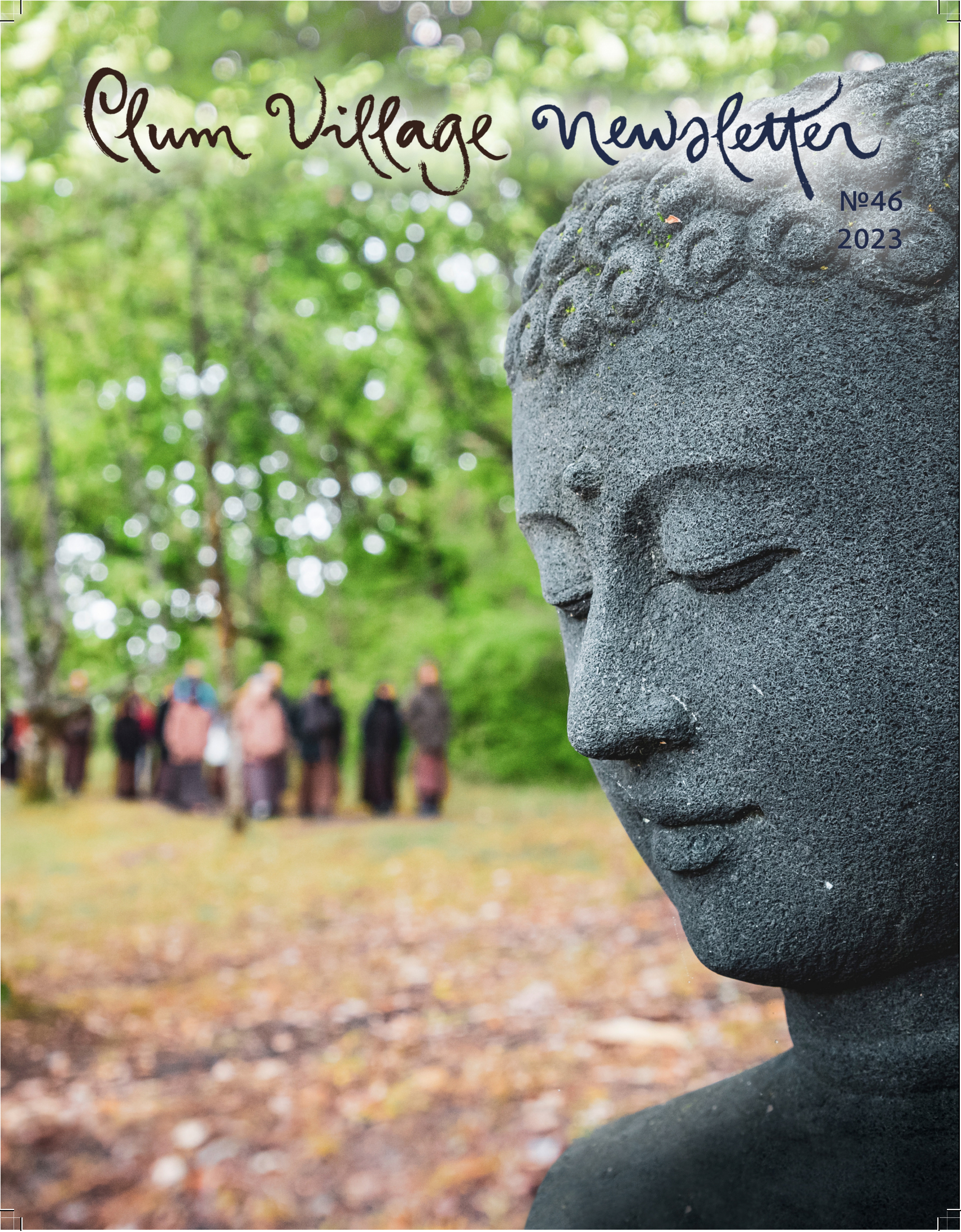
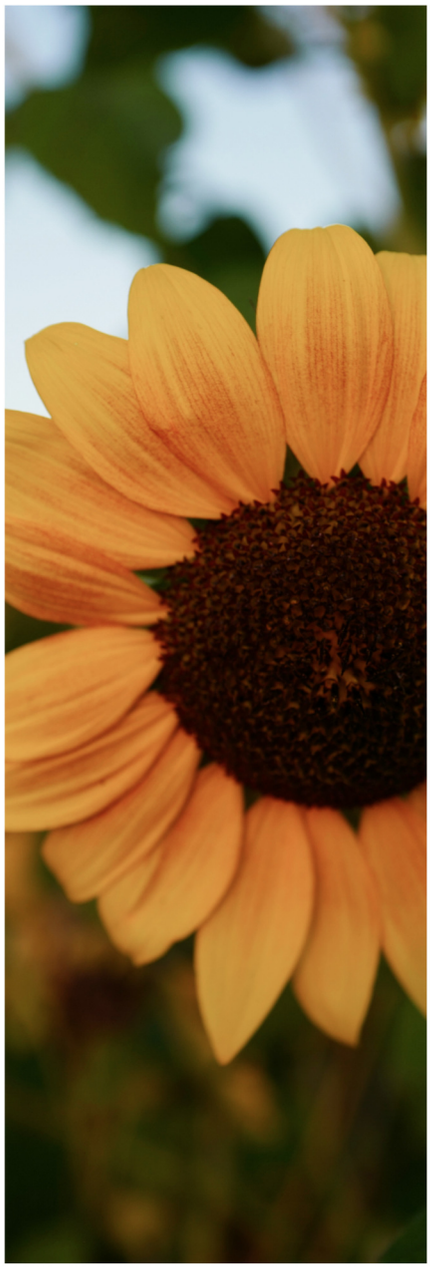
Plum Village Newsletter

№46
2023
















SONY




peace in
every step
freedom in
every smile

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Review of the Year

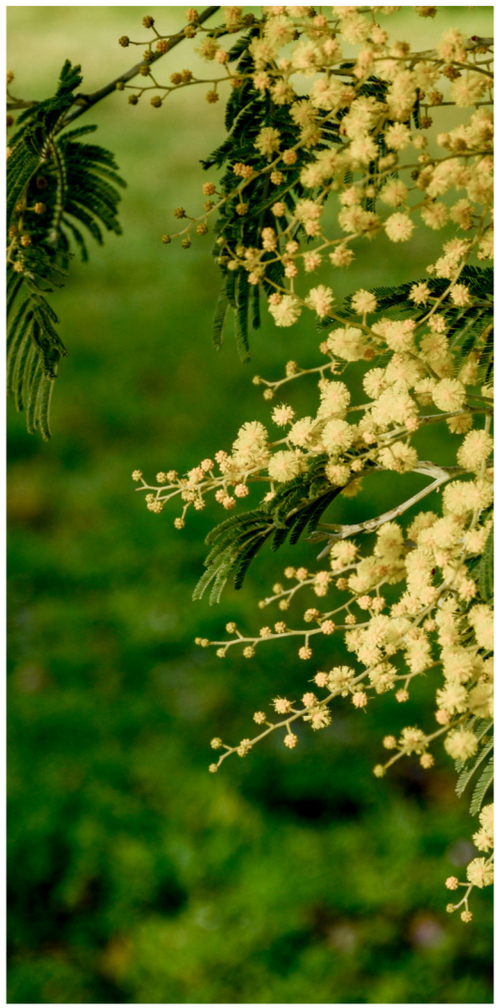


Monastic Retreat

Nearly 160 monastics from around Europe gathered in the Dharma Cloud Temple for a monastic retreat from February 13-26 with the theme "Now We Have a Path, There is Nothing to Fear."

It was a profound and delightful 10 days as we learned from our elders, shared experiences among our peers, envisioned the future together and practiced side by side as one spiritual family.













Spreading Thay's Ashes

In early March, Thay's senior disciples from around the world invited Thay's ashes home to each Plum Village center.

In Plum Village France, the multifold sangha gathered at Dharma Cloud Temple on March 5 to receive Thay's ashes with a solemn ceremony, accompanied by the sound of the Great Temple Bell and the Prajna drums.

On 13 March, we held a 3-day online retreat with over 500 practitioners to honor the 49th day of Thay's passing. We returned part of Thay's ashes to the earth while over 15,000 sangha friends joined online. Holding Thay's ashes reverently in our palms, we each connected deeply with Thay in our heart.

Then in June and July—together with Thay's most senior monastic and lay disciples, who came to honor Thay and celebrate 40 Years of Plum Village—we spread Thay's ashes in Lower Hamlet and New Hamlet.



















Spring Retreats

From early March to May—after two years of closure—it was a great joy to reopen and receive over 500 retreatants, including a special retreat for scientists, as spring dazzled us with her ephemeral wonders.





A Cloud Never Dies

In response to the growing humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, the Plum Village community released *A Cloud Never Dies*, a documentary about the life of Thay, on April 2.

The film traces Thay's footsteps from his early days in Vietnam, through his peace efforts during the war, to building an international community of practice, and his return to Vietnam. The film was viewed over 50,000 times within 5 hours of its release.

On the same day, the Sangha wrote an open letter calling for peace in 14 languages to offer hope through Thay's teaching of "Peace in oneself, peace in the world."









Monastics on Tour

Our monastic siblings joined hands with lay sanghas to share the practice everywhere, from the rainforests of Latin America to the Franciscan chapels of Italy and hikes in the French Alps.









In every country, we had the opportunity to connect with up to a thousand friends. Many people came to heal the grief of losing loved ones in recent times. The retreats also sprouted new sanghas such as the Wake Up sangha in Bogota. While not all of our monastics spoke the local language, they were able to connect through songs, games, and being present, especially for the children.

The sisters and brothers on tour were beautifully living and touring together, practising the Six Harmonies, bringing their harmony and diverse methods of teaching with them. In turn, the happiness they saw among the lay friends was their greatest nourishment.

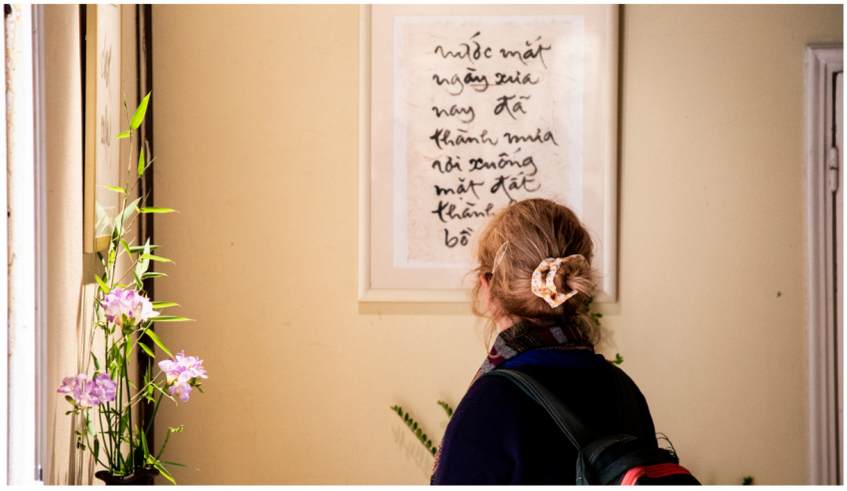





i have
arrived
i am home


i am
here
for
you
Tâm Kinh
go as
a river
go as
a ronatha
be
still
and
see







40 Years of Plum Village

The Plum Village Tradition formally turned 40 in June! To mark this legendary moment, we held a special 14-Day retreat.

Thay's senior lay and monastic disciples from around the world came to honor Thay's legacy, share sangha-building experiences, and transmit their insights to the younger generations.

Alongside the classic practice schedule, specially curated sessions were offered, including a Music and Poetry evening, "Tales from the Old Timers," an exhibition of Thay's calligraphy, as well as a ceremony to transmit the Dharma Lamp.




Hội
ngàn
Dao
OLD PATH WHITE CLOUDS









Wake Up and Summer retreats

In July, we welcomed over 350 young friends to a one-week Wake Up Humanity Retreat (July 1 - 8), and over 1,500 practitioners, mainly families with children and teens for a vibrant Summer Opening (July 15 - 29).





Rains Retreat

We were blessed by the presence of our elders during this 3-months Autumn Rains Retreat that started on September 14 with 255 monastic and lay practitioners.

During this retreat, which focused on Engaged Buddhism, friends at home practiced with us through the weekly teachings posted online, with questions for reflection and home practices.













Novice Ordination

During the year, 25 new novices were born into the Plum Village family, coming home to centers in Thailand, Vietnam, US, and France.

This new generation of "youngsters" are the first of the Plum Village monastics to carry our teacher's name - "Nhat" for the brothers and "Hanh" for the sisters.

Stone Pine family (on June 12 in Plum Village Thailand): Brs. Chân Nhất Nguyện, Chân Nhất Niệm, and Chân Nhất Lưu.

Manzanita family (on September 25 in Deer Park): Brs. Chân Nhất Hướng and Chân Nhất Ấn.

Red Cedar family (on December 18 in Plum Village Thailand) Brs. Chân Nhất Thể, Chân Nhất Đạo, Chân Nhất Đăng, Chân Nhất Chiếu, Chân Nhất Thừa, and Srs: Chân Lạc Hạnh, Chân Pháp Hạnh, Chân Bi Hạnh, Chân Phước Hạnh, Chân Giới Hạnh, Chân Tuệ Hạnh, Chân Nhân Hạnh, Chân Xuân Hạnh, Chân Quang Hạnh, Chân Khiêm Hạnh, Chân Bảo Hạnh, Chân Bối Hạnh, Chân Dung Hạnh, Chân Phổ Hạnh, Chân Tường Hạnh.









Lamp transmission

In June, September and November, Br. Phap Ung, Sr. Chan Khong and Sr. Chan Duc represented the sangha to transmit the Dharma Lamp to 31 new Dharma teachers, both lay and monastic students of Thay.



Here are the transmission gathas of 2022:

Br. Thích Chân Trời Đại Giác

(Andreas Lukas Ambühl;
Great Determination of the Heart)

The spiritual **sky** is radiant with brush strokes
Sun Vow mountain blooms with flowers of **great awakening**
A decade, diligently tending to the garden of wisdom
Gratitude cultivates the six harmonies

Br. Thích Chân Trời Phạm Hạnh

(Bart Johan Christiaan Bannink;
Deep Understanding of the Heart)

The sacred **holy life** of both east and west
Illuminates the well trodden ancestral paths
Revealing their true treasures
As action and non-action go perfectly together.

Sr. Thích Nữ Chân Tựu Nghiêm

(Hồ Thị Bích Minh; Tâm Thánh Quang)

Bước chân hơi thở là nhà
Thành **tựu** chỉ quán không xa Phật đài
Vạn pháp là một không hai
Nghiêm thân hộ ý ngày mai giúp đời.

Sr. Thích Nữ Chân Nhất Nghiêm

(Lê Thị Thanh Nhàn; Tâm Phước Thiện)

Nhất tâm hướng Bụt
Hộ trì **nghiêm** thân
Báo ân phụ mẫu
Tạ nghĩa bốn chúng
Ngày ngày không quên.

Sr. Thích Nữ Chân Trăng Lộc Uyển

(Phạm Thị Thu Hằng; Tâm Trung Kiên)

Đông tây nam bắc một ánh **trăng**
Lộc Uyển chuyển luân diệu pháp âm
Đất Mẹ thanh lương bừng hơi thở
Ngước mắt cười vang bặt cầu tầm.

Sr. Thích Nữ Chân Trăng Xóm Mới

(Nguyễn Thị Thu Hà; Tâm Nguyên Hải)

Trăng tròn sáng giữa một trời sao
Lối cũ **xóm** xưa rõ nẻo đường
Cây khô xuân sang mọc lá **mới**
Khắp nơi gieo rắc hạt yêu thương.

Sr. Thích Nữ Chân Trăng Thủy Tiên

(Trần Dạ Thụy Vy; Tâm Hạnh Khương)

Tâm sáng tỏ tựa **trăng** rằm
Thủy triều vang tiếng pháp âm Bi Từ
Tiên đang cứu giúp muôn người
Sá chi mệt mỏi đường đời quanh co.

Sr. Thích Nữ Chân Trăng Tam Muội

(Susan Rooke;
Transformation of the Heart)

The **samādhi moon** shines in the eastern sky
For many years our ancestors have sought it
Carefully disciplined, we find our way home
Ancestors greet us and descendants rejoice.

Sr. Thích Nữ Chân Trăng Tin Yêu

(Bong Suryati;
Deep Communication of the Heart)

The **moon** over my country shines brightly.
My aspiration is still very alive.
My **trust** has not lost its lustre
And brings true **love** to all places.

Sr. Thích Nữ Chân Trăng Tịnh Thường

(Hồ Vũ Anh Đài; Tâm Quảng Bảo)

Trăng không tròn không khuyết
Khắp chốn là quê hương
Kiện hành trời phương ngoại
Đẹp nếp sống **tịnh thường**.

Sr. Thích Nữ Chân Trăng Thường Trú

(Nguyễn Thị Bích Vân; Tâm Quảng Huy)

Trăng treo đỉnh Thứu ngàn năm sáng
Thần khí trượng phu giữa núi sông
Tùy duyên **thường trú** nuôi hơi thở
Mỗi bước chân về rạng tổ phong.

Chân Đại Hòa - True Great Harmony

(Shelley Anderson)

The **great** work of no birth and no death
Can be realized at any moment
The true **harmony** of heart and mind
Takes us to the shore of peace and joy.

Chân Quang Độ - True Land of Light

(Martha Caroline Soule)

Mindfulness is the **light** that shines near and far
Taking care of the **land** of the five skandhas
The sangha is the home where voices are heard
And people can sit together in freedom.

Chân Liễu Nghĩa - True Deep Meaning

(Uli Pfeifer Schaupp)

The **deep** still waters of the lake
Reflect perfectly the true **meaning**
Insight gives rises to compassion
Bringing relief to all places.

Chân Biểu Tôn - True Manifestation of Reverence

(Marisela Gomez)

Reverence for the Buddha **manifests**
In our speech, actions and relationships
Right diligence completes the work begun
And our vow is already realized.

Chân Hỷ Định

(Martine Robier)

Phụng sự ở trong bản môn
Niềm vui có được lắng yên nhẹ nhàng
Tâm **Hỷ** theo gió thênh thang
Còn lại thân **định** mênh mang lòng từ.

Chân Lạc An - True Happy Peace

(Denise Sanematsu Kato)

True **happiness** is **peace** and freedom
Caring for others and for oneself
The way home is in every moment
Adorned with flowers of the Dharma.

Chân Thoại Khởi - True Auspicious Arising

(Jorieke Rijsenbilt)

The **arising** of a lotus of compassion
Marks an **auspicious** moment of change before us
It brings people together in peace and joy
And heals the wounds for future generations.

Chân Thái Hòa - True Great Harmony

(Dorit Alon Shippin)

The bird flies over the **great** hot forest
Putting out the flames with drops of water
Body, speech and mind held in **harmony**
Invite the bell that settles the tension.

Chân Hòa Gia - True Harmonious Family

(Marleen van der Bosch)

True harmony lies within oneself
The sangha becomes a **family**
Listening deeply reconciles us
The refreshing Dharma rain brings joy.












Now we have a path
we have nothing
more to fear

Chân Lạc An - True Joyful Peace

(Margriet Messelink)

The **joy** of meditation is food
That nourishes right view and right action
Seeds of **peace** have already been sown
Their flowers and fruit adorn the world.

Chân Hỷ Vân - Vrai Joyeux Nuage

(Jacqueline Thouvenot)

Le **Joyeux Nuage** lentement dans le ciel
Rafraîchit le généreux soleil du midi
Toucher la guérison avec le sourire de l'inter-être
Goûter la douceur et la paix de l'ultime: tout est déjà parfait!

Vraie Terre de Paix

(Marie-Ange Amiel)

Dans la **Terre de Paix** se trouve la source joyeuse de l'instant
Où le souffle tranquille de la compassion guide l'action
Dans l'océan de sagesse, les bruits de l'injustice s'effacent
Le vivant dans toute sa beauté resplendit dans le silence.

Chân Thâm Nghĩa - Vraie Loyauté Profonde

(Dominique Prodel)

La **Loyauté Profonde** de la terre donne aux arbres l'éclat joyeux de la Vie
Sur les pas des ancêtres spirituels chaque respiration devient libération
La présence lumineuse du cœur se suffit à elle-même
Comme le cyprès au milieu de la cour.

Chân Lạc Ân - Vrai Sceau du Bonheur

(Christian Michel)

Dans chaque pas s'inscrit le **Sceau du Bonheur**
La profondeur du silence intérieur réveille la douceur de la joie
L'esprit du débutant s'amuse avec l'impermanence
Comme la feuille joue avec les saisons.

Chân Hòa Lâm - True Harmonious Forest

(Claude Acker)

The **forest** has its ways of **harmony**
Each tree standing straight in its position.
The sangha body grows like a forest
Where all the roots and branches interare.

Chân Bích Trì - True Blue Lake

(Annie Lake Mahon)

The **jade** waters of the deep **lake**
Refresh Mother Earth's heat and pain.
We shall never give up our task
Watering the flowers of peace.

Chân Quang Trang

(Bar Zecharya)

Understanding is the clear **light**
That dispels all hatred and fear
It **adorns** the untended garden
Where all beings can enjoy the fruit.

Chân Hạnh Toàn

(Hélène Prost)

Tấm lòng hiếu **hạnh** vẹn **toàn**
Nguyện theo gương sáng theo dòng Tổ tiên
Không bùn không đóa hoa sen
Trời xanh mây trắng thênh thang đường về.

True Source of Listening

(Maya Brandl)

By **listening** to the cries of the world
Drops of compassion well up at the **source**
By transforming mud into lotuses
Faith in the three precious jewels deepens.

Chân An Đạo

(Hélène Nardot)

An ban thủ ý phá tâm nghi
Lắng nghe, nhìn thấu **đạo** thâm sâu
Một tâm bước vững vào rừng tía
Vượt sóng ba đào như dạo chơi.



Sister Chan Khong receives an Honorary Doctorate

On December 10, Sr. Chan Khong received an honorary Doctorate in social work from Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University in Thailand, in recognition of her work for peace and social justice over many decades, including her humanitarian relief work, and promotion of the status of women within Vietnam.











Thay's Memorial

10 January 2023 marked one year since Thay's transition according to the lunar calendar.

Nearly 1,000 monastic and lay practitioners of various traditions gathered at Tu Hieu Temple (Hue, Central Vietnam) to honor our teacher. It was here that Thay ordained as a novice monk in 1942.

On the evening of January 9, Plum Village brothers and sisters from around the world sat together with guest monks and nuns to share loving memories of Thay.

January 10 began with a silent walking meditation on the grounds of Tu Hieu Temple amidst the cool rain. This was followed by a memorial ceremony led by several venerable monks and nuns who were students of Thay in the 1960s.

The sangha also chanted sutras, practiced Touching the earth and recited the Five Mindfulness Trainings to cultivate the energy of peace, love, and reverence.





















Let us Share the Vision

A Dharma Talk by Thay

Dear Sangha,

Today is the 13th of February 2011, and we are in the Loving Kindness Temple (New Hamlet) Plum Village, in our Winter Rains Retreat.

We are sitting here in a small village in the south of France. Why have we come here? Let us broaden our mind and use our mind's eye to see that person, who is not here, who is far away, perhaps in Asia, America, or Africa. What are they doing at this moment? Are they someone we love or someone we hate? Where are they and what are they doing? Look with the mind's eye! Are they asleep, or if awake, what are they doing?

If we know how to sit still and see that person from afar, we have a chance to see them more clearly. We sit still for a while and see them completely engrossed in something, in a corner of the world somewhere. We only need to sit and use our consciousness to see and in five or ten minutes, we are filled with love and sympathy for that person. In the past you may have been upset with, blamed or criticized that person. Now you sit here alone in a faraway village and you have a chance to look back. And because you are far away, you can see very clearly.

Sometimes we have to go far away to see what we want to see. We live side by side and interact with each other day in and day out but still we do not see. It isn't until we have gone very far, so far that we may never meet again that we then start seeing that person and feel sympathy for them. It's a pity for them and for us that we did not know how to relate to them and treasure them.

Look Down From Up High

In the past when Thay read the stories of Hans Christian Anderson, Thay loved one of them very much. It's a short story called *A Great Grief*. There were two brothers standing on a rooftop of a high building looking down. On the ground there was a group of children playing. A dog had just died and they wanted to bury it. They made a grave for the dog and they made it very beautifully. They thought, it's such a beautiful grave, if they didn't let the other children see it, it would be such a shame. They announced to all the children in the village that they could visit the grave.

The children had to have a ticket to enter - the ticket was one of their buttons from a shirt or trousers. Many children wore overalls. When they tore off a button, the overalls didn't fall because there was a button on the other side. Some children had five, six buttons on their shirts so it was not a problem for them either. All the children really wanted to see the grave. When they saw other children entering and they had not gone in, they would pull off any coat or trouser button for a ticket.

After all the children had gone in to see the dog's grave, there was a poor, small girl still outside. She did not have a single button; her clothes were tattered. All the children had gone in and she was the only one who had to stand outside. She was so upset and cried bitterly. She was the only child in the entire village who could not enter because she did not have any buttons.

The two brothers on the rooftop saw everything from the beginning to the end. The younger one said, "Looking from high up here, it's hardly worth crying over not having a button to enter!" But the child below did not know that. When we see from above, we see very differently our own pain and the pain of the other. Thay doesn't remember exactly the original line, but that was the essential meaning. Thay remembers vividly that short story of only one and a half pages.

Treading the Path That Leads to the Moon

The first time human beings organized a very far journey, it was to the moon. Apollo 11 was the name of that expedition. It took a great deal of money and energy to send a few astronauts to the moon.

When the spaceship flew out of the Earth's atmosphere, the astronauts were able to capture images of the Earth for the first time in history.

Back then, Thay wrote a poem about this event called *Morning of Peace*:

Treading the path that leads to the moon,
I look back and can't stop marveling.
I see a bubble of water on the immense ocean of space.
It is the Earth, our green planet,
her sumptuous beauty sparkling and proud,
yet oh so fragile.
...

Going out into space and looking back, they saw how beautiful our Planet Earth is. In this solar system or the universe, we had never seen anything as beautiful and ephemeral like that. When the astronauts landed on the moon and walked on it, they saw the moon was very different, there was no life. At night on the moon they could see their way thanks to the light of the sun reflected from the Earth. Standing on the Earth we see the moon rise, and on the moon they saw the Earth rise. The Earth rises very beautifully - not golden, but shades of blue and white. Those images were sent back to us humans on Earth.



Earthrise, 1968, William Anders[1]

The members of the Apollo 11 expedition were deeply moved when they saw the image of Earth. They described the space on the moon as bitterly cold and inhospitable. On Earth they had never seen darkness like the darkness of outer space. There may also be pitch dark nights on Earth, but that darkness is alive, there is warmth, sounds and fragrance. But the darkness on the moon is terribly cold and black. Although there was the reflected gleam of the sun, they could see nothing. The universe up there is empty. Light has to encounter something for us to be able to see it. When light travels in empty space we do not see it. The color blue that we see when we look up at the sky is not there in outer space. It is thanks to the layers of atmosphere that when the sunlight shines on them, we see the blue sky. Once you have left the Earth's atmosphere, the blue is no longer there. There is just pitch black, a freezing pitch black.

Looking down at the Earth, a feeling of great love rose up in the astronauts. They visualized billions of Earth's inhabitants and what were they doing? Eating, sleeping, working, being angry with each other, fighting and killing each other for an inch of territory. What a shame. Whites are against Blacks and Blacks are against whites. People in the North are against people in the South and people in the South are against people in the North. When we are far away and look back, we see things differently. We see that we humans are crazy and very foolish. We have such a beautiful and marvelous planet and yet, we are in the process of destroying it.

One astronaut (Edgar Mitchell) upon returning to Earth said, "We went to the moon as technicians; we returned as humanitarians." We need a journey like that to see clearly who we are, how precious our planet is, and how foolish we are. We live on it and we do not know what it is, we do not treasure it and we are letting it be destroyed.

Our life is the same. We all have life but we do not know how to value it. We waste our time and use it unwisely. We waste our lives and our time as if we were burning one hundred dollar bills, one after another. We inflict suffering on each other and look for something we call happiness. Meanwhile, we are accumulating unhappiness and causing each other to suffer. That is what is happening right here and now, but we don't see it. Sometimes we have to go very far to look back and then we shall see - heaven is right where we are living.

The astronauts said, the moon and the stars are very beautiful, but freezing cold. That is not our place. It is only that tiny planet with its shades of blue and white that is our home, that welcomes us. We are living in our home, but we do not treasure it and the time we have to live on it. The images the astronauts sent back are a bell of mindfulness.

1. https://www.nasa.gov/image-feature/apollo-8-earthrise.

Seeing those images is like hearing the sound of the bell, we need to wake up. Wake up to see, to understand, to love, and to treasure.

Eyes of the World

Only a few hundred astronauts have had a chance to leave the Earth. They are our brothers and sisters, our representatives who leave the planet, look down and report back to us. It is like our body which is tens of kilos, and has eyes which are only a few grams, but those eyes can see and report back to the whole body. We have our eyes - they are those first astronauts who flew out of the Earth's orbit to go to the moon. They knew their mission was very dangerous, and that they might never return. They explored the moon not for themselves but for humankind. The human race needed to take the first steps and so needed those pioneers who would sacrifice themselves and go first.

The astronauts also had families and knew the dangers awaiting them. When someone asked one of the astronauts, "Were you able to sleep last night?" He replied, "Yes I slept." "Did you take sleeping pills?" "No! I didn't take sleeping pills, but I had terrible nightmares." Because he knew once he climbed into the spaceship, he might never return.

Those astronauts are our eyes that we sent into space to see for us. When our eyes reported back, did we listen, did we see anything? We have to educate our children so they can see the preciousness of life and the Planet Earth, see the preciousness of being born, growing up, walking and breathing on this planet. That is awakening. Once you see this, it is happiness to take a step and happiness to speak a word. When we come in touch with Mother Earth, each of our steps is filled with love, each word we speak is filled with love. That insight changes us completely.

The Buddha was also our eyes. He did not need to travel into space, he just needed to sit under a Bodhi tree. But with the eyes of his mind he saw very deeply and reported to us that there is a world of freedom, which is nirvana. And there is a way to that freedom, which is the Noble Eightfold Path. In the past many of his disciples praised him as the eyes of the world.

The astronauts also followed that path. They volunteered to be the eyes, to see for us and transmit to us the insight. Have we seen it or not? How many bells have been sounded and how many images have been sent back? Yet we still live in slumber, we continue to inflict suffering on each other, and to destroy this one-of-a-kind work of art of the universe. As parents, teachers, elder brothers and sisters, you must have this insight and transmit it to your children and younger siblings. We have to wake up. If not it will be too late! Buddhism is called the *Path of Enlightenment*. Enlightenment means just this. ☙



a true Teacher

Sister Chân Thệ Nghiêm

Dearest Thay, our hearts are full as we remember your Mind of Love. In gratitude, we are holding all of our memories of you lovingly and spaciously, with open palms.

I am so grateful to be a disciple of Thay, who bore all the hallmarks of a true spiritual teacher. He is one who has *guided* us on our spiritual path, has *embodied* understanding and compassion, and has *inspired* his disciples to do the same.

Embodiment

Manifestation Body

When I was 21, my father introduced me to Thay's book, *Being Peace*. I remember the feeling of coming alive as a new world opened before me. Here was a wholesome and compassionate way of living. Here was a teacher who shared authentically, with peace, joy, and wisdom. Thay's words breathed life into my heart, and directed my eyes towards a spiritual path. Like so many others, I awakened to my monastic life because of Thay.

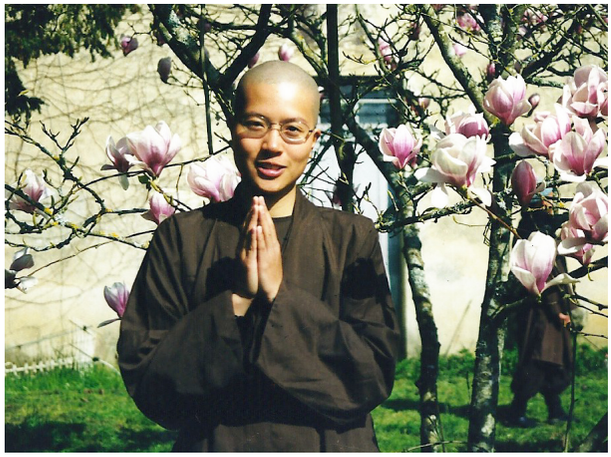
Compassion

Becoming Thay's disciple was a chance to experience Thay's understanding and compassion in person.

During my formative years in Plum Village, many of us were fortunate to have a chance to take turns to attend Thay. Thay created these conditions to get to know and guide all of his disciples, no matter their skill or capacity.

During those early years, I found it difficult to break out of my insular habits and adjust to community life. Therefore, whenever it was my turn to attend Thay, I often felt overwhelmed in his presence. He was always very present, and usually in the limelight of sangha activities. It was a doubly uncomfortable spotlight that, as a novice, I actively tried to avoid.

And yet Thay occupied these seemingly stressful circumstances with grace, ease, and spaciousness - without ego - and always sought to share this ease with those around him. These were especially the moments when I touched Thay's compassion personally. For though he himself was not prone to complexes, or the ups and downs of afflictive emotions, he empathized with those who were. Thay was ever considerate of these sensitivities in others.



I remember driving Thay from New Hamlet to Lower Hamlet as his attendant one day. I had recently learned how to drive stick-shift in the French countryside, but had not yet fully mastered it. Our morning drive along the country road was going smoothly and peacefully... until we approached a crossroads. The car suddenly jerked to a hard, unceremonious stop as the engine shuddered and died. I looked down at the stick-shift, flush with embarrassment at my blunder.

In a calm and pleasant way, but quick as lightning, Thay suddenly pointed out the window and made a cheerful observation about some distant landmark - something Nature-y, I suspect. In his compassionate way, Thay was attempting to distract me from my embarrassment. Flustered by my mistake, and self-conscious of the fact that Thay was "changing pegs" to make me feel better, I remained silent. However, in my heart, I registered fully his kindness. *Thank you for your kindness, dearest Thay.*

Understanding

Another memory surfaces of Thay's understanding and kindness. One day, I was attending Thay in the Great Meditation Hall of Lower Hamlet. As Thay and all the monastics were sitting down and arranging their robes in preparation for formal lunch, I found myself stranded in the center aisle.

Searching for a path to my attendant's seat, I spotted a clearing next to Thay's sitting mat. Relieved, and wholly unaware of my impending faux pas, I approached the opening and took the fateful shortcut - directly over Thay's alms bowl and food tray.

At that time, I was still quite green in my monastic training. I did not know how improper or impolite it was to step over your teacher's belongings, let alone his alms bowl and food.

As I began to step over the tray, Thay's quick, sharp upward glance caught me mid-step, and I froze. I saw Thay's stern gaze quickly widen as he recognized who the errant disciple was: me in all my ignorance. Instantly his eyes softened, and with a kind, upward nod of affirmation, he said softly, "Ah, go ahead, my child."

Once again, like so many other times, Thay met my gauche ignorance with understanding, and responded with kindness. That day, I certainly learned a lesson in Fine Manners. But the greater lesson by far was Thay's graciousness, and the example of magnanimity born from understanding. This magnanimity of spirit is something that has always touched me about Thay, and is something I continue to aspire to develop in my own practice.

Guidance

Skillfulness

As a novice, making the transition from a small nuclear family to a large community like Lower Hamlet was quite challenging. So many questions and doubts arose about "taking refuge in Sangha," especially because Thay emphasized this practice so much. I could not understand what it meant to take refuge in something so amorphous and so seemingly imperfect.

Thay's skillful guidance at this time allayed my confusion and helped me find firmer footing.

One day at Lower Hamlet, my culminating angst bubbled up in the form of a question, almost bordering on a plea: "Dear Thay," I asked with furrowed brow, "Thay teaches us about the importance of Sangha, but I really don't understand what Sangha is. *What is Sangha?*"

Thay looked at me quietly for a moment, and then without fanfare, replied directly, "It's as expressed in the song, my child: *Sangha is my five skandhas... working in harmony*." Oh! I had heard and even sung these lines many times before. But this time was different: Thay's words cut through my confusion like a shaft of light. I suddenly saw myself and the ground beneath my feet.



Reflecting on our exchange, I realize there could have been so many other ways for Thay to respond. Instead, he chose a way that would bypass my intellect and subdue my agitated mind. His response resonated with my past life's experience, and it met me at my capacity to receive at the time.

Thus, Thay cleared the obstacle and opened up the door for me to mature through direct experience. In fact, Thay's teaching has continued to be a precious koan for me over the years. From various vantage points of time and experience, I have often returned to this teaching to reflect on my understanding and practice.

Nurturance

Thay has often been likened to a master gardener. He skillfully cultivated the vast and varied nursery of our sangha with the nurturing and affirmative qualities of a loving teacher. Thay steadfastly tended to the shoots and leaves of our practice. Even more fundamentally, however, he gave careful attention to the sometimes dormant seed of faith in us, helping us awaken confidence in our own Buddha nature. Through his understanding and trust, Thay watered this seed of faith in me. Because of this, I was able to awaken to the goodness within and around me.

Once, at the Hermitage, in a space of quiet, Thay brought me to a flowering plant whose blossom had not yet open. Teacher and disciple observed the plant quietly. Then Thay said, "Everyone is like that flower, my child. It unfurls its petals in its own time, when it is ready." In that moment, I felt Thay's understanding and acceptance of my reserve and diffidence to him as his disciple. At the same time, I felt his skillful encouragement: *allow yourself to bloom*.

Thay's nurturing and affirmative ways are such a breath of fresh air in our world. The public discourse and social climate of today are often filled with skepticism, cynicism, and hurtful speech. In this toxic milieu, the self-confidence of our youth, and their faith in others, can easily be wounded. Our young ones especially need heartfelt affirmation of their goodness, and a vision of a wholesome path. How else will their inner and outer faith take root? Early and steadfast nurturance like Thay's can lead them away from despair, and even save their lives. It can give them the self-confidence to face and overcome their suffering, to transform hurt into understanding and compassion. This kind of nurturance was the gift that Thay gave us.

Open the Path Wider

True to the Bodhisattva Vow, Thay has always encouraged us to open the path wider. Sometimes, this calls for us to stretch beyond our present comforts, challenges, and concerns in order that our sangha may grow, our embrace widen. Many times, Thay has challenged our hearts to expand in order to merge with his larger vision.

In May 2007, our small sangha at Green Mountain Dharma Center and Maple Forest Monastery finally closed its doors in Vermont. That summer, after many months of preparation and packing, we made the decisive move to our new home in upstate New York: Blue Cliff Monastery. A group of ants re-coalescing after a disturbance to its nest, we began the slow, somewhat disorganized work of converting the former summer hotel-and-resort into a year-round monastery.

By the beginning of autumn, we had made some progress, but it didn't seem like much. Our small sangha felt like a little choo-choo train chugging uphill. Trying to be realistic, we petitioned Thay to hold off on hosting our first big retreat in the coming season. Our reasons were many: it was too soon, we had not yet transformed into a monastery, we were not yet prepared to receive retreatants... Thay's reply: "The sangha can do it." We had more reasons: the main buildings were still in need of renovation. We hadn't even built a meditation hall yet... Thay's response, "Not an obstacle." Thay called upon our sangha spirit, and told us to rent a huge tent in place of our non-existent hall.

We worried that the prospect of a semi-outdoor retreat in frigid New England weather would deter retreatants from coming. But despite this, registration quickly filled beyond capacity. Come mid-October, we were indeed able to open our doors to host our first retreat, to the great joy of many. Yes, it was memorably cold, and yes, the retreat turned out to be a timely and deeply rewarding experience for everyone, just as Thay had envisioned.

Over the years, Thay has steadfastly conveyed to us in equal measure the assurance, *You are more than enough*, and the admonishment, *Open the path wider*. These dual reminders stand as supportive bookends for our sangha. They are invaluable reminders to have faith in ourselves, and to remember to always grow our hearts and widen our embrace.

Continuation

Watching Over Us

A number of years ago, during our biennial US Tour, the sangha was traveling by bus on our way to the next retreat. It was late at night, and most of the sangha was sleeping. I happened to be sitting in the front near Thay and the bus driver. Thay turned, smiled to me, and said in Vietnamese, "We need to help the bus driver stay awake." Hearing this, I endeavored to keep my eyes on the bus driver. Eventually, though, my eyelids drooped, and soon I dozed off. When I awoke from my nap, I sheepishly looked over and was met with a familiar and

comforting sight: Thay sitting upright, alert, with his eyes on the road before us. A feeling of gratitude arose, along with the thought, *Thay is watching over us...*

Assurance

Under the watchful eye of our teacher, we've been given the conditions to blossom on this path. Thay has patiently guided us to awaken the teacher within. He has steadfastly admonished us to take responsibility for our practice and our happiness. How remarkable that throughout his life, Thay so carefully and lovingly laid the groundwork for us to continue on with assurance.

In fact, our sangha has grown into a bountiful forest of sustenance and support, of self-discovery and transformation. Today, our sangha is a vibrant and nurturing font of creativity and outreach. May



we continue to lay down rich layers of sediment to nurture the awakening and well-being of many, many generations after us. So that countless generations from now, this greeting from the heart will continue to emanate: *Hello, my teacher. Hello, Plum Village.* ☙

The Leaf

JOHN P. HUSSMAN

John Hussman (Genuine Friend of the Heart) is the Director of the Hussman Foundation, which is engaged in projects to improve lives and reduce suffering among vulnerable populations, including the areas of education, human rights, global health, homelessness, hospice, and neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism and Alzheimer's disease. Since 2002, John has helped to establish and support numerous projects for the Plum Village monastic sangha. John and his wife Terri live in Maryland, and have four children – Julianne, J.P., Michael, and Christina.

"If someday, someone tells you that I have died," Thay paused, smiled, and continued, "don't believe them."

We have the tendency to honor the life of someone we love with an inscription of its boundaries – "Thich Nhat Hanh: 1926-2022."

Thay would undoubtedly whisper, "That is not very accurate."

I first met Thay 20 years ago, after years of reading about his teachings and eventually attending a retreat. Our charitable foundation was working to support vulnerable children in numerous schools along the Thailand-Burma border and in Vietnam. Thay, already contemplating his continuation, wished to protect and continue the training and support of his monastic sangha. In our conversations, the clarity of his intention and the resolve of his decisions gave the impression that he saw ahead a hundred possible futures extending from each moment, choosing one deliberate step along a mindful path.

Even ordinary actions with Thay were grounded in mindfulness and appreciation. I remember walking with Thay and Sister Chan Khong along a grove of trees, each of us finding an apple, and the world becoming suspended in the simple experience of enjoying them, without words, in each other's presence. Present moment, only moment.

Each time we met again, Thay took my hands in his, and we faced each other for a moment, breathing, smiling. He would often begin those visits by offering a short teaching. Though we only saw each other face-to-face perhaps once a year, Thay's voice gradually became part of my own inner voice, and over time, the inner voice of my children, wife, family and friends. His teaching has done the same for a multitude of others – calling us to our better selves; gently bringing us back to the present moment; inspiring us to treat others, and ourselves, with compassion and understanding; encouraging the next deliberate step along a mindful path.

The name "Thay" – teacher – was something he embraced with a combination of joy, seriousness, study, and deep meditation. He drew examples from the Buddhist sutras one day, and from great philosophers, novelists, and theologians the next. Anyone who has taught a classroom full of students could sense his delight as he stood at a chalkboard, teaching about bija (seeds) in the basement of our mind (our store consciousness), understanding as the foundation of love, and the importance of being truly present for others – "I am here for you, and I know you are there."

Thay's examples were full of nature – trees, leaves, seeds, sunshine, waves, rivers, clouds, rain, sky, and moon. In each of them, he saw a lesson. Yet no less important was that in every aspect of nature, and in every person, Thay always saw the best in them. The qualities that he found in the world mirrored the goodness of his heart, and bent toward what he called their "true nature." Listening to Thay's words, one came to understand that ideas like non-self, impermanence, continuation, compassion, non-violence, reconciliation, non-discrimination, and love are not separate concepts or ideals, but only conclusions that naturally follow from mindfulness of our true nature – that we are of the same substance; that we "inter-are."

"All of us are empty – but empty of what? Empty of a separate self, and full of the whole universe." Waves of the same water. Thay's commitment to peace, compassion, and non-discrimination – even toward those that others might call the "enemy" – came at the personal cost of decades of exile from his home country of Vietnam. Yet there is no doubt that amidst all its conflict, the world is more beautiful and compassionate because of Thay.

Because he was a true teacher, Thay was not inclined to make concepts impenetrable, or to hold enlightenment at a distance from his students. One mindful step was enough to say "I have arrived. I am home." It was enough to live in mindfulness one percent of the time, then two. Instead of treating imperfection as failure, Thay pointed them toward the north star, and offered practices filled with compassion, healing, forgiveness, grace, acceptance, and growth. No mud, no lotus.

Listening to Thay, one did not need to contemplate the sound of one hand clapping to see that life is found in the present moment and to see the reality of interbeing, not the notion of a separate self. The closest thing to a koan that I remember Thay posing was at a retreat, when he visited the kitchen as his students were making dinner. Thay invited them to the present moment, asking, "What are you doing?"

"Cutting carrots."

"Thay has good eyes," he smiled, "he can see that you are cutting carrots. What are you doing?"

Like the master asking a student to contemplate the cypress tree in the courtyard, Thay led his students to moments of enlightenment by encouraging mindfulness, insight, and appreciation of interbeing. One could imagine Thay looking for someone to hold up a piece of carrot, smiling like Mahakashyapa.

His students came from every background and religion, and Thay taught in a way that embraced all of them. Instead of being caught in dogma, or pitting one set of beliefs against another, Thay guided his students to the well of interbeing. He didn't hesitate to talk about the universe, God, Nirvana, and the Pure Land of the Buddha in the same breath. Thay did not discriminate. If all of us emanate from one source, its greatest wish would be for us to be enlightened enough to recognize our common humanity.

Even when Thay spoke about a notion like "death," his teaching was beautiful and light. He once shared a story of a little girl who asked him, "Thay, have you decided what to be in your next life?" After some reflection, Thay answered her, "I see that I will be many things. I will be a butterfly. I will be a cloud. I will be that yellow flower." Then he playfully added, "and if you are not mindful, you may step on me."



The Leaf

Some of the moments that I remember most are the simplest. When Terri and I were married in Plum Village, Thay held up a lotus leaf and showed how two parts of the stem remained connected by strong fibers, even when they were separated.

As we sat for lunch one time, Thay momentarily broke the silence, and spun his chopsticks backward, as he picked up a little fried object and laid it on my plate.

"It's a leaf," said Thay, smiling with an enthusiastic light in his eyes.

Sharing happiness in something as simple as a leaf reminded me of something Thay wrote in the foreword to Sister Chan Khong's book, *Learning True Love*:

> *It was in 1966, when the war in Vietnam had become unbearable, and I was so absorbed in working to end the war it was hard for me to swallow my food. One day, Sister Chan Khong was preparing a basket of fresh, fragrant herbs. She asked me, "Thay, can you identify these fine herbs?" Looking at her displaying the herbs with care and beauty on a large plate, I became enlightened. We spent ten minutes discussing the herbs, and that encounter took my mind off the war, allowing me to recover the balance I needed so badly. Years later, a friend from America asked me, "Thay, why do you waste your time planting lettuce? Wouldn't it be better to use the time to write poems?" I smiled and said, "My dear friend, if I do not plant this lettuce, I will not be able to write poetry."*

Thay sometimes talked of the moment he stopped to contemplate a leaf.

> *I asked the leaf whether it was frightened because it was autumn and the other leaves were falling. The leaf told me, "No. During the whole spring and summer I was completely alive. I worked hard to help nourish the tree, and now much of me is in the tree. I am not limited by this form. I am also the whole tree, and when I go back to the soil, I will continue to nourish the tree. So I don't worry at all. As I leave this branch and float to the ground, I will wave to the tree and tell her, 'I will see you again very soon.' "*
> *That day there was a wind blowing and, after a while, I saw the leaf leave the branch and float down to the soil, dancing joyfully, because as it floated it saw itself already there in the tree. It was so happy. I bowed my head, knowing that I have a lot to learn from the leaf.*

Like the leaf, Thay was not worried about his continuation. "We are all of the nature to grow old. We are all of the nature to have ill health." Instead of avoiding such statements, Thay used them to teach us how to live deeply and with gratitude. When he was unable to walk, he was supported by his sangha, surrounding him, in Sr. Chan Khong's words, "like joyful bees." I was reminded of a little sign in Thay's hut, "When you walk, you walk for Thay."

In one of our later visits, it was difficult for Thay to speak. We stood face to face, breathing, smiling, but this time, no words of Dharma. I said "I am here for you, and I know you are there." His eyes brightened, and he laughed.

We have the tendency to imagine that we have "lost" Thay. He would undoubtedly whisper, "That is not very accurate." He is there, in the butterfly, in the cloud, in the little yellow flower, in the leaf, in countless manifestations of the Pure land; the ultimate reality. All of them hold Thay for us.

"This body is not me. I am not caught in this body. I am life without boundaries. No birth, no death." Thay had no fear, because he saw his own endless and beautiful continuation clearly – in his beloved monastics, in his students, and in the countless actions he inspired; every smile, mindful breath, act of compassion, and word of peace, rippling like waves from his teaching, his life, and the lives he touched.

Thầy in my heart

Brother Chân Pháp Lưu

Like all of us writing here, thinking of Thay fills my heart with joy and peace. I remember the first talk I listened to at Maple Forest Monastery in 2001, with Sister Chan Duc translating. Thay taught about the role of the Care-Taking Council in Sangha life; here is a teacher thinking deeply about community, I thought! Sister Susan let me know that the next year, Thay was coming to Providence, Rhode Island. There, by the canal downtown, Thay seemed to burst out of a sea of brown monastics like a magician at the beginning of the walking meditation. Later that night, in the public talk, I remember listening to Thay while down on my knees in gratitude for his life and his capacity to teach the Dharma. I was blown away.

The following year, 2003, I sneaked out of the Stonehill Retreat to listen to Thay speak at the Boston Public Library. At the Q&A that followed the launch of *Creating True Peace*, Thay left time for questions. I walked up to the podium, and in front of hundreds of people - including my sister - asked Thay if I could become a novice. The audience burst out in laughter from the unexpectedness of the question, but Thay looked at me with solemnity. Thay said, "Thay only plays a ceremonial role in the novice ordination. The Sangha decides who ordains. To become a monk you should come to Plum Village, and live and practice in harmony with the community, and if the aspiration is correct..." At those words, Thay looked at me, and it felt as if my face were pressed into the torrential flow of a mountain waterfall, eroding away all my worries, anxiety and fear. Thay's look penetrated to my bones. "...and if the aspiration is correct, you can ordain as a novice." In the next month, I sent in my last paycheck to pay off the remainder of my debt from student loans, and boarded a plane to Paris.



A Group of Nuns in the Bookstore!

Thay loved telling the story of how I met the community, and told it many times while I was an aspirant: I was working in a bookshop in my college town when four of the monks came in, including Thay Phap Lac. It was as if the monks in the sutras I had been reading suddenly leapt off the pages to manifest in front of me. The following day, Sr. Huong Nghiem and other nuns visited the bookstore as well. I had forgotten to run an errand at the bank before opening the store, and I was a bit stuck about what to do. But I then realized - I have nothing to worry about! There's a group of nuns in the bookstore! "I'll be back in ten minutes," I announced, as I headed out the door. They smiled and were content to watch over things until I returned.

"Just Look at Thay"

I felt so nervous the first time I attended Thay, following Thay back to Sitting Still Hut after the Dharma talk, and I tried to make myself - a tall Westerner - as small as possible in the corner between the kitchen and main room. Thay must have sensed my anxiety; when he came out from the kitchen, he laid the palm of his hand on the middle of my back. My whole body relaxed and felt at ease. Many times since then, when I have felt overwhelmed by an emotion, I just remembered Thay's hand on my back and, I relax right away.

Once, when I accompanied an elder brother to massage Thay at the Hermitage, Thay pulled a Sanskrit copy of the Buddhacarita by Asvagosha off the shelf for me to read while the massage was going on. It is a complex poem, even for those who know a bit of Sanskrit, but thanks to Thay's gesture I have come back to it numerous times through the years, learning from the passages on Siddhartha Gautama's renunciation of sense pleasures.

I was the youngest monk to follow Thay to Vietnam in 2005. In Hanoi, one of the elder brothers told me to "just look at Thay" whenever I didn't know what to do. This worked wonders to a young novice who had never been in Asia before.

One night, in the first week, we got off the bus in a town near the outskirts of Hanoi to visit a temple of a nun - a student of Thay who had been to Plum Village. The road was narrow leading to her temple, and the sun was setting; we would have to walk about one kilometer to arrive there. I felt anxious for Thay; everything was so new and unusual for me in Vietnam, and I feared that someone might hurt Thay. Walking close to Thay, though, I felt no fear. Thay had been through so much, and practiced so deeply, that he was not afraid of being hurt or dying. Whenever fear or anxiety comes up in me, I remember Thay's fearlessness in that moment, as Thay led the delegation through the winding dark roads, and my fear dissolves.

Human Beings Who Need the Practice

In the fall of 2006, as I worked with Brother Phap Thanh from Germany to organize the first Neuroscience Retreat in Plum Village, we stopped at the Hermitage after arranging for the retreat flyer to be printed. Thay was in his short robe outside, walking in meditation amidst the fruit trees. When Thay looked at us - two tall Western monks - I saw him austere as the general of great armies. I had the perception that Thay was in deep contemplation on how to transform the suffering of the world - and here we were suddenly disturbing Thay's contemplation! But Thay was so compassionate. We wanted to ask Thay if it was all right to invite scientists to come and present in the retreat. Thay said, "The scientists can come and practice with us, but they should not expect to present the papers they have already written. After a few days of practice, they can speak to us about the insight they have received during the retreat." It was an important teaching for me: not to get caught up in someone's renown as an important scientist or knowledge, but rather to see them as human beings who also need the practice.

Engaged Practice and Contemplative Life Are Not Two

The Dharma teachers of Upper Hamlet decided to send Br. Phap Ho and I to Deer Park Monastery that spring, and we said goodbye to Thay before leaving. Thay told us, "Do not try to find the balance between engaged practice and contemplative life. They are one." In that moment, an obstruction in my thinking broke open, like a dam bursting. Since then I haven't once fallen into the trap of thinking that my practice needs to be more engaged, or more contemplative. Thay revealed it for me as the dualistic thinking it is.

Proof of this came in the US Tour the following year - 2007 - when Br. Phap Dung and I presented the text of an Ecological Initiative that we had written for all of our centers. Deer Park was preparing to get solar panels, starting to drive cars that run off used vegetable oil, and had made the commitment to have a Car-Free Day once a week.

When we read the text to Thay, Thay announced the *Earth Peace Treaty* - a commitment that people could make to themselves to reduce their impact on the environment. That night I drafted the first version of the *Earth Peace Treaty* Commitment Sheet, and Thay called me up after just about every talk and retreat in that tour to present it to the attendees and practitioners. Hundreds of people made commitments. I felt nervous to be getting so much attention from Thay on that tour, but I soon realized that, more and more, I was just an extension of the Sangha body. Thay was training me to see myself like that. Even now, when I give a talk and am up in front of people, I don't feel nervous because I see that I am not separate from the Sangha body. I trust in Thay's teachings, and let the ancestors do their work.

In 2008, on Thay's last trip to India, one day Thay asked me to come with him to Motilal Banarsidass—a renowned Sanskrit bookstore in Delhi. I was touched by how joyful Thay was to walk with us amidst the ancient Buddhist texts in their original language. We made quite a pile of books for Dharmacarya Shantum Seth to help us buy at the register! Later on that trip, Thay was invited to be the guest editor of one day's edition of the *Times of India*. Sister Pine, myself and others set up an impromptu editorial office in the business lounge of a Delhi hotel - one we had an event in but were not staying in - and worked all day to edit articles from lay friends on how to write a love letter to a terrorist. At that time there was growing violence between Muslims and Hindus, and a temple had been attacked. We went with Thay to the offices of the main editors of the *Times*, and they listened attentively to Thay as he taught them how journalists can bring peace to the world through their practice and writing.

When I returned to Plum Village in 2009, our young brothers and sisters had been expulsed from our Prajna Monastery in Vietnam, and I found myself thrust into the team working to get the word out about the situation. One day we were working in the Hermitage and Thay, with compassion for all of us, ordered us to sit at the kitchen table while he prepared scrambled tofu for us. Thay would not let us help him, and served us each individually. We were so moved at Thay's humility. I realize now that Thay knew that we were doing things Thay could not do - and what he could do was offer us his love in a concrete way.

In a one-on-one meeting with Thay, Thay asked me to help him to write an opinion letter - on how to write a love letter to a terrorist - for the *New York Times*, by translating part of his talk on the *Sutra on Fear and Terror*. I felt so intimidated and reluctant to do it - how would I find a lay friend to help me translate? How would the New York Times agree to print such a letter? Now I see how my doubts did not give justice to Thay's vision and insight. Although this letter did not happen in 2010, it did manifest in 2012 in a new form, when a young disturbed man in my hometown in the US killed 26 people in an elementary school - the Sandy Hook shootings. I felt that the horror of those shootings - happening in a place so dear to me - brought all of Thay's teachings on non-violence together for me as I wrote the young man a love letter. Thay also asked me to work on the book *Fear*, but I didn't yet feel ready to take on such a responsibility. Now, in 2022, having worked on a number of Thay's books, I feel I am beginning to pay back my debt to Thay.

Guiding With Love and Care

I constantly received so much love and care from Thay, even when Thay corrected me - like the time I guided a meditation through all of the sixteen exercises of mindful breathing in one sitting session (and Thay said it was too much), or when we started streaming Thay's talks and filmed pan shots of the audience (Thay said it was distracting people who wanted to concentrate on the talk). I am still learning how to give guidance to my younger brothers with as much care and love that Thay gave me.

In 2013, when the President of the World Bank Jim Kim invited Thay to speak there, I joined Thay to meet with Jim Kim, and was impressed at how Thay was considered a teacher even by such an important person. Jim Kim asked Thay for one hour of one-on-one teaching before the main events; I realized that it was difficult for a person like the President of the World Bank - in such a high-profile position- to get guidance from someone with wisdom he can totally trust. Afterwards, he put into practice what Thay taught him, and Thay told me to write to him to tell him that he was an excellent student.

One last story: For years the Spanish sangha had wished to invite Thay on a full tour in Spain, and finally, with Sister Thoai Nghiem's help, Thay agreed to come in the spring of 2014. I was the main

monastic organizer, together with Br. Phap Lieu; we did not imagine yet that it would be Thay's last teaching tour.

Before going, I met with Thay to discuss a minor difficulty in organizing one of the public talks, and Thay said that the public talks were not necessary. "Thay only goes there to offer retreats, so that people can practice and get transformation and healing."

Thay gave the first public talk in a theater on Gran Via, one of the main arteries of Madrid. The attendees were deeply moved by the talk, which was followed by Sister Chan Khong's singing and a presentation of Thay's calligraphies and books - some of which had been written in Spanish especially for this tour and were for sale.

A few days later, an article appeared in the largest newspaper, *El Pais*, titled *The Lotus and the Euro*, criticizing the commercial nature of this "spiritual enterprise" around Thay. The sangha in Spain, and I, were hurt by the article, which did not mention at all the charity work Thay and Sister Chan Khong had done throughout their lives. They also did not mention the public walk that Sister Chan Khong led, directly following the talk, from the Royal Palace in Madrid to a nearby park. To respond we organized, along with journalist friends in the sangha, a coordinated response, which included an interview with Thay on the "contra" or back page of the most prominent paper in Barcelona, *La Vanguardia*.

When I came to Thay to discuss the situation, Thay was resting in his hammock in the Catholic nunnery where we stayed in Barcelona. Thay saw my concern about the negative article as I explained to him why we had arranged for an interview. Thay looked at me with compassion from the hammock and said, "Thay doesn't care about these things." Suddenly, I felt a huge weight come off my shoulders. If Thay doesn't care about negative press, why should I care about it?

I have continued to use this teaching and practice to help me take care of my emotions, and not to be too concerned about wrong perceptions others may have. Thay teaches me to come back to myself, and to do my best to practice. That is what I do until today.



Going the Extra Mile

Jack Lawlor

I have many strong memories of Thay, so strong the experiences seem like yesterday. Of course, much of what we learned from Thay was by way of example.

My favorite story about Thay's teaching by example dates back to 1989, when my young family collectively organized a very active week for Thay in Chicago, involving a Dharma talk for over 1,000 people of all ages at a local Thai Buddhist Temple, and a weekend retreat in a Chicago suburb for about 90 people, including many children. As a precaution, we hired a very personable college-age babysitter to help us with the children's program. But as the retreat continued, she became so swept up by Thay's talks that she stopped helping us with the children! So, my wife Laurie missed the retreat's Five Mindfulness Trainings ceremony on the last day of the retreat and played with the children instead.

When Thay learned what had happened, and how Laurie had missed the ceremony, all while we drove back together from the retreat center to our house, Thay had an idea. We would have a Five Mindfulness Trainings ordination for Laurie at our house that evening, followed by an ice-cream party. This after such a busy week for Thay!

Once home from the retreat, after a rest, Sister Chan Kong, our very young children, our Labrador retriever and me assembled in our modest living room. Thay descended from the bedrooms upstairs, not just in his brown robe, but in his full ceremonial robe! I thought he might do an abbreviated version of the Five Mindfulness Trainings, but he did the entire ceremony, which for me seems to resonate in that room in our modest house to this day. Whenever needed, I can evoke a crystal clear memory of his recitation of the incense offering verse based on that evening together.

As you know, Dharma teachers are very frequently asked to listen, to help, often at inconvenient times. Thay's example that day of



"going the extra mile" after offering the Dharma all week in other settings is for me an accessible lesson on the meaning of love and generosity in our role as Dharma teachers. Thay's nourishment continued to resonate in our family: Laurie became a Dharma teacher in 2000, and our son and daughter attended Thay's retreats many times as they grew older and even visited Plum Village. Our local sangha is over 30 years old. One time when we visited our young grandson in California, when he was in first grade, he plopped on the bed, sat upright, and asked, "Can I teach you meditation?" Thay has clearly nourished three generations of our family already, and we and our local sangha very much dwell in an atmosphere of Thay's love and generosity.

There's a Song in My Heart

Sister Chân Từ Nghiêm

Everything is frozen
and the garden is still.
Only dogs bark.

But the sun has risen,
and the curtain
of cold clouds
holds back her light.

Be patient, my friend.
Her warmth will
melt the cold arms of winter.

Everything is frozen
and the garden is still.
There's a song in my heart
For them who will listen

To the stars' lullaby
Streaming down
from the heavens:

The Boat continues
in the waters of life.

People get on and get off,
and the Boat continues
in the waters of life.

Waves crash and slam,
yet the Boat continues
in the waters of life.

Multitudes are smiling as
the Boat continues
in the waters of life.



One morning it was -5 degrees Celsius and I saw that the garden was frozen overnight. Everything was very still in the freezing air. But I know that the sun always rises and warms up the air later on. I was reflecting on the Sangha, and how Thay taught us that the Sangha is our Boat, always carrying us, and supporting us as we are engaged here and in the world with our practice, and with the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings.

The Sangha is the boat always continuing to move forward. Over many centuries people have come and gone, but the practice of the teachings has continued even in world situations of war, hatred and violence. And thousands of people who have received and are practicing Thay's teachings, and are following the Bodhisattva path, are able to smile at life, knowing we will be able to reach the other shore of transforming suffering by living the truth of interbeing with love and understanding in the present moment.

Opening the Door to a Life of Peace and Purpose

Dr. Lilian Cheung

Born into a family practicing Buddhism in Hong Kong, my journey with mindfulness started at an early age. My young self took notice of the premise that our world is full of suffering, and that we needed to be compassionate towards others and help each other. Although this was an important message, at the time, it failed to resonate with me.

I didn't truly grasp the lessons or practices of these teachings until decades later when I was introduced to Thich Nhat Hanh. Once I met Thay and received his teachings, I began to live a life of peace while fulfilling my purpose in public health. For that, I am forever grateful.

Knock, Knock. Are You There?

In August 1993, I received a multi-million dollar grant from The Sam & Helen Walton Family Foundation to conduct a four-year nutrition and physical activity study in 14 Baltimore Public Schools. While this was an incredible opportunity, the project was one of the most challenging periods of my career. My to-do list grew longer by the day - as did my list of worries. In an effort to keep up, I was waking up earlier and earlier despite having difficulties falling asleep. In addition to commuting from Boston to Baltimore once every two weeks, I was juggling care for my three children aged four to fourteen.

I will never forget one evening over dinner when my oldest son was trying to share the challenges he was facing at school. Suddenly, I heard him saying: "Knock, knock, Mommy. Are you there?" The moment pierced my heart as I saw I could not even be fully present for my son. I recognized that change was necessary. As I was suffering from sleep deprivation and mounting worries, I found myself becoming more withdrawn with feelings of emptiness and hopelessness.

I was faced with the need to take one-year of leave as I was not able to function, and at times, I could not even leave my bed. My doctor prescribed anti-depressants, but they did not work well for me. During a dinner party celebrating my middle son's elementary school graduation, a very dear friend



whispered in my ear, "Please come and try meditation with my meditation group." I accepted her offer and meditated for thirty minutes with four other ladies. That night, for the first time in what felt like forever, I slept like a baby.

An Open Door to Transformation

In the fall of 1997, I received a flyer announcing a special seven-day retreat on the teachings of Buddhist psychology, *Opening the Door to Healing & Transformation* by Thich Nhat Hanh. I did not know who Thich Nhat Hanh was, but my mind returned to my son's "knock, knock" plea years earlier. I figured this was definitely a door I should open! The retreat took place under a big tent at a golf course and when the monastics entered the stage, I was astonished that they ranged in ethnicity beyond Asian. I would later come to realize and appreciate the inclusive nature of Thay's teachings, reaching people of all faiths, races, and nationalities from around the world.

Thay appeared on stage walking calmly towards his cushion. Without even hearing him speak and only through his presence, I recall my initial impression of Thay as a divine being. As I listened to his words and lessons, I began to feel a shift within myself. In one Dharma talk, Thay taught us that suffering is always there. "We need to look deeply into ill-being and find a way out. We cannot escape it. Happiness and well-being must be found in the heart of suffering." Having been a worrier my whole life and often finding it difficult to be happy, I was moved by this lesson. The retreat was completely transformative for me, and when Thay bid farewell to us at the end of the Key West retreat, he made a special comment, "Many of you may have touched some peace in this retreat, but if you return home and do not practice, you will lose all your peace." This message became deeply rooted in my brain and I set out to apply his advice in my life at home. I began to practice mindfulness daily - even if I could only manage for three percent of my waking hours to start. However, eventually a habit began to form, and I was increasing my degree of mindfulness practice year after year!

The Genesis of *Savor – Mindful Eating, Mindful Life*

During the week in Key West, Thay taught us about mindful breathing, mindful walking, and mindful eating. *Mindful eating*? Despite studying nutrition throughout my academic training and career, I had never encountered this concept. It was profound for me to learn that we need to eat mindfully, not only for health purposes, but so there will be enough food to feed future generations.

When I returned to Boston, I was interested in exploring whether the concept of mindful eating had been applied in personal health and public health. Searching the scientific literature, I found that mindful eating had been used clinically to help people with eating disorders and binge eating tendencies. However, there were no studies focusing on mindful eating for both personal and planetary health. As I continued to practice mindfulness and reflect on Thay's teachings on mindful eating, in 2008 I decided to write a book integrating both the scientific aspects of mindful eating and Buddhist philosophy.

One afternoon, I was meeting with Thay, Sr. Chan Khong, and Sr. Chan Duc (Annabel) at their Maple Forest Monastery in Vermont to share the outline of *Savor - Mindful Eating, Mindful Life*. In what was truly a spur of the moment question, I suddenly asked Thay, "I'll be citing you every other page... why don't you co-author this book with me?" I saw the surprised looks of Sr. Chan Khong and Sr. Annabel, while my husband, Lee, covertly elbowed me as he considered the question inappropriate. After a long pause, Thay turned to me and said, "Why not?!" I was totally astonished by his reply... and thus the *Savor* journey with Thay began!

Savor – Mindful Eating, Mindful Life was released in 2010, has been translated into seventeen languages, and was even featured in a three-page mindful eating spread in The New York Times food section in 2012.[2] I was so impressed that the article's author, Jeff Gordinier, spent a day at Blue Cliff Monastery so that he could experience the authentic practice of mindful eating and mindfulness.

Encouragingly, the book and Thay's teachings continue to resonate. Mindful eating for our health and the health of our planet was recently featured by *Our Planet Our Future* in their ten-year campaign to reach 1.5 billion people worldwide. The organizers were all inspired by *Savor - Mindful Eating, Mindful Life* and Thay's all-faith approach. They told me that because everyone eats, mindful eating is an ideal pathway to get people around the world to change their behavior for their own health as well as for the health of our planet. Moreover, a mindful eating approach will help ensure that there will be enough food to sustain future generations. This is the Buddha's prescient lesson from his sutra, *Eating the Son's Flesh*.

Teaching Googlers How To Eat Mindfully

One day in 2011, I got a call from Olivia Wu, the Executive Chef at Google headquarters in Mountain View, California, who was eager to get Googlers to eat less desserts. I suggested numerous ways to improve the nutritional quality of the desserts and reduce the portion sizes. However, Olivia noted she had already tried these modifications without much success as all the food offered in Google is free! Then I asked her whether they have been coached on how to eat mindfully as described in *Savor – Mindful Eating, Mindful Life*? She hadn't, and then asked if I could get Thay to speak at Google.

Fortunately, Olivia's request came at a time when Thay was leading a retreat at Blue Cliff Monastery. I had the opportunity to meet with Thay and Sr. Chan Khong and asked him to consider

2. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/08/dining/mindful-eating-as-food-for-thought.html

giving a talk at Google. Thay seemed to be amused by my request. After a long pause, he smiled and nodded and said he would give a talk if Google allowed for a half-day retreat led by him and his monastics. Olivia was elated with Thay's positive response; and Thay also seemed to be delighted about going to Google. The Google retreat was transformational for the campus culture. The Google community meditated, listened to Thay's precious teachings and singing by the monastics, walked mindfully around the Google campus, and ate a dinner mindfully together in silence. The magic of the Google retreat has been captured by a wonderful video recording, *Mindfulness as a Foundation for Health*[3].



Thay and His Monastics Flowing Through Boston

Later that year, in the winter of 2011, I got a call from Dr. Judy Reiner Platt, Director of Continuing Education in Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and Cambridge Health Alliance, asking if Thay could offer some teachings at their upcoming annual Meditation and Psychotherapy Conference. Judy asked me if I could help as they found Thay unreachable as he does not have a public relations office!

Again, when I reached out, Thay said that he would be happy to speak as long as he could bring some monastics to join the conference. He stressed the importance of *flowing as a river*. Held in the ballroom of Boston's Park Plaza Hotel, the event was packed with over 1,000 registrants - all eager to listen to Thay's teachings.

During the Q&A session, myself, along with Jon Kabat Zinn and conference organizers Christopher Germer and Ronald Siegel had the opportunity to ask Thay a question. My question was, "Thay, what is the most challenging and desperate situation that you have faced in your life? And how did you cope with it?" His answer, and the story he shared, resonates with me to this day:

"I think the worst thing that can happen to a person is despair. And in a situation like the war in Vietnam, people can easily become the victim of despair.

"During the war in Vietnam, we tried our best to help people. We trained young monks and nuns and lay practitioners, to help them rebuild regions that had been destroyed by the bombs. We tried to help peasants to heal, and to continue to rebuild. Many of our workers have been killed, because we followed the line of non-alignment. We didn't want to take sides in the war. Our voice was that we do not want war between people living in the same country. We want to stop the war. We want negotiations, we want to reconcile.

"That is why we stood in the middle, and that was a dangerous situation. Because this side thought of us as being with the other side. That is why many of us, monks, nuns, lay social workers, were killed. Just because of misunderstandings, wrong perceptions. And then the war went on and on and on. It didn't seem to stop. Young people came and asked me, 'Dear Thay, do you think the war will end one day soon?' I saw their despair. Despair is the most dangerous thing for a man, for a woman, for a people.

"And that is the most difficult thing in our life-to continue always. That is why I told the young people who came to me and asked that kind of question, 'Dear friends, the Buddha said that everything is impermanent. So, the war should be impermanent also. It will have to end one day.' I tried to prevent despair from overwhelming them. It was very difficult. But we made it."

Coincidentally, my colleague Dr. Walter Willett, who had invited Thay to his medical school at Michigan University in 1968 to speak up to stop the Vietnam War, asked me if he could meet with Thay during his Boston visit. During the conversation, Thay exclaimed, "The Harvard School of Public Health should be a Center for Mindfulness!" Walter and I looked at each other in amazement. I also agreed that our school of public health, full of mission-driven people seeking to improve the health and wellbeing of others, would indeed be an ideal place

3. youtube.com/watch?v=Ijnt-eXukwk

for such a center. Thay brought into focus that everyone in the school should learn mindfulness practices to nurture peace in oneself and peace in the world.

Thay's Continued Presence

I feel so blessed to have been taught by Thay and his monastics. He was a wonderful, effective teacher who modernized the 2,500-year-old Buddhist teachings. Through his lessons, we are able to gain the benefits of mindfulness practice and recognize the importance of interbeing and interconnectedness of all in the 21st Century. Though Thay is physically transformed, he forever lives on! Our world is truly blessed to have been endowed with Thay's teachings and energy.

Today, whenever I hear The Beatles' song *Let It Be*, Thay's presence emerges:

When I find myself in times of trouble,
Thay's teachings come to me,
speaking words of wisdom, let it be
...breathe mindfully, walk mindfully.
And in my hour of darkness,
he is sitting right in front of me,
speaking words of wisdom, let it be
...No mud, no lotus.
Let it be, let it be, whisper words of wisdom
...Inter-be
...A cloud never dies! ☙



We Are With You at the Top of the Hill

Sister Chân Thao Nghiêm

I don't know when we will stop missing Thay. It will probably be a long time, or perhaps never. It's ok to miss Thay, and to cry, because all my brothers and sisters and everyone are like that.

Whenever the brothers and sisters gather, we share many stories about Thay. We always laugh with such joy and our hearts are filled with love and respect towards Thay. Late autumn is the season when Thay would return to Plum Village, after having taught the Dharma abroad. The brothers and sisters at home were often eager to clean up and prepare to welcome Thay back, in order for the sangha to enjoy a warm Rains Retreat together. We did not forget to buy a few pots of chrysanthemums, Thay's favorite flowers, and placed them in the greenhouse for Thay to enjoy on his return. Thay often made surprise visits to each hamlet to catch a glimpse of the ordinary and natural life of his monastic children.

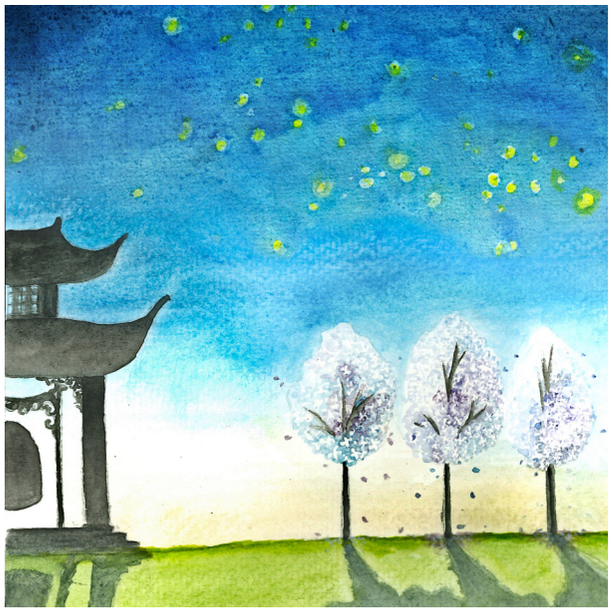
In the autumn of 2014, Thay was recuperating in Upper Hamlet and the attending brothers and sisters stayed there with him. One morning at four o'clock, Thay rang a small bell to call us. Myself and another sister went over to Thay's hut to see if he needed any help. Brother Phap Ao—who slept in the same room with Thay—let us know that Thay wanted to go and visit the monks' residence. I was a bit surprised, and asked again:

"Now, dear Thay? But the wake-up bell hasn't been invited yet. The sangha is surely still sleeping."

Thay said:

"Just get ready, my child. We are going to surprise the brothers. Call the other (attending) brothers and sisters to come also. We have to be quick to be on time. It's only fun if we arrive before the brothers have risen."

Promptly, our group of brothers and sisters followed Thay into the monks' residence before everyone had time to wake up. Thay told the sisters to bring two pots of chrysanthemums as gifts for the brothers. The attending brothers pushed Thay's



wheelchair, while the sisters carried the flowers behind, up all the steps of the Sitting Still Hut, out of the woods. The path from the bell tower to the monks' residence was still pitch-dark before five in the morning. Above us was the vast starlit sky. Thay cried out in amazement, "Oh my, so beautiful, so wonderful! Thank you Buddha and ancestral teachers for giving me this opportunity. It has been a long time since I've had the chance to see this again." All of us were touched and cherished this chance to enjoy the mystery of the early morning earth and sky.

When we arrived at the monks' residence, indeed the brothers were not awake yet. Thay enjoyed entering a few rooms to wake up the brothers and give them a surprise. Then we went to the library to drink tea and spend time with the brothers. Thay asked after them, told stories and even sang a song. He also did not forget to offer the two pots of chrysanthemums to the monks' residence. It was truly a happy and cozy moment. All those close to Thay knew that this required more energy than Thay's health allowed, but nevertheless he was happy. Thay is very much nourished by the love between teacher and disciples, and always wanted to bring peace of mind to his monastic children.

I remember the feeling of having Thay in the sangha. Thay was someone who was always proactive, a master of any situation, one who created an open atmosphere that made everyone feel at ease. I remember the times when Thay attended the activities of the monastic sangha and joined Dharma sharing with all of us. With love and lightness, Thay always guided the sangha to share and created a joyful and warm atmosphere. Thay also clearly showed his whole-hearted presence.

Thay was a very humorous and lively storyteller. He remembered all the essential details and recounted them in a complete, memorable and mild-mannered way, without any need for flattery.

In Thay's hermitage there is a flight of stairs that leads to Thay's room. It is old, narrow, and dark. Thay often told us that there are 18 steps and whenever Thay walked on them, he always walked in mindfulness and happiness. Every time I was about to walk up those stairs with Thay, I rushed because I was behind him and had to gently close the corridor door, turn on the light, straighten the slippers ... so I always made Thay wait. Thay always stood there to wait and I hurried to keep up so he didn't have to wait long.

Thay was always like that–he waited for me to come before starting to walk, and we both walked up the stairs one step at a time in mindfulness and happiness. It took a few steps for me to calm down again and be happy, because Thay had guided and reminded me to walk in mindfulness. I didn't have to do anything, only to walk in Thay's footsteps. Thay often smiled and said, "The teacher and student are climbing the hill of the century!" Thay had trained me to walk mindfully and today I always remember to do as Thay.

Back then Thay kept saying: "We have already climbed the hill of the century for many years. When we reach the top, how old will I be?" and laughed. I imagined that when I reach the top of the hill, Thay would be sitting there, in flesh and blood. By then I will be an old nun whose heart is filled with happiness, knowing that Thay is still sitting with us, surrounded by a beloved sangha. I will be wise enough and grown up enough after having leaned on Thay for so long.

Dear respected Thay, we are with you at the top of the hill, sitting peacefully together, breathing with the same rhythm, smiling and looking at the wonder of earth and sky. With Thay in my heart, I see that I have enough, I am strong, rich, and warm.

Whenever I am immersed in the heart of the sangha, I remember Thay's old dream–to build a kind sangha that has brotherhood and sisterhood, and the substance of the practice. Dearest Thay, perhaps your dream from long ago has been realized? That dream has become our present and will be so for our younger siblings and for everyone in the future. ☙



Reflections on Engaged and Applied Buddhism

An Interview with Sister Chân Đức

PV Newsletter: What do Engaged Buddhism and Applied Buddhism mean to you?

Sr. Chan Duc: Until the early years of this millennium, Thay used the words "Engaged Buddhism." When we thought about Plum Village, we thought about Engaged Buddhism. Thay became famous in the West because of Engaged Buddhism.

In the West, Japanese Buddhism was the first kind of Buddhism that came to the United States and it concentrated on sitting meditation. In the 1960s, Thay came to the West to call called for peace in Vietnam. The idea that we needed to bring the practice of Buddhism into the world of peace activism was new. Many peace activists were very angry.

In 2008, at the European Institute of Applied Buddhism (EIAB) Thay first started talking about "Applied Buddhism", more than Engaged Buddhism. There may have been a slight dualism in people's minds, thinking that you are either engaged or not, and while you are engaged, you may not be applying Buddhism. That is, you go out for social or peace work, and you come back later to do sitting meditation. This is not what Thay meant by "Engaged Buddhism" though. Thay's experience from leading retreats in many parts of the world was that we need to apply Buddhism in all fields of life, not just in the field of activism or in times of war, but in businesses, politics, the police force, and particularly in education. Thay also used the words "Applied Ethics." One French president wanted to reintroduce civics classes, where students learnt how to be good citizens. Some politicians were asking, "What will be taught in those classes?" and thought of taking excerpts from philosophers.

Thay responded that Applied Ethics should contain four elements: the first element was relaxation. You would not think relaxation was ethics, but Thay considered knowing how to relax very important, both for the individual and for any organization. The second element was taking care of feelings and strong emotions, in order to handle suffering and to nourish happiness and joy. The



third element was communication, that is to learn to resolve conflicts, begin anew in the family and so on. And the last element was non-fear. At the end of all retreats Thay would give a talk about no-birth and no-death to help people lessen their fear, even if they were just beginners. Applied Buddhism means applying Buddhism in all walks of life. In all our teaching and retreats we make sure these four elements are present and we help people to apply them. We do not expect people to be socially engaged or do relief work.

PV Newsletter: Some people ask if Plum Village is engaged enough or not. How would you respond to these questions?

Sr. Chan Duc: I feel very grateful that Thay introduced Applied Buddhism, because when we say Engaged Buddhism instead, you may think you are expected to be doing something in a certain area or direction. Whereas in fact, we are already applying Buddhism when we can walk peacefully on the earth and when we can have a place like Plum Village where people can come and learn how to put down their suffering. Yesterday a retreatant who works in conflict resolution came to me and said she is completely depleted. Since the mediators do not take sides in a conflict situation, they get a great deal of hatred coming toward them. I told her to stay in Plum Village until her batteries were recharged again. That is very important. Sister Chan Khong and other members of the School of Youth for Social Service had to have a place to come to every week in order to recharge themselves. To me, it is enough to offer this place. I am not aware of any pressure to be doing more than taking care of Plum Village such that it can be a refuge. I do think it is necessary to look at ourselves and ask, "Am I doing all I can?" And if somebody says you are not, listen to them and then ask yourself, "Is there something I can be doing more?" Please be honest. What we can offer also depends on our health. Many people say that they are very grateful to us. Please remind yourself of that gratitude.

PV Newsletter: What impact have you seen the practice has had on the climate crisis or situations of war?

Sr. Chan Duc: There cannot be an immediate impact. Wars and climate change have causes and conditions that have been laid down for many years. Now we have to make sure not to do things that lead to more wars in the future. When we were protesting in Greenham Common (in the early 1980s) by surrounding the nuclear weapon base, I do not know if it had any impact, but in the end the Americans left. I do not know if it had anything to do with us or not. You cannot really know. As far as reducing our carbon footprint - there is of course more that we can do. We need to share our ideas and make positive steps in this direction.

PV Newsletter: When we are designing our retreats and what practices we offer, we try to respond to the needs of the people who come to us. Sometimes it is not simple for young monastics to choose where to focus our energy. How do you choose?

Sr. Chan Duc: First of all, we all have different talents and capacities. We really have to make the most of our capacity. When I was in the EIAB, I used to concentrate more on retreats for teachers because I myself had been a teacher and sympathized with them. We do what we can based on our own experience and capacity. Everyone has something to offer. It is not only leading retreats that is important. We also need people to take care of Plum Village, or look after the younger brothers or sisters. If everyone was going out to lead retreats and no one took care of the young buffaloes, then they might fall into the river, rather than cross safely over. Therefore we have to find a balance when we reflect on what to offer.

Still, I think education is very important to prepare the younger generation for what they will have to face. Thay always used to say, "Happy teachers will change the world." Young people need to be informed about applied ethics, especially relaxation, taking care of emotions and communication.

PV Newsletter: Thay taught us about bodhicitta - the great aspiration, but at the same time also taught us about aimlessness, no expectation, letting go, nothing to do, nowhere to go. How do these fit together?

Sr. Chan Duc: It is quite right not to have expectations. We do our best. We cannot know the future. To have an aim that we project onto the future is an idea in the intellect rather than the reality. To have a deep aspiration - bodhichitta - is very important, but it does not have anything to do with an aim, with attainment. The aspiration is there in the present moment. When we kneel down and vow, "I will do everything that I can," we are cultivating that deep aspiration. Aspiration is a seed in store consciousness which sustains us in doing

what we can in our daily life. But it is not an aim. Everyone has the seed of bodhichitta, but it may not have the right causes and conditions to manifest. However, in the monastery we have many favorable causes and conditions. Every day we can strengthen our vow. For instance, you may make a vow for all beings to come in and go out in freedom. This is not exactly an aim, but a deep aspiration in the present moment. When you wash your hands and see Mother Earth's suffering, you want to have hands that will help Mother Earth and wish for others to have helping hands as well.

PV Newsletter: Is there a contradiction between a peaceful, secluded life and an engaged life?

Sr. Chan Duc: It is true that you have to be at peace, as is described in the *Discourse on Knowing The Better Way To Live Alone*. You may like to be by yourself alone because you feel at peace, but we also need peace in meetings and when we are trying to resolve difficult matters in the sangha. It is true that we do need to develop our peace in our sitting meditation. But we sit with the sangha not just to nourish ourselves, but to nourish the whole sangha. My peace and your peace are not separate. Some say they need more silence, but do they have inner silence? If the chatter goes on in our mind then it is not really silent. I did not become a nun to be able to practice sitting meditation and retire from the world. My contact was with Thay and Sister Chan Khong who were two big Bodhisattvas engaged in the world, and I aspired to follow in their footsteps.

PV Newsletter: In the sangha in the early days, how have you practiced in physically and mentally demanding situations?

Sr. Chan Duc: In the early times, when it was only the four of us, Sr. Chan Khong, Sr. Chan Vi, Thay and myself, it was not easy to lead retreats because the retreatants were all very new. For instance, some retreatants would say, "Why should I stop when I hear the bell? It takes away my freedom!" But as their experience grew over the years, we noticed the practice energy becoming much stronger. Returning long term practitioners gave us faith in the practice. Now there is a huge monastic and lay sangha and retreats flow easily. In the early years we were quite disorganized. Communication between the hamlets was not always good. Lower Hamlet did not know the schedule of Upper Hamlet and Upper Hamlet came down expecting a Dharma Talk and Lower Hamlet was doing something else. Thay used to say, organization is not our talent in Plum Village. There are lay people who do it much better than us.



PV Newsletter: When you felt very tired and needed a spiritual boost, what are the practices that have been very supportive through the years?

Sr. Chan Duc: Walking was very important. When I am not able to go outside, I just walk up and down in my room. I walk very slowly. I can take one step for every two breaths. To be able to sit in a good position is also very helpful. I try not to do anything but just to breathe, keeping my eyes open. I may look out of the window. At that moment if I make myself meditate on something I may become too tired. Then I just sit and breathe, and whatever happens is okay.

The times when I have real insight is when I cannot sleep at night. It is completely dark and I lie there, following my breathing, taking care of some physical pain. I suddenly see that this body is not me. I am simply lying there and not really trying to have any insight.

PV Newsletter: When you witness a very difficult situation like deforestation, wars or pollution that is ongoing, how do you maintain a heart that is able to act from a place of compassion?

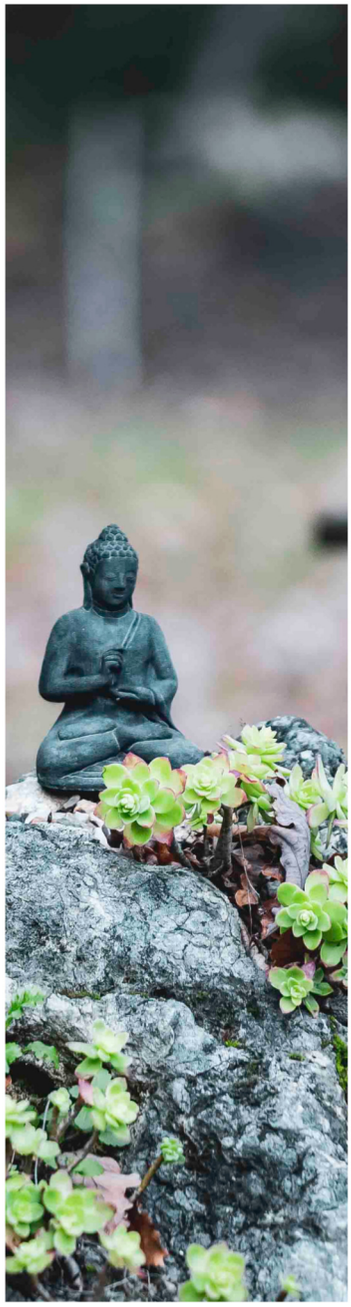
Sr. Chan Duc: If I need to cry, I have to cry. That is the first thing. I am very much aware of the destructive effects of modern agriculture. Sometimes I do not feel very happy with farmers. Recently when I see them driving with big tanks of pesticides, I think they are the first people who will suffer from the poison because they are sitting right next to it. I recognize that they are forced into this position. The farmers are only responsible to a certain extent. Those of us who have looked deeply and seen the effects have to help the farmers. The government has to help the farmers be able to make a livelihood without having to destroy the planet.

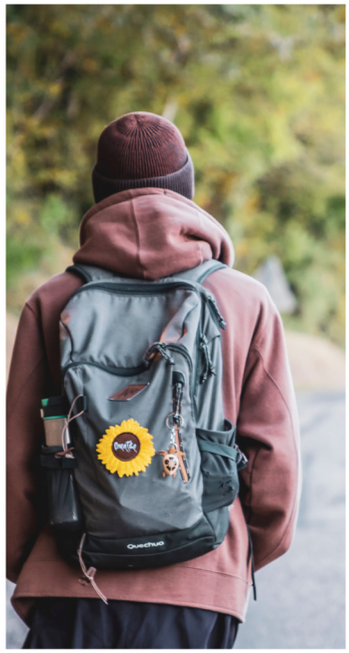
The worst thing I saw was when we were on a journey south of San Francisco. We passed farms that had thousands of beef cattle all squished together, without any grass, only fed by soybeans. There was a terrible stench from the methane gas. That was really painful. Sometimes I feel helpless. And all I can do is send my compassion to the cows and hope that they do not suffer too much. That when they go to the abattoir, they do not have to be shot several times in order to die. What can I do? I can continue my practice of being vegan.

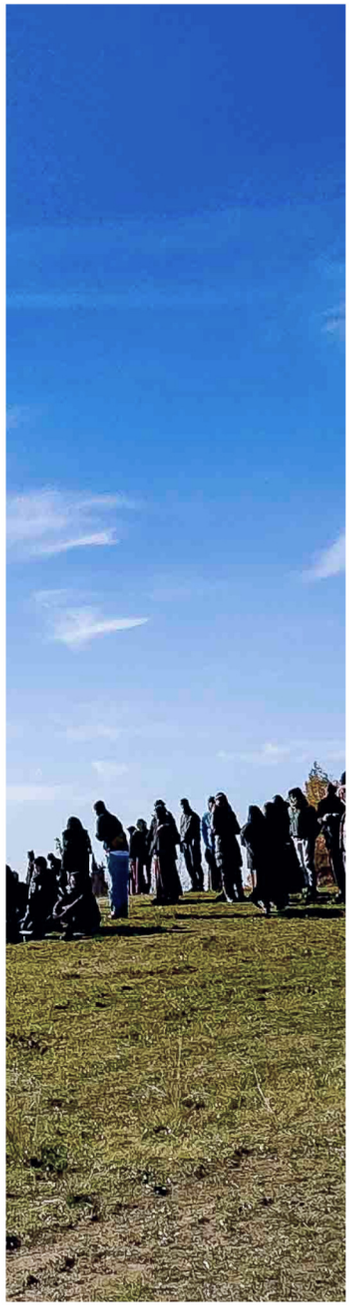
PV Newsletter: When we see people who are causing harm, is it helpful to be angry? And if not, how do we take care of that?

Sr. Chan Duc: When we are angry, we think that the person we are angry with is causing harm. That is our first problem. We identified that person as the one who is doing the harm. But if we look into what that person is doing and the causes and conditions and everyone else who is involved in it, then we will see that it is not an individual who is doing harm, like President Bush or President Trump. They have a whole lot of things backing them up, like the people who vote for them, the people who advise them. Therefore to blame the individual is silly. If we look deeply, we see they are also victims. We can say that global warming is caused by fossil fuels, by agriculture, etc. But what lies behind? It is ignorance and greed. The human species have mental formations like greed and ignorance, which lead to suffering when we do not know how to transform them. This is why it is very important to be able to come back to ourselves and take care of our mental formations, in order not to contribute to another war, to more harm and destruction.













Young buds glistening in the Sunshine

THE VOICES OF YOUNG MONASTICS

"Before ordaining, I lacked confidence when I smiled. When I met someone and smiled, there was something in me that made me feel insecure. After becoming a nun, I've had the chance to live more naturally. Now, my smile comes from the peace and joy in my heart, and it is very natural.

I also train to see things more positively. In the sangha, we come from many different regions, countries, and cultures. Naturally, friction occurs sometimes. I practice to look into myself first so that I am not caught up in those frictions. Or, I find ways to make the issue smaller, and I notice how much lighter I feel." *—Sr. An Niem*

"When I was a lay person, I spoke very little, even though my work was in management. I communicated very briefly, and sometimes felt nervous to share. When I became a monk, I began to practice loving speech. I started feeling more inner space and time to say what I wanted to say. In this way, my words now contain more love and understanding." *—Br. Ruong Hieu*

What is a positive habit that you have developed since entering the sangha?

"When there is an emotion coming up, I like to recognise it, and take time to sit with it, acknowledge it and embrace it for a few minutes. I don't want to move onto something else too quickly anymore. Otherwise, I know that this emotion will 'follow' me for hours. I prefer to take care of it right away and re-establish inner peace as soon as I can." *—Br. Thien Y*

"After ordaining, I felt I didn't need to rush anymore. In the past, I was always rushing: to work, to do this and that, running after time. Now, first thing in the morning, I just drink a cup of tea with my brothers. No need to rush anymore - just drinking our tea, being relaxed, being together. Sitting like that, in silence, I find it a very healing time for myself." *—Br. Ruong Duc*

"Before becoming a nun, I had the tendency to walk very fast, to save time. I worked as a nurse, and had to prepare the necessary tools before the doctors arrived, taking care of patients and their families. When I first entered the temple, everyone said I flew as I walked! So my first lesson was learning to walk.

At the start it was really difficult for me. I was used to walking fast and didn't know how to be aware of the body or hear the sound of my footsteps rushing. I had the idea that the elder sisters were watching me and would give me reminders. So if an elder sister walked in front, I walked behind; if she took one path, I took another. I was hiding! I felt like a train being halted.

After a while, I began to see myself as a baby learning to walk, to balance herself. Practicing like that, I knew better how to stop. When there is a lot of work or something urgent to do, I notice old habits coming back, so I try to slow down and have more understanding." *—Sr. Tuong Niem*

The Angels of Summer

Sister Chân Trăng Bồ Đề

Looking at the two golden, red leaves one last time, I placed them in an envelope, my heart brimming with affection. A smile rose up in me when suddenly, I remembered those innocent words I received one fine morning, "Today is the first day I go to school. My school is in Bilthoven. I cycled 2.5 kilometers to school in the morning and back in the afternoon..." That is one of my fond memories from last summer's children program at the EIAB (European Institute of Applied Buddhism) in Germany.

Most of the young German and Dutch children did not speak much English, so there were many stories of tears and laughter as a result of language differences.

"What Are You Looking For?"

I was standing in the corridor cleaning when one child rushed over, looking confused. "What are you looking for?" I asked her. Very naturally she answered in German. Seeing my round and bewildered eyes, the child was completely lost. Luckily a volunteer passed by in the nick of time to rescue us from this moment of confusion. Looking at the direction she ran off in, I understood that she was looking for the bathroom. I could only put my hand on my forehead and shake my head, not knowing whether to cry or laugh.

In the first few days of the children's program, I could only contribute my presence. Watching the children laugh, speak, and share, even though I did not understand any of it, I still felt so happy. Each child was like a flower, radiant with their own color. Slowly I remembered each child's name and knew which ones spoke English. So if there were important things to communicate, I asked one of those children to help translate for me.

It truly required great effort from both sides. I had to express myself in the most easily understandable way and the children had to listen very carefully, and then find ways to convey my words to the other children. Sometimes we were all scratching our heads and ears! But the moment we arrived at understanding, everyone was so happy.

Sometimes, after "speaking" for a while by waving their hands and feet and seeing that I still looked confused, the children had their last solution, "Follow us!" With great excitement, they would lead me to their new discovery in the mammoth EIAB building. After climbing nearly a hundred steps, up several floors, we reached the stairs ascending into the building's attic, where the exploration of the secret passageways began.



Love Makes One Strong

The moments I connected most with the children were outside of the scheduled activities. We played ping pong, kicked balls, swung on swings, blew bubbles, and visited the neighbors' rabbits and donkeys. I also invited their mums and dads to join us.

Watching the children play in the afternoon, I did not wish to leave even though I knew I needed to rest. So I closed my eyes and relaxed right there and listened to the children's laughter like birds singing by my ears. One child put a finger to her lips, "Shh...," the group became quiet and listened. "Sister Bodhi is sleeping," another child said. As is the nature of children, they only kept quiet for a few seconds before the excitement resumed again.

I wondered, "Why is it that children have so much energy; they can run and play all day without getting tired? Is it because they do not yet worry and grieve as grown-ups do?" Looking at the bright smiles on those wholesome, angel-like faces, I suddenly felt a twinge of compassion when I thought that one day, that carefree and innocent look would disappear. Though I know that it is an inevitable rule of life, that traversing difficulties will help them grow and mature, I still did not wish it for them.

Few people go through storms without withering a little from the pain. Will they have the courage to wipe the wounds from their eyes and still look at life with joy? The memories of a week in Plum Village may be a mere rain drop on the ocean's surface, spreading a little, then swept away by life's waves of emotions. But it doesn't matter. Whenever I have the chance, I do everything in my power to plant the seeds of joy and unconditional love in their hearts.

I have faith that even the smallest things will never be lost once cast into the ocean of consciousness. I hope that on days when they feel helpless and lost, they will remember a place where they can always find refuge. I will keep this place alive with my practice and open heart to welcome the children back.

I stand here with a heart of patience,
my hands turning to stone, waiting.
One hundred years, one thousand years
sweep by the dome of the sky.
Be there winds, be there rains,
the torch of love burns quietly
in the garden of humanity.

Love is like that, but sometimes I had to learn to say "no". During program activities a child would suddenly nudge me, "Sister, can I go play ping pong?" Looking at the starry eyes and cheerful face, I had to be firm even though it was hard, "Not right now. Let's wait until the end of the session and I will take you." After begging for a while and seeing that I was unshakable, with a sad look of disappointment the child quietly returned to playing with paper and crayon.



Usually when the children shared their wishes with me, I would also share them with my elder sisters and brothers. If everyone disagreed, I would also let go of the idea. I am here to support my elder siblings, not to make things more difficult for them. It might have made the children a little sad, but at most for an hour or so and then they were back to laughing and playing as if nothing had happened. I admire that in children. It seems that the older we are, the less we are able to let go, and the more we unnecessarily cling and grasp onto our opinions and emotions.

There were also times when the children said "no" to the program activities. Some were not interested in going to the forest and refused to participate. That was a really tough moment for me. I hesitated, "We cannot force the children against their wishes. But we also have to respect the program activities." I then decided to go to the forest with the group. Passing by those children, I couldn't help feeling guilty because it was as if I had left them behind. I walked very slowly, looking back many times to see if the children had changed their minds to follow us. When I recognized that my heart

was fluttering, I returned to my breath and steps to stop the wandering thoughts and to be present for the serene surroundings and those walking with me. Strangely enough, at that moment I suddenly realized that the children didn't want to go because there were fears in them. Fear of distance, of heat, of fatigue, or they disliked walking.

Though we were already half way, I turned back, taking strong steps with the hope that my angels had not yet "flapped away". As I got closer I could hear the children's chatter. I secretly rejoiced. The children were surprised to see me, "Sister, you are not going to the forest?" I smiled as I said, "I went and saw that it is a very beautiful place. There is a lake and a stream with clear, cool water we can drink. I thought you might like to come, so I came back to ask you." The children looked at each other with curiosity. Great! Seeing that they had mellowed, I made the last move. With a soothing voice I said, "Come with me if you'd like to try. Whenever you feel tired I will bring you back right away." They agreed. So the forest walking program began for the children and myself.

I walked and talked with the children, frequently asking if they were tired. I discovered that they did not want to go simply because of their preconceptions. Nearing the destination, the silence in the forest brought up a little anxiety in me. Where was everyone? How would I find them in this vast forest? Fortunately, we met a brother who came to fetch water. He told us, "Everyone is playing in the woods up ahead." Indeed, I heard sounds coming from afar. In that moment, the brother's answer and the serenity of the forest mingled with the rustling brook, full of pure and sweet water, forming a silence of peace and wellbeing in the traveler's soul.

"Sister, the water of the stream is delicious!" The young voice of an angel made me laugh. I led the children up the hill with carefree steps. Arriving, they quickly joined in the fun with the other angels. My elder sister asked, "How did you manage to persuade them?" Looking at the hammock swinging hard under the weight of the angels, I replied, "Well, I guess they love me and so they followed. Besides, I promised that whenever they felt tired I would bring them back." If there hadn't already been good communication with the children, I would have found it hard to succeed no matter how skillful I was. "Angels love to sit in hammocks. Next time we come to the forest I will bring more hammocks," I thought quietly to myself.



The Super Naughty Can Also Be Sad

I found that I was able to love the children equally, whether they easily followed our guidance or not. During the two weeks of retreats in Germany, there were two girls who were incredibly energetic, smart, and ... super naughty. They set up all sorts of games to play, to destroy, and to tease everyone. To be honest, I only dared to look from afar and did not have the courage to come close and play with them.

One afternoon while playing shuttlecock with the brothers and sisters, "Super naughty #1" came and whispered, "Sister, can you play with me?" From the look on her face I knew that she was sad because she had to say goodbye to her friend, as "Super naughty #2" had gone home. I turned and asked with an affectionate voice, "Yes, what game do you want to play?" Playing with her, I discovered that she was a very emotionally sensitive girl. Once she could feel the love from the brothers and sisters, she became more at ease and quiet than before. From that, I realized that no matter how indescribably naughty a child can be, if we have enough inclusiveness, embrace and acceptance, it will be an opportunity for them to change.

The Future of the World Lies in the Hands of the Angels

One tranquil morning, the golden sun painted the mulberry leaves and the meditation hall roof. The sun's rays skipped and hopped everywhere amidst the chirping music of small birds. In stillness, I enjoyed the scene before my eyes. Suddenly a thought arose, *If people in the future no longer value spiritual life and society moves more towards consumption, this peaceful natural setting may disappear and the meditation hall may become a supermarket.* I thought of the angels at that moment.

Besides their freshness and innocence, children also have seeds of fear, violence, anger, and despair. Whether they are angels or not depends on how the seeds in their consciousness are watered. If I water the seeds of love for nature and life, then the children will know the pain of seeing a tree cut down, they will know to let the accidentally lost small bee fly out of the house, they will take careful steps so as not to step on a snail crossing the road...

I transmit the seed of love to them through my smiles, my eyes, my words, and my conduct. I do everything I need to do so that tomorrow, when I become the wind and the cloud, I can smile peacefully. Because I know that the angels will continue the mission of bringing love to the earth.

Whether the future of the world is bright or not depends on how you treat a child in the present moment. There are many ways to protect Mother Earth. And one of the most concrete ways is to care for your children and grandchildren with all your love and awareness.

This Path

Because I chose this path
there is calmness.

Because there is calmness
something can grow.

A tiny seed, buried in the soil,
silently stretching out its roots
—a trust beyond lifetimes.

There has to be a winter first
before welcoming the spring.

—Sister Chân Trăng Lâm Hỷ

When We Are Gone

Who will look at the stars
and witness the sunrise?

Who will listen to the wind
in the trees and the owl?

Who will smell the honeysuckle
and feel the cat in your lap?

Who will write poetry?

No one to cry, to laugh,
to feel the intense beauty and the pain.

Being alive is not a small thing.



My face before my Mother was born

Brother Chân Trời Ruộng Pháp

30th July, 2022. This was the day my grandmother chose to shed her human form.

Almost six months to this day, I was allowed by the sangha to go back to Portugal to give support to my grandmother and my family. My grandmother had suffered from a severe stroke a few years earlier and, although she partially recovered, it became increasingly difficult for her to have an independent life. One of her main difficulties was dementia. She started forgetting things and, at some point, it became dangerous for her to live on her own.

The previous year I had already spent some weeks with her. This was the first time I was back home as a monastic. Her dementia was already quite advanced and she did not recognise me. "I know you are family, but I don't know your name or who you are", she said. As the days passed she would call me "little monk" or "Mr. Priest," never referring or relating to me as her grandson. Although sometimes I felt sad witnessing my grandmother's mental and physical decline, I knew, almost instinctively, that love was the best language I could use. She would find this energy familiar too, for she had boundlessly transmitted it to me and to anyone she came in contact with, infinite love and generosity.

Five months passed and her health worsened. She was now bedridden, emaciated and in pain. Her cognitive capabilities were declining rapidly. When I arrived at my granny's apartment, on my following home visit, I could sense in my flesh and bones the depression experienced by all my family members. The atmosphere was thick with suffering, stress, and permeated by the scent of death. This was the first time my mother hadn't smiled at me upon my return home; she cried instead.

The practice has taught me that everything is dependent on causes and conditions, that nothing exists by itself alone. This helped me to stop and allowed me to look deeper, to breathe with the awareness that whatever I was witnessing was more complex than that which manifested before my eyes.



Knowing that we can only truly learn and grow when we are in touch with the present moment, I took this suffering as a teaching; accepting my grandmother as my teacher. And what a teacher she has been! I promised myself to maintain my awareness on the teaching of the Five Remembrances. After all, old age, sickness and death were unfolding before my eyes in a very direct way. How could I not keep this awareness?

Days, weeks and months passed. To take care of my grandmother was a full time endeavor. Although we had help during the week from the social services, we needed to offer our presence and support in everything else. I could see how I was easily becoming my environment, how interconnected I was with the suffering of my grandma, my mother, other members of the family and the wider world. The constant stream of news on the television, the rush of the world, the heedless conversations. The inability to connect

with our deepest aspiration to heal the wounds caused by our individual and collective traumas. None of these conditions were separated from me.

Fortunately, I could always come back to the basic teachings. I felt so much gratitude for having a teacher like Thay. His teachings are very concrete and conveyed in a very simple manner. I understood that this simplicity comes out from a true and deep realization, brought about by our teacher's lifetime of practice. The longer he practiced, the simpler and deeper his teachings became.

I sense the sun,
it always shines.
I may not see it, but I know it's there,
above the dark and smothering clouds.

Thanks to the basic, everyday practices, I could always touch a source of healing. I could apply the practice to whatever I was doing - I did not have to do anything extra. Being aware of my breath was sufficient. Knowing I was walking was enough. By simply being mindful of my body, my feelings, my emotions and perceptions, I could be more present and connected to my grandma and my mum. I felt I had more solidity and clarity even in very challenging moments. There was a greater sense of direction and the energy of non-fear in me.

Sickness and death are not beautiful. Society always tries to make it clean and aesthetic. Dead bodies are beautified and groomed, so that they resemble the person while they were alive. It is very sanitized. The living body of the grandma in front of me was skeletal, parched, riddled with marks of a long life of poverty and backbreaking work. How "beautiful" would they make her the day she decided to die?

Disintegration before my eyes.
Still, illusion lingers.
Permanence...



From Angola to Portugal, she carried the history of her life in her flesh and bones - more than that, she carried them in this mind of hers, now afflicted by a ravaging dementia. But even in the midst of so much pain and confusion, she maintained beautiful traces of her boundless love and generosity. Sometimes, when we had to turn her body, she would scream with excruciating pain and become really angry towards whoever had to move her. Only to, in the next moment, fill us with loving hugs and kisses. I could see all those seeds in me too; the anger, the confusion, the deep love and selfless generosity. And I knew also, that at any moment she would breathe her last breath.

On the 30th of July, in the year 2022, at the age of 92, my grandmother died. She was rushed to the hospital with a severe lung infection. She had stopped eating and her breathing became labored. I knew on this day, before she was carried away by the emergency services, that she would not return home. Not in the same form.

Impermanence —
how can I let it impregnate my being,
outside of language,
inside of silence?
Can I embrace it as the bell,
that wakes me up to truth?

I feel very humbled and fortunate for having had the chance to spend a last private moment with her. "Avó!" I called, when I saw her tiny, shriveled body, lying on a hospital bed in the emergency room hallway. Almost in a fetal position, she turned her face to look at me with her clear, dark-brown, almost black eyes. Fully present! I could see that she had recognised me this time. She gazed at me for a moment, eyes locked with mine, in deep connection. Simple. Direct. Awake. We lingered for a moment in this non-verbal communion. In these brief moments she was there, fully present for me. She then rolled her eyes up slightly, eyelids shutting slowly, and turned her face the other way, struggling to breathe. I hugged her gently, my tears running down onto her face. I whispered into her ear,

"It OK grandma, you do not need to struggle anymore. I love you so much! We all love you so much! You can let go now. You have had a long life and you leave a beautiful family. We are your continuation. You continue in us. You already fought so much throughout your entire life. No need to fight anymore. You can rest!"

I left the hospital that night knowing that I would not see my grandmother alive anymore.

Where are you now, my dear grandma?
Why are you hiding behind my face?
Did you hear the little brown wren singing
on the Pitanga tree?

The funeral was simple and short. My family did not want a religious service to be performed. No priest. No religious symbology. They had lost their faith and trust in the Catholic Church long ago. I was the only person who brought a spiritual dimension to that solemn moment. With my saffron sanghati robe, I simply stood there, silent, with tears in my eyes and a gentle attention on my breathing. Contemplating deeply my grandma's stiff, cold, lifeless body, I could clearly see that she was not only that body. At the moment of the final farewell, I watched my mother put her hand on granny's cold forehead, the other family members also surrounded the coffin in a perfectly connected circle. At that moment, I wished everyone could see what I could see. Her continuation body, there, right in front of me. She was much, much more than the body lying there. If we took the element "grandmother" out of any of us, we would vanish right there and then.

To my surprise, my family asked me to offer something, just before the body was to be cremated. I invited everyone to be present in that moment of loss and togetherness. I asked everyone to simply follow their breathing and touch the preciousness of life. I then chanted in Portuguese while inviting the small bell. They felt touched and grateful. I felt touched and grateful. And the coffin burned, hidden from view. Only ashes were left.

If only I could wake up
— for a split moment —
to the infinite web of life.
My fear would end.
My sorrow would be no more.

My deepest wish is to integrate this experience with my grandmother in such a way that it impregnates my whole being with the truth of impermanence and interbeing. So that I am able to offer the gift of non-fear to others. I missed this chance when my father died, when I was eighteen. I could not be present for my father. Now I have the chance to heal the past in the present moment. I have the opportunity to share about the nobility of suffering. Because, if I choose to use it well, endless flowers have the potential to bloom. Life can become more colorful, richer, more precious.

Life continues and I still catch myself looking for grandma's familiar form. I train myself to see her, peeking and smiling in the red oak leaf. Asking me,



"Are you paying attention, my dear? Can you see me here? What about over there? Haven't you seen me winking at you when you look into the mirror every morning when you wake up? Can you feel me at the soles of your feet, every time you are present for your steps? Just pay a little more attention, and you will see that I am both your feet and the earth that you tread."



I can see you in my eyes
and with your eyes,
I see mine. ☙

Thay's Hand in My Pocket

Sister Chân Tuyết Nghiêm



Dear Respected Thay,

I still write to Thay because I feel deeply that Thay is still here at this moment. With just one peaceful breath, I can invite Thay to be by my side. When you were not hidden, I had already learned to be in touch with you like this. So whenever I write to you, I can feel that you are very close, always present to listen in order to deeply understand the minds of your students.

Small Game of Life and Death

Dear Thay,

Once again I am setting foot on a new land. Every time I move to another center, I notice that I am engaging in a small game of life and death. I experience letting go of the familiar and accepting the new. *Tram Tich* nunnery is a place that has given me so many conditions of happiness, a place I have lived in for nearly six years. I love everything that is part of this place - the energy of practice, the aspiration to serve, the sisterhood, the love of the sangha, the serene forest and all the blessings.

The day I left Tram Tich I felt as if I was only going for a long retreat, so I did not have any feelings of parting. Looking back, I see that the game I had experienced on the land of Tram Tich was beautiful enough. I had lived, practiced, and served with all my heart and when I left, I felt fulfilled and happy.

I once again reflected deeply on my ideal for life: *Live fully, live wholeheartedly, so that when I leave, I am at peace.* Live beautifully and I will die beautifully. I have deposited a little capital into my spiritual bank account for my career of liberation from birth and death. Dear Thay, do you think it is all right for me to think like this? Though small, this insight always allows me to feel light and happy in the face of changes.

The Great Hidden Mountain - Deer Park Monastery, a name I have long heard of, and its associated vastness and majesty. But today, when I placed my first steps on this patch of Earth, I truly felt the stability and excitement. True to its name, the monastery is situated in the heart of a mountain and surrounded by rocky desert hills. As soon as I arrived, I felt happy because of the chance to return to nature, to be under the close protection of Mother Earth and Father Sky. My heart also opens vastly as I look upon the wide open sky.

My first dawn on this new land, I answered a call inside me to reach the top of the mountain. With a younger sister of mine, we sat on the top to look out

at the mountains and clouds, feeling at peace. We stayed quiet to feel the sacred heaven and earth in this precious moment.

The sound of the Morning Chant echoed:

The Dharma body shines brightly as the day dawns.
We sit in stillness, our hearts are at peace.
A half smile is born upon our lips...

How wonderful, this present moment! I am grateful for the innumerable conditions that have brought me here. It is clear that there is a ceaseless continuation; one condition ends for another to begin. Life is a continuous chain of miracles upon miracles.

Thay's Hand in My Pocket

This morning, it was quite cold. I put on socks, a jacket and gloves, but my hands were still cold. I walked with my hands in my pockets. A sweet memory with Thay in the winter of 2010 surfaced. That year I turned 24 - a turbulent year with many changes on my spiritual journey. The changing of centers came upon me like an unprepared destiny; causes and conditions weaved into each other in a rush.

At the age of 24, I was still very playful and still needed a lot of siblinghood. Therefore, having to move from Lower Hamlet to Maison de L'inspir in Paris was like a loss, a sacrifice of youth. From a large sangha of three hamlets with hundreds of monastics, I was encouraged to experience living in a small center with just eight sisters, among which four were young Vietnamese.

That morning, Sister Noi Nghiem and I went to greet Thay before leaving. I was weighed down by sadness. As if understanding that feeling, Thay was waiting for us at the Hermitage gate. As soon as we got out of the car, Thay came over, patted our heads, then held our hands to go for walking meditation inside the Hermitage. Walking quietly by Thay, I deeply felt a teacher's warm love even though Thay did not say anything. Thay was always like that - showing his love discreetly, but in a way that made us remember each moment.

My hands were cold, and even more so when I held Thay's warm hand. I was afraid that the coldness would seep through to Thay's hand. I cared very much for Thay. Suddenly Thay stopped and looked at me. Before I had the time to understand, Thay said, "Your hands are too cold!" Then he smiled and gently placed both our hands in his pocket. I was surprised and felt so happy and touched by this love of a teacher. My hand became warmer, and every cell, every crevice of my soul was infused with the warmth of love.

After one round of walking meditation, Thay took out our hands, squeezed mine and said, "My child, you see? Your hand is now warmer. When you are up there, whenever you feel sad, lonely, and you miss Thay and the sangha, put your hand in your pocket - you have Thay's hand there." That moment of connection settled deeply into me and became a legend. Every word of Thay's was a seal, a heritage, a piece of luggage for a young student to embark with on a long journey, and I carry it with me until this day.

The sadness was soothed by the warmth of a teacher's love. I wanted to grow stronger with the trust of Thay and the sangha. Indeed while in Maison de L'inspir, there were moments when I felt weak, sad, and weary. There were also moments full of loneliness and regret. I remembered Thay, and many times I put my hand in my pocket to be in touch with Thay's hand - the hand of love and trust.

That strength helped me overcome the small difficulties and I gradually matured. Perhaps in the ensuing journey, I was far from Thay physically, but I always felt Thay very closely in my heart. Thay's words were like a mantra for me, "Thay's hand is in your pocket." This morning, walking up the hill with my two hands in my pockets, I also held Thay's hand in those moments of returning to happiness, peace, and the warmth of love.

Sing With Your Own Style

Dear respected Thay,

The mountains and hills of Deer Park are truly beautiful. Sitting on a cliff and looking down on the vast mountain landscape, my heart naturally opens. There is nothing for me to worry about, or regret at this moment. Thanks to the lessons you have taught me while I was by your side, no matter which corner of the world I am in, I can find a few things that turn my thinking towards the positive. My mind always chooses to go in the direction of freedom so that whatever I choose to do in my monastic life has meaning in its own right.

I still remember when I returned to Plum Village after a year in Maison de L'inspir, I received a lot of love from the sangha there, especially from the young Vietnamese students who frequently came.

When I left Paris, I practiced to let go of all the connections with the people, the scenes, as my perspective on life was very clear - live wholeheartedly and leave with no strings attached. I thought this to be true of the monastic ideal of freedom.



So, I was quite surprised when I returned to Plum Village and Thay again taught me, "I heard that the young friends in Paris love and cherish you very much, right? Remember to write to them and nurture them." I was very surprised, but I thought, "Thay is encouraging me after my year of living in Maison de L'inspir and building the sangha there." So I let Thay's teaching pass by like a breeze.

But when Thay asked me again a few days later, "My child, have you written a letter to the young friends yet?" I paid more attention and asked myself, "What is Thay teaching me here? Why is it that I want to let go, but Thay is teaching to me hold on?" I wanted to understand well so I could carry out Thay's teachings naturally, but I did not understand the lesson yet. So I chose to be silent and did nothing. Then a few more days passed and Thay gave me an even more concrete practice, "Tuyet Nghiem, please write and invite the young friends to come and celebrate Tet[4] in Plum Village. They will enjoy it very much!" This time I understood Thay's teaching for me.

The more I looked into Thay's teaching, the more I saw a new value for my way of service: "When we still have the conditions to nourish someone, somewhere, we should continue to do so because that is a beautiful condition." Having thought it through, I sat down to write to the young friends in Paris just like Thay taught. It was very heart-warming for them to receive the letters. I told them about Thay's care for them and how it was expressed through his guidance for me to write to them. It was indeed a joyous occasion when the young friends, for the first time, called out to each other to come celebrate Tet in Plum Village even though it was only for two short days.

That same year during the Oracle Readings[5] in front of the whole sangha, Thay also gave priority to the young people. I felt so happy to hear their questions and see how they were embraced, loved, and supported by the big sangha. While enjoying that happiness, I suddenly heard Thay call out my name, "Tuyet Nghiem, please sing this verse from the *Tale of Kieu*." I sat behind Thay, so Thay turned around to look at me as he spoke. I felt confused, because my "level" of singing in Vietnamese folk style was rather low while around me were many elder brothers and sisters who were superb singers. I whispered to Thay for help, "Yes, dear Thay. Just now the elder brothers and sisters sang so wonderfully. Some sang in the Northern style, some in the Central style and some the Southern style. I don't even know which style I should sing in?" Thay smiled compassionately, "You should sing with your own style."

Thay's words startled me. I knew that I could only sing naturally how I have always sung. After singing, though my voice was not very good, I was satisfied with the koan Thay had given me - "You should sing with your own style." That is the mark of freedom, of ease, of readiness.

As I breathed a sigh of relief after passing through one challenge, Thay suddenly gave me the second challenge, "Tuyet Nghiem, please interpret the Oracle for the young friend." I was even more shocked, because it seemed that only Thay and the elders ever interpreted the Oracles in front of the sangha. I felt so confused and tried to find a way out, to refuse lightly, "Yes, dear Thay, but I don't know how to interpret Oracles at all." My eyes were speaking SOS to Thay, but Thay laughed and resolutely said, "How can that be? You are my continuation, right?" There was nothing I could do except to accept my current predicament - to interpret the oracle for our young friend. Perhaps I

4. Vietnamese lunar new year
5. Translator's note: A Plum Village tradition during the Tet celebrations whereby a few lay friends or monastics come before the sangha to select an unseen verse from "The Tale of Kieu" (or from Shakespeare or Victor Hugo), ask a question from their heart, and receive a response from Thay or senior monastics based on the chosen verse.

knew enough about her so I went straight to her issue, and it made everyone laugh because it was too much to the point.

Dear respected Thay,

Throughout these past years, I have put all my heart into understanding the practices you have taught me. The mantra "You should sing with your own style" has helped me to overcome feelings of inferiority so that I can be natural and free in whatever I do. Whenever I do something wholeheartedly and with freedom, I can feel Thay right by me. At times when I feel so afraid, and hesitant of my own ability that I want to stop, withdraw, and quit, I find confidence again with the mantra "How can that be? You are my continuation, right?"

There are times I wish to end a connection even though I can still offer something to nourish someone. Your teaching "You should continue to nourish them..." will motivate me to keep on offering the most beautiful while I still can, so that each connection can be complete, until the conditions are no longer sufficient and then I can let go with a smile.

Dearest Thay, I am growing day by day on the path you have led. The path of Engaged Buddhism is not an easy one at all. You have prepared us so much for this journey through all the love and trust you have shown your students.

This morning, your teachings continue to illuminate the path I walk with the beautiful aspiration of a monastic. I walked up the hill with leisurely steps - each step in freedom, each step untangled, each step a promise to return to peace. At the top of the mountain, I sat down to enjoy my peaceful breathing together with the wind and the clouds. Putting my hand in my pocket, I see that your warm hand continues to encourage me to trust and love.

Look again, you will see me in you
and in every leaf and flower bud.
If you call my name, you will see me right away.
...
You and I have never really been apart.
—A Teacher Looking for His Disciple - Thay's poem

I am deeply grateful to Thay because Thay is always beautiful in my heart and still alive in the continuous wonders of life. I will hold the sangha's hand, so that together we can bring you into the future.

With deep respect and gratitude,
Your student: Chan Tuyet Nghiem



Mountain dream

There are moments, I am mountain,
standing tall against the wind.
There are moments, I am water,
flowing free through the mountain.
There are moments, I am flower,
blooming by the water.
There are moments, I am space,
silent and ungraspable.

Be it mountain, be it water
be it flower, be it space,
I surrender to the magic of the moment.

—Sister Chân Trăng Linh Dị



ARISE Sangha

An Interview With Marisela Gomez

Marisela Gomez co-founded the ARISE Sangha in 2016. ARISE is an acronym for Awakening through Race, Intersectionality[6], and Social Equity. *Rooted in the Plum Village Tradition, the ARISE Sangha is committed to socially engaged mindfulness to bring about racial and social equity. The La Thu Lang Mai Editorial Team interviewed Marisela in New Hamlet in June 2022.*



arisesangha.org

Interviewer: Good afternoon, dear Marisela. It is a great joy for me to be with you. Many monastics of the Plum Village Sangha would like to learn more about the ARISE Sangha. Could you please share what inspired you to co-found the ARISE Sangha?

Marisela: During the tour in the United States led by Plum Village monastics in New York City in 2015, we had a panel discussion on racial justice called *Where Spirit Meets Action*. At Deer Park Monastery, there was another panel on racial justice. At both of these panels it was shared that there were not enough Black, indigenous, and people of color being present and represented. In the U.S. we say BIPOC. In England there is the acronym BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic). We are wonderfully represented by the Vietnamese siblings in the monastic community, but there are hardly any Black people, Latinx people and even fewer indigenous people that we are aware of. And so the few we had - myself for example - were asking the question, "Where are we and why aren't we here?" When BIPOC people raise this question we are often told, in essence, "That does not matter, because we're all the same, we're interbeing, we're one. It separates us when you talk like that." Hearing this really hurts us. What we are experiencing in our daily walks of life, because of our racial/ethnic identities, needs healing. The sangha should be the place where we can heal that. But if we bring these things up, it does not land. Most of our sanghas in the U.S. have a white majority.

A clear example was after the killing of Freddie Gray, a Black man in America, in 2015. There were big protests, thousands of people took to the streets because of police brutality, everybody was traumatized again. A Black person brought it up in a sangha with a white majority and nobody said anything about it. There was no offering of energy, no acknowledgment of this pain of our whole society. Not just Black people but our whole society is hurting. This Black person personally reached out to me and said they cannot continue there because they felt invisible and not cared for. When something difficult happens in the BIPOC community, can the mahasangha hold it? Because there is a lack of knowledge, the mahasangha cannot hold it. If someone of importance in our community passes, especially from violence, we want the community to grieve with us and hold our hearts. (We also want to celebrate together when something amazing happens.) But if the community does not know anything about this, we are isolated and feel very hurt.

Examples like this kept coming up, so people with a history of engaged mindfulness practice around racial justice and other kinds of social justice issues formed ARISE. We decided to focus on race, but also include intersectionality and social equity in our name, because racial injustice is not the only injustice. Although we focus on race, we also try to shine light on other areas as well, including LGBTQIA+, immigrants, and class. For example, we have a really big issue of class in our mahasangha: Who can afford to come to retreats? Until all of the injustices are taken care of, we are still suffering. Trying to bring this greater awareness to our mahasangha is at times very frustrating.

6. Intersectionality is an analytical framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. Intersectionality identifies multiple factors of advantage and disadvantage. (from Wikipedia)

Interviewer: Thay led retreats for people of color. When we offer such retreats today, people question whether they are creating more separation. Do you feel there is a benefit of separate retreats or spaces for people of color? If so, could you explain why they are needed.

Marisela: One of the first things ARISE did was to establish an action plan about what we felt needed to be addressed in the mahasangha. One of them was holding BIPOC-only retreats, because it is easier to address our suffering when we share common experiences, especially around discrimination. In mixed spaces (with white people), we would first have to define it, for example, "This is how I feel when white people don't acknowledge my pain. When I speak about it, they tell me I'm being separatists and I should leave. They expect me to leave this at the door, come in, and pretend we're all one together." In a BIPOC-only space, we can share very openly about our trauma, our hurts, and we do not offend white people by stating clearly that racism is real, that we hurt from white people bringing privilege and their lack of awareness about how this privilege harms us.

There is so much trauma caused by allowing racism to continue as it is. The legacy of racism has a heavy retribution. We may not realize that what we are experiencing now has this whole long past. A lot of people with privilege do not have to look at that, they can ignore all of that history and just keep walking. But what it does to their hearts and their spirit is not healing, which is why white people need to have their own separate space too, in order to speak honestly about when they behave in a racist way.

Now, in mixed spaces when a white person speaks about how they might have said, done or thought something about a Black or Brown person, we get hurt again. Thus, white people do not bring it up, because they do not want to hurt the BIPOC friends. Vice versa, the BIPOC people do not bring up how white people hurt us because we do not want to hurt our white friends. So we all sit there and pretend nothing is going on, thinking that everything is just fine. But this is not our practice. Our practice is to cultivate happiness in order to heal, and cultivate the spaciousness to take care of the trauma of racism that is so deep in us and our ancestors.

All of us have ancestors that have pain around race because we are a greedy species, wanting to



own so much and discriminate based on anything to justify our superiority, be it skin color, class, accent, etc. This is why we all have to sit still for a while, become more spacious, create the safety to bring it up, look at it, feel the pain and take good care of it. Once we have more awareness and lightness, we will come together in a very different way. We may still hurt each other, but we know how to come back to ourselves and heal. After practicing like this, we may eventually be able to be together without hurting each other. But right now, honestly, when we are together, we hurt each other. Because when I am in a sangha where the majority of people are white, I keep being squished into a small cell because there is so much white privilege.

Sometimes white people are unaware of how they bring privilege forward. It is heavy and takes up a lot of space. People of color are so used to deferring to power because our ancestors were killed if they did not. You have to keep your mouth shut, stay behind and not look people in the eye. When we get into mixed spaces, sometimes we have some of these same behaviors because we internalized them so deeply. We cannot heal like that. This is why we need to be by ourselves first, talk about it, feel the hurt, and heal. Then can we come back together in true harmony.

For many, many years, we have been hearing the criticism that separating by race is not harmonious. But being together as we are now is not true harmony! It is false harmony. And in some ways we have been practicing this false harmony. To smile like that is not deep. It is not in my eyes. When we experience deep harmony however, we see the

wisdom of the need to heal the heart so we can come back together in a more beautiful way. Because if I am full of hurt from having this color and I am around a bunch of white people, I am going to be angry, and I am going to drop it all over them, causing more harm. So I need my space to walk, to breathe. I need my people, my tribe, without words, knowing we are alike, we feel a little safer, and we can start to look at these things and identify the trauma. Where does it stay in my body?

ARISE is mixed, but with the requirement that the majority are people of color. We know from experience that when the majority are BIPOC, the energy of white people is not so strong and big; it stays more balanced, so we can at least have the conversation. This is important until we have reached a place of healing and balance, and we do not retraumatize each other. ARISE is a majority BIPOC space and we do not apologize for that. We say respectfully, "If you do not understand, we want to have a conversation. It is time to have a conversation." We know that many in the mahasangha do not understand and still think it is a creation of separateness. But I believe this can change if our monastic community sincerely helps us, because our lay community looks to the monastics for guidance.

Interviewer: What can Plum Village do to help bring more awareness and action in the area of social justice and racial equity?

Marisela: This invitation to speak about ARISE is a big important step, as well as forming affinity groups, and mentioning them to the entire community. Dharma talks that address the suffering of racial discrimination are also important. We need to bring awareness to more areas of where social injustice is happening.

ARISE just had a beautiful six-month training course called *Race: A Dharma Door*. We used the Four Noble Truths as the framework to show how racism and racial injustice are a suffering. We go over the history - mostly American history. ARISE also helped to edit a contemplation on the Five Mindfulness Trainings that focuses on racial justice to show how we can actually apply all the Dharma tools to bring an end to this suffering. All the skillful means are already there in our hands.

Brother Phap Ung said yesterday, "open the door and let the wind in." I think we are afraid of what will come in, because the suffering of racism is so deep, and the wind does not discriminate. It is worldwide. It is not just in the Americas. It is not just enslavement. It is the decimation of native



indigenous people in the United States. We have had societies that have been built on the foundation that colonization was okay. We are saying it is not okay, not now, not then and not in the future. It is hard. I have suffered in many of these intersections. I really do not blame people for not wanting to engage in it.

Earlier in this retreat, there were younger BIPOC people who wanted to leave. Why? Because they felt there was no space or safety for them. We need to share the Dharma in such a way that everyone finds their place in it; see that the Dharma helps anyone develop the space to heal, see more clearly, and understand what else can flourish besides pain. Poor people, queer people, people with disabilities. You cannot leave anybody out because the Dharma is universal.

Interviewer: What have been the biggest obstacles in building the ARISE Sangha?

Marisela: From the very beginning we felt little support. We had to push hard against the status quo. Why were there no Black people in the Dharma Teacher Council in North America? What does it look like here in Europe? Few seemed to worry or care about it. It was difficult to find the ears of people in our mahasangha who have the power to help us bring about change. The murder of George Floyd in 2020 helped us to get invitations to talk more about what ARISE is offering and to be recognized as an official part of our mahasangha.

We are Thay's disciples. Thay challenged traditional Vietnamese Buddhism. He wanted Buddhism to be for the people. How do we transform Buddhism such that everyone benefits? ARISE is also for the people. How do we make sure everyone is at the table, making decisions, and benefits from the practice? Groups like ARISE form because the community is not seeing the need for Buddhism to be accessible to everyone, for whatever reasons: too busy, lack of experience, ignorance, or fear. This is real though. We cannot wait till everyone is ready.

Interviewer: When you are faced with these difficulties, what do you take refuge in?

Marisela: We take refuge in Thay, in our breath, our practice and our steps. We have to remember to stay diligent and steady. The majority of us are affected by race/ethnicity. No one can deny my lived experience of how I am treated every day. So we take refuge in the truth of our lived experience and we also take refuge in the practice, because it works and has transformed us all. It not only works, it is freedom, real freedom, true freedom. This keeps us committed. It makes it very clear that we do not stop. We do not rest until it is done, for everyone.

Interviewer: But we know that it is endless. There is no lotus without the mud. How do we find true peace whilst the suffering is still there?

Marisela: That is a good question because the mud is always there. The question is: how do we meet the mud? If I still suffer every time I meet injustice, then I have not been practicing enough. This is a controversial statement isn't it. The other part of that statement is that we have to meet the practice first, awaken our spiritual powers, and meet good spiritual friends. This is part of the reason why we are helping to bring people into the practice in order to heal. We do not want to stay negative, with only bad news. We have to nurture joy and lightness.

There is so much beauty. Even in the heat, there is the breeze that enters. There is refuge under the shade of these trees. After our last ARISE affinity sharing, one of the participants shared his insight, "I just realized that at any moment I could bring a moment of joy into my heart, which helps me to take care of the suffering." By bringing the energy of care and togetherness, we can bring an end to the suffering of feeling "I am the only one," or "This is never going to end," or "Nobody cares." Now you have the practice and you have the community. When people step into the practice something miraculous happens and transformation occurs.

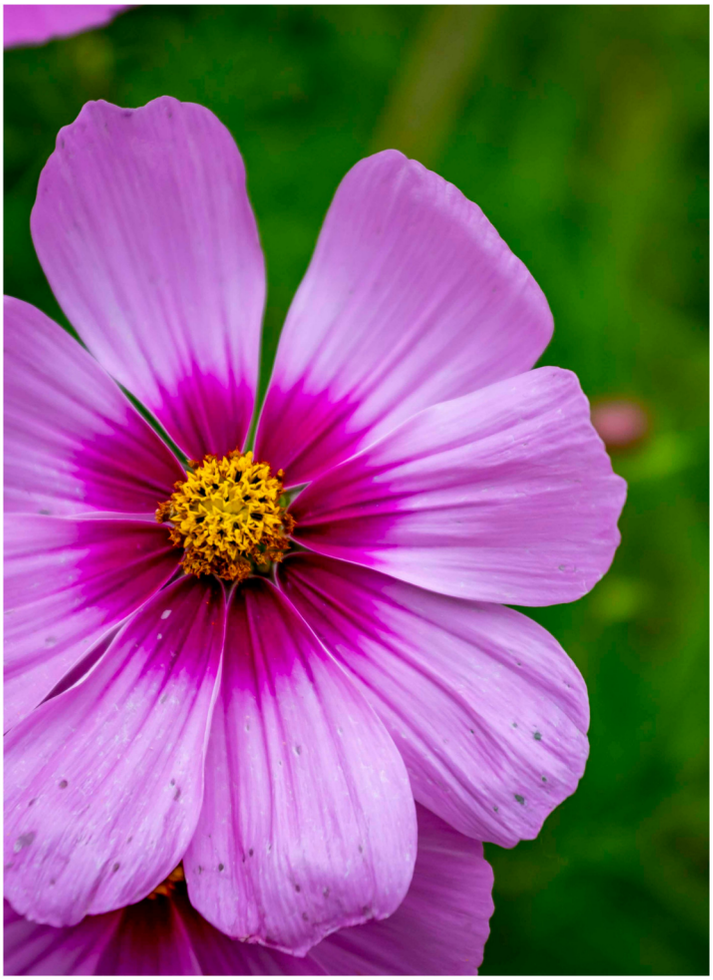
The way I hold racism now is completely different. I do not hate white people anymore. Even when someone acts in a racist way toward me, I do not get mad anymore. This is huge for me. Racism has not ended, but I feel I have control. I am not pulled and yanked by the cow I am riding. I am walking next to the cow.

Interviewer: Thank you so much. It has been very touching to hear from you.











"I really appreciate seeing an elder one follow the schedule. It makes me feel that I can do the same as I grow up; that I don't need to sacrifice those moments of happiness, of practice. It makes me feel happy about my future.

Having someone who allows me to grow, to make mistakes, to not be perfect. Anyway, one day, we'll be able to do it in a way people call 'perfect', but there's no need to rush in that process! For me, learning in a slow, kind and compassionate way is very important, and my mentor has the capacity to be there for me in that spirit." *—Sr. Xuan Hanh*

"When I can see their practice, I am impressed by their way of daily living. I am really inspired by that kind of presence, cultivating more 'being' rather than knowledge." *—Br. Niem Xa*

"A heart of service brimming with enthusiasm and sincerity. Some elder sisters have inspired me, and given me plenty of inspiration to practice in this way." *—Sr. An Niem*

"Sometimes I feel 'small' when talking to some elder siblings. I find it really cool when there is one who talks to me in a respectful and open way, that it shakes me out of that 'role' of the younger one. There is something in their energy of listening that makes me feel heard, that my opinion is important. I had some organising team members and mentors who embody that spirit, and I really try to bring it with me - for example in a cooking team, asking others for their input, and seeing their surprise and sense of self-worth being re-kindled." *—Br. Thien Y*

What is the quality you appreciate the most in an elder brother or sister, and why?

"For me, I appreciate when they have some stability and commitment to the teachings of Thay. Then, I feel I can learn a lot from them, from their teachings and experiences. In particular, how they went through a difficulty: even if in that moment it doesn't help me, if I have a similar suffering in the future, I will be able to relate to it." *—Br. Niem Thuan*

"Kindness and openness. For example, as an aspirant once I had to invite the activity bell, but I didn't know I had to wear the long robe for that. One sister came around, and just said to me, 'oh, let me do it for you,' without any judgement. I felt it was such a nice way of showing the path, without saying, 'you should do this,' but rather by example and as a kind offering." *—Sr. Lam Hy*

"For me, it is their acceptance. When I entered the temple, I brought all my difficulties along with me, and there are some I cannot practice with yet. The elder sisters have given me a great deal of space, patiently waiting for me to practice. And they are always ready to be present, to guide me. This makes me feel at home." *—Sr. Tuong Niem*

"I know everyone comes from different walks of life, that people grow up in different cultures, and have different aspirations. I really appreciate an elder when they can embrace all of these cultures; they may have strong self-discipline, but at the same time they can be very flexible for others. They understand the essence of Plum Village practice, and how to apply it in modern times. I think those aspects have to go together: understanding the younger siblings, and understanding the world." *—Sr. Hieu Duc*

"When I have the chance to live closely with my elder sisters, I can feel their love, especially from those who had directly received the guidance and love of Thay. They have such great love for the sangha. They always wish to transmit the practices and words of advice from Thay to the younger ones who don't have the chance to be with Thay. That is truly the beauty of sisterly love in one family. The elder ones give the younger ones all their love, care, and encouragement. Therefore, I also feel that I need to be responsible and to practice well so that I do not let down my elder sisters." *—Sr. Tam Duc*

My Journey With Thay

Sister Chân Đào Nghiêm

What did I learn from Thay? To stop, to simply be, listening to the rain, drinking a cup of tea, touching life deeply, not doing but being, not trying to be something other than I am, to be truly present for life.

How did Thay's teachings transform my life? Thay used very simple words and his own examples. He lived what he taught and this touched me very deeply.

When I came to Plum Village for the first time in February 2002, I had the wish to meet the person who gave such a powerful teaching in September 2001 after the terrorist attacks in the USA. I started reading some of his books like *Old Paths, White Clouds* where Thay speaks about the Buddha not as a god but as a human being. I felt very inspired and put into practice his suggestions, like for example, smiling. At this time I had been practicing sitting meditation for more than twenty years; I never thought that a simple smile on my lips could change my practice so much. By doing this simple practice I felt more ease, more joy, more simplicity in my way of practicing, bringing gentleness and softness into my body and mind.

I had—as well—the deep desire to understand death, why the people that I loved suffer, and what could I do to relieve suffering, to be at peace. I wanted to liberate my heart and be able to love more.

During my very first retreat, Thay told us the story of a group of nuns who had come for a retreat. After five days the mother superior had said to Thay, "You have taught about everything but why have you not talked about God?" Thay said that he did not answer right way, he breathed a few times, then told the nun, "Dear Sister, is there anything I talked about in the last five days that was not about God?" And Thay added, "It was a moment of enlightenment in the room, a realization! We are so caught in words and notions. We can always talk to God."

I really enjoyed this story and hearing Thay—a Buddhist teacher—speaking about God so freely and so beautifully!

Just after this first retreat I went to see my aunt, who had been in a coma for a couple of months. She died the night after my arrival and I felt deeply how the teachings I had just received while in Plum Village gave me the peace to embrace my own pain and the pain of her children and grandchildren. The words of Thay resonated in my mind. My aunt is still alive, she is everywhere. I feel her presence and can help my cousins to recognize within them the beautiful qualities of my aunt. She will continue within us.

I learned from Thay how to connect with my father, with my mindful steps. *Feel that you are holding the hand of your dad, then feel his feet walking in your feet*.

My dad passed away so long ago, but I trusted Thay and put into practice his teachings. At the beginning it was simply imagination but as we walked, I felt my father walking with me. It was a very powerful experience as my father had passed away when I was only 19 years old and I thought that was it.

This practice of walking meditation brought back memories of my childhood when I used to stand on my father's feet and we danced together. Dad was still alive in me! From then on, a path of healing opened up, a beautiful path of transforming the relationship with my father by gaining understanding about what he has transmitted to me. From then on, I could reestablish a connection with my dad, write to him and tell him things that I never had the chance to say to him.

The practice of walking meditation is one of the greatest gifts that I received from Thay, to nourish my joy and also to soothe my pain. For example at the loss of someone dear to me, or when I feel anger or sadness or when I feel anxious etc., I take a few mindful steps, fully aware of each one of my steps, fully present with my steps, my breath, my feet touching the ground, my legs, my whole body walking. It is such a miracle to be able to walk. I walk for my beloved ones who cannot walk any more. I walk for the simple joy of walking. In 2020 I had the fortune of visiting Thay for a week in Tu Hieu Root Temple in Vietnam and was invited to

push his wheelchair around the temple. Thay spoke to me with his hand showing me different places of the temple. There I walked for Thay; his feet were my feet.

So many times I walked behind Thay, on different paths, in many big cities surrounded by thousands of people or with only a few people on small paths. All these years walking with Thay, I could see the joy, the lightness in Thay's way of walking, his freedom, his peace. During walking meditation Thay always enjoyed sitting for some time with the community, sometimes thousands of people, sometimes just a small group. We just sat and enjoyed doing nothing, simply enjoying being together in nature, even on the pavement in big cities. I remember at the beginning of my practice in Plum Village, when we sat with Thay during walking meditation, I was expecting Thay to say something, to do something special. But nothing happened. We simply sat, enjoying the present moment, offering to all of us a moment of deep connection and peace. I learned to enjoy each moment deeply.

The suffering that I felt at my mother's death in 1995 was buried deep within me. It was too painful to look at it and I preferred not to. Thay's teachings on Mother Earth and his deep love allowed me to open myself to my suffering and to feel the love of my mother through the love of Mother Earth. Looking at the incredible beauty of Mother Nature and being truly present for her gifts, her beauty, her love, I was able to embrace my pain, bring relief and understand that my mom is still alive within me. I can offer to her my joy, my way of living and not only to my mom but to all of my ancestors. I am their continuation.

Arriving in Lower Hamlet in February 2002, I was moved by the simplicity of the place and the calligraphy on the wall of the dining hall, *The piece of bread in your hand is the body of the cosmos*.

In 2005, one day after a U.S. tour, Thay was resting with us in Pine and Crane, a nunnery we had in Vermont at that time. Just a few of us had dinner with Thay and Thay asked me, "You have nothing to eat, why don't you eat?" "Oh Thay, I prefer not to eat in the evening, I feel better this way," I answered. Thay looked at me with a smile and he took a piece of bread that he had on his plate and handed it to me. How could I refuse this piece of bread? I took it with a smile and gently ate it. This simple gesture from my teacher touched me and I learned how to look deeply at a piece of bread, to see the presence of the whole cosmos in the piece of bread, the interbeing nature of the bread, to feel the immense gratitude for everything that surrounds us.



Drinking tea in Thay's company was one of my dreams when I first came to Plum Village and I wrote about it to Thay. On the first anniversary of our novice ordination, Thay before his Dharma talk called our little ordination family of four sisters and asked us to share about our practice during the past year. I shared that I practiced letting go of my expectations. Thay asked me if I was expecting Thay to become a Buddha quickly and I replied that for me Thay was already the Buddha. Then Thay said, "Were you expecting to drink many cups of tea with Thay?", and I said, "Touché", and Thay laughed a lot —a beautiful moment of complicity. Since then I have enjoyed many cups of tea with Thay. Such a simple gesture that can bring great happiness.

The first year after my ordination Thay often played with my name, calling me DaoLakshmi or LakshmiDao, smiling as he looked at me. Before I ordained I lived in an ashram for twenty years and I identified a lot with who I was. There I was called "Lakshmi." Thay helped me to see this identification and the suffering that this was bringing, as it did not allow me to open myself to what the present moment was offering.

The last spoken Dharma talk that Thay offered was at the beginning of the French Educator's Retreat. Sr Jina and myself were sitting on each side of Thay. Thay turned to me and said, "Sœur Dao Nghiem, êtes-vous confortable?" (English: "Sister Dao Nghiem, do you feel at ease?") Gently, Thay brought me back to the present moment, the wonderful moment of sitting with Thay, alive next to me. Thay was sitting in a wheelchair and was already very sick and in my mind anxiety was present there. The question that Thay asked was a big bell of mindfulness. *Come back my child, where are you?*

Thay taught me to see how life is incredibly beautiful. Thay helped me to touch, to see the miracle of life in very ordinary things, to experience the interdependent nature of all that is, and to understand how all of my actions of body, speech and mind have an effect on the whole world.

The first couple of years of being a novice I had some very difficult moments. Sometimes I did not know what to do. I was asking myself, *Why did I ordain, why did I choose to join this community, why did I leave my other community?* And I was calling in my heart to Thay to come and help me to see clearly. And so many times, Thay appeared. Physically appeared. During this period I was staying in the New Hamlet and Thay would suddenly appear for sitting meditation with us early in the morning, or for precepts recitation or from behind a door or in his car or maybe coming out of a bathroom, giving me a smile or a gentle gesture from his hands, a few words, a simple presence, all showing me that he was there present for me. He still is even though he is not physically present anymore.



In 2012 Thay and the sangha came to Paris for a few days. At this time I was living in Maison de l'Inspir and with another sister we were very much involved in the organization of this big event. We had an argument in the garden and Thay was sitting not too far from us. I went to Thay and shared with him the feeling I had at that moment, sharing about how we hurt each other with our perceptions, and how painful it was. Thay listened and then shared with me that many people had perceptions about Thay but Thay just continued with determination, not letting himself be discouraged by the perceptions that people had of Thay. We have wrong perceptions about others, others have wrong perceptions about us and we have wrong perceptions about ourselves. We need to continue, to keep going. Everything that Thay shared stayed with me and helped me to go through many difficult times in my monastic life.

From Thay I learned to touch life very deeply in simple moments in my daily life. To touch the depth of every ordinary action: brushing my teeth, washing dishes, playing in the snow, to love Mother Earth, to enjoy the miracle of life.

Thay helped me to stop, to smile, to see that every moment is a happy moment, a legendary moment. ☙

The Ancestors Calling Me Home

Sister Chân Trăng Hiền Nhân

Dear Respected Thay, dear Sangha,

In France, it is autumn. The golden light of the sun is piercing through great clouds in the vast sky, the deep pink of the dawn, the dazzling beauty of the dancing leaves vibrant with life, display a Dharma festival for us to rejoice in every day. New Hamlet has recently become the home to tens of chrysanthemum flowers adorning our practice center with a spiritual and ancestral energy always ready to manifest.

A few days ago, as a group of us were about to sit down for a sharing session, a bright yellow chrysanthemum caught my eye and I brought her to the center of our circle. I felt that she had something to tell me. After I sat down, my grandmother became very present in me. My grandmother comes from Mexico, a country where paying respect to our ancestors is a core element of the culture, especially at this time of the year.

Abuelita, as I lovingly addressed my grandma as a child, passed away last year during the Rains Retreat. It was then that I realized how similar the Mexican and Vietnamese cultures are in respect to relating to our ancestors. What I had seen my Vietnamese sisters do so often on memorial days such as cooking special dishes, preparing an altar, devising a ceremony, I suddenly found myself doing for my grandmother. It felt so natural and so familiar. During nap time, when the kitchen was empty, I cooked *Frijoles refritos* (refried beans), a traditional dish that Abuelita had prepared so many times for me. I didn't have a recipe. I just remembered the scenes of my grandmother cooking as I sat nearby at the kitchen table, learning to draw, snacking, chatting with her, or writing a poem.

The ceremony for Abuelita took place one evening, in the Red Candle Hall. The altar with her picture was there, as well as a letter I had written for her in Spanish. As the ceremony was to take place in French, the other language that I spoke with Abuelita besides Spanish, I invited the sisters who also understood that language to take part in the ceremony. They were all very supportive and kind. I devised a simple ceremony and we gathered. It turned out to be a rare and moving moment for all of us, the western sisters of Lower Hamlet, to gather like that for a ceremony. I felt happy and grateful that Abuelita had given rise to such a joyous and rare occasion.



As Abuelita passed away during the time of Covid, I couldn't join my mother in Paris to be with her in hospital or attend Abuelita's funeral. Actually, my mother couldn't organize any proper ceremony due to the pandemic. And so, I invited her to join us by zoom. She was so moved during the ceremony that she cried. She cried as I read the letter I had written to Abuelita and she cried when she saw the altar that brought up in her so many memories and the fragrance of Mexico. She also cried when she saw the presence of my sisters, who had so naturally offered their time to be with us. Her heart softened and she opened to look differently at the path I had chosen. This was also coming from the very deep, immense love that Abuelita always had for me.

This year, gently rocking in a sea of colorful chrysanthemums that were waving at me every day, something opened in my heart. One evening, in the Buddha Hall, after having touched the earth in front of the Buddha, Avalokita, Thay and the spiritual ancestors, I felt driven to also prostrate before the altar of the blood ancestors. I turned to them, raised my joined palms before my forehead, and rested my four limbs on the floor, my forehead sinking into the earth.

As I was opening my heart to my blood ancestors, a feeling of release and joy started to gently arise in me. The energy I was getting in touch

with was not an energy of suffering. It was on the contrary a positive energy that brought me closer to myself and to life. Connecting to my father, my mother, both my maternal and paternal grandparents, for a moment, I got in touch with an unstoppable life force that manifested as passion, strength, unshakable determination, infinite talents, deep sensitivity, and immense love. Standing up, I felt more whole, more rooted, more at peace and freer.



Gratitude for the monastic path, for Thay, and for the Sangha, arose in my heart. I was very aware that without the Three Jewels, without the daily practice, without the love of my sisters, without countless conditions coming from so far, I wouldn't be able to experience what I was experiencing right in that moment. I saw that my blood ancestors and spiritual ancestors were not opposites; the seeds I had received from both these streams of life were making my life in the sangha possible today. Being a monastic was accepting to become a field for all these seeds to gently emerge from the depth of the earth and sprout.

Practicing as a monastic in my country of birth, I also have opportunities to get in touch with my land ancestors. Around twenty minutes walk from the New Hamlet, there is a village called Dieulivol with a beautiful church looking out over the fields. When I am there and able to come back to a space of peace inside of me, I can connect with the presence of many generations of French ancestors.

I also have a similar feeling when I sit in the Telephone Room in New Hamlet. The aesthetics of the room remind me of the novels written by Balzac, a very famous writer of 19th century France. In the early mornings and evenings when it is quiet, I like to just sit there from time to time and let myself be impregnated by the atmosphere. I get in touch with a stream of life flowing through many generations and warm scenes of family life flow through my mind. I don't know why, but something of the French pride, the French culture with its richness and beauty, some highlights from the French rhetoric and glorious scenes from history of France come up in my mind, and I enjoy sitting with them. They mingle with childhood memories of the hours spent in school learning about these subjects, and the hours spent alone immersing myself in a book. I feel a sense of belonging and rootedness, of intimacy.

For me, having the opportunity to connect to my blood, spiritual, and land ancestors is one of the most precious gifts of monastic life. My blood ancestors come from many different countries on my mother's and father's side: France, Canada, Mexico, and Germany. As a child and young adult, I also lived in many places as my father was a diplomat. On top of that, his hobby was traveling with my brother and I. Therefore, I inherited a great diversity of experiences, openness to many cultures, but also a sense of being constantly uprooted and not knowing where I belonged. Therefore, coming back to myself to get in touch with my roots and experience some level of belonging is deeply healing.

I was ordained in the Beech Tree family on the 25th of October, 2018. It was the day Thay flew back from Thailand to Vietnam; a few days earlier, our ceremony to request ordination had taken place on the Memorial Day of Master Tang Hoi. Therefore, the energy of the spiritual ancestors was strong. Even though I was born in the West, I feel very close to Asia. Sometimes, my sisters tease me, saying that I must have been Asian in a past life. During the Lunar New Year, I always pick an oracle from Kieu, trusting that the spiritual ancestors will offer their guidance to me for the year to come. This year, when I came to live in New Hamlet, I also felt that it was the spiritual ancestors that were bringing me here.

Just recently, I learned that a group of us will go to Thailand to receive the Great Precepts. This news filled my heart with joy and faith. On the day my teacher flew from Thailand back to his homeland, I received the 10 novice precepts. Now, it is my turn to visit Asia, the home of my spiritual ancestors, at this very special moment on my monastic path. A full circle will then be completed. The ancestors are calling me home.

Meeting my Teacher

Dr. Hà Vĩnh Thọ

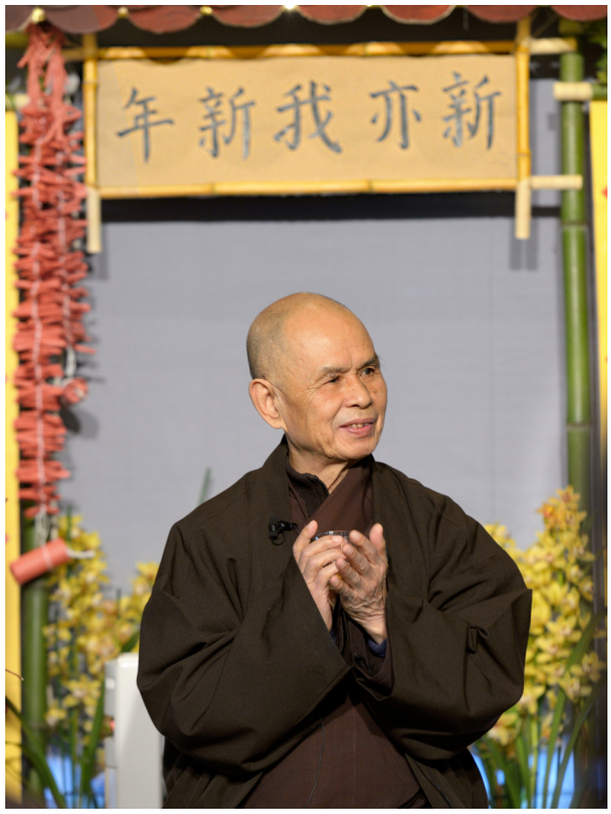
Dr. Ha Vinh Tho (Chan Dai Tue) is a lay Dharma teacher in the Plum Village tradition. He was the program director of the Gross National Happiness Center (GNH) of the country of Bhutan from 2012 to 2018. He holds a PhD in psychology and education from Geneva University, Switzerland.

I was born from a Vietnamese father and a French mother. I grew up in many countries, but mostly in Europe and I first visited Vietnam with my father in 1982. I was 31 years old.

Although I grew up abroad, I felt a connection to the country of my paternal ancestors, but it was limited because I had not learned Vietnamese as a child. My uncle Mr. Ha Van Lau was the ambassador of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam to France and lived in Paris, and when he came for working sessions to the United Nations in Geneva, he often visited us, as we lived nearby.

At that time, we lived in a community that took care of children with intellectual disabilities, and my uncle often told us we should create something similar, to support the disabled children in Vietnam. During this first visit to Vietnam, I met several members of my family, including one uncle who was a well-known Buddhist sculptor, and his son who was a painter. Both father and son had been students of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh in the sixties and they asked me if I had had the chance to meet with Thay who now lived in France. I was embarrassed to admit that I had never heard of him – in those days Thay was not so well known in Europe yet.

When I returned to Europe, I wrote a letter to Thay asking if we could come and visit. His close disciple Sister Chan Khong wrote back a very friendly letter inviting us to come and visit the newly opened Plum Village center in south-west France. She also sent an English edition of *The Miracle of Mindfulness* that was published in Vietnam. I read the book with great interest, but for some reason it took us several years before my wife Lisi and I visited Plum Village for the first time in the late eighties.



Tet 2014

When we arrived, we were right away invited to have tea with Thay and Sister Chan Khong, and we thought at the time that it was usual for newcomers to be invited to Thay's hermitage. In fact, Thay knew many of my relatives because my family was also from Hue, his hometown. One of my uncles and his son had been close students of his, and had illustrated some of his books. Furthermore, Lisi also has a Swiss cousin that Thay had met in the sixties in the U.S., because he belonged to the first batch of Westerners who ordained as Zen monks in the San Francisco Zen Temple founded by Suzuki Roshi in California. So, arriving in Plum Village for the first time almost felt like coming to a family reunion.

The first time I heard Thay give a Dharma Talk, I was deeply moved, in fact more than once, I found myself crying while listening to the teachings. Not because I was sad, but because it touched my heart so deeply. I knew that until then, my understanding of compassion had been quite shallow, too theoretical, but when I was in the presence of Thay,

I had a direct experience of lived compassion united with a wisdom so vast that he could express it in very simple words without losing its depth.

I knew I had met my teacher.

From then on, we went regularly for retreats to Plum Village, along with our children, and we had the chance to develop a very deep connection with Thay. For me it was also a wonderful opportunity to reconnect with my Vietnamese roots.

Thay was able to share with the world the best of traditional Vietnamese culture and through him, many Vietnamese felt proud of their origins and could share it with their children. They were reminded of their ancestral roots even while living abroad. His foreign students developed a profound admiration for the beauty and depth of Vietnamese culture and spirituality.



Ancestors altar at Magnolia Grove Monastery
Photo by Jamie Hadnagy

As a child, we had an ancestor altar in my home, but it did not mean much to me. After visiting Plum Village and listening to Thay teaching on the importance of both biological and spiritual lineages; ancestor worship became very meaningful. To this day I have an ancestor altar in my home, and each morning I offer incense, fresh fruits and tea.

We were some of Thay's first students to have a chance to go back to Vietnam at a time when few foreigners were visiting. Thay was happy to receive news and pictures from his homeland and especially from his hometown Hue, his root temple Tu Hieu and his many disciples and friends. When we came back to Europe, we gave Thay a book with many pictures we had taken for him from the places he knew.

In his Dharma talks Thay would often quote traditional Vietnamese folk tales, the *Kim Van Kieu*, figures from Vietnamese history such as King Tran Thai Tong who became a Buddhist monk, and great Vietnamese teachers such as Buddhist Master Khuong Tang Hoi. Therefore, alongside learning about the Buddha Dharma, his students also learned a great deal about Vietnamese culture and history.

Thay strongly encouraged us to develop educational projects in Vietnam, first for the children with disabilities and then also more widely. This is how my wife and I, with the help of some educator friends, created Eurasia Foundation. The two people who supported us from the beginning were Ambassador Ha Van Lau and Thay.

Looking back at the many years we had the chance to be in Thay's presence and to receive his teachings, I am filled with a deep sense of gratitude; he never asked anything from us, never expected anything, left us completely free, but he was always there for us. He himself was a living embodiment of his teachings, I had the chance to meet him quite often on different occasions but he was always the same, when meeting with famous or important individuals or with a simple common person. He especially liked having children around him and when he practiced walking meditation, he often held the hands of the children. He offered everyone the same compassionate and full attention.

I was also impressed with how he was an amazing "Ambassador" for Vietnam. To many people around the world, he was a true representative of Vietnamese culture. When I moved to Bhutan at the Gross National Happiness Center, I wanted to invite Thay to visit the country. I discussed this project with the Prime Minister of Bhutan, Jigmi Y Thinley. The Prime Minister was very supportive of it and wanted it to be a State Visit. I also had a chance to offer a copy of the book *The Art of Power* signed by Thay to His Majesty the Fifth King, and he told me that he had read Thay's book *Old Path White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha* several times. The King even knew some parts of the book by heart and he held Thay in great esteem.

Unfortunately, the visit of Thay to Bhutan never happened. First we had to postpone it because of the national elections, and then when it would have been possible from the Bhutanese side, Thay's health did not allow for it anymore. Nonetheless, Thay's teachings and practices have had a major influence on the way we conduct the Gross National Happiness (GNH) programs, and mindfulness is a core part of all our programs. Therefore, in a way,

although Thay did not come to Bhutan in his physical body, his Dharma body has been there and is still there, because much of the way we impart GNH is deeply connected with his teachings.

I would like to share two personal anecdotes to show how Thay was teaching us besides the Dharma talks and the formal meditation sessions.

Once, in Switzerland, I was walking with Thay. I had just come back from Vietnam and I was sharing about my visit to Tu Hieu monastery. He had not been back to Vietnam yet, and I was sure he would be happy to hear about his root temple, and so he was; but I guess I got a bit too carried away, and I was not really mindful of where I was, there and then. So, at one point, Thay stopped, made me stand still, smiled and pointing at the earth under our feet, said, "Tu Hieu is right here, right now," and then we continued our walk.

Another time, I was having dinner with Thay and Sister Chan Khong, and I was sharing about the educational projects we were implementing in Vietnam. I was very enthusiastic and probably not very mindful of what I was eating. Again, Thay smiled, made a small gesture with his hand to stop me and asked, "Are you eating projects or are you eating rice?" I felt a bit embarrassed, but I was also grateful to be reminded of truly living in the present moment.

A true Zen Master, he was always attentive to help us live the mindfulness practice in every moment of our life, but he did so very gently and with humor and compassion.

When I heard of the passing of Thay, to be frank, I did not feel sad. I felt a deep sense of gratitude and love. I am aware what a blessing it is to meet such a great master in my lifetime. I do not feel that Thay is gone. He lives on in his teachings, in his many disciples; he has had a tremendous impact on this planet, he has brought so much wisdom, compassion, and a sense of ethical values to so many people all over the world. His spirit is more present than ever, and the people of Vietnam can be proud to have produced such a prominent son who has contributed to radiating the spirit of Vietnam in the ten directions. ☙



Ha Vinh Tho (in the center) with Plum Village monastics offering Thay's books to the Bhutanese royal family in 2012

Being Rainbow

Brother Chân Trời Đức Định

I am a rainbow, a beautiful stroke of art,
Overarching Earth in the free sky.

I am here for you!
I am an object of your mind, and you are an object of my mind,
We are each other's.
Thank you for being here, as you are.
Without you I couldn't be.
You make my life real and beautiful.
Do you know you can see me this way because you stand where you stand?
Take a little step to one side, and you may see me differently,
You might not even see me anymore - we are fragile beings!

I have the blue color, and I have the pink color,
I have both pink and blue – and many other colors.
In the small blue box in your mind, the one with the blue label,
I feel a little tight.
Would you allow me a little bit of pink, too?
If you have difficulties to accept my pinkness
While I am in the blue box,
Remember I am an object of your mind.
We are not separated: I am this way because you are that way,
And one can't avoid oneself.
I'll do just the same and listen to what you have to say,
for your blue box is mine too.
For your happiness is mine too.
In fact I am free from all that color thing, and you too.
Let us accept pinkness in blue boxes, and such and such,
It might help both of us feel happier,
And we'll be able to enjoy each other.

You may be mostly red, orange, pink, or blue,
And we both dwell in the same rainbow.
Between you and I, no real boundaries,
Look, I send my hand across colors and reach out to you.
Ha! Look! My hand has the same color as you!

When sunlight and rain aren't seen
What is our color my dear rainbow?
The water in us, is it pink, blue, green?
How about the air, the earth and the heat in us,
Are they blue, are they pink?

Looking at ourselves through a Diamond eye,
What shall we see?
What is our true color?

I love to fly in the great sky,
And swim across from one box to the next!

Most important is to arrive into my body, mind and breath,
As they unfold in the now.
Let them decide which color they'll manifest.
Coming home to myself and again,
I get to discover my true self.

A last little thing I'd like to say:
Holding the flag of inclusiveness,
Adorning unwavering inclusiveness,
Whether or not the flag has rainbow colors,
Healing and peace manifest in this very moment,
and is communicated to all in the three times.

Thank you, my friends, for being here with me,
Thanks to you I can enjoy myself and learn to live and to love together.



A Mysterious Journey Home

Sister Chân Lạc Hạnh

On 18 December 2022, the novice family (the "Red Cedar" family) was ordained in Thai Plum Village. They are the new generation of novices who carry Thay's name in their Dharma name - the novice brothers carry the word Nhat *("One") and the sisters the word* Hanh *("Action").*
Here, we share some reflections from Sister Chan Lac Hanh ("True Action of Happiness") on Day 2 of her monastic journey.

✦

What an incredibly beautiful, mysterious journey life is! I sit here in the pre-dawn morning, listening to the night creatures and distinct sounds of the countryside in Thailand, contemplating the sheer magnitude of what it is to be alive and awake to the profoundness of life, and all the causes and conditions that bring me here today, a recently ordained novice in the Plum Village tradition.

How wondrous it is that a baby born in Korea, adopted by Belgian parents in Italy, grew up in the United States and felt compelled to seek a spiritual path through yoga at the age of 16, bringing her to India to practice with her teachers for 18 years, traveling, teaching yoga, and living around the world to finally reunite with her biological, birth parents in Korea, which gave rise to a deeply embedded, overwhelming suffering, and finally washing up on the shores of the practices and teachings of Thay and taking refuge in New Hamlet in Plum Village, France.

When does the seed of monastic aspiration manifest? Perhaps it is deep and ancient, inherited from one's ancestors; or a life already lived through many previous lifetimes. Only in stillness and silence can this seed be observed deep in oneself, breaking through the shell of one's social conditioning and parental expectations; growing stronger and higher in one's heart; bursting through one's own inherent resistances and self-imposed obstacles until it fully blooms through the care and attention, cultivated from one's own practices and received from the collective teachings, guidance, wisdom, support, and love from the beloved sangha.

Who can actually comprehend all the different elements, causes, and conditions that unite 20 monastic aspirants from Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, France, and Korea, ranging in age from 16 to 49, to ordain as novice monastics in the year of the tiger (Thay's year), and in the physical presence of Sister Chan Khong and the noble, multi-fold sangha with Venerables and elders from around the world in a most beautiful, peaceful ordination ceremony in Plum Village, Thailand. The Buddha, all our spiritual and family ancestors, Thay, and family and friends around the world, although physically absent, could be deeply felt supporting us with their energetic presence.

Where this journey of freedom will carry each of us as we scatter in the ten directions to our respective monasteries is a mystery. We stand united as the Red Cedar family, our roots deeply intertwined. And now that we have a path, we have nothing to fear. We know that with each mindful step and each mindful breath, we are arriving in our true home, transforming our suffering and commit to helping others do the same, so that all beings can touch true happiness and peace.

Life is a miraculous gift. How sweet it is to be fully present to receive it and to taste the true happiness that is born out of the goodness of suffering. May we all be able to touch this in our lifetimes.

With deep love, respect, and gratitude to the totality of life, I bow to you.

Sister Chan Lac Hanh
(True Action of Happiness)
Plum Village Thailand, 24 December, 2022 ☙





The Taste of the Insight

Brother Chân Trời Thiện Chí

Very soon after I received my aspirant robe, I realized that I needed to find ways to nourish myself other than the ones I knew as a lay person. The path I chose leads us to transformation and healing, and the medicine to achieve these are the practices of mindfulness, concentration and insight. Insight is a real source of strength, giving us confidence and energy and leading us to understanding and self-acceptance. Herewith, I would like to share with you three insights important to me and some key elements of my journey in exploring insight.

Conversation With Pain

It was a cold, rainy evening at the monastery, and I was on my way to the cooler - ten minutes from my room. I had not taken my raincoat with me and was walking fast so as not to get wet. It was very dark and I could see almost nothing. At some point I felt that I was walking over grass and mud that was not supposed to be there, and I realized that I had lost the way. At that moment, I took a step to the side and hit a large rock hard with my lower leg. Immediately I put my hand on the injured area and felt a warm, sticky liquid and a sharp, burning pain. I had to stop and slowly walk back to the residence. Later, a brother helped me clean and bandage the wound on my leg.

That night I could not fall asleep. My mind was very restless and the pain was severe. I decided to breathe with a small mantra that manifested in my mind, "Breathing in, the whole universe is healing me, breathing out, I relax." After breathing with the pain for some time, I slowly began to feel the warmth under the blanket and the stillness of the night. I began to feel the bandage covering the wound, filled with my brother's care. I realized that tomorrow there will be a warm breakfast for me from the sangha, a brother who will drive me to the doctor, and another brother who will help me with my responsibilities, so that I can rest and heal. At that moment I could feel that all these conditions were the healing response of the universe. I felt love and care like a mother's embrace. The pain continued to be strong, but I could feel the warm presence of the universe in every moment, and I fell asleep relieved and grateful.

Mirror

A few years ago, I went to the beach with some monastic brothers. I love the sea very much, so I felt happy and fresh - my smile reached up to my ears.

One morning I woke up and had breakfast with my brothers. Already excited by the thought of going to the beach and having a coffee while listening to the sound of the waves, I enthusiastically went to brush my teeth and put on my swimsuit. As I entered one of the campsite's changing rooms, I noticed a large mirror on the wall. Somehow, I started reacting to seeing my reflection. The old, bitter feeling of not liking myself and my body began to permeate me from the top of my head to my ears, neck and back. I stopped changing and looked at myself in the mirror. "Why do I dislike my body so much?" I began to look at my long thin arms, my big hands, my skin and my narrow chest. And at that moment I realized—I don't like my body because my body is the same as my father's. When I see my body, I see my father. "Oh, no..." I whispered.

This was a very long and silent moment. How could I have lived for so long without seeing how much my father is present everywhere in my body?

As a child, I was a little afraid of my father. His loud and deep voice, his beard and hairy chest, his heavy energy and sometimes aggressive way of walking and talking, the unpleasant smell in his bedroom after drinking alcohol were things I never liked and never wanted to be associated with. I realized that I was trying to create a person who had nothing in common with my father - including my way of speaking, my sense of humour, my style of dress, my friends, my livelihood, etc. It was as if there was a mechanism inside me that kept checking to see if my actions were protecting me from becoming like my father. In that moment, in the changing room, I realized that trying to run away from my father is trying to run away from myself.

Lunch With Brother Dao Quang

I remember during the last Rains Retreat there was a moment when I had to take care of many things and felt stressed because of it. When I am under pressure, I don't say what I mean but something else, my ability to listen decreases and I ask illogical questions. At such times, the feelings of fear, anxiety and worry find wonderful conditions to blossom and bear fruit.

One morning, I went by my friend Br. Dao Quang. After my grumpy greeting, he looked at me and asked what was wrong. Before I could answer, the lunch bell rang. Then we served our food and a few minutes later we were already talking in the teahouse. I said,

"It seems like I'm always looking for opportunities to feel stressed. Whether I'm in the monastery or out, the way I organize my life always involves a lot of stress."

"Oh, that's a good observation. Go further, go deeper. Go to the place that is painful," Br. Dao Quang said.

"No matter what responsibility I take on, I always get into doing more and more things until I'm exhausted. It's always the same story. It's like a race against myself. It's like I'm trying to convince myself that I'm good, that I'm good enough. That I'm just as good as the others... It looks like deep down I believe that everyone is better than me. It's as if the basis of my doing is just to prove to myself that I'm not so bad... Obviously, there is such a huge trauma of not feeling good enough, or such a deep inferiority complex that it creates a huge amount of life energy. Enough energy to work under stress and pressure for years without giving up."

Insight = Practice?

In my very limited experience, insights like to stay hidden under a few layers of unpleasant wrapping paper. They are like fruits covered with a thick, prickly and smelly skin. To get to the soft pulp, I may have to relax and accept the painful covering and make it a part of me. Asking a question, like "Why don't I like my body?" or "Why am I always stressed?" helps me gently direct my focus. When I'm on the verge of insight, I usually give up fighting the pain and open myself up to becoming more and more vulnerable.

It has not been the greatest happiness to understand that my father, with all his good and not so good qualities, is already inside me. This realization has not made me happier, but humbler, more grounded and less special. I am not someone who is better than everyone else. A few years ago, I would not have been able to bear the weight of this realization. It would have smashed me.



But now I have already begun to open my heart to my father. Every day I allow myself to be my father and to love my father within me. I don't fight it anymore. Sometimes I still feel a little bit like a victim, but I don't fight with that feeling anymore either.



After talking with Br. Dao Quang, I felt a big hole inside me, almost in a third of my body. How uninspiring is it to understand that a huge generator of my life energy is the desire to be as good as others, isn't it? If you ask me how this realization tasted, I would say ten times as bitter as a bitter melon. I don't know how to handle it yet. Since the realization is fresh, I am still very emotional about it. I just know that I need to be more present for this feeling inside me. Whether it will change or not doesn't matter right now.

In the book *The Art of Living*, Thay says in reference to the insight of impermanence "We can make the insight of impermanence into a living insight that is with us in every moment." Regarding the wonderful insight I had about the healing presence of the universe, I ask myself, "Can I live this insight in every moment of my daily life?"

an old home in a new land

Brother Chân Trời Minh Lương

This article is based on a journal entry written in September 2022 in Plum Village Thailand.

Dear Journal,

I can't believe I've lived in Thailand for five months now! Only one more month to go before returning to Deer Park in the U.S. One month before I taste the burritos and acai smoothies of Southern California and leave behind the delicious Vietnamese soups of Thai Plum Village: phở, bánh canh, and mì quảng. The brothers and sisters here are mostly Vietnamese, and living among them, I find my perspective shifting in unexpected ways. I've been struck by the community's deep appreciation for the monastic path and their reverence for teachers, both those living and those already passed away. Never before have I been surrounded by so much energy and enthusiasm for studying the Dharma and discovering the gems of wisdom unearthed by our ancestors.

This morning, a group of brothers and sisters presented to the sangha a new Thai Plum Village newsletter. One sister shared about an article in the inaugural issue on the parallel verses in the Root Temple (the Root Temple is called Từ Hiếu, in the



city of Hue, central Vietnam). These verses are prominently displayed in the main hall of the temple, on either side of the altar, but because they are written in classical Chinese, many of the brothers and sisters don't know what they mean.

This article shines light on the verses, giving our siblings a chance to learn the translation and, through the article's commentary, discover the deeper meaning beyond the words. My sister's eyes shone with excitement as she shared, each phrase punctuated by an enthusiastic smile. With this article, she revealed another gem for her brothers and sisters to enjoy, another gold coin in the treasure trove of our Zen lineage. I could feel her pride and delight in our rich tradition and, at the same time, her sense of place, of knowing her roots.

Of course, she is right to be joyful. There are so many things to discover in the work of our ancestors, and there seem to be countless ancestral teachers. Who can say how many Dharma jewels are contained in their twinkling eyes? When I think of our spiritual lineage, I feel as if, after hiking through a dense, obscure forest, I've come upon the worn but dignified remains of an old stone house. It is solid, patient and persevering despite all the years gone by. I wonder, if it could speak, what stories it would tell. Who lived in this house? What were they like? What did they hope for and dream of? What did they fear? As I contemplate the worn stones of this old house, all those people who came before me manifest, present there with me. I can't see or hear them directly, but the forest lets me know they're there. I hear them through the rustling trees, and I see them in the house they once built.

In Deer Park, we sometimes come across circular impressions on the tops of large boulders. They are perfectly round, nothing that could be produced by the natural cycle of rain and erosion. They are the mortars created by the native people who once lived and thrived on the land we now call Deer Park. When we see these, we're struck by a sense of awe and wonder. The distant past seems to reach out and take our hand as we feel the rock's smooth surface. How ingenious, how resourceful were our ancestors? We could never imagine living in a valley like ours without the help of the grocery store down the road and the water pumped up from the city. We're grateful that we aren't the first people to live here, that we have wise elders who have come before us. Even if we don't know their names, we feel a connection.

When I was growing up, it was the holidays, like Christmas and the Fourth of July, when I felt most connected to my culture and to my ancestors. I remember joyful traditions like decorating the Christmas tree or watching the fireworks, and as a young child, surrounded by my family in an atmosphere of celebration, feeling warm and safe. Life made sense. I had a place where I belonged. As I sat there this morning, in the meditation hall of Plum Village Thailand, I was halfway around the world, thousands of miles from my homeland. I was in a foreign country, listening to a foreign language, and yet I felt that same belonging. I couldn't help but smile with her, my sister in the Dharma, this young nun from Vietnam, so energized and animated by her spiritual lineage. How wonderful to be part of this great stream of wisdom, to be born in a land dotted by ancient temples, and to have renowned ancestors who have transmitted deep and profound teachings. How wonderful to have a home, like an old stone house in the forest, keeping her warm and safe. A house that has stood for many years.

As I looked into my sister's eyes on this sunny morning, I knew this house would continue to stand from the present onwards, for our descendants and their descendants, shining light and offering refuge for all future generations, and that one day someone will come upon a clearing in the dense forest and see those old, worn stones, and wonder if that house could speak, what stories it would tell.





Interbeing — The Spirit of Community and Human Connection

Kim Nhật Nguyễn

With an aspiration of practicing deeply and dwelling in Plum Village for the three months Rains Retreat, I packed my bags and excitedly and nervously, flew across the Atlantic Ocean. Landing in France, right away I was warped into a different culture. I smiled as my ears attuned to hearing the different languages. I could feel my heart opening as I popped out of the bubble I created for myself at home.

Arriving at Plum Village, the familiarity of the practice and the sangha made me feel a deep sense of connection. For many years, I have been practicing and contemplating *interbeing*. Similar to any new concept, I am able to visualize and reflect on it intellectually. Only when I am lucky, am I able to receive a felt sense of it. My eyes widened and my heart fluttered at the amazement of the sangha embracing me and me embracing the sangha: giving, receiving, learning, practicing together as an organism.

I witnessed interbeing in action on my rotation team, especially on cooking day. After finishing my usual responsibility of cutting and washing vegetables, two types of rice are steamed, a few entrees are made and a delicious pot of soup is ready to be served. This is for a community of up to 200 practitioners on a regular week. After my first few cooking days, I stood in the serving line amazed and surprised at the many dishes that were offered —it was as if I had not even been in the kitchen! I saw the carrots or leeks I had washed and cut in a bowl of soup and knew that many hands were there for it to manifest, even though I did not directly see the boiling pot.

The meticulous planning, the contribution of each practitioner in ceremonies, sitting, walking practices and other daily life activities can be broken down into tiny actions that may not seem important. Yet at the same time, all of it is very important for our sangha to create a "bubble of mindfulness."

What was special for me during this Rains Retreat was collaborating with the inter-hamlet Care Taking Council (CTC) to support the Lay Day of Mindfulness hosted by one of the three hamlets each Thursday.



On these days, the monastery is entrusted to lay practitioners from all three hamlets while the monastics gather at another hamlet. The interbeing of these days of practice are incredible and clearly, no one individual can do it. If someone forgot to set up the extra serving table, then the queue will be longer than usual. If someone forgot to fill up the dish-washing basins or put out the sponges, well then, the dishes won't be washed! Organizing "Lay Days" opens a path for lay practitioners to contribute to the Rains Retreat, and to trust in ourselves that we also know how to build sangha as lay practitioners. I tasted a very small bite of the many responsibilities our monastic sangha does everyday to keep the monastery and the practice alive.

The Plum Village practice center is truly a net of Indra, holding space for an international community from all over Mother Earth to come home to, to take refuge in, and to learn to understand one another. For the first time in my life, I must have come in contact with thousands of people from all over the world, coming and going every week or fortnight. I've established a closer connection with lay friends who have stayed here for three months. Interestingly, I feel at home and not lonely.

Loneliness is a common experience of many immigrants such as myself, regardless of being a part of many communities "out there." My family's narrative has been, "we just have our immediate family here in the United States," and our friends and community are the closest to having relatives nearby. Living in an individualistic society further increases this inner sense of loneliness and decreases the sense of belonging.

Life here in the monastery reminded me that the feeling of loneliness is a signal for a need of connection; that nothing is wrong with this loneliness. I can clearly see that living in an individualistic society has denied a part of my innate human need—of having a tribe and to belong. *Neuroscience has shown us that our brain is wired for connection and to be in community with one another*. Over the course of the Rains Retreat, I connected with other first, second, or third generation immigrants, and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) / BAME (Black, Asian, minority ethnic) practitioners. My experience of loneliness and longing for a community where we all belong was reflected back to me again and again. I cannot help but ask, *how did we as a society get here?* And how do we bring back our innate sense of connection with one another so that it is a natural part of our life?

In Thay's writing and songs, he expressed a longing for his homeland, Vietnam. Touching on his insight from a song of "Quê hương nơi này" (loosely translated as "Home, In This Place"), I feel connected to his experience and the insight of arriving in his inner homeland and allowing it to manifest outwardly through sangha building and establishing practice centers.

As a bicultural individual, my birthplace in Vietnam does not feel 100% home. The US also does not feel completely like a true home. When I am at Plum Village monasteries, I feel both parts of the East and the West in me and around me. I have a sense of arriving at an inner and outer home, both at the same time. The monastic and lay practitioners became my spiritual siblings, teachers, and friends. Here, the fruits of practice and interbeing can penetrate deeply into my consciousness. And I know I am receiving the seeds and flowers Thay and the multi-fold sangha has been tending to for many decades.

Yours on the path,
Kim Nhật Nguyễn
(Chân Thôn Xuân - True Spring Hamlet)

Removing the Blindfold to Enjoy Autumn's Beauty

Brother Chân Trời Khiết Tâm

Eight and a half years have passed since I moved to Plum Village. I lived in Upper Hamlet as a lay-member with the sangha for more than two years. Both my aspiration and my stubbornness were really big and I wholeheartedly dived into the learning process of taking care of my body, feelings and mind in the midst of communal living. While I was on a steep learning curve, wanting to do everything *fully*, my life was filled with deep contentment, which is still the case today. I also learned to make compost near the Happy Farm, which was at first challenging and then increasingly fun (the second completely unforeseen) - a nice symbolism of how experience by means of the practice shifts from suffering and confusion to wellbeing and understanding.

I ordained in December 2017 as part of the Poplar tree family - what happiness! Living in the monks' residence I have been so lucky to share rooms with Br. Phap Dung, then with Br. Phap Ung and more recently with Br. Phap Huu, thereby having a clear example of the path manifested, giving me concrete examples of ways in which I could possibly realize it.

What can I say? All my questions have been answered and all I had wished for that brought me to Plum Village has been fulfilled. Even more - the happiness of practicing in the sangha is beyond what I had imagined before. Maybe I was like someone who had a blindfold on for lifetimes. We can have a vague intuition (which could symbolize bodhicitta) of the beauty of nature's autumn, which



is then *experienced* when blindfold is taken off with the help of friends. At the same time, I still need to carefully turn the compost. It is fun as well!

In May 2022, together with three brothers, I had the pleasure of going on a ten-day-tour to Austria, the country I am from. I was so happy to participate in bringing the practice body of awareness and true happiness there; thereby letting my Plum Village identity and my Austrian identity blend naturally. It felt like bringing light, and my blood family has been happy with this blended manifestation of me.

Now I would like to briefly share some recent experiences of life in the sangha with you.

Office Work

Working in the office in Upper Hamlet, we read and respond to many emails with questions and requests of many kinds. Some are long, some quite short. Each of the friends' writing is unique, with regards to their relationship to the spiritual practice and to Plum Village. That relationship is sometimes new, sometimes random; or it is deep and has great aspiration within it.

Mostly I feel inspired, drawn, to "listen" deeply to these emails. It is not a question of how much time I take for the email, but rather it relates to my quality of presence at that moment. I don't imagine a face or something similar, but there is an intuition about that person which I lean on to some degree. Then I will respond in a way that is hopefully appropriate to that person. I want to keep the door of compassion open and to be open to the possibility of an authentic, unique connection, of inter-being. The work is nourishing and joyful.

One day I remembered Thay sharing on how in the sixties and seventies, before preparing and sending a care package for a child in his homeland, he looked deeply at the child's photograph. Thay's insight and compassion is certainly way beyond mine; still I feel connected to this and this is a direction I am inspired to go in.

Joyfully Together

I have seen a tendency in me to believe that we, as individuals, have to be pure, perfect, to be enlightened or truly happy. Looking at myself or others in such a grasping way, I see many problems, formations or knots in myself or others. How on earth can we reach well-being if there are so many knots and problems in us? I have an example, an image, for this grasping kind of thinking: When an acupuncturist doctor came to Plum Village, so many of the brothers and sisters went to consult her. A thought coming up in me at times was, *it seems our brothers and sisters don't have much faith in their capacity of self-healing*.

I have experienced that in the sangha, by practicing mindfulness, concentration and insight, my way of looking at things changes for the better, and the insight arises that in Plum Village being a monastic is not only about oneself and that here we don't have to be a perfect individual. So every day, I am encouraged or challenged to see the interconnection and not to get caught in the details, in fixations. Then I don't need to think any more about the mistakes and problems that I perceive in individuals. *Joyfully Together* is the name of a book by Thay on communal living, and this pair of words describe that shift very well. Sangha life and Thay's teachings give me plenty of opportunities to make that shift in my way of looking. Do you remember what I wrote above on composting? This is a similar process.

My Notebook

After months of not writing in my notebook, suddenly something comes to mind. I welcome it and write it down in order to later either distill short practices of insight out of the material or refine one I already have. Those are simple, short *gathas*, short phrases of insights (in the spirit of Buddhist meditation) that I can breathe with and look at things within my daily life.

Sometimes what I scribble down simply communicates something to myself or other people. In both cases the store consciousness gives me the words that inspire me, something that maybe fits for me, for us. If a detective read my notes, they could deduce what my mind has been focusing on and the fruit of the past weeks of practicing mindfulness, concentration and insight. The paragraphs above on Office Work and Joyfully Together have also manifested in that manner. Would you like to guess what I have been mindful of in the past months? ☙











"The mindful manner on 'receiving a reminder with joined palms, saying thank you.' I found it so simple, and yet so liberating. Outside, in the workplace, if anyone reminds you, they expect a quick reply, something back. But in the monastery, the person who is receiving a reminder can have a lot of freedom and insight.

Firstly, I try to receive any reminder with a lot of gratitude, because the other person had the courage and compassion to share something difficult. Afterwards, even if I totally disagreed in the beginning, I wait a few days to check inside, 'is it true?' By not reacting emotionally, remaining humble, sometimes I discover how that feedback was right. Then, I reflect that without this mindful manner, I would never have seen that about myself."
—Br. Thien Y

"For me, not drinking alcohol. It's not that I did it often, but sometimes I did. Now, after a long time of not doing that, I can compare then and now. I can see how much freedom there is in not being in that state of mind, where I wouldn't have had much control over what happened to my body and mind.

Also, our precept on chastity makes me feel free to interact with clarity with others, knowing where I stand in any relationship. This way, I feel free to direct my energy onto the spiritual path."
—Br. Niem Thuan

"Working together with the sangha, as an organism, makes me feel free from individual concerns, and I can enjoy working with more ease." *—Sr. Lam Hy*

What is the mindful manner that gives you the most freedom, and why?

"I like to practice not chatting while working. I can feel the energy of stopping and calming in my heart, and I can contemplate more clearly my body and mind." *—Sr. An Niem*

"Mindful cooking. While I work, I can be aware of my breathing, of what I am doing, of the thoughts and speech I produce... being aware of what I am doing clearly, I feel very free and joyful."
—Br. Ruong Duc

"The practice of knocking three times before entering a room, helps me to stop. Before, I used to knock as if I wanted to bring down the door! Then, I started to practice the mindful manner, but only the outer form, like a robot. However, day by day, that practice has become a very beautiful new habit. I enjoyed seeing this practice bloom naturally, without having to feel forced.

Also, there are always people coming and going in the sangha, and this practice of knocking has become my way of acknowledging the person whose room I am entering, to really cherish every relationship." *—Sr. Tuong Niem*

"I really like all the mindful manners. I like very much how they create harmony among us, and that is a kind of freedom already, because it makes me feel more at ease. I also feel safe, knowing all my brothers and sisters practice the mindful manners and precepts. This is also a kind of freedom, to feel safe and spacious." *—Br. Niem Xa*

"The mindful manner about sharing a room helped me to become more aware of others' needs - which are often different from mine. More and more, I am learning to interact, to double check, and to hear what is said and what is not being said - something I find so interesting." *—Br. Dinh Tuc*

"Bowing. When I had some relationship problems, I still practiced bowing, and recited the gatha, 'A lotus for you, a Buddha to be.' It was not easy, but I chose to keep practising it fully. Slowly, I found more freedom, more insight: I saw our ancestors practicing together with us, in us. Finally, we could reconcile and begin anew, and I recognised how freeing this practice of cultivating openness had been to me." *—Sr. Hien Tam*

Thay is still Thay

Sister Chân Định Nghiêm

After a major stroke like Thay's, seven years could seem like an endless span of helplessness, sorrow, and despair to a non-practitioner. But with his experience and realizations, Thay remained the Teacher—proactive in each decision and continuously guiding us in the practice. Thay reminded us to practice dwelling in the present moment, instead of missing him as the Teacher we knew in the past or mourning for him now, or fearing for the future. Thanks to his teachings, we enjoyed countless moments of joy and happiness with him throughout those seven years.

Thay taught us to practice mindfulness with the entirety of our store consciousness and not merely with mind consciousness. Since my first day in Plum Village, I have never seen Thay take a single step without mindfulness. With his ceaseless practice over the years, mindfulness has followed Thay into his store consciousness. Before falling ill, Thay once told us that in his dreams he saw himself in walking meditation, enjoying nature, cherishing each green palm leaf.

While in a coma due to the stroke, Thay continued to breathe in mindfulness, never once losing his mindfulness. That morning, the doctor looked at the scans, shook his head, and predicted that Thay had only a day or two left to live. The monastic children of Thay immediately flew to France from all directions to pay their respects to Thay, one last time.

The doctors were surprised to see that Thay's blood oxygen level was still high at 96% to 99%, and his breathing remained deep and regular without the need for a ventilator. This is the breath that nourishes, the breath that heals. Two days passed. Thay still lay quietly, breathed evenly, and radiated such an indescribable energy of peace that the doctors and nurses liked coming into his room. One resident doctor often came to Thay's room whenever she was exhausted or stressed. She simply stood looking at Thay for a long time, quietly and relaxed, before continuing to work.

Days passed. Thay continued to lie quietly and breathe evenly. The doctors and nurses could not do anything in terms of treatment. They could only watch and wait. Wait for Thay's decision.

On the fourth night, Thay suddenly opened his eyes. He looked intently at each of the attendants surrounding his bed. His first movement was to lift his left arm—weakly—to pat the head of the attendant closest to him. From that moment on, Thay slowly came out of his coma with clear consciousness. Three days later, Thay looked and smiled at each attendant—a smile that was familiar and filled with love.

Just two and a half weeks after his stroke and coma, Thay independently began to practice moving his arms and legs at night. Exactly one month later, Thay's digestive system returned to its regular functioning. The chief doctor arranged for physiotherapists to come daily to train Thay in exercises for his arms and legs, practicing sitting up, and swallowing food. After that, Thay was transferred to the hospital's rehabilitation center for further practice in pronunciation, eating, standing, cycling, and skillfully controlling his limbs.

During the first few days, the nurses fed Thay. But only a few days later, Thay took hold of the spoon and scooped food for himself. Every day, Thay gave the doctors and nurses one surprise after another. There were moments when Thay laughed out loud, very happily. When his attendants along with the doctor and nurse helped Thay to sit up for the first time, they saw that he had already tried to find a way to sit cross-legged on the hospital bed. He continued many more times to practice sitting crossed-legged like that.

Sometimes, Thay sat in meditation on a cushion placed directly on his bed, at other times on a chair for 30 to 45 minutes. If any of the training exercises seemed to be designed for children, Thay shook his head and refused them right away. He even waved his hand to greet the doctor and then invited him to leave the room. Gradually, Thay stopped following the instructions of the physiotherapists; and instead, the physiotherapists had to follow Thay. After witnessing the miracles that occurred in Thay

every day, the chief doctor—Dr. Rouanet—declared, "Now I know that I do not understand anything about the human brain!"

When Thay decided to leave the hospital and return to Plum Village, Sister Chan Khong panicked! Back in Plum Village there would be no doctors or nurses by Thay's side, nor a rehabilitation gym with physiotherapists. What would we do? But the doctors were not overly worried. Dr. Rouanet said, "Thay has his own program." Indeed! Back at the Hermitage, Thay revisited every single room despite having to go up the long staircase to the upper floor carried by his attendants. Every day Thay went out to enjoy each tree, the blades of grass, and each rose. He relaxed on the swing under the shade of the three pine trees, which he often called our "three elder brothers." Thay went to visit the growing squash, practiced walking outdoors with the assistance of his attendants, and even meandered with them through the densely woven grove of green bamboo.

An unplanted young dogwood sapling was still sitting in a bag, waiting to be planted. The sisters knew that Thay liked the dogwood flower and had bought it. Thay immediately "commanded" the attendants to dig a hole at a chosen spot, plant the sapling and provide it with ground cover and water. Thay also indicated for the brothers and sisters to restore the old wooden barn, and to hire workers to build a meditation hall at the far end of the Hermitage grounds. Every morning he went out to survey the project.



Thay began to eat more and more, starting with pureed apple and pureed vegetable soup while he was in the hospital. After his return, one day Thay passed by the kitchen and saw a lemon on the table. Straight away Thay pointed to it and indicated that he wanted to taste sourness again! Soon after, Thay wished to try avocado, then rice, then crunchy baguette with all kinds of dishes such as Vietnamese noodle soup (pho, bun rieu)... Every meal of Thay's was a moment of peace and happiness.

Once in a while, Thay and his attendants went into the kitchen and opened the fridge to check what was inside. Sometimes he took a piece of cake or enjoyed some yogurt. The doctors had scheduled to see Thay in two months to assess his eating, and to determine when to stop the nutritional supplements through the stomach tube. A month before the appointment, Thay quietly pulled out the tube and did not let anyone know.

From time to time, Thay visited New Hamlet, Lower Hamlet, Son Ha, and Upper Hamlet, and sometimes stayed for a few days. Thay did not forget to lead us in his wheelchair on walks again along the straight row of fir trees, on his legendary paths.

While visiting the brothers working in the Upper Hamlet office, Thay came across a bronze statue of the Buddha on a shelf. The statue was very artistic with the body and legs gently bent. Thay held the Buddha statue close to his heart and brought it back to his hut. On the wall in the center of the hut hangs one of Thay's Zen circle calligraphies and underneath it stands a wooden table. Thay directed the attendants to clear everything on the table and to place the statue there, to one side of the calligraphy. Thay even indicated to the attendants to turn the statue slightly so that its curvature could be clearly seen.



Waking up the next morning, Thay changed his mind. He was happier when the Buddha statue was centered in front of the Zen circle. The attendant poured a cup of tea for Thay, and temporarily placed it on the table before offering it to him. Straight

away Thay signaled to the attendant to remove the cup—*do not put anything on that Buddha's table!* Since then, every time an attendant forgot this, Thay would remind him.

In July 2015, Thay decided to go to the US to follow the rehabilitation program at the Physical Therapy Center of the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF).

And six months later in January 2016, Thay decided to return to France. Then in December of the same year, Thay decided to go to Thailand.

In August 2017, Thay went to Vietnam to visit his Root Temple, the Tu Hieu Temple in Hue. Less than 24 hours later, Thay left his Root Temple to return to Thailand, arriving while the sangha was in the midst of the Closing Ceremony of the Annual Rains Retreat.

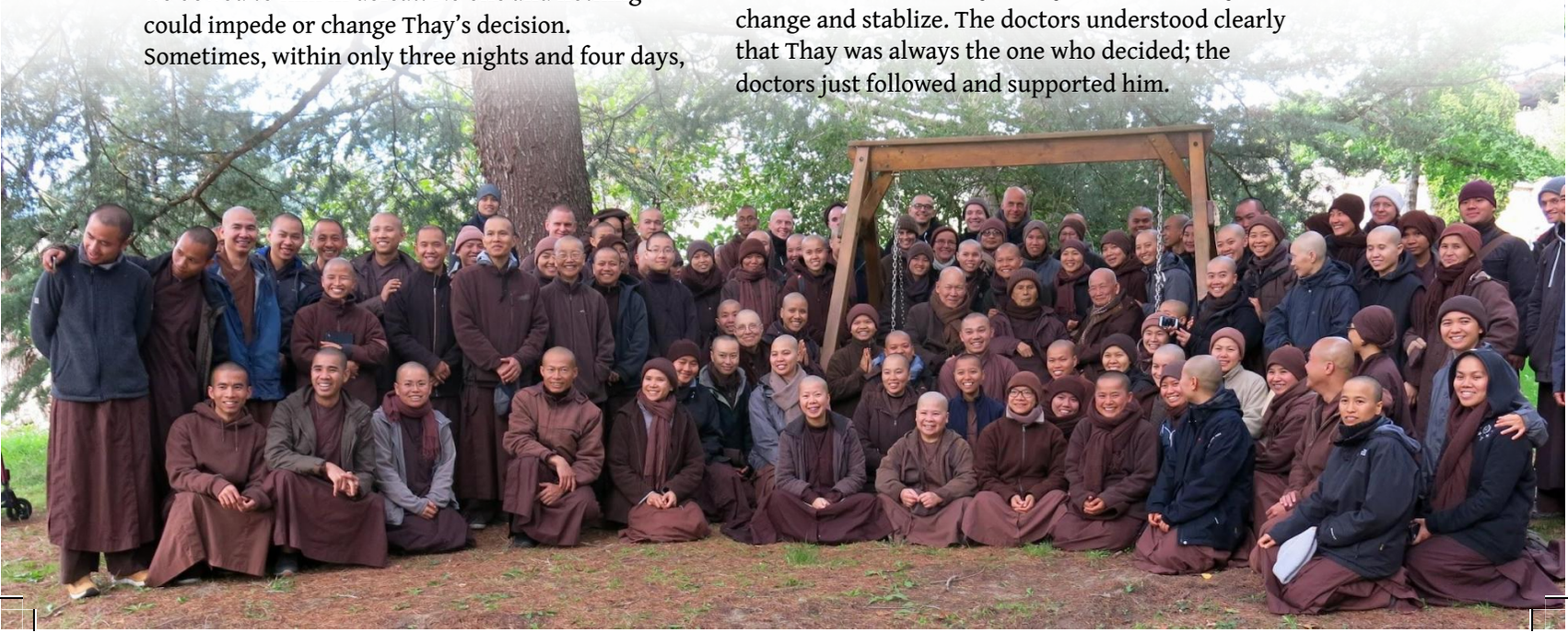
In October 2018, Thay returned once more to his Root Temple.

At the end of 2019, Thay went again to Thailand for his medical check-ups and afterwards, he returned to his Root Temple and lived there until his last day.

Within those eight years, Thay made eight airline flights and each time, he clearly made the decision. Once a decision was made, Thay always wanted to realize it right away without any hesitation. He stopped eating, stopped drinking, and just went around with his attendants to see how the attendants were doing in preparing the luggage. We young ones who did not wish for Thay to travel far tried all kinds of ways and reasons to persuade him otherwise. But no matter how sharp our reasoning, within moments of coming before Thay, we bowed to him in defeat. No one and nothing could impede or change Thay's decision. Sometimes, within only three nights and four days, the attendants had to do whatever it took to complete all the formalities and arrange everything for Thay's trip.

Thay was always decisive when he needed to go somewhere or do something, as well as when he saw that there was no need to go somewhere or do something. For example, during one Monastic Day at the Hermitage (in Plum Village, this is a day of practice reserved for the monastic sangha), the attendants tried to convince Thay to go on walking meditation with the sangha. But no matter how much they begged, Thay shook his head "no," even though the sangha was waiting. In the end, the sangha walked without Thay. (Perhaps Thay wished for the sangha to be prepared for Monastic Days without him?) On another occasion, it was the day of Thay's regular medical check-up. The ambulance, and the police car that came to clear the way for the ambulance, the cases of kitchen utensils, and Thay's luggage... all were ready and waiting for Thay. But Thay shook his head and refused to go, even though the attendants took turns to try to persuade him. After two hours, the ambulance and police car had to leave. In the same way, once Thay refused to take a medication, no one could persuade him otherwise, not even to take half a pill.

Thay was always the one who decided and took responsibility for his health, his living, and his dying. In San Francisco, Thay boldly signed the consent form to the doctor's recommended treatment plan. In a hospital in Thailand, Thay signed with his fingerprint in front of the doctors and nurses. On so many occasions, the doctors had to bow in respect when they saw that Thay was still the one who knew his body and health better than anyone else. There were times when the doctors could not do anything except to monitor and observe him, when Thay's body would suddenly change and stablize. The doctors understood clearly that Thay was always the one who decided; the doctors just followed and supported him.



Thay not only led the way for his healing and recovery, but he also continued to lead us on the path of daily practice. On the first full moon day, while lying on the hospital bed in Bordeaux, Thay pointed to the full moon shining through the glass door. It was also there that the Teacher and disciples enjoyed the fireworks of that New Year's Eve.

There were times when Thay would indicate to the doctors and nurses to look out the hospital window and see the blue sky, the white clouds, or two birds playing on a tree branch. Likewise, no matter where Thay was, whenever he saw the sunrise or sunset, he would ask everyone to watch it with him. Thay continued to love the times when the Teacher and disciples sat together to drink tea, and enjoy the cactus flowers slowly blooming, whether it was at the Hermitage or at the Looking Afar Hut (in Thailand).



Whenever Thay felt unwell in his body, the attendants would push his wheelchair outside to practice walking meditation. Moving slowly and calmly this way, Thay would feel better right away. The young monks and nuns often visited Thay at the Hermitage where Thay had planted a ylang-ylang tree brought from Vietnam. Thay brought them to pick the flowers and would then lift a flower right up to their noses for them to enjoy the fragrance.

When summer came, Thay went to admire the hill of golden sunflowers blooming brightly right behind the Hermitage. And when it was the chrysanthemum season in France, teacher and disciples went together to the chrysanthemum market. Then during the Lunar New Year celebrations in the ancient capital of Hue, the Teacher and disciples went to enjoy the plum blossoms in the local market.

Following Thay, we did not miss any opportunity to enjoy the four seasons. After arriving in Plum Village Thailand, and resting for just a few days, Thay instructed the attendants to push him in his wheelchair up to visit all the hills within the monastery precinct. The sangha gathered in groups and followed Thay up those hills. Whenever Thay appeared, the most ordinary activities on the schedule became legendary moments - walking meditation, sitting meditation, breakfast, lunch...

We still remember when for the first time, while sitting on the sofa in the Hermitage, Thay suddenly started to chant "Namo Avalokiteshvara" with us. In the following days, Thay sang one song after another, from Vietnamese to English to French. Every day, Teacher and disciples went on walking meditation while singing. Sometimes we sang long songs like "Looking for Each Other." Then Thay went into his library to reread the documents there. He practiced to read the poems he had previously written. On calligraphy paper, he practiced to draw circles, to write the word "breathe" (in Vietnamese: "tho"), and to write Chinese characters, all with great joy.

One time in San Francisco, Thay was listening to a recording of his poems read by himself and he waved his hand and used his facial expressions to describe the poem's ideas. The most exciting moments were when Thay practiced on the exercise bike. It involved riding the bike, listening to music, and enjoying the scenes on a screen in front of him. The scenes were there to make Thay feel as if he were cycling on a beach, or on country lanes in the midst of charming nature.

Sometimes Thay was tired, but he persisted and pedaled non-stop until he fell asleep while pedaling! The most spectacular moments were when Thay could stand on his own without an attendant supporting him from one side. The day it first happened, Thay wanted to eat lunch while standing up! There was such radiance and excitement on the faces of Teacher and disciples. Then there were the times when Thay stood up very straight on a standing chair and the attendants moved it in slow circles in the Looking Afar Hut. It was rather strange. Thay didn't say anything, but wherever he was, the place became a place filled with warmth, joy, and love.

During the times when the Root Temple was being restored, to avoid the dust and noise, Thay agreed to go to the Thuan An and Da Nang beaches many times. He also went in the water with his attending brothers. Perhaps it had been a long time, 60 or 70 years, since Thay could immerse himself in

warm seawater. Thay wanted to go further and farther out into the sea, farther and farther and farther. Those were the days when Thay was at his most playful, and for both Teacher and disciples, the most fun days at the seaside. Isn't that so, Thay?

By 2020, Thay was much weaker. He no longer went around the temple or visited the hut of Grandfather teacher (Thay's master). But, breathing in, we were aware that Thay was still alive. Breathing out, we cherished and smiled to life. We continued to enjoy every moment by Thay's side and did not allow regrets or worries to take hold of us. Thay demonstrated that even with an aging, ailing, and weakening body full of aches and pains, Teacher and students could still live happily in any situation. This was possible with the practice of dwelling happily in the present moment, taught by the Buddha.

Throughout those seven years, we recognized that every action of Thay was a manifestation of a transformed store consciousness, one filled with the fruits of a true practitioner. Those fruits could completely change the surrounding environment. Whatever needed to be done, Thay did it with all his love. At last, with clear awareness, Thay decided to become a cloud, as quietly and decisively as he had made decisions in the past on countless occasions. Thay's cloud has embraced his Dharma children in an atmosphere of warmth and stillness, then, now and forever. ☙

Continuing Dad

Sister Chân Trăng Giác Ân

"Dad's in intensive care." The call that I've dreaded over the years finally came one late morning. "He arrived at the emergency saying he didn't want to be resuscitated. I don't know what's happening, I'm still waiting to talk to the doctor." Far off in France, a flood of memories came back after this short call with my mother.

Dad had open heart surgery some seven years ago, with complications, and spent almost a month on a ventilator in intensive care. It was a long period of great suffering. Seeing my father hooked up to all the machines, laboring to breathe, his fear, left an indelible mark in my memory. After he came out, he was almost annoyed at having been dragged back to life, it was one of the first things he said when he could finally speak! We then drafted an Advanced Care Plan (ACP) with the help of the social worker at the hospital, making clear his end of life wishes. Against all odds, dad recovered almost completely and was back at work a few months later. But knowing that his heart was still weak, I had a strong sense that his heart could be the cause of his death eventually.

In a dream-like state, I found dad's ACP in the midst of my own medical records. What possessed me to bring them all the way from Singapore? Leafing through it, I saw my own signature, a promise to dad that if he couldn't speak for himself, that I, his daughter, would respect his end of life wishes for him, no resuscitation, no intensive care, no artificial life support.

I finally found the courage to call the hospital in Singapore. It was 2AM there, the graveyard shift, but in intensive care, there is always a doctor on call, and he was able to talk to me.

"Your dad has been resuscitated twice already and is intubated (on a ventilator), his heart is in very poor condition. As a team, we have decided not to resuscitate him a third time if he has another cardiac arrest." The doctor tried to deliver this as compassionately as possible. Everything that my father did not want had come to pass! I offered to send the doctor the ACP, so that they too could know dad's last wishes, which the doctor gratefully accepted. These decisions of whether to resuscitate a patient or not must not be easy for doctors to make as well, and I am sure these ACP documents help them also. I knew that despite everything, the doctors were also doing their best.

When I put down the phone, I silently thought of my dad in intensive care, hooked up to all sorts of machines, beeping quietly, all alone, in the dark, unable to respond to anything. "Dad, help is

coming, I've let them know what you want," I told him silently, and deep in my heart I really wished he knew that.

My father passed away the next day peacefully, as they finally stopped administering the life supporting drugs, while mom accompanied him on his last journey. He slipped away, never regaining consciousness. My brother and I arrived a few days later, helping mom with the funeral and sparing her the ordeal of cleaning and clearing up dad's space (my father lived alone). As we interacted with his various colleagues at work, friends and neighbors, we were slowly able to reconstruct the last few weeks of dad's life. Someone who was mostly alone, sick (and refusing to go to hospital), yet able to receive help and compassion from friends and concerned strangers alike. My father, being a medical doctor himself, probably had a strong sense that the end was near, and didn't want to prolong it more than necessary. The fact that he declared on arrival at the hospital, "I don't want to be resuscitated," told me that he had nothing left unsaid to the family. I discovered, as I slowly sorted through my father's things, that the most present and pertinent question for me was, "Dad, as you made the final journey, did you know that you were loved?" Because I knew in my heart of hearts that I, for one, loved him. I also suddenly felt very strongly that if one knows that they are loved, even if they are alone, they can die in great peace.

While mulling over this question with a friend a few weeks later, he asked me, "Can you be alright never knowing?"

I took this as my koan for a few weeks, and then one day I suddenly realized, "Dad, I won't ever know whether you knew that you were loved, but I can know that for myself." With the practice, I have tasted being held, accepted and loved in a deep and unconditional way. I have swum in the waters of boundless love, but how often do I remember this? One day, when I'm in a cold and lonely place, can I remember that I am loved? Still? Always?

I had found a way to continue my father. With that thought, dad in me was suddenly free. He could be who he was, where he was, when he died. It didn't matter so much anymore if he knew or not, because I can continue this work for him. Thank you, dad.



My Master's Freedom

Brother Chân Pháp Xả

The first time I saw Thay was in December 2000. I was in Plum Village for the first time after I had heard about Thay and Plum Village through books and my practice of Japanese Zen meditation. It was my first time in a monastic practice center. I especially enjoyed the clock chimes in the dining hall, when everybody would just breathe and relax and silently listen to the clock. It made me feel very at home.

At that time I remember fast walking around the linden tree in Upper Hamlet before sitting meditation. Thay came to the tree and invited us all to go to the big hall for sitting meditation. I very much looked up to Thay as a great Zen master and had quite a romantic idea about Asian culture with martial arts and deep meditation practices.

Two years later, in 2002, I became an aspirant. When Thay gave me the name Phap Xa at my novice ordination, I think he mainly knew me by my letter of aspiration. Before my ordination we had never talked. Xa means equanimity and is one of the Four Immeasurable Minds of Love. In my ordination family two other Minds of Love were given to two of my brothers: Phap Bi (compassion) and Phap Hy (joy). When Thay gave me my name, I was very happy to have a name that was easy and wouldn't be easily confused with other names. It may sound silly, but it had been my main concern: to have a name that was mixed up with another similar sounding name. It was not uncommon for non-Vietnamese speakers to be confused about the pronunciation and the differences in pronunciation of similar sounding names.

Thay told me right at the ceremony that this name means to love everyone equally. Thay told me once, I could call myself Brother Equanimity, just like one of the sisters who called herself, and was mostly known as, Sister Steadiness. However, I was quite happy with Phap Xa and wasn't planning to change it. In later Dharma Talks Thay preferred to use the word inclusiveness instead of equanimity as a translation for Xa. This word puts the emphasis on loving in a way that doesn't exclude anyone, rather than to love everyone equally. I personally also like inclusiveness. Why did Thay give me my name? I can only guess. After 20 years, I cannot remember my aspiration letter, but I think I mentioned I came to Plum Village for Thay and not so much for the Sangha and that during my stay I had discovered the Sangha Jewel. My best guess is that this has been the reason for my name—to have a love that includes the whole Sangha.

The three month Rain Retreat usually started in November, but in 2004 it was different. The Rains Retreat 2003-04 started in January 2004 and the Rains Retreat 2004-05 was in autumn 2004, so that Thay could travel in January 2005 to Vietnam after 39 years of exile. In September and October 2004, Thay therefore stayed in Upper Hamlet and I was his attendant with Brother Phap Hien.

I have very warm memories of this time. We used to wake up at 4:30 in the morning to prepare ourselves. The official wake up time was at five, and at that time we entered Thay's hut to prepare tea for Thay. The mornings were cold and quiet and the sound of the great temple bell united us in mindfulness. During those pleasant sunny autumn days, I treasured the time lying in the hammock outside of Thay's hut. I was in standby mode in case Thay needed something, but that was rarely the case.

Being in Thay's presence in the hut was very peaceful if I could allow myself to relax and not to think about what to do next. I remember sitting with Thay in the hut with hot tea and fragrant incense in the early cool morning before sitting meditation. A natural and peaceful shared presence in silence. Being in Thay's presence I mostly did not say much. Partly because I did not know what to say, but mostly because I treasured the peaceful and silent atmosphere.

I had the fortune to travel with Thay for retreats in Europe, America and Asia. I really treasured these times. It was precious to travel with Thay and witness the transformation and healing of so many people. In 2006 and 2009 I was in the Netherlands with Thay. The sangha there had expressed an interest in having a monastic center in the Netherlands and I asked Thay about it a few times. First Thay said I could go to the Netherlands regularly for retreats and we did not need to have a

monastic center there. In 2009 Thay wanted the Dutch people to come to the EIAB and in the year 2010, we had the first retreat for Dutch-speaking retreatants with Thay in the EIAB.

Whenever Thay came to the EIAB, the whole monastic sangha of Plum Village came along. We always rented a big tent in our parking lot for up to 1000 people, as we didn't have a big meditation hall yet. These yearly retreats in summer for German and Dutch speakers has been a tradition ever since.

Out of all my memories of Thay at the EIAB, one image stands out the most: In 2012 the ground floor had just been renovated and Thay led the whole sangha—around 1000 people—to the main entrance. Up until then this area had been a dark and desolate area. On that sunny day with the whole sangha entering the building, I saw the sangha as a stream of bodhisattvas bringing light and warmth into the building. It made a deep impression on me.

When I think of the retreat schedule of Thay, I see it was really tough with a lot of traveling and back to back retreats. He really did not choose the path of comfort or a leisurely retirement. Until almost 90 years of age, he gave everything he had. That is a great inspiration for me, as I many times would have liked to follow the easy way. Thay was really living a fulfilled life and his retreats and books have helped so many people. I have a tendency to think I already know the Plum Village teachings and practices and would like to look for something "new." But every time I am pleasantly surprised to rediscover the richness and depth of our own tradition. One lifetime may not be enough to realise it.

There are many simple, yet profound moments I have shared with Thay. I have found it challenging to share these moments with you in written form, as it is not so much what was being said and done, but just the way of being present for the moment.

Walking with Thay one evening in Deer Park Monastery, Thay looked up at the full moon and did not say anything. I felt it was a moment of great freedom. There was just the moment of looking at the moon, as if nothing else mattered. Then Thay said, "The moon is so free. Free of projects and worries." To be able to recognise that, Thay must have been just that: free.

After Thay's passing, we all got the text "Coming and going in freedom," I still carry it with me wherever I go. The wonders of life are beyond grasping and letting go. If I have to name one quality I treasure the most about Thay, it is this one —authenticity. I have always seen the oneness of his life and teachings. He was really free to be fully present for the wonders of life. Thay is freedom. Freedom is Thay.



Little Bird, Take Gentle Steps

Sister Chân Từ Nghiêm



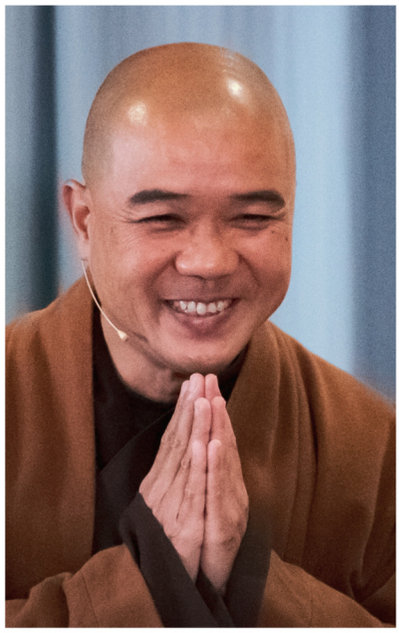
A nightingale has left the midnight sky,
leaving silence and darkness,
as the stars try to shine.

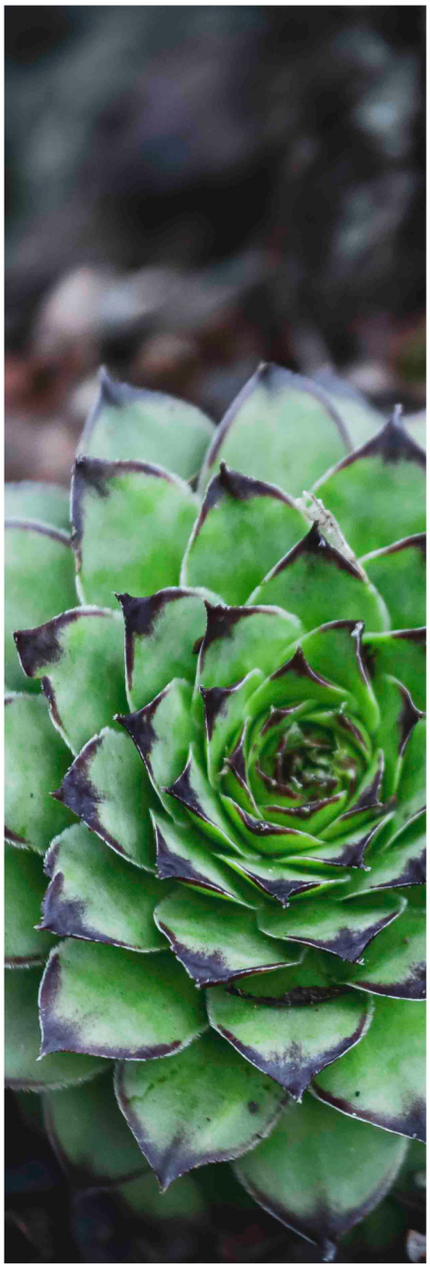
We hear her Ave Maria
echoing in the ten directions,
bringing love, peace, and tears
to our lives

Suffering is powerful,
yet freedom
is more so.

Little bird, take gentle steps,
then fly into freedom.

This poem was written the morning of 12 February 2023, when the sangha gathered to chant for Sister Trang Chanh Niem, who had passed away on 10 February, 2023. She had a beautiful voice, like a nightingale, and she sang Ave Maria beautifully like an opera singer, which she was. And the little bird, so young and tender, is perhaps the new continuation of the nightingale who left the sky.

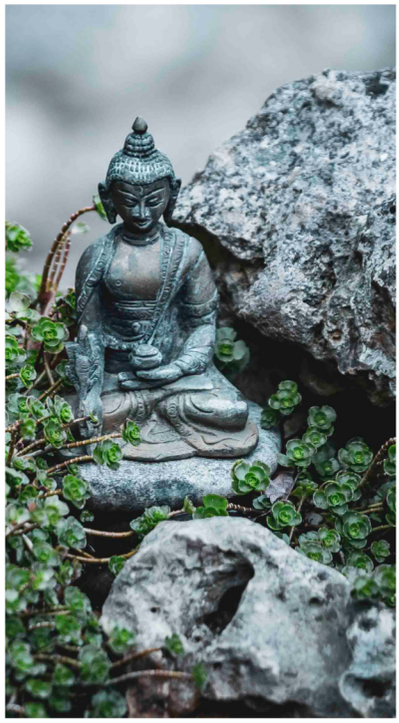

















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