and strength. When the sangha practices walking meditation in the poplar grove and the small forest sanctuary where Thay loved so much to take us, I feel like we are walking in Thay's steps and continuing the old path with a faithful and determined heart. When the sangha walks on the newly created path, passing by the new Happy Farm, the 150 newly planted trees, looking over the vast, wide open neighboring fields, I rejoice in the going forth of our sangha and feel how together, we are carrying Thay into the future.

## The signs of attachment

Dear community, as a very young disciple, I want to offer you a gift—the story of my practice with one of the mental formations that I have inherited from a long stream of ancestors, their experiences, and inner formations. The name of this mental formation is attachment, and the name of this ongoing story, sometimes going up and sometimes down, is “Hello attachment, You Are My Friend.”



Lower Hamlet tree planting day

So, how does this story start? Earlier this year, Mister Attachment came once more to knock at the door of my heart and started singing his familiar song of fear and desire (the one I first listened to the day I came out of my mother's womb). He sings to me very eloquently, with a powerful voice that can both rise very high and come down to the very low notes, accompanied by a whole orchestra. His songs can be captivating. I have to make a great effort in order not to get too absorbed in them. Mister attachment is a poet, he has a whole range of metaphors, rhymes, tones, and forms; he is grounded in a whole lineage of artists and his strength comes from the very core of human nature. He is also a philosopher capable of deep reflection, and a scientist with proven evidence. His songs contain all of that.

Now, do you want to know how he started his lament? In the past year, I have had a close relationship with my mentor, and I felt that I could share anything with her, that she would understand, love, and support me no matter what dark energies were inside me. I enjoyed being with her, embraced by her energy and receiving her guidance. She also taught us the fine manners and precepts, which made my happiness even greater. This happiness gave me great energy to practice. I was aware that, part of that inner happiness was based on our mentor-mentee relationship as well as friendship, but I was also aware that there was some attachment in me. I understood, based on my childhood and past

experiences, that attachment was very natural, and that my elder sister seemed to trust my capacity to be responsible and to practice with the mental formations that came up. So I let the relationship unfold naturally. I enjoyed the times we had together—sharing, drinking tea, learning or working together. I observed my mind and let the joy and love penetrate me and sing in my thoughts. I didn't worry because I had faith in my sister, in the sangha, and in the practice.

Then, naturally, the time came to change mentors and precept teachers. When that time came, sadness arose in me as well as other feelings like loss, of being abandoned, jealousy and anger.

I am very shy about going to my elder sister, so not having her as a mentor or teacher, I would rarely see her or share with her, I just wrote her letters about my practice from time to time. The inner child in me started to feel pain: after being so close to her, I saw very little of her, as if we lived far away from each other.

### Embracing the storm

For three days, I held this sadness in my awareness while continuing daily activities with the sangha. Somehow, behind the painful feelings, I also felt faith and had the impression that if I could stay with what was there, I would discover something even more precious than the kind of joy which was still tainted by attachment. I felt that if I went through the storm, I would be able to bring more freedom into the relationship. I was also aware that I would need to go through many more storms after this one if I wanted to walk towards freedom. So the only thing to do was to practice.

### The unfolding of a poem

I observed my body and mind, kept my heart open to moments of joy: sharing, working, sitting and of walking together with the sangha. I continued to nourish myself with the Dharma. On the third evening, when I came back to my study desk after the evening sitting, I found myself starting to write. I didn't know it would be a poem, and I didn't know this poem would be about the sangha.

But it started to unfold like a fruit ripening in the store consciousness. During that time of practice, an insight came up and I experienced how my body and mind are very different depending on whether or not they were in the collective embrace of the sangha's energy. Thanks to the pain manifesting in me based

on attachment, I wholeheartedly came back to the practice and opened myself to the collective energy of the sangha, generating a presence in me that allowed the insight to ripen.

While writing the poem, I suddenly felt so happy. Images from the sutras came up in me, praising the sangha. I didn't have to make any effort to write, the sentences just came up from store consciousness and surprised me. I felt great happiness because I was experiencing the fruits of entrusting myself to store consciousness and my deepening roots in the sangha.



Sr. Trang Hien Nhan

### Taking refuge in the spiritual stream

After this poem, the ripening continued in the next days and I started to feel the energy of attachment loosening and a more stable feeling of being anchored was slowly born. By gently continuing to hold my pain and keeping to the daily practices while in the embrace of the sangha, I started to feel part of a spiritual stream of wisdom and love that carried me. I found great joy in studying and practicing the Shikshamana Precepts and in directing my mind to the basic Dharma doors throughout the day. Every evening, when I sat at my study desk, a more mature presence arose in me, embracing the vulnerable part. This helped me to be less affected by the emotions and mental formations that came up during the day, because I knew I was on firmer ground. It appeared to me that the practice of "investigation of dharmas" had naturally been born in me.

After this experience, something began to change. I didn't want to get caught in attachment anymore because I felt that attachment was an obstacle to getting in touch with the spiritual stream I had found. I wanted to come back to myself to observe, listen, and embrace.

Of course, attachment is still in me and manifests in daily life. When I see my elder sister, hurt might come up. From time to time, I still miss

her and seek her presence. In daily life, when I am in a situation that might cause the energy of attachment to arise in my body and mind with my elder sister or other siblings, I can become very tense. Something in me is making me feel like freezing or running away. But there are also times when I can sit still and reflect on what is happening, and at those times, I know that if I stay with the pain, it can become a bridge to inner freedom.

Now I know that the way is not to want to transform or to fight. Not only with mental formations like attachment, but also with the body, I don't want to try to walk beautifully, to sit with a straight back, to stand with grace, etc... even though monastic beauty touches something very deep in me when I see it manifesting in my sisters. I just want to listen, to understand, to accept and embrace myself, and I have trust that transformation of my body or mental formations will then naturally manifest as a byproduct of love, even if it takes years.

### **Finding acceptance**

In my heart, I started to feel close to my elder sister again. That closeness was based on the practice of coming back and embracing what came up. I felt how this relationship was helping me to grow, how there was a deep respect and faith that I couldn't lose. This deeper feeling embraced the childlike feeling of missing and seeking.

Since our initial encounter, there have been many more events, and there will be many more to come. I still need to suffer a lot to learn to love freely, and many storms will cross my path. When a storm comes, I can only do my best to practice and entrust myself to the sangha. I wholeheartedly put my energy into watering the good seeds in me so that they can balance all the other seeds being dug up and crying inside.

Dear community, here is the poem I shared about earlier, which has helped a heart to heal and to grow. It was born in French and then translated into English because it lives in an international sangha.

*The sangha is as vast as the ocean  
High as a mountain  
Free as the unobstructed sky  
The sangha is a festival of stars  
A full moon brightening the night  
A deep, ancient forest*

*The sangha is protected by a spiritual stream  
Within her, all that occurs is a mirror  
Which gently unveils our minds  
The sangha is a path to awakening  
Each pebble invites us to take a step  
That brings us to the heart of our being  
The sangha is made of laughter and tears  
Because the sangha is made of human beings  
Tears purify the heart  
The sangha is the teacher  
Teaching me resilience,  
Inner strength, acceptance,  
Openness and love  
The sangha is the sea that collects my tears  
The sangha is the valley which echoes my laughter  
The sangha makes me discover that I love what is  
difficult, because what is difficult makes me grow  
and frees me  
The sangha teaches me that Manas, that emotions and  
hurts  
Are not my true mind  
The sangha teaches me to stop, to breathe and to  
smile  
The sangha teaches me to love my inner child  
Wounded and shy, she suddenly jumps up and runs to  
join a festival of joy  
Loved among her sisters  
Manas and my inner child walk hand in hand  
Sometimes, I let myself be a child even if then I am  
also Manas, I am not afraid  
Because the sangha is both gentle and sharp, seeing  
straight into the heart  
The sangha teaches me silence and the sangha teaches  
me laughter and joy  
The sangha teaches me to be happy and to suffer  
The sangha teaches me that my body and mind are  
not separate from the energy of the sangha  
The sangha lives in my heart, in my body, my breath  
The sangha thinks in me and dreams there  
The sangha eats, drinks, falls asleep and awakes  
She carries me on the ocean of life  
She is the source of my balance, my joy, my energy  
Without her, I cannot say what would manifest in  
me-how could I know?  
This poem is also the Sangha  
As well as each of my thoughts, my actions and my  
words  
Today, I cried the tears of the sangha so that gently,  
my heart in the heart of the sangha becomes freer.*

With love and gratitude, Sr. Trang Hien Nhan ☸

# The Mud for the Lotus

OCEAN VUONG

*A “love letter” to the Plum Village monastic and lay community from Ocean Vuong, a celebrated young Vietnamese American poet and novelist, written shortly after Thay’s passing.*

Dear monastic and lay practitioners in our Buddhist communities far and wide—

In the days following Thay’s continuation, I have been asked by various media outlets, as a Buddhist author, to speak on this momentous occurrence in our community. But I declined—for what have I to say that Thay’s teaching has not already solidified, already made so self-evidently clear? His practice and life’s work were always to prepare us for this moment and, in this way, prepare us for us. For our own grief in Samsara. I have always felt that to do nothing was wiser than to do something without strong intention or proper conditions in place. But when Denise Nguyen, executive director of the Thich Nhat Hạnh Foundation, reached out asking me to share directly to our community, this call made sense to me, to speak to you as one among you.

Language and sound, as we know, are one of our oldest mediums of transmission. The root of the word “narrative” is “gnarus,” Latin for knowledge. As such, all stories are first and foremost the translation of knowledge. But not only that, they are the transmission of energy. And, as Thay taught us, energy cannot die. As a poet, this is a truth I live with every day. Because to read a few lines of *Gilgamesh* or *The Iliad* or the *Tale of Kieu*, is to receive the linguistic energy of a mind working up to over four thousand years ago. In this way, to speak is to survive, and to teach is to shepherd our ideas into the future, the text is a raft we send forward for all later generations. We know this because we have all clung, are still clinging, to the raft of Thay’s and Buddha’s teachings. How lucky we are, as a species, to have such a vehicle. I do believe that language, despite major developments in medicine and science, is still our most advanced technology. We owe it to ourselves to commit to building new rafts for all sentient beings. Our work, as was Thay’s, is part of a long tradition of liberation that spans multiple epochs and myriad realms.



Yes, energy, and even people, do not truly die. But I must speak, too, as a lay practitioner, who does not yet possess the merit to devote to a monastic life, and must admit that my heart breaks to see Thay’s body prepared for cremation, to know his journey through death and dying, which, as the Buddhas taught us, is one of the passages of suffering all sentient beings must move through. And because I am not strong enough in my practice, I watched the procession for Thay’s funeral with tears in my eyes, both for the beauty of the community he built but also for the immense sadness in my heart. I weep for myself and others who do not yet have the wisdom and merit to bear this pain well.

When my own mother was dying of cancer in November 2019, on her deathbed, she said to me, her voice weak, and the heat energy already fading from her limbs, “My son, now that you know this sickness, you must take this knowledge to help people.” My mother, though illiterate, memorized Vietnamese Buddhist sutras and would listen to Thay’s teaching on her iPhone with regularity. I told her, “Yes, I will not let this pain be experienced in vain.” And since so many of us are feeling pain about Thay’s continuation, I think it is helpful to see sadness, too, as energy. May we let the sadness come and teach us how to live. Let it be the mud for the lotus, as Thay says. Let us sit with it and let it pass through us so that it might be transformed to something like love. My mother, having learned from Thay, knew that pain can be recycled into knowledge. Isn’t that what language is?

And I ask now, specifically of our monastics brothers and sisters, folks, and elders, as you have *Xuất Gia*, or “gone forth,” and therefore are the true pioneers of human phenomena, I ask you humbly, to seek, in your practice (as I am sure you have already done), all the ways sadness might be transformed. And we, the lay practitioners who have “remained,” will follow your path. This is why monastics are, to my mind, the true embodiments of courage, are warriors more grounded and determined than anyone who has ever raised a sword: you have chosen to shave your heads and march into the vast unknown, beyond the cliff of human knowledge, while we remain here in relative safety and comfort, awaiting your discoveries, ready to go forth.

It is said that grief is actually love—but with nowhere to go. In a quest that might very well take up the remainder of my life in this form, I ask of myself and also of you, dear community: where shall we go, both within and outside us? Now that we have

such a capacious raft, one that can hold so many, fortified by *Thay*’s teaching, there might still be sadness, yes, but there is no more fear.

Knowing you are out there, mining the answers when you sit down, when you follow your breath, when you make offerings, knowing you are just ahead of us, and that I can glimpse your bright robes along the road, like scraps of sunlight among the grey detritus, how can I ever be scared? But more so, how can I ever be lost?

I am sad, yes. And I will be so for some time. My heart aches—but despite, or perhaps because of that, I have found you. And in you I have found myself.

That is the narrative, that is the knowledge.

*Yours, in hope and word,*

*Ocean Vuong (Dharma Name: Đức Hải) ॐ*



# Continuing the Deep Practice of Generosity

THE THICH NHAT HANH FOUNDATION

The Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation is so grateful for the opportunity to share space in this publication, which so beautifully honors the rich and transformative life of dear Thay and celebrates 40 years of our beloved Plum Village Monastery.

We also recently celebrated an anniversary: our 10<sup>th</sup>. In 2011, Thay and Sister Chan Khong blessed the creation of a team of professional lay practitioners and monastic liaisons to raise funds to support the work of our growing community.

For the foundation, this was a great honor and a formidable challenge. For half a century, Sister Chan Khong did a masterful job of gathering donations to expand and maintain the monasteries across the globe, support humanitarian work in Vietnam, and so much more.

Like everything she does, Sister Chan Khong's fundraising was an act of great love, compassion, and humility. She often compares fundraising to her work during the war in Vietnam, when she went from household to household humbly asking each person for a handful of rice. Soon there was enough to feed a village of women and children.

Those who donated rice were fed, too, by Sister Chan Khong, who helped them understand that a small gift can have enormous impact.

While the foundation was created to take the task of fundraising off of the monastic community so they can concentrate more on spreading the Dharma, we strive to embody Sister Chan Khong's approach to honoring the giver as well as the gift: to be her continuation in the same way we, as practitioners, talk about being Thay's continuation. And there is a great deal of work yet to do to honor their intertwined visions for our global community.

In an episode of the Plum Village podcast *The Way Out is In*—supported by your donations—Brother Phap Huu recalled a remark that Thay made to him during the 2013 visit to Hong Kong, which turned out to be their last teaching tour together. Sharing cups of tea after lunch, Thay looked at Brother Phap Huu and said, “Thay has already renewed Buddhism by 60 percent. And the future, that 40 percent—it’s in

the hands of my students, my descendants, monastic and lay. You all have the responsibility of keeping the Dharma wheel spinning.”

There are many ways we can keep the Dharma wheel spinning, just as Avalokiteshvara—the bodhisattva of great compassion—has a multitude of arms to meet the needs of the world. There are the teachings and deep practices shared by our monastic and lay teachers; there are the thousands of lay sanghas that meet regularly to meditate and recite the mindfulness trainings; there is a growing body of resources, from books and videos to meditation apps, to water the seeds of practitioners' compassion and understanding; and there is the work of the foundation to help ensure that all these wonderful gifts can continue to flow outward to the world and help ease the suffering of all living beings.

In the scheme of things, 10 or 40 years is not long at all. In many ways, Thay's work is just beginning. All of us reading this lovely publication are invited to find our place in the beautiful story that Thay and Sister Chan Khong envisioned for our beloved community: to become an unshakeable siblinghood rooted in peace and committed to joy, gratitude, transformation, and generosity of spirit.

In a Dharma talk on Thay's continuation, Brother Phap Linh (Brother Spirit) said it's good to assess our day each night, to ask how skillfully we spoke and acted. And that it's important to remember the ways we were generous and kind, as well as ways we disappointed ourselves or others.

“When we've been generous, when we've been loving, it's also kind of letting our ancestors know that, yes, we're doing OK, this is good,” Brother Phap Linh said. “We know that Thay loved life, he loved to do all these things, so it's very easy if we want to live like Thay that we just do the things that Thay loved.”

Thank you for continuing Thay, for continuing to work on those things that Thay loved, and for supporting our community with so much care and generosity for more than 40 years.

*With a deep bow,  
The Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation Family* ☸

