

# Chum Village *newsletter*

n°47  
2024





Spacious  
mind

inclusive  
heart



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# A Year in Review

EDITORIAL TEAM

*Highlights of the year of the Plum Village Sangha in France.*

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## **Trùng Quang Great Precept Transmission Ceremony (10 – 14 February 2023)**

This spring marked a new beginning for 38 Siksamana nuns and 19 novice monks receiving the Great Precepts to become fully ordained Bhikshunis and Bhikshus, respectively, at the Trung Quang Great Precept Transmission Ceremony, hosted at the Thai Plum Village. The event was named after the

lineage name of Thay, which means pure light. This was the first in-person gathering of its kind after a long hiatus due to the COVID pandemic.

This was also an auspicious occasion for the sangha to welcome 16 new Dharma teachers in the ensuing Dharma Lamp Transmission Ceremony.

With the presence of hundreds of monastics of various Buddhist traditions from Europe, the US, Vietnam and Thailand, the sangha of Thai Plum Village also celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary and hosted the brick-laying ceremony for the construction of the new meditation hall.





**Monastic Retreat: Unshakable Faith**  
(15 – 23 February 2023)

The time had come again for the brothers and sisters of Plum Village France, Maison de L’Inspir and Healing Spring Monastery in Paris, and the European Institute of Applied Buddhism in Germany to come together in Upper Hamlet for the much

anticipated annual monastic retreat. This 9-day retreat was an opportunity for monastic siblings to nourish each other’s resolve to live a life of transformation and service. In the spirit of togetherness, Br. Phap Ung, Sr. Chan Khong and Sr. Chan Duc represented the sangha to transmit the Dharma lamps to seven sisters and one brother.



**Francophone Retreat (7 – 14 April 2023)**

At long last, 400 Francophone friends from France, Switzerland, Belgium, and Canada reunited in Plum Village for the first Francophone retreat since 2019 due to the pandemic, themed *Ensemble, Tout Simplement* (loosely translated as Simply Together). What a precious opportunity it was for the multifold Sangha to celebrate Sr. Chan Khong’s 85th continuation day, as well as to welcome 18 new members into the Order of Interbeing.





## Monastics on Tour

In continuing Thay's aspiration to share the practice of Engaged Buddhism worldwide, groups of brothers and sisters traveled on four continents: Europe (the UK, Ireland, France, Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Czech Republic, Austria, Spain...); North America (Mexico, the US, Canada); South America (Colombia, Ecuador, Argentina, Brazil, Chile); and Asia (India, Taiwan).



Freiburg, Germany



Toronto, Canada



United Kingdom



Mexico



Mexico



Netherlands



Sweden



Brazil

## Plum Village at the First Global Buddhist Summit (20 – 21 April 2023)

On 20 April, the International Buddhist Confederation launched the first Global Buddhist Summit in New Delhi, India, themed *Responses to Contemporary Challenges: Philosophy to Praxis*. Among the delegates, approximately 170 were from foreign countries and 150 from Indian Buddhist organizations. Representatives from Plum Village included Br. Phap Khoi, Br. Nguyen Luc, Sr. Bien Nghiem, and Sr. Trang Loc Uyen. This event coincided with their mindfulness tour in India.

## Thich Nhat Hanh Center for Mindfulness in Public Health opened at Harvard University

On April 26, the Thich Nhat Hanh Center for Mindfulness in Public Health opened at Harvard University. The inauguration was attended by over 30 monastics of the Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism. The Center was made possible by an anonymous donation of \$25 million, one of the largest donations in the history of the University.

The mission of the Center is to “pursue evidence-based approaches to improving health and wellbeing through mindfulness by undertaking rigorous, scientific inquiry; and provide mindfulness education and training for the Harvard community and beyond.” An interplay between

academic research and public engagement at its heart’s core, the center endeavors to improve public health and inspire global action.

Dr. Lilian Cheung, director of Mindfulness Research and Practice in the Department of Nutrition of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, met Thay in 1997 at a mindfulness retreat and later co-authored with Thay the book, titled *Savor: Mindful Eating, Mindful Life*. Dr. Cheung shared: “Over the years, I became deeply interested in learning how the practice of mindfulness could be applied to the discipline of public health, which seeks to prevent disease and promote well-being at population scale. That is exactly what this Center will do.”

The event also included a 1-day symposium, which featured presentations from academics, mindfulness practitioners and monastic students of Thay, including Br. Phap An, Br. Phap Luu and Sr. Hien Nghiem. Additionally, a Q&A session was offered by Br. Phap Dung, Br. Phap Linh and Sr. Lang Nghiem.

Despite the nearly 25,000 peer-reviewed publications on mindfulness as of 2023, this field of research is relatively nascent. There is a general consensus on the need for new scientific means to evaluate the impact of mindful living on health and wellbeing.





Dr. Lilian Cheung



Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn



Photo Courtesy: Robert M Walsh  
[flickr.com/photos/robertmwalsh/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/robertmwalsh/)

### Sister Chan Khong visited the US (April - May 2023)

In combination with attending the inaugural ceremony of the Thich Nhat Hanh Center at Harvard University, Sr. Chan Khong also visited the three Plum Village monasteries in the US.

At Blue Cliff Monastery, New York, Sr. Chan Khong offered a Dharma talk on the Day of Mindfulness on 16 April. With the support of the Union Theological Seminary and Blue Cliff Monastery, Sr. Chan Khong also gave a public talk, titled *Compassion in Action*, in New York City on 18 April. The following day, Sr. Chan Khong joined the Blue Cliff sangha in a 5-day retreat for members of the Order of Interbeing with the theme *The Art of Compassion* from 19 to 23 April 2023.



Sr. Chan Khong at the Union Theological Seminary



Photo Courtesy: Văn Lan - Người Việt News



Photo Courtesy: Việt Báo News



Photo Courtesy: Việt Báo News

At Magnolia Grove Monastery, Sr. Chan Khong joined the sangha for a retreat, themed *Learning True Love*, from 3 to 7 May 2023. This retreat also featured separate mindfulness practice programs for children and teens. Amidst the splendor of spring blossoms, the multifold Sangha celebrated Vesak (Buddha’s birthday) on the last day of the retreat.

At Deer Park Monastery, the Sangha welcomed the presence of Sr. Chan Khong with a special Day of Mindfulness on Mother’s Day, 14 May, where the sangha transmitted the 14 Mindfulness Trainings to a new group of longtime practitioners; thus, welcoming them into the ever-growing international community of Order of Interbeing.

Additionally, Sr. Chan Khong also joined approximately 60 monastics in a unique event, called Dāna Day of Mindfulness, on 21 May at the Mile Square Park in the city of Fountain Valley, California. The event was in English with Vietnamese translation for the nearly 600 people present, many of whom did not speak Vietnamese.

Everyone participated in the Plum Village core practices, such as listening to the bell, awareness of breathing, walking meditation, and total relaxation. The program also included an alms round for everyone to have a chance to get in touch with their seed of generosity. This was also an opportunity for the Deer Park monastics to fundraise for the expansion of the monk’s residence to accommodate the growing number of monks at the monastery.

The local newspaper, Viet Bao, commented that “the Day of Mindfulness by Deer Park Monastery has inspired great happiness not only for the people attending but also for the atmosphere, plants, and animals in the surroundings. A gaggle of geese at the nearby pond also honked as though to greet and welcome the community. It has been a long time since Mile Square Park had a public event as peaceful as this.”

## Cooking Retreat: Cooking Moment, Happy Moment (26 May - 2 June 2023)

One of the most anticipated retreats in Plum Village is the cooking retreat hosted by New Hamlet. The retreat offered an opportunity for over 200 retreatants to apply mindfulness into one of the most important, yet, also one of the most undermined daily activities. Here, everyone learned how to cook delicious dishes, while generating happiness in the act. They taught us that when we know how to cook in mindfulness, the kitchen becomes a meditation hall. Then, peace and happiness will radiate within us and around us. To be able to cook for and feed the Sangha or our families is a great happiness.



## Business Retreat: No Mud, No Lotus (26 May - 2 June 2023)

Concomitant with the cooking retreat at New Hamlet was the retreat for over 50 Vietnamese business people in Upper Hamlet, themed *No Mud, No Lotus*. These entrepreneurs experienced seven days of mindful living, learning how to slow down and be more present for themselves. In this peaceful and supportive atmosphere, the participants were encouraged to reflect on the value of life, as well as

the driving forces of their lives and their businesses: Do you truly want to be #1 or do you want to be happy? Are you a victim of your own success? Is your business heading in a wholesome direction? The entrepreneurs also learned and practiced the art of loving speech and deep listening. Sister Chan Khong offered a session on *Beginning Anew* for reconciling communication in their families and workplaces. On the last day of the retreat, 20 people received the Five Mindfulness Trainings to help them continue to nourish their spiritual lives.



## Retreat for Young Asian Diaspora: Finding Our True Home

(2 – 9 June 2023)

A first of its kind in Plum Village in Lower Hamlet, this retreat provided a space of reconnection to ancestral roots for many young Asians growing up and living in the West. These up-and-coming young individuals explored reflections by themselves and with each other: Where is our true home? Is it a particular place with particular people within a particular culture? What if we had to leave our “home”? Or grew up in a culture vastly different from that of our parents? Please [read the article, “Coming Home to Our Roots,”](#) in this newsletter written by three international Wake Up sangha core members to understand more about how it felt for them to get in touch with their ancestral roots.

## Earth Retreat: Love is Freedom

(16 – 23 June 2023)

An expression of togetherness and solidarity across traditions and continents, the Earth Retreat was the first hybrid retreat offered in Plum Village with 700 retreatants joined in-person and 800 friends participated online from around the world. A co-creation of the international Earth Holder communities, the retreat was inspirational for countless people from different corners of the planet practicing together mindful living and sharing the aspiration to protect Mother Earth.

One of the highlights of the retreat was the inter-spirituality summer solstice celebration where indigenous leaders from the Amazon, Mexico and Africa led the community in a deep, serene and joyous ceremony around a big bonfire under the bright stars in Upper Hamlet, awakening feelings of deep connection with all humans, Mother Earth and the cosmos.

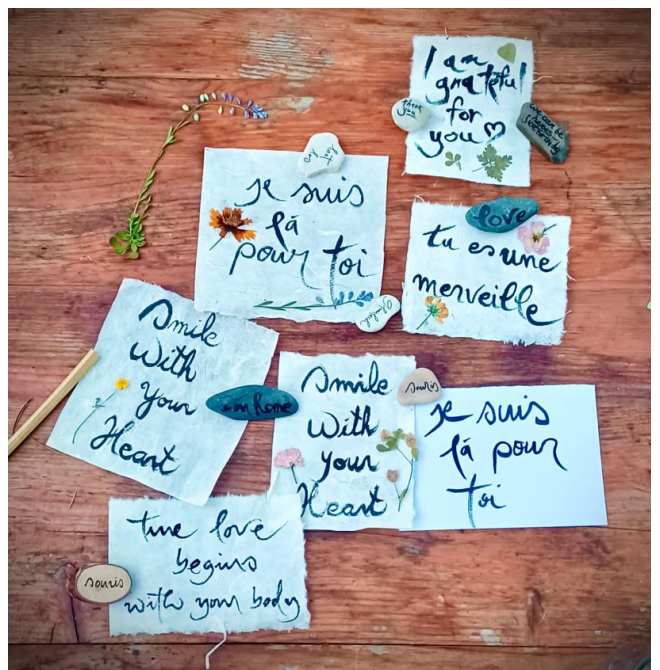


## Premiere of the French documentary “Respire, Souris, Vis”

On 22 June, the French documentary film, “Respire, Souris, Vis” (Breathe, Smile, Live), directed by Yen Le Van, premiered in Paris with the presence of Sr. Chan Khong and a number of Plum Village monastics. Featuring the spiritual experiences of Thay, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Laurent Debacker, Eline Snel, Mira-Bai Ghatradyal, and Jean-Gérard Bloch, this documentary invites its audience to explore what it means to come back to oneself and redefine the meaning of living. What is it to be human if not the ability to transcend the fear of dying, to live and to love?

## Summer Opening (9 – 29 July 2023)

For three weeks, Plum Village received over 2,000 lay practitioners of which were 170 teens and 480 children for the annual Summer Opening. The largest gathering of the year, this retreat has become a rendezvous for many parents and children to practice together, cultivating awareness, understanding and compassion. We are deeply grateful to all our spiritual friends, especially the more than 120 volunteers, who helped make the Summer Opening possible.



## Wake Up Retreat: Love in Action (4 – 11 August 2023)

Over 600 young people aged 18 – 35, representing more than 30 regions, gathered for the *Love in Action* retreat. A friend from Spain shared: “The collective energy is astounding and very powerful. It touches my heart deeply to listen to both the retreatants as well as the monks, nuns and volunteers share their suffering so vulnerably. I can really see how alike we are in our experience of being human. How healing it is to come together like this and share our deepest fears, our grief, our aspirations and also our joy.” The retreat ended with more than 200 friends making the commitment to practice the Five Mindfulness Trainings – a compass to navigate an era that is at once immensely uncertain and filled with potential. As Thay had urged: “It is possible to reclaim our sovereignty from the systems of our creation.”





## Plum Village at the 2023 Parliament of the World's Religions (14 – 18 August 2023)

In August 2023, Sr. Luc Nghiem from Plum Village, France, and Sr. Tri Nghiem from Magnolia Grove Monastery in Mississippi, USA, were invited to take part in the 9<sup>th</sup> International Meeting of the Parliament of the World's Religions which took place in Chicago, USA. The conference was attended by over 8,200 delegates from more than 95 countries. To learn more about the event, please [read Sr. Tri Nghiem's article](#) in this issue of the newsletter.

## Educators' Retreat (18 – 25 August 2023)

Amidst the sweet fragrance of ripening plums, over 300 educators from Europe and afar gathered in late August to rest, renew, and connect within and with each other. Apart from the Dharma talks offered by Sr. Dinh Nghiem, Br. Phap Ly and Sr. Chan Duc, there was also a panel of teachers sharing about the three pillars of Wake Up Schools, sangha-building and the importance of beginning anew with the teachers themselves. Joost Vriens, one of the four panelists, wrote [an inspiring article](#) in this issue of the newsletter about his journey with Wake Up Schools and his experience in this retreat.

At the end of the retreat, a number of lay friends stayed back to help the brothers and sisters harvest the plums for drying and making jam, a specialty everyone can enjoy at breakfast when staying in Plum Village.



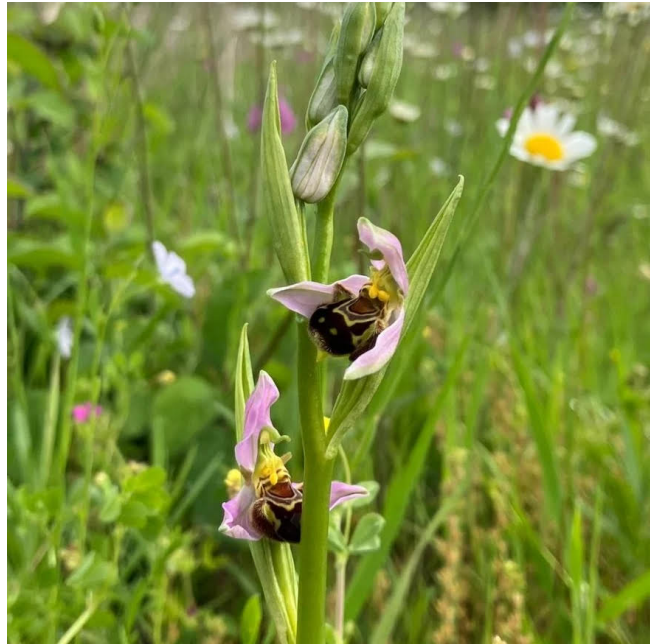
## Happy Farm Retreats: Coming Home to Mother Earth

(5 – 19 May and 15 – 29 September 2023)

Since 2022, the Upper Hamlet brothers together with friends from Happy Farm have offered two-week immersive retreats designed to bring the participants intimately in contact with nature. The retreat was offered twice this year.

Here is a reflection from a retreatant:

*“For the last two weeks, we have been exploring forests and fields and lakes, eating delicious vegan food, spending time with genuinely kind and thoughtful people, reading, listening, farming, singing, meditating, and consciously trying to live mindfully. It may sound like a very abrupt change of pace from normal life, but somehow the community energy helped make the transition. A friend described Plum Village as like a liver or kidney for society, quietly filtering away the toxins. That’s exactly how it feels. A lifelong health condition cleared up after the first 4 days. I’m a little calmer, a little more forgiving towards myself and others, and I’ve laughed a lot. I don’t expect this state of mind to last forever, but I hope I will remember how it felt, and be nudged towards a better way of living.”*

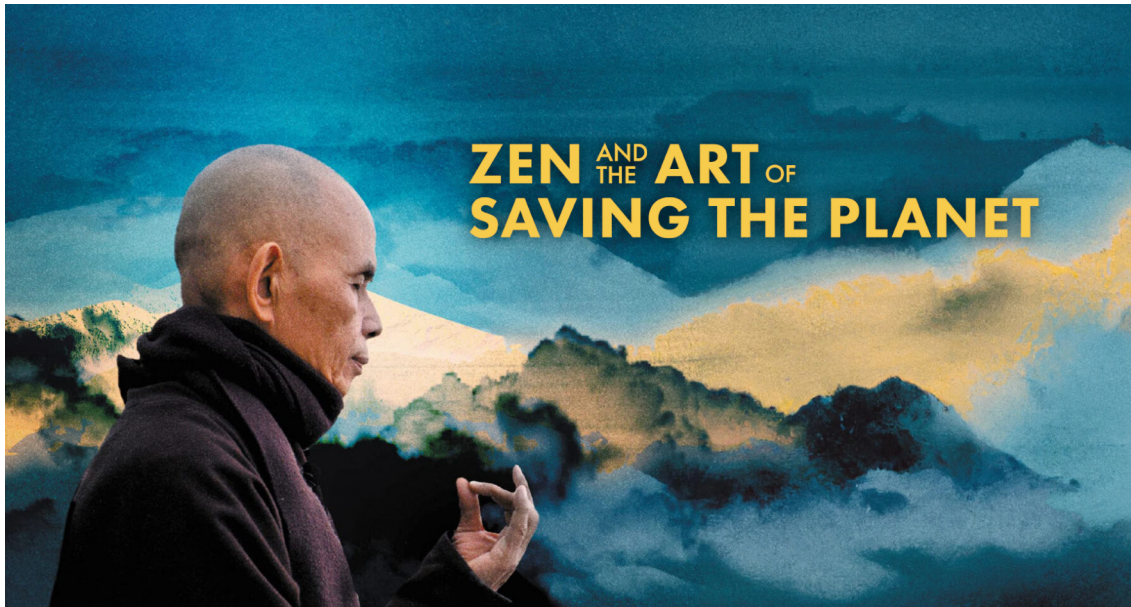


## Rains Retreat: Now We Have a Path

(19 Oct 2023 – 16 Jan 2024)

On the morning of 19 October 2023, the multifold Sangha of Plum Village gathered at the Still Water Meditation Hall of the Dharma Cloud Temple (Upper Hamlet) to conduct the Ceremony of Refuge for the annual Rains Retreat. There were 225 people (141 monastics – 48 Bhikshus, 78 Bhikshunis, 9 male novices, 6 female novices – and 84 lay practitioners) committed to practicing in Plum Village for 90 days. During the retreat, the sangha listened to weekly Dharma talks by Thay from Winter 2008-09 and June 2009 on the contributions of Buddhism to global ethics. The monastic day on Thursdays was a special opportunity for the brothers and sisters to attend classes on engaging topics to further nourish their monastic aspiration. Sister Trang Bo De wrote [an endearing article in this issue of the newsletter](#) about her impression of these monastic days.





**Online course: Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet (ZASP)**

*(15 October – 3 December 2023)*

In addition to participating in the Rains Retreat, a group of monastics also took part in this 7-week in-depth online learning journey to nurture insight, compassion, community, and mindful action in service of the Earth. The course was curated in 2022 by a group of monastics and the support of lay practitioners. It was then piloted in early 2023 and later launched publicly in October. With a global audience of approximately 1,600 participants from about 50 countries on six continents, this was the first online course of its extent and content. To know more about the experience of the course, please read the article by [Br. Troi Duc Niem](#) in this newsletter.

**Message for Peace** *(19 October 2023)*

In the wake of violence in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world, our monasteries in the United States and Europe have offered reflections and suggestions of practices in support of peace.

Here are two excerpts from the letter:

*“From a Buddhist perspective, the wars in the Middle East, Ukraine and beyond are a collective manifestation of human consciousness; of the collective destructive energy that exists within humanity. This destructive energy is a fundamental cause of human suffering. As members of the human family, each of us has a duty to recognize suffering within us, and a responsibility to transform ‘the seed of violence’ into the reality of peace.*

...

*At this difficult time, it is important to take root in ourselves and calm our emotions. We invite our Israeli, Palestinian, Ukrainian friends, and all who suffer in conflict zones, to sit with us so that, together, we may cool anger and hatred, stop harmful actions, open our hearts, generate compassion, and radiate the powerful energy of peace...”*

To read the full letter, please visit [plumvillage.org/articles/an-invitation-to-sit-together-for-peace](https://plumvillage.org/articles/an-invitation-to-sit-together-for-peace)

# Lamp Transmission Gathas of 2023

In 2023, the Sangha happily welcomed 27 new Dharma teachers, both lay and monastic students of Thay. Below are their transmission gathas:

## Transmission gathas in the Trung Quang Great Precept Transmission Ceremony (10 – 14 February 2023, in Thai Plum Village)

### Brother Thích Chân Phương Cần

(Lay name: Nguyễn Xuân Lộc)  
(Dharma name: Nhuận Thọ)

Chân pháp mở bày muôn vạn lối  
Đường vào **phương** ngoại chẳng ngoài tâm  
Công phu **cần** mãn trong nhật dụng  
Gương trí soi tròn nghĩa uyên thâm.

### Brother Thích Chân Trời Kỳ Ngộ

(Phạm Hùng; Tâm Đức Khang)

Muôn dặm không mây muôn dặm **trời**  
Nhân duyên **kỳ ngộ** bước thành thơ  
Ở đây gặp gỡ bao tri kỷ  
Mở hội tăng thân cứu độ người.

### Brother Thích Chân Trời Lĩnh Nam

(Lê Dũng; Tâm Đại Niệm)

Chân **trời Lĩnh Nam** đất xưa  
Tổ tiên xây dựng truyền thừa mai sau  
Bước chân cần trọng cho nhau  
Mím cười tương kính làm giàu tương lai.

### Brother Thích Chân Trời Bình An

(Trần Công Danh; Tâm Từ Thủy)

Pháp thân tỏa sáng rạng **chân trời**  
**Bình** minh rực rỡ ánh hồng tươi  
**An** nhiên từng bước là dừng lại  
Mắt biếc hồn thơ rộn tiếng cười.

### Brother Thích Chân Trời Linh Cảm

(Lai Thanh Vũ; Tâm Khuyến Thiện)

Chân xuân thấp sáng cả **trời** xuân  
Ứng hiện tâm **linh** đẹp tuyệt trần  
Có nhau nhiệm màu trong tương **cảm**  
Cử xướng tăng thân thực pháp thân.



### Brother Thích Chân Trời Nguyễn Ước

(Nguyễn Bá Nhật; Tâm Nhuận Minh)

Chân tâm soi tỏ **trời** cao rộng  
**Nguyễn ước** năm xưa vững một lòng  
Tăng đi từng bước xây mầm tuệ  
Nghĩa trả ơn đền vẹn núi sông.

### Brother Thích Chân Trời Đâu Suất

(Đặng Ngọc Hồng Quyết; Tâm Minh Đăng)

Mắt thương nhìn thấu cõi trần  
Từ **Trời Đâu Suất** hiện thân giữa đời  
Bồ đề chiếu rạng muôn nơi  
Mở bày phương tiện độ người trầm luân.

### Brother Thích Chân Trời Tương Lai

(Phạm Quang Hà; Tâm Đức Tĩnh)

Khung **trời** hiện tại đã về tới  
Ôm cả **tương lai** sáng nếp nhà  
Tình xưa gửi gắm từng huynh đệ  
Ơn nghĩa truyền trao vẫn đậm đà.

### Sister Thích nữ Chân Đán Nghiêm

(Phan Thị Minh Tuyền; Tâm Quảng Bích)

Một trời xuân **đán** bình an  
Uy **ng nghiêm** vọng tiếng thâm ơn nghìn trùng  
Lối về có thủy có chung  
Từ bi chiếu rạng khắp cùng thế gian.

**Sister Thích nữ Chân Nhẫn Nghiêm**  
(Nguyễn Thị Bích Lê; Tâm Nguyên Tĩnh)

Chân tâm một nẻo đi về  
Hành trang ẩn **nhẫn** xá hề gian truân  
**Nghiêm** phong hoạt thái chuyên cần  
Quê hương lối cũ bước chân vững vàng.

**Sister Thích nữ Chân Thiện Nghiêm**  
(Văn Thị Kiều Oanh; Tâm Chơn Khai)

**Thiện** nghiệp gieo trồng cõi lạc bang  
**Nghiêm** giới trì đức tuệ vững vàng  
Dong thuyền bát nhã ra khơi vớt  
Cõi gió về mây giữ an ban.

**Sister Thích nữ Chân Đế Nghiêm**  
(Vũ Thị Minh Đức; Tâm Diệu Chuyên)

Xuất lưu pháp bảo từ chân **đế**  
Một dạ giữ **nghiêm** phép chỉ trì  
Mỗi khi trời đất lên tiếng gọi  
Hoa lòng thơm ngát giọt từ bi.

**Sister Thích nữ Chân Dương Nghiêm**  
(Phạm Thị Hồng; Tâm Phương Minh)

Chân thân vốn hoàn hảo  
Rạng ngời ánh **dương** quang  
Một lòng thường **nghiêm** cần  
Lan tỏa pháp An ban.

**Sister Thích nữ Chân Công Nghiêm**  
(Hoàng Lê Kim Loan; Tâm Nhật Kim)

Đức sáng nằm ngay **công** tu luyện  
Nghiệp lành vun tưới tướng uy **nghiêm**  
Thông điệp từ bi về mọi nẻo  
Tha hồ thỏa chí chốn an nhiên.

**Sister Thích nữ Chân Trăng Nga Mi**  
(Chew Yee Lee;  
Noble Fulfillment of the Heart)

**Trăng** không tròn không khuyết  
Núi **Nga Mi** lưu danh  
Phổ Hiền mười hạnh nguyện  
Làm lợi lạc chúng sanh

**Sister Thích nữ Chân Trăng Đông Hải**  
(Tsui Miu Ling; Tâm Quán Ân)

**Trăng** tỏa sáng bầu trời **Đông Hải**  
Biển trần gian phản ánh nào phiền  
Đem tay tế độ bao người khổ  
Sóng bước bên Ngài Quán Thế Âm.

**Transmission gathas in the monastic retreat**  
“**Unshakable Faith**” (15 – 23 Feb 2023, France)

**Brother Thích Chân Trời Nội Tâm**  
(Phạm Văn Tài; Tâm Phúc Lộc)

**Trời nội** điển, ngày pho thủ tự  
Nhập tánh không, đêm quán **tâm** kinh  
Ơn thầy tổ nguyện xin tiếp nối  
Một lên đường, sông núi chứng minh

**Sister Thích nữ Chân Trợ Nghiêm**  
(Hoàng Thị Minh Nguyệt; Tâm Liên Du)

Chân tâm vắng duyên **trợ**  
**Nghiêm** từ chẳng đến đi  
Như Lai bậc như thị  
Chánh Niệm vượt thị phi

**Sister Thích nữ Chân Trăng Quê Hương**  
(Nguyễn Thị Kim Thanh; Tâm Nguyễn Hòa)

Chân **trăng** là **quê hương**  
Chiếc lá vốn bản môn  
Pháp nhiệm ấy con đường  
Lắng nghe hiểu và thương

**Sister Thích nữ Chân Trăng Mới Lên**  
(Yuliana Wijaya; Tâm Hướng Quang)

Out of darkness **the moon** has just **risen**  
Its guiding light illuminates our steps.  
In this pure land of mindfulness and joy  
I offer my service to all beings.

**Sister Thích nữ Chân Trăng Hoa Tiên**  
(Nguyễn Thị Quế Trâm; Tâm Huệ Anh)

Gót sen thiền tập cùng **trăng**  
**Hoa** tâm nở rộ thoát vòng thị phi  
Dáng **tiên** hiện nét uy nghi  
Lắng nghe **nhẫn** hạnh từ bi cứu đời

**Sister Thích nữ Chân Trăng Thông Dong**  
(Bùi Hồng Thu Quý; Tâm Diệu Vinh)

**Trăng** xưa lập nguyện đại bi  
Sao cho muôn loại tổng trì vô sanh  
**Thông dong** cùng chúng đồng hành  
Ân đền nghĩa đáp dạ thành khắc ghi

**Sister Thích nữ Chân Trăng Chí Thành**  
(Lê Thị Tư; Tâm Hạnh Niệm)

Vén mây **trăng** lộ diện  
Tu tập dạ **chí thành**  
Công phu không xao lãng  
Sen nở cõi Trời Tây



## Sister Thích nữ Chân Trắng Lý Tưởng

(Châu Thị Thu Sương; Tâm Tuệ Như)

Hé nụ cười chân, thật tuyệt vời  
**Trăng** sao chiếu sáng khắp muôn nơi  
Long lanh ánh mắt người **lý tưởng**  
Sưởi ấm tình người giữa trùng khơi

## Transmission gathas from Mountain Spring Monastery (11 April 2023, Bringelly, Australia)

### Brother Thích Chân Trời Bình Minh

(Trương Văn Sen; Tâm Đức Lượng)

Cultivating the **peaceful sky of the mind**,  
the ten directions are illuminated beautifully.  
Throughout the triple world,  
our true home is present everywhere.  
The roots of virtue planted millenia ago  
are deep, true, and long lasting.  
The accomplishment of the great gentleman is carried  
far and wide on the fragrant wind.

### Chân Minh Hải

(Daya Heather Jepsen;  
Peaceful Courage of the Heart)

The **ocean of wisdom** is our ancient and true inheritance  
The bright eyes of the Awakened One contemplate  
the nature of all things and see no coming and no going  
On her path of return, she carries the peaceful  
light of the moon  
As a gracious offering to each living being.

### Chân Hỷ Tạng

(Faye Nhi Nguyen; Tâm Hướng Dương)

By seeing the nature of affinities planted since  
beginningless time  
The authentic fruit of insight reveals itself as a  
**storehouse of joy**  
Walking this ancient path suddenly we realize that  
there was never a time when we were not  
wonderfully together  
Sunflowers waving in the gentle breeze quietly  
reveal the wondrous Dharma Body.





## Ordination ceremonies

This year, the Sangha also welcomed 31 new monastic members into the following ordination families:

- **Longan Tree** (24 September at Deer Park Monastery, USA) comprised of 4 brothers: *Chân Nhất Lâm, Chân Nhất Thiên, Chân Nhất Điền, Chân Nhất Sơn*; and 2 sisters: *Chân Ân Hạnh and Chân Thuần Hạnh*.
- **Daffodil** (5 November at Dharma Cloud Temple, Upper Hamlet, France) comprised of 7 brothers: *Chân Nhất Vân, Chân Nhất Vũ, Chân Nhất Thanh, Chân Nhất Lương, Chân Nhất Nguyên, Chân Nhất Mộc, Chân Nhất Xuân*; and 3 sisters: *Chân Đôn Hạnh, Chân Diệu Hạnh, Chân Đăng Hạnh*.
- **Golden Trumpet** (17 December at Thai Plum Village) comprised 13 sisters: *Chân Cung Hạnh, Chân Chuyên Hạnh, Chân Cẩn Hạnh, Chân Chuẩn Hạnh, Chân Cảnh Hạnh, Chân Chí Hạnh, Chân Cư Hạnh, Chân Chánh Hạnh, Chân Chiêu Hạnh, Chân Chung Hạnh, Chân Cần Hạnh, Chân Cát Hạnh*.

During the 2-year memorial ceremony of Thay at the beginning of 2024, the Sangha ordained 11 new monastics:

- **Tropical Almond Tree** (23 January at Dieu Tram Monastery, Hue, Vietnam) comprised of 4 brothers: *Chân Nhất Trú, Chân Nhất Âm, Chân Nhất Lạc, Chân Nhất Giới*; and 7 sisters: *Chân Mật Hạnh, Chân An Hạnh, Chân Hiếu Hạnh, Chân Lập Hạnh, Chân Quán Hạnh, Chân Đoàn Hạnh, Chân Khánh Hạnh*. ☸



# Honoring Our Teacher Thay: 2-Year Memorial Ceremony

THAY'S DISCIPLES

*The following is a letter to Thay from his disciples in Plum Village, France.*

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## Your life is your message

Dear Beloved Thay,

As we sit in the gentle embrace of our worldwide Plum Village Sangha, penning this letter to you, our heart is filled with a profound sense of gratitude and reverence. It has been two years since your physical presence returned to Mother Earth; yet, your presence and spirit continue to illuminate the path for us, your students and followers.

As students, we had the honor and privilege of walking beside you, absorbing the depth of your wisdom and the boundless compassion that you embodied. Your teachings were not just lessons; they were living experiences that infused our daily life and interactions. Your presence was a sanctuary of peace, a testament to the power of mindfulness and loving-kindness.

You taught us, through your own luminous example that even in the face of adversity and hardship, the flame of aspiration can burn brightly, undiminished. Your life was your message, embracing the mud and lotus of life, pieced together from the cloth of resilience and an unwavering commitment to peace. In the darkest of times, you remained a beacon of hope, demonstrating that inner peace is the foundation for the peace of humanity.

Your journey was not just your own. It became our journey too. Through your eyes, we learned to see the world with compassion and understanding. You showed us the interbeing of all life, reminding us that we are not separate but deeply connected to each other and to the Earth. Your teachings on mindfulness, on cherishing every moment, on living fully and lovingly, are gifts of immeasurable value.



As we continue to walk the path you have laid before us, we feel a deep commitment to be a continuation of your legacy. Your guidance lives on in each of us, your students, as we endeavor to embody in our thoughts, words, and actions, the Dharma doors you have transmitted to us. We aspire to be mindful, to cultivate peace and understanding in our hearts, and to extend that peace to the world.

Your physical absence is felt deeply, yet we find solace in knowing that you are still with us, in the rustle of the leaves, in the stillness of meditation, in the smiles we share, in the silent moments of

reflection and in this living community, your masterpiece. You taught us that life is impermanent, but love and understanding are a legacy that endures from generation to generation.

Thank you, dear Thay, for your unwavering guidance, your endless compassion, and the invaluable lessons that continue to guide us. We vow to carry forward the torch of your teachings, ensuring that the essence of Plum Village continues to flourish and touch the hearts of many.

*With deepest gratitude and love,  
Your students* ☸





*The following is a letter to Thay from his international monastic disciples gathered in the Tỳ Hiếu Root Temple for Thay's 2-year memorial.*

---

### **Ocean of smiles**

Dear Beloved Thay,

We are here. Here in the Root Temple, here at our roots, at our home. Thank you Thay for guiding us home, to our breath, to our steps, and to this deeply familiar land of our spiritual ancestors.

Over the last few days more than four hundred of your monastic disciples, gathered from all over the world, have been walking together in peace and gratitude along the paths here that you have loved so deeply. Have you been enjoying our laughter around the fires? Have you been enjoying the sangha's "ocean of smiles"? Could you feel the moment when we sang "I have arrived, I am home" around the half moon pond? We could feel you smiling in the ultimate dimension as our voices rippled over the calm temple waters in Vietnamese, English, German, French, Thai and Chinese. Your children have come home, to express our gratitude to our roots, to our spiritual ancestors, and to you, our beloved teacher.

We remember you once saying, under the shade of the pine trees at your hermitage in France, that the root temple's lands are vast. The territory of Tu Hieu extends far beyond Hue, to France, Germany, the US, Thailand, Australia and Hong Kong. Our spiritual ancestors are present in all our monasteries on various continent. Six decades ago you stepped out of the temple gate here and brought the Dharma to the West. Today your children, monastic and lay, from over thirty countries in the ten directions, have returned home to the source to touch the Earth and pay our respects.

Dear Thay, we feel your absence keenly, and yet at the same time we know you are still with us. We are climbing the hill of the 21st century with you in our hearts and our steps. Going forward as a community, we can feel your energy of patience, gentleness and trust. You taught us how to accept each other and cherish our differences, to embrace the mud and the difficulties. Thank you, dear Thay, for giving us permission to be authentic and human. We are committed to keeping our communication open so we can trust each other and the collective insight. The path of transformation you have laid out for us is practical and real, and we have nothing to fear.

We know it is your greatest happiness to feel the Dharma continuing in so many different lands. The monastic and lay disciples of the Root Temple are spread far and wide, sharing the riches of Vietnamese Buddhist spiritual culture that you have taught us. In our time of stress and injustice, your teachings and practices continue to be a balm that brings relief and healing to families, relationships, workplaces and movements for change. Monastic and lay teachers are learning how to guide the next generation through the ocean of your Dharma. We are learning to keep refreshing our Dharma doors so they stay practical, relevant and adapted to our different environments and challenges. Your students are continuing you in so many diverse ways, each with their own style and voice. So many young people are flocking to your community on every continent, to find meaning and purpose, just as they did when you started teaching here in Vietnam over 60 years ago.

You gave everything to build the beloved community, and today we make the vow to do our best to take care of each other, to stay on the path, and together carry the torch of your teachings into the future. We promise to be real, to be natural, and to embrace each other and the path ahead with patience, compassion, courage, and trust, just as you taught us.

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

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

*This is a legendary moment. This is a happy moment,  
Your students ☸*



## Thay's 2-year memorial ceremony

On 29 January, more than 400 monastics from all Plum Village centers, alongside venerable monks and nuns of Hue and lay practitioners from over 30 countries gathered in Tu Hieu Root Temple to honor Thay. This grand memorial ceremony recognized Thay as the Fifth Patriarch of Tu Hieu and the founder of the Plum Village tradition.



Ceremony to purify the Deep Listening Hut





Inviting Thay's relics to the Deep Listening Hut



Br. Phap An leading the procession to the Ancestral Hall



Br. Phap Hai carrying Thay's Sanghati;  
Br. Phap Luu carrying Thay's Alms Bowl



Asking permission of ancestral teachers to allow Thay to rest  
alongside them in the Ancestral Hall

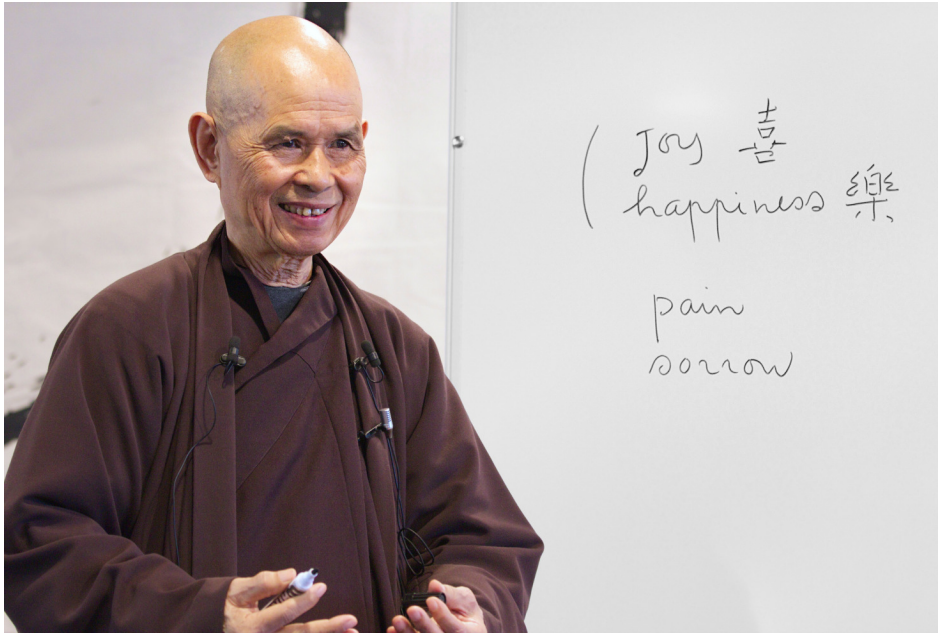


Visiting Thay's Memorial Monument at Eternal Park, Hue, Vietnam

# love is the answer

## AN INTERVIEW WITH THAY

*This is an abridged excerpt from a “lost” interview conducted by Jo Confino (working for the Guardian at the time) in 2012 with Thay at the Toadskin Hut in Son Ha Temple. The entire interview is available on the Plum Village Podcast, “The Way Out is In,” episode #47 aired on 21 March 2023.*



**Jo Confino:** I have been looking at issues like climate change and the fact that last year, there has been very bad weather, extreme weather, lots of other problems as a result of climate change and the destruction of the environment. And yet, it seems like not many want to act. What is your thought on this?

**Thay:** Not many seem to be acting on the climate, but they are also not acting on many other things. They have many problems: their relationship with themselves, their relationship with another person, their family. They don't act on those problems either. So, it's easy to see how they don't want to act on the environment. If we expect them to do something about the environment, it might be too much; because they still are not doing the most necessary things: like understanding themselves, taking care of their suffering. They are afraid of thinking about their own suffering, their own problems. Why would they have the courage to think about the suffering of the Earth or the environment? So, that is the attitude of many. We are afraid. We don't want to see the truth.

**Jo Confino:** And if they saw the truth, what impact would it have?

**Thay:** When they see the truth, it could be too late to act. Yes, I think that is true. People like yourself, would like to wake them up, but they don't want to get up because waking up makes them suffer. So they continue to dream in order not to suffer. They are not strong enough to confront the truth. It's not that they don't know what is going on. They don't want to think about it. They want to be busy in order to forget. It's not because they like what they do so much that they are busy. They need to be busy in order not to think about the real situation.

**Jo Confino:** Do you think we'll need a real disaster to wake people up? Or do you think that will make people hide even more? What do you think might change the balance?

**Thay:** If you show them the truth, if you bring them a film or something with evidence to convince them that the situation is urgent, they might have



some time to look at it. But after that, they'll go back to the way they were because they don't want to think about it. It is not because they are not intelligent enough to know what is happening.

I think there are other approaches, like showing them another kind of reality. Show them a person who is happy, who lives relaxingly. That person does not need a lot of money or power or anything to be happy. We try to make them experience a little bit of that kind of happiness. If they can taste the happiness of relaxation and peace, then maybe they will change. They will see that it's not worth continuing on this path of money and power. So bring them to a place where there is happiness; bring them to meet a person who is truly happy. That is their chance, because they think that there's no other way than the way they are going. You have to show people happiness like that, to bring awakening. And we need people who know how to be truly happy in order to show them.

**Jo Confino:** You also talk about fearlessness, about the courage to stand up. What helps people to find that courage to stand up, even at the risk to themselves?

**Thay:** You have the courage to do it, because you have enough compassion. Compassion is a very powerful energy. Without compassion, you cannot do it. With compassion you can die for other people, like a mother who can die for a child. Compassion is possible when you understand the suffering. You also have insight, because compassion is born from insight; because of our insight into suffering, and also insight into happiness, you have the courage to do it, to say it, because you are not afraid of losing anything. You are not afraid of losing fame, your status, because you know that that is not the foundation of your happiness. The foundation of your happiness is understanding and love. So, if you have that insight and you live by that kind of insight, you are not fearful anymore. But if you still have fear of losing your status, your position, your house, and so on, you will not have the courage to do it. If you have experienced some happiness, like love, understanding, you know that happiness does not come from these outer conditions. We know that happiness comes from our mental insight. You know how to be happy. You know how to recognize the real conditions of happiness that you have. Then you are not fearful anymore.

We have to learn to live like that, without fear. We have to be strong enough. We have to have the power of love, the power of giving up all these things, and the power of understanding. These three kinds of powers are not dependent on money or status or things like that. The power to love, the power to be able to cut off these sorts of afflictions, the power to understand our suffering and the suffering of the other person. These are cultivating true powers.

**Jo Confino:** What's the best way of communicating to people so that it really creates change amongst a lot of people rather than just a few?

**Thay:** Suppose you write a book on the art of consumption, because people spend money and buy a lot of things every day. You can speak in the kind of language that can help people to wake up to see that what they buy cannot make them happy.

Many people consume in order to cover up their suffering. That does not help, because during the night, these kinds of things come up and they suffer in their own hell. So, tell them how to consume and what to consume, so that they can heal. They can have a little bit more peace and love. When we do walking meditation, we consume time. In the context of modern civilization to walk like that is a waste of time. You don't do anything. You don't talk, you don't think, you just walk. It's a waste of time. Time is money. But for us, this is good consumption, because we allow our body to relax, our mind to relax, to rest. In every step, we touch the wonders of life, the refreshing and healing elements of life. That is good consumption. After half an hour of walking like that, you feel refreshed, restored. That does not need a lot of money. It does not need anything at all. We are not against consumption. So, tell them how to walk from the parking lot to the place where they work. To walk in such a way that every step can restore their peace, their joy, and their love for life. Teach them how to stop their thinking.

**Jo Confino:** A lot of people I speak to say there's a disconnection between people's lives and the impacts of their lives. So, you buy something and you don't know where it comes from. You don't know who produced it. You don't know the conditions of those people. They're so isolated from the world around them. And whatever they do, they

don't see the impact. Do you think there's a problem with the fact that people live their lives, but they're so disconnected?

**Thay:** So, in that book, "The Art of Consumption", you tell them how to eat: the art of eating. Instead of thinking and talking a lot, you stop talking. You stop thinking and you try to eat properly. You look at the food. You get in touch with the piece of carrot, and you get in touch with the soil, the water, the rain, the sunshine. You get in touch with Mother Earth. You eat in such a way that you feel in touch with true life, your roots. That is meditation, and the meditation is very pleasant. You have a habit of eating and you should be shown another way of eating, so that you can see how a piece of carrot has come to you. At the beginning of our meal, we read the Five Contemplations. But during our meal, we contemplate it; not just at the beginning. While stopping the thinking, we chew every morsel of our food in that way. We get in touch with the food and we become grateful. As long as you are grateful, you can still be happy.

This morning when I touched the Earth, I did not touch the Earth as one individual. I saw a lineage of ancestors, blood ancestors, and spiritual ancestors. I see myself as a fourfold Sangha; and I touched the Earth as a huge community, not as an individual. I do not see a self; I see a whole lineage. When I touched the Earth before the Buddha, I saw that the Buddha is not a self. Buddha is the continuation of a long lineage. So, we see the roots of the Buddha, the origin of the Buddha in many generations. So, in that moment of touching the Earth, you have the insight of no-self. The person sitting in front of you, she is an ambassador. She represents a whole lineage. You see that she is not there as an individual. She represents her lineage, her country, her people. So, you have to see your partner, your friend, as an ambassador of the whole lineage. Then you bow to him, to her: "Good morning, Mr./Ms. Ambassador." With that, you can deal with her with respect, with admiration, because the talents and virtues of many generations are in her. You don't talk to her, as a self. You talk to her with respect, because there is a Buddha in her also. So, that's the way to look at a person. A pine tree is made of many generations, and there's the moon and the stars in her. So, you bow to that pine tree. That is a kind of civilization, a way of life. If you learn how to live that kind of life, you don't need anybody to remind you to take care of the environment. You can do it by yourself. That is the insight you get when you

practice no-self. We live that kind of experience. We live our daily lives like that. Then everything we say, everything we write down will be able to touch the hearts of people; because you write from your own insight, and not from the ideas you get from another person. So, writing that book *The Art of Consumption* is a practice also. The ones who produce for us to consume, and we, who go and buy the products, we all should learn how to consume.

**Jo Confino:** In the 14 Mindfulness Trainings, it says, "don't invest or purchase from companies that deplete natural resources, harm the Earth, and deprive others of their chance to live" and also to take a clear stand against oppression and injustice. What should activists do? You said quite rightly, the first thing they need to do is to find their own happiness. But in terms of action in the world, how should people work in terms of speaking against injustice, against oppression? How can they do that in a way that is peaceful and that they're resolved in themselves?

**Thay:** You know that the monastics have a 3-month retreat every year and like to have a monastic day every week. We are aware that if we cannot be ourselves, if we don't have enough brotherhood, sisterhood, and happiness, what we do will not have any meaning. We organize our monastic days in such a way that we can get the nourishment; enough to sustain us as a community, so that we can offer retreats and Days of Mindfulness, a little bit everywhere. This is very clear and we feel that very, very much, we should be ourselves. We should not lose ourselves in too much work. Otherwise, we are not authentic. We are not true in our daily service. The problem is not to do a lot of things, but to do things forthrightly. We should not have the feeling that we do not do enough to help. We should be sure that what we are doing is well done, and is right. With that, we can be peaceful; because whatever we do will benefit everyone, even if we are just doing sitting or walking meditation. If you do walking meditation right, you get nourishment and healing in every step. Not only your ancestors in you profit, but the future generations will profit. Without that, you cannot do anything. So, every step is the basic practice. Every breath, every sitting should be true, should be nourishing and healing. So, even if you do a little, like organizing a Day of Mindfulness only, but if you do it with all your heart and with happiness, you are doing everything at the same time. So, whatever you do for yourself rightly, you

are doing for all of us. That's how I see things. You don't need to have any complex that you are not doing enough. This is very important.

I think to contribute to collective awakening, we have to operate as a community, as a sangha. Even the journalists should have their own sangha, where they can share their suffering and difficulties, their happiness, their hopes and successes. It's a very important thing. This is very clear in Plum Village that without a sangha, we cannot do anything meaningful. So, taking refuge in a sangha is a very basic thing.

So that business man, he produces in a way that intoxicates people. He doesn't help himself. He does not help his consumers. We want to change him. But how can we change him? There are many ways. One of the ways is to go to him and say that you can be happier. You can be more relaxed. You can live a life that is not hectic like this. You can have more joy or relaxation. You do not need to be overwhelmed by your worries, your anger, and so on, and you help him. That is one way.

Another way is to tell our friends to consume according to the Five Mindfulness Trainings. Why do we have to buy these things? We will tell them that they should not continue to consume these things. We don't need them. We need other kinds of products that help us to be healthier. If there is awakening in the ranks of the consumers, then the producer will have to change. Otherwise, he cannot continue. So, we force him to change by not buying what we don't need. I can survive very well without these electronic devices. I have more time for myself and for my sangha by not using too much of these electronic devices. We can survive very well without television, even without a telephone, and without reading newspapers. We don't need to watch the news every day or twice a day. Now, if the newspapers bring us good food, then we will buy them. So, there are many ways. I think if we operate as a sangha, and we work with the grassroots

people, we can make change from there. We don't have to persuade the people on top to change, if that work is not easy.

I think Gandhi was capable of urging his people to boycott a number of things, and he knew how to take care of himself. He knew that during the nonviolent operation, he should take care of himself. He told his partner that we should practice, we should refrain from sexual practice during this time. We have to practice breathing and preserving ourselves, because this is a hard struggle. He knew about all these things, how to preserve energy, because the struggle is long. So, a spiritual practice is very much needed in an attempt to help society change. This spiritual dimension in the life of an activist is very, very important. We should arrange ourselves so that there will be more peace and relaxation and healing in our daily life. We should have companions on our path and should have sanghas. I think the idea of having journalists come together as a community and getting their collective insight and the way to work is very important. In Plum Village, we need monks, nuns in order to do things together. We need to support each other. It's very clear in Plum Village that if we do not stay together as a community, we cannot do anything. We cannot serve, in the good meaning of the work.

**Jo Confino:** How are you able to look out in the world with peace when you see so much suffering? There are wars everywhere. Things are not becoming more peaceful. If climate change gets much worse, there'll be terrible, terrible suffering. How do you maintain your own sense of peace when you see all that going on around you?

**Thay:** I think our perception of time may help, because for us, it's a very alarming notion. But for Mother Earth, if she suffers, she knows that she has the power to heal herself. If needed, she will take one hundred million years in order to heal herself. But for us, we think that our time on Earth is only 100 years, and that is why we are impatient. I think



the collective karma, the collective ignorance of our race, collective anger and violence of our race may eventually lead to our destruction. We have to learn to accept that. Or maybe Mother Earth will produce a great being sometime in the next decades, so that person will tell us what to do in order to avoid this catastrophe. We don't know. Mother Earth is very talented. She has produced Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, great beings. So, take refuge in Mother Earth, surrender to her, and ask her to heal us, to help us. We have to accept that the worst can happen, that most of us will die as a species and many other species will die also. Mother Earth will be capable after maybe a few million years to bring us out again, this time wiser. We are very intelligent, but we have to learn how to be better. First of all, to love Mother Earth.

When you practice mindfulness, and when you look at the sun during your walking meditation, mindfulness of the body in the body helps you to see that the sun is in you. Without the sun there's no life at all. Suddenly you get in touch with the sun in a different way. You see the relationship between you and the sun change. Even the sun is embracing

you as a father. That is the power of mindfulness, bringing insight. Before, you saw the sun as something very far away, not having too much connection with you. But in fact your connection is very, very deep. You are a child of the sun. You come from the sun. That is true with the Earth also.

You walk in such a way that you see that your relationship with the Earth is so deep and that the earth is in you. This is not something very difficult. It's much less difficult than philosophy. If you can walk like that the relationship between you and Mother Earth will change drastically. Maybe you can feel that Mother Earth is in you. You are Mother Earth. Then you are no longer afraid of dying, because the Earth is not dying. You might be reproduced in a better form, in a more beautiful form. It's like a wave. A wave appears and disappears and appears again. Why should a wave be able to die? So, that kind of insight can come when you have a good relationship. I don't think that you need to be a philosopher in order to feel that way. Every one of us can see the connection.

**Jo Confino:** Dear Thay, thank you so much for your time. We really, really appreciate it. ☺

i am  
in love  
with  
Mother  
Earth



# Sun-Bleached Brown Robes

BROTHER CHÂN PHÁP ỨNG

*On 11 December 2023, the monastics of the Fish ordination family turned 30 years old. After 30 years, the number of “fish” has reduced to two-thirds, from six individuals down to four. Now, they are elder brothers and sisters of Plum Village. Brother Phap Ung is one of the remaining four “fish,” alongside Sr. Thoai Nghiem, Sr. Dinh Nghiem and Sr. Tue Nghiem. On this occasion, the editorial team had a chance to drink tea with Br. Phap Ung at Thay’s hut in Upper Hamlet.*

## An ancient seed deep in the Earth just smiles

After 30 years of being guided by Thay and nourished by the sangha, I feel like I have nearly completed a period. Just as there are four seasons in a year with leaves falling in the autumn and new buds manifesting in the spring, I have experienced all sorts of changes.

During those years, I have made all kinds of mistakes, learned to get up from a fall, and incurred many scrapes and scratches, so to speak. Perhaps, it is because of these experiences that I feel like the fruits and flowers are beginning to take form; the

buds are now just beginning to open. I am beginning to recognize and have faith in the teacher within myself. This is incredibly precious to me. In truth, however, it is not anything new. It is the feeling of being able to return to myself, like returning to the source in order to continue forward. Maybe it is the essence transmitted by the ancestors that is now beginning to blossom in me. It is like a continuation.

When I had the aspiration to become a monastic, my family was not ready to receive the news. I felt sorry for myself and cried alone in my bed. While crying, I suddenly saw a figure with a glowing complexion who kindly said, “Rest assured, my child!” It calmed me down... Not long after that, I met Thay at a retreat in the Netherlands. Thay looked at me – maybe because I looked naive like a young student or a scout of a Buddhist youth group – and asked, “Do you want to be an engineer of Buddhism?” I thought to myself, “Huh? What’s an engineer of Buddhism? I don’t understand.” I looked confusedly at Thay, but the seed had been transmitted. *A seed that has lain deeply in the Earth for many years just smiles.*<sup>1</sup>



Fish family after the ordination ceremony in 1993

1. Adopted from the poem “Cuckoo Telephone” in *Call Me By My True Names* by Thich Nhat Hanh, 2022.



Omega Institute, New York, 1996.  
Photo Courtesy: Simon Chaput

### **Taking care of birth and death is the greatest happiness**

Thanks to Thay, my greatest happiness of becoming a monastic was fulfilled. My aspiration was to find a path that could transcend birth and death. In the past, my idea of becoming a monastic was to go to another world, as if to say “bye bye” birth and death. However, Thay taught that we do not need to say “bye bye” to birth and death; rather, we only need to take care of our notions of birth and death. We do not need to run away from suffering; do not need to go to another world. If in our daily lives we have happiness, joy, a bit of something to offer to the world, and the ability to generate love and understanding within ourselves, only then will we be able to take care of our suffering and the suffering of the world. Our lives will have a clearer meaning.

I have been able to come home to the island within and be in touch with myself. Through the lens of the historical dimension, I understand that there is birth and death, there is suffering. At the same time, I can also learn to touch the ultimate dimension: the no-birth, no-death nature of life.

I feel very fortunate. This may be the merits of my blood and spiritual ancestors from countless past generations.

### **“Stick of the Zen master”**

During the years serving and learning from Thay, I received many “Zen sticks.” Thay’s Zen sticks would strike swiftly to the heart’s core because they were usually unexpected. I had the tendency to avoid clashing with anyone. I would choose instead to compromise to make things easier. If I needed to go on the frontline, I would; but I preferred to be in the background more. This was with regard to building sanghas in Vietnam. At the time, I was in Vietnam and Thay was in France. The Zen stick struck when Thay admonished me over the phone (Thay rarely communicated by telephone). I felt so sorry for myself then but later on, I was very grateful to Thay for it. Thay wanted me to grow up, to take action and do the things that needed to be done. Thay gave me the Zen stick to help me be stronger, to have agency and give my input with more inner freedom, rather than always trying to keep harmony by following others.

### **Patience is the mark of true love**

It was not until 1996 that Upper Hamlet and New Hamlet had an abbot and abbess, respectively. Before that, each Hamlet only had a head of the sangha, service coordinator, etc. Perhaps Thay wanted to train me when I was just a novice and then a young bhikshu, because he nominated me into the council of elders, consisting of “venerables,” like Br. Giac Thanh, Br. Doji, Br. Sariputra and Br. Nguyen Hai. I don’t know how I was eventually “put” into the position as head of practice.

One time, at the end of formal lunch, Thay said, “Let’s have Dharma sharing this afternoon!” Being head of the sangha, I “cleverly” said, “Dear Thay, let us look it over. Let us discuss it.” The whole sangha was startled, wondering “who was this audacious young monastic?” A lay friend sitting next to me, named Tinh Thuy, who later became Sr. Quy Nghiem, whispered, “How could you?!”

Later, I slowly got it. But at that time when I answered Thay, I didn’t understand what I had done wrong. I was taught that the bhikshu council was a democracy; so I applied it right away. When Thay heard my response, he didn’t say anything; he only breathed.

Thinking about it now, I feel deep sympathy for Thay. Thay kept quiet about it for who knows how many years. He was very patient. Perhaps, Thay thought, this young one was slow and needed time to ripen somewhat before Thay could say anything.

Once, we were in the Sitting Still Hut of Upper Hamlet. Thay whispered into my ear, I think it was my left ear, “My child, Plum Village is a combination of two key factors: seniority and democracy.” That went straight to my heart. Yet, I wondered why Thay said that, because I had already completely forgotten about the formal lunch incident. Then I remembered; there was a reason.

### The life jacket

I have gone through many ups and downs in the past 30 years. During the low moments, my life jacket was my faith in the practice, the loving connection with Thay and the sangha. It was thanks to the support of my ancestors that I was able to ordain, not because of my talent. Thay often said it is thanks to the merit of our blood and spiritual ancestors, including the sangha.

Upon reflection, I saw that the ups and downs I went through came from the ancestral wounds of my blood family, not from external conditions. Those wounds manifested through certain ways of thinking, confusions and doubts. I learned to accept and persevere in exploring how my mind worked. I knew that this path was worthwhile and in-line with my aspirations. Thanks to that faith, I had the strength to keep going. I continued to get up after falling down and took good care of my ancestral wounds. These wounds were so deep that they kept coming back in phases; they wouldn't subside.

I was lucky to learn that I didn't have to wait until the wounds completely healed to be happy. I could be happy in the process of taking care of my wounds. I didn't need to look for external conditions to find the way out, solace or healing. With my faith as a foundation, I practiced to take care, understand and accept the wounds. This faith helped me feel that I was not alone. My relationship with Thay, the sangha, and my blood and spiritual roots helped me stand firm through the storms. I applied what I learned to continue moving forward. On the one hand, I practiced nourishing joy; on the other hand, I practiced healing.

When I became a monk, I also wanted to help ease the suffering of the world. However, even in the effort of helping our blood families, we need the

help of the community. We cannot achieve much as a “lone warrior.” *One Buddha is not enough.*

### Presenting the insight gatha

In the autumn of 1994, Thay taught the Discourse on Youth and Happiness. At the end of the Autumn Retreat, Thay suggested that everyone write a song or poem to present their insight. Thay was even going to grade our insight poems. Out of nowhere, I was “gifted” a song! After singing it before Thay and the sangha, I went with Br. Phap Dang to a retreat in Germany. When I came back, I heard that Thay gave my song 7 out of 10 points.

“*Sun-bleached brown robes,  
coming home to the Buddha,  
footsteps imprint on leaves.  
Fragrance of the homeland  
wafts faintly.  
You are here  
to nourish me  
and I live to support you.  
Each small step  
together move the Earth and sky.  
Whether with or against the flow,  
all nourish the entire Village.*”

### “Thay is behind you”

While walking in the forest with Thay one day, he said “This is heaven, my child!” Arriving at a narrow path, Thay said “You go ahead.” But I didn't dare. Thay said again, “Go on.” I had to obey. I could feel that Thay was sending me the message that he would always have my back. Thay also wrote a calligraphy “Thay is behind you” (Thầy ở sau lưng con).

Many of my monastic siblings did not have the chance to meet Thay; but if they are lucky, they would somehow be able to feel that Thay is always present to support them. Although Thay has passed away, his aspiration is still: “May we never have the need to leave the Sangha body. May we never attempt to escape the suffering of the world, may we always being present wherever beings need our help” (from the chant “Protecting and Transforming”).

Thay's practice is dwelling happily in the present moment. The present moment is eternal, transcending time and space. Being in touch with the present moment can greatly benefit us. *I have arrived, I am home.* It's like we have returned to our roots. That is the inheritance, the insight that Thay wants us to have.

After I was ordained, I experienced a great suffering that I was unable to put into words. *Only I knew; only I bore its burden.* The brothers could feel my sorrow but did not know what had happened. Luckily, Thay was there to listen to me; he understood and loved me all the same. That helped me to heal. That love continued to be my nourishment on the path. I am tremendously grateful to Thay.

### The spirit of non-fear

The essence of Thay that I want to continue most is the spirit of non-fear. That quality is very much needed in this time of our lives, of humanity and of the Earth. A spirit of peace, non-fear and courage will help us to have more faith. This is the faith that we can feel in our bones; it can ignite the fire in our hearts and invigorate us, helping us to take care of our suffering rather than hoping for a better future. This quality of non-fear, embodying the essence of compassion, can help us to face violence, destruction and chaos.

Thay is no longer in the familiar form to guide us directly; therefore, a foundation for each one of us must be to come back to take care of and nourish ourselves. From this shared foundation, we can draw our strength. By breathing the same breath and walking the same rhythm, we have the Buddha, the Patriarchs, and Thay with us.

Another important element is to do what we can so that everyone feels comfortable to be themselves living in the community. That is a very practical necessity. To be able to be oneself means that each person has time to develop, to understand the nature of things, to grow up, as well as to be supported and accepted. However, we also need to open our hearts to each other as the glue connecting this sangha of diverse cultures and traditions.



In the gatha that Thay's teacher (grandfather monk Thanh Quy) gave to him for his Dharma lamp transmission, there is the sentence: "Walking without dispersion and without strife" (Hành đường vô niệm diệt vô tranh). "Without dispersion" is very important. Everyone has an idea of right and wrong. However, from a meta-ethical standpoint, we need to be "without dispersion"; that is, to accept the left and the right, the mud and the lotus. We need to develop and water the qualities that are beautiful, but, at the same time, we also need to accept the things that are not yet beautiful. We take care and embrace the things that are not yet beautiful. We need that essence in a sangha. We also need to practice "without strife" to take care of the three complexes (superiority, inferiority and equality) present in each of us. That is the hallmark of what we need to develop in order [for the sangha] to realize collective awakening: Thay's dream. ☸



# A Thousand Rivers of Moonlight

SISTER CHÂN HOA NGHIÊM

This autumn, two guests from Vietnam, Mr. Thanh and Mr. Huy, came to visit Blue Cliff Monastery. Mr. Thanh, the director of a documentary about the life of our teacher, Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh (or Thay), contacted us through Ms. Chau Tho, who is the main director of the film. He wanted to ask for assistance from the brothers and sisters to learn more about the places where Thay had visited and lived in the 1960s. This was a crucial period in Thay's life when he came to the United States to pursue a Master of Arts degree in 1962 and also began advocating for peace in Vietnam.

Brother Phap Khong contacted Princeton University and Columbia University to organize a visit by the film crew and some monastics to the historical sites where Thay had lived. The first location we visited was Princeton University, where Thay had studied. Dr. Brian Shetler gave us a guided tour of the Princeton library, which houses many of Thay's Master's theses, and pointed out Brown Hall, where Thay resided.



We did walking meditation on the path from the library to the campus where Thay had walked in the past. On that day, it was strewn with gold and red leaves. As we walked, I felt as if Thay were revisiting his former school with us. Pausing under a maple tree, we sat in a circle and listened to a passage from *Fragrant Palm Leaves*. Afterward, we sang "Falling Autumn Leaves," a French folk song rewritten by Thay with Vietnamese lyrics. The wind blew, scattering golden leaves from the swaying branches, creating such a beautiful and memorable scene.

Our next destination was the Pomona wood cabin at Ockanickon Summer Camp in Medford, New Jersey. Pomona belongs to the YMCA and serves as a camp for children and adolescents. This was the wood cabin next to the large lake where Thay had sat on a small boat, paddling north on the lake and playing among the water lilies until evening. As it was now autumn, yellow leaves were falling from the trees onto the surface of the lake. I imagined Thay as a young monk sitting contemplatively, reminiscing about his native country, Vietnam, the pain of war there, and *Fragrant Palm Leaves* (a monastery Thay founded in 1957). I recalled reading Thay's memoir, *Fragrant Palm Leaves*, and how my eyes had teared up at the two verses written as a farewell to Thay by Ly, a social activist. Even now, reading them again, my emotions well up:

*"On the day you return, if the sky is torn asunder,  
look for me in the depths of your heart."*

We sat inside the wood cabin by the wood-burning stove. Mr. Tho (a lay practitioner and close friend of Blue Cliff Monastery) collected leaves and dry wood for the fire. The dry leaves ignited, filling the room with warmth. It was in this very cabin that Thay had written a short book in Vietnamese, titled *A Rose for Your Pocket*. Later, a musician took a part of the prose and put it to music. Inspired by the surroundings, Sr. Noi Nghiem requested to sing this song in memory of Thay. Everyone joined in, as most everyone knows this song by heart. Suddenly, I remembered the poem "The Joyful Meditation Hut" that Thay had written for Venerable Thanh Tu when Thay was still at *Fragrant Palm Leaves Monastery*. This poem was later set to music by Sr. Quy Nghiem. In this quiet moment, it felt as if Thay were sitting with us in this room. Suddenly, I wanted to sing to offer homage to Thay and to those present.

*"Clouds softly pillow the mountain peak.  
The breeze is fragrant with tea blossoms.*

...

*My confidence intact,  
I bid farewell with a peaceful heart."*

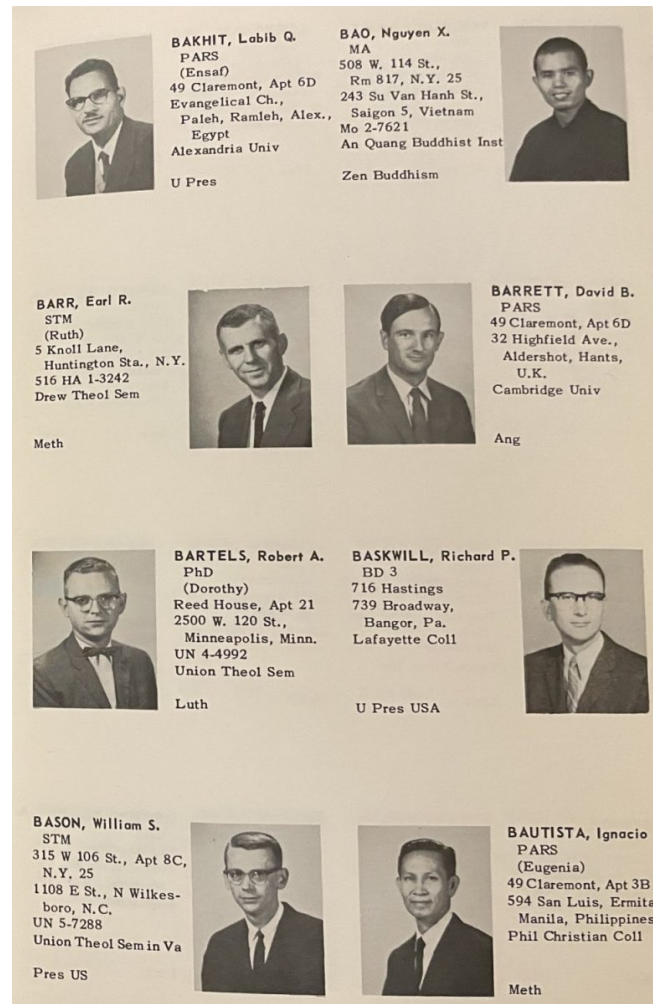
—from the poem "Untitled" in *Call Me By My True Names*

Singing up to this point, I suddenly felt my throat constrict, and was unable to continue. Thay has indeed gone far away; perhaps, the faith he entrusted to us was: "Continue the path that Thay has traveled, don't give up, my child..." I whispered in my heart, "Yes, I will never give up, Thay!"

The next day, we continued our visit to Union Theological Seminary, which is affiliated with Columbia University in New York, to explore the places where Thay had lived during his time there. We began walking meditation from the house at 306 West on 109th Street, where Thay resided before returning to Vietnam in 1963, to Columbia University. The city of New York was bustling with people. Passing the fruit stalls, I imagined Thay buying vegetables or bread alone on these streets in 1962, when his close friend Steve wasn't around. Those must have been lonely times for Thay. Thinking about this, I felt compassion for him.

During that time, there were almost no Buddhist monks where Thay lived. I thought about this period during which Thay had to confront internal conflicts and feelings of loneliness in this new environment. That young monk also carried the sorrows and intensity of the war happening in his homeland. Thinking about this, my eyes welled up with tears for the young monk, my teacher, who carried such a heavy burden on his shoulders. I didn't want people to see me cry, so I quickly wiped away my tears. But, I remembered Thay telling me, "If you want to cry, just cry, don't suppress it. There's nothing shameful about crying. Being aware that you are crying is enough." Being aware that we are crying, the tears will naturally stop flowing. When the sun of awareness shines, light will flood in, and we don't need to suppress our emotions. Being aware that I am crying, how can I continue crying?

In the past, Thay came here alone. When leaving New York to return to Vietnam, did he ever think that there would be a time when he would come back, not alone, but with a whole sangha? At that time, Thay probably didn't expect that he would later establish a monastery in the New York area, on the East Coast of the United States, where he was once an unknown young monk. Today, Thay has thousands of American disciples, monastic and lay. The continuation of Thay's legacy is truly unimaginable.



Union Theological Seminary class directory in 1962  
Photo Courtesy: Columbia University

We visited the library of Columbia University, exploring Butler Library on the eleventh floor. Thay mentioned this library in *Fragrant Palm Leaves*. It was here that Thay opened a book and found that two people had borrowed it before, on dates decades apart. They happened to be the third person. He wrote, "I am standing here, meeting them in space but not in time." Thinking about this, I suddenly felt moved; I too was meeting Thay, a young monk opening a book here, in the space of my own consciousness.

Caro Bratnober, the public services librarian at the University, gave us a guided tour during the visit, stating that everything in the library was essentially the same as before, with few changes, except that they had changed the call numbers on the book covers to correspond with numbers in the computer system. Looking at the bookshelves, my heart marveled! Time had passed, but the space remained as before. Many generations of scholars had walked past these bookshelves, including my teacher.



Caro then took Br. Phap Khong and me to Burke Library, another library on the upper floor, where students could study and conduct research. They led us to a small secluded room displaying pictures and materials about the founders of the school and the professors who had taught here. I was surprised to see a picture of Thay in a glass case alongside other renowned professors of the university. Thay looked very young, around 36 years old. They displayed his Master's thesis with his research topic, titled "The Problem of Knowledge in the Philosophy of Vijñānavāda." I felt a sense of pride and admiration for my teacher: A young monk could eloquently present the epistemology of Buddhist philosophy, a relatively challenging doctrine, in the Western academic environment where Buddhism was still quite unfamiliar at that time.

Mr. Thanh also wanted to visit Riverside Church, where Thay gave a talk on September 27, 2001, after the Twin Towers were attacked on September 11. When we arrived, it was already quite dark. Initially, those inside the church didn't want to receive us, saying that they had closed. But upon hearing that we were making a documentary about Thay life, an elderly man in the church told the security guards to let us in. The kind elderly man welcomed us and took the delegation to visit the hall, where Thay had given his talk to 1,500 people. He had been present among the audience. Brother Phap Khong mentioned that he was not yet a monastic at that time and had also sat among the audience, listening to Thay talk.

I still remember that year: We were on our way to Kim Son Monastery, California, when we heard the news that the Twin Towers had been attacked.

They asked the driver to stop the bus and told all of us to join our palms and recite the names of the Buddha and bodhisattvas to pray for those who had died in that terrorist attack. Afterwards, the US sanghas invited Thay to give a Dharma talk at Riverside Church because the American people were in a state of fear and desire for retribution. Some of us who accompanied Thay to the church that evening were very worried, including me. I was afraid that a bomb somewhere would suddenly explode while Thay was giving the talk. But Thay was very calm. Thay said that we needed to practice fasting to pray for peace in America, and no matter what, Thay had to give them a Dharma talk during this period of time. Upon arriving, Thay, with each steady step, walked into the church. Each one of us took mindful footsteps up to the podium. Sitting on the podium behind Thay, I felt ready to accept anything that could happen to me at that moment, even if I had to sacrifice my life. The main content of Thay lecture that day was how to embrace our anger.

The vow of a bodhisattva is not to be afraid, not to think only of oneself, and to dare to speak out and call for peace in the world. Our society today needs many bodhisattvas to speak up together for world peace. One bodhisattva is not enough. We need a sangha, for only a sangha can create a mountain that can withstand the storms of war.

The Bodhisattva Vows are something that I learned from Thay's teachings. They include the path of the Bodhisattva of Great Understanding, Manjushri, who uses wisdom to cut off all afflictions, and courageously faces violence and hatred without fear. The path of the Bodhisattva of Great Action, Samantabhadra, is to bring the practices of Love and Understanding into life. The path of the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion, Avalokiteshvara, is to help reduce people's suffering through the practice of immense love without discrimination. The path of the Bodhisattva of Great Aspiration, Ksitigarbha, is not to avoid suffering, not to find a peaceful place just for oneself, but to commit to go to the places that need help. It was only much later that I understood Thay's fearless actions in giving the Dharma talk at Riverside Church at that time.

### **In the water of a thousand rivers, the moon appears**

The day I asked Thay to ordain as a nun, I simply thought that I wanted to become a nun because life in Plum Village was so fun. There was nothing to

worry about. Every day I could do sitting and walking meditation with the sangha, eat in silence, and every week I could listen to Thay's Dharma talk. I didn't need to look for a job or compete for an important position, nor did I need to think about money. Life was so simple and happy. But over time, I gradually saw clearly that the path I was on was not as simple as I thought. I began to have work and responsibilities assigned to me by the sangha. I became more worried about monastic life, because at that time, Plum Village was not as developed as it is now. I started thinking about how to raise money for Plum Village so that we would have enough to live by.

I asked Thay for permission to keep bees to sell honey, because Plum Village has up to 1,250 plum trees, and every spring, they bloom and bees fill the garden. I also had other ideas like making spring rolls to sell at the market in the local town of Sainte Foy on Saturdays, etc. Thay shook his head, looked straight into my eyes, and said very firmly: "Don't worry my child, just keep practicing! If one has virtue through their wholehearted practice, one will not lack for food. Instead of worrying, you should take *Transformation and Healing* as a book for your bedside table and read one chapter a day for me."

Starting from that day, every night I read *Transformation and Healing*, a commentary that Thay had written about the practice of the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. The text is very simple and easy to understand. Reading it, I felt like I had just struck gold. The path of transformation has helped me transform my habits every day, giving me a new perspective on life, showing me that my true homeland is right inside me, not somewhere far away.

One time, Thay told me: "Out there, people are suffering a lot. They really need our help, so we should study and practice properly." I nodded, joined my palms, and replied, "Yes." At that time, I could only agree, but my mind was blank. Over time, however, I've had the opportunity to go to many centers and come into contact with the many cultures and diverse lives of many people. Regardless of nationality, race, skin color, or class, wherever people are, they cannot avoid suffering in life.

I have been residing at Blue Cliff Monastery for nearly ten years now. Living in a wealthy country like America, I thought that there would be less suffering than in poorer countries around the

world. But I was wrong. The suffering here seems as full as the Atlantic Ocean. I know of a family whose son had committed suicide. I listen to students who have wounds from sexual or physical abuse by their parents. There are people who feel lonely in their lives. There are young people who have been mired in addiction, debauchery, etc. Of course, there are also beautiful aspects of life. But what I want to say here is that even an economically developed country has its downsides.

Recently, a sizable crowd of people regularly shows up for our weekly Day of Mindfulness at the monastery. More and more young people come for the first time and then return. I can see that the need for the practice of mindfulness is very strong, because the world has more and more conflicts, wars, global economic recessions, unusual climate changes, natural disasters, and depression. Stress causes many young people to commit suicide. Occasionally I hear of young people committing suicide in New York or in Washington, D.C. The pressure must be tremendous in order to make people take their own lives like that. There is also much mental illness in society. Most recently, I had direct contact with a young woman who told me, "There is an evil spirit inside me that keeps urging me to stab myself or hang myself. I was so scared that I ran here." I advised her to recite the name of Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara whenever she heard the voice in her head to help her deal with her paranoia. Even though I tried to help her, after she left Blue Cliff Monastery, I heard that she had stabbed herself. Luckily, she was saved. But, in situations like this, as parents and siblings, what must we do to help our loved ones overcome emotional storms and distress? Isn't it too late to wait for the storm to come before finding a solution?

When I see young monks and nuns interacting happily with young people, being their companions in the practice as well as in service, I feel very happy. I hope Blue Cliff Monastery will be able to receive more and more young monks and nuns here to live and study.

I clearly see the reason for my presence and my practice here. I clearly see that I am not practicing only to achieve my own personal goal of enlightenment. My existence and practice is to help alleviate the suffering of those who are in need of help and love. Every time I come back from a long trip, I feel that Blue Cliff Monastery is a peaceful place, my home.

Tonight, the moon is so bright outside the window of my room, it reminds me of the year I sat with Thay on a bench watching the moon. Thay told me: “Only when we are free, can we see the bright moon...” Did Thay want to tell me that only when I am not busy with family or social matters, only when my heart is not filled with desires, wishes, and sorrows, only then will I be able to truly be in touch with the bright moon? As Thay’s parallel verses in the Great Togetherness Meditation Hall of Blue Cliff Monastery says:

*“Nước Bích lắng trong, ngàn sông có nước ngàn sông  
trắng hiện.*

*Non Nham tú lệ, mỗi lần nhìn lại mỗi lần mới tinh.”*

*“The blue water is clear. In the water of a thousand  
rivers, the moon appears.*

*The mountain cliff is beautiful. Every time you look at it,  
it is brand new.”*

I would like to say to Thay: “Dear respected Thay, I am very happy because every day I see our direction clearly and know where I am going. The gratitude I have for my teacher, for the Patriarchs, for my spiritual family, for my parents, and for my blood family will never run dry. In 2024, we commemorate the two years of your passing; but right now, I know that you are roaming freely, and that you will still be forever in our hearts.” ☸



# Lessons From My Teacher

BROTHER CHÂN PHÁP DUNG

*On 27 January, in Hue, Br. Phap Dung shared about his first encounter with Thay and his experience returning to Hue for Thay's 2-year grand memorial.*

As a young man growing up in the US, I rejected everything that was Vietnamese. I did not know at the time that it was a kind of internalized racism. I wanted to belong and to be like the people around me. I remember feeling ashamed of the lunch I brought to school because it smelled “weird.” Even though I loved it so much, I would find a corner far away from everyone to eat it.

I didn't know many other Vietnamese people. Then, when I was studying architecture in university, I won a scholarship to go to Vietnam to study “Vietnamese architecture”! I thought to myself, “I better get to know some Vietnamese people.”

That was in 1995 and Thay was in California leading a retreat. That's how I first met Thay. It was a retreat for Vietnamese people in the US, and Thay focused on healing intergenerational conflict and trauma as Thay would often do at retreats for Vietnamese people abroad. So many of us had grown up in the West and felt alienated from our parents' generation. Thay did his best to help us understand and reconcile with each other.

For me, it was the first time I had some understanding of my father's experience of the war and understanding his anger.

I remember going home after the retreat and one day, for some reason, I was very angry with my father. But instead of slamming the door to show my anger — that was how many of us communicated nonverbally in the house — I made the commitment to sit and breathe. I thought, “I will just sit and watch this anger and not say or do anything until it passes.” I did just that. And I sat until the anger subsided. It was a real revelation and triumph for me, to be able to master my anger like that. I know it may seem something small to you, but for me, it was mind-blowing to have sovereignty over my anger. That was the start of my journey of healing my relationship with my father.



I remember seeing the young monastics at the retreat with Thay, who were so different from the Vietnamese monks that we would often encounter in the US. The elderly monks looked as stiff as rocks. But these young monks and nuns were so joyful and lively.

At one of Thay's talks, it was very solemn on the stage, but behind Thay I could see these two young nuns poking each other. I am pretty sure it was Sr. Dinh Nghiem and Sr. Tue Nghiem! I was so surprised to see them laughing and having a good time.

It made me curious about Thay's community. I was still very suspicious. I didn't believe that the monks and nuns could be smiley and joyful all the time, so I decided to follow them on their US tour! What I didn't know was that Thay had noticed me and had asked Br. Phap Niem to observe me!

I stayed with them in various lay friends' homes, sometimes 30 of us in one house and sharing one bathroom. I still remember all the monks standing in a circle around a patch of lawn and brushing their teeth together. So simple and so joyful all the time!

Coming to Vietnam this time, I am using Thay's life as an object of my contemplation. To see the environment that Thay lived in, to understand the circumstances he met, and to learn from the decisions he made. Thay never wanted us to be dogmatic and to have a fixed set of rules to live by. He just wanted us to be mindful and to learn how to respond to each changing situation ourselves.

When we learn the life of Thay and of our ancestral teachers, we are bringing history into the present moment. It is not something archaic that only belongs to the past. It is very much influencing our present, and forming our future. It is important to ask ourselves how their lives continue to be relevant in our time.

Thay has helped us learn to dwell in a country of the present moment. One that is without frontiers. Today, as we are surrounded by monastics and lay

practitioners from over 30 countries, we really see how the practice of dwelling in the present moment helps us transcend time and space.

When we walk together in the Root Temple, we only need to dwell in our steps and be aware of our breath. We don't need to do anything more. That is already continuing Thay. When the people in Vietnam see an international delegation walking mindfully around the half-moon pond, they know immediately that we are Thay's disciples. That is all we need to do. ☸



## Coming home to our roots

MAIN HƯƠNG, HỒNG ANH & JANNY

*Where is our true home? Is it a particular place with particular people within a particular culture? What if we had to leave our “home”? Or grew up in a culture vastly different from that of our parents? Main Hương, Hong Anh, and Janny, three international Wake Up sangha core members, explored these questions deeply during a retreat in Plum Village, France, for young Asian diaspora (those growing up outside of their homeland).*

### A “unique” retreat

Coming to Plum Village, besides enjoying meeting friends from around the world, we usually longed to connect with friends with whom we could share our background and experiences. In other retreats we previously attended, it often felt like we had to deliberately seek out these spaces which mirrored the experience many of us had growing up as ethnic minorities, where there might have been 1-2 friends in school or at work who shared a similar background.

Last June, the *Finding Our True Home* Retreat was the first retreat specifically for young Vietnamese and Asians from the diaspora. We have never seen so many young Asian friends together at a Plum Village retreat before. Attending the retreat surrounded by those who shared similar upbringing and challenges of being disconnected from our Vietnamese culture and our parents' experiences was incredibly empowering. There was such a deep understanding without needing to exchange many words.

In her Dharma talk, Sr. Lang Nghiem shared about the four elements of true love and reminded us that Thay taught us that love is understanding. "True love is limitless, so is understanding and vice versa." We felt that during this retreat we all touched a deep love that was hard to put into words: unconditional love from the monastic sisters, love for our parents and our ancestors, love for our roots that we had long thought were buried, love for our cultural practices, and love for ourselves.



Compassion family on lazy day after breakfast on Thay's deck

During this one week that provided us a safe space, everyone practiced wholeheartedly. Every little activity became meaningful and sacred. During one gathering before our working meditation, a sister invited us to sing the song "Happiness is Here and Now" and dedicate this song to our parents. She reminded us that our parents might not have yet had the opportunity to "let go of their worries," and we can offer them our peace and freedom while singing this song. Many friends were moved to tears.

The collective energy and quality of practice also felt very special. The sisters shared that as Asians, our ancestors had transmitted the seeds of Buddhist practice for centuries. So even though we had not practiced for many generations it only takes a

sprinkle of water and the seeds would spring up like mushrooms. Combined with a strong presence of 'the beginner's mind', the awakened seeds in us and the deep gratitude for having such a special space for our community to come together, created a very unique atmosphere.

Sometimes, we don't realize something is missing until we find it right in front of us. This feeling of (finally) coming home and being able to connect with others was very unique. It was a reminder that we were not alone in our journey of healing and transformation and that we could find solace and strength in the company of others who intimately understood our experiences.

### **Coming back to claim our inheritance**

Many of us grew up as children or descendants of Vietnamese refugees displaced by war and colonialism. Our families did the best they could given their difficult circumstances from the deep loss of their homeland while trying to navigate a different society and culture in a new country. Our sense of Vietnamese heritage was limited to our families, and often took the backseat to the heritage of the places we grew up in.

Fractured from their homeland, our family transmitted to us the language and culture as best as they could while focusing on providing for us. Being brought up in a western society, we were often torn between wanting to assimilate to Western ideals and the different ideals our families had, which often led to a rejection of our origins in order to fit in. As adults, many of us felt this loss of culture, language and heritage and a longing to reconnect and heal this part of us that we had long rejected. During this week, we were able to allow ourselves to grieve and reconcile with this wound in us by creating uplifting experiences which nurtured and healed them.

By coming together and sharing these experiences in this space of mutual understanding, we were able to not only heal but also generate a sense of community together despite living in different countries and cities. We were able to cultivate deeper compassion for ourselves, our parents, and our friends. With this, we were able to hold space for ourselves and our pain and joy, to heal the past, celebrate our culture and create a sense of home and belonging for each other and within ourselves.





Thay giving a Dharma talk under the oak tree in 1987

While having lunch underneath the oak tree in Lower Hamlet, Sr. Dinh Nghiem shared with us that Thay gave his first few Dharma talks right here. People of our parents' generation who came to Plum Village back in the 80s, only a few years after the war in Vietnam had ended, would sit around him to listen to his talks. Back then, mostly Vietnamese refugees and people who lived in exile like Thay came to Plum Village because it was a place where they could seek not only spiritual but also cultural refuge. They helped Thay and the monastics build and shape the Plum Village as we know it today.

In this beautifully loving and nurturing environment, our parents were able to transform their suffering and allow their young children to connect to their roots. During those years, the children could learn how to sing and speak Vietnamese, enjoy homemade Vietnamese food and the community could come together to experience a sense of belonging in this place that was home away from home.

Forty years later, we sat underneath the same oak tree. Thay was still present all around us—when a breeze prompted the leaves to send us a warm welcome or when we walked mindfully through the forest. We felt fortunate to be able to continue this beautiful legacy of Thay and our parents. To see that Plum Village could also be a place where we, like our parents, continued to celebrate our culture and heal the wounds of our ancestors, was so meaningful.

### Love and transformation

Being surrounded by a strong presence of the Vietnamese language in all the activities was deeply touching. It was the first time many of us heard the orientation of a Plum Village retreat in Vietnamese. Sister Thuy Nghiem and Sister Bien Nghiem's welcoming words in their mother tongue made us



feel immediately at home. We really felt that they were sharing from their hearts; and it went straight into our hearts. We had never seen so many people cry during an orientation.

To hear some of the teachings in Vietnamese added an additional layer to the practice. Particularly, listening to the chanting in Vietnamese was such a powerful and memorable experience. It allowed us to connect with, explore and experience the Vietnamese culture on a deeper level.

For many of us who were of the post-war generation, we were only ever exposed to Vietnamese at home. Often, this language transmitted much suffering and violence to us. But here in Plum Village, we got to hear the language used with so much peace and love. It's so hard to put into words the sense of full embrace, generosity, love and care the sisters gave to us. In Vietnamese, we say *thương* which describes a very deep, unconditional love—and that was what we felt throughout the whole week.

Our hope is that this retreat can continue and be a space where the Asian and Vietnamese diaspora can return to and feel at home. ☸



# Plum Village Goes to the 2023 Parliament of the World's Religions

SISTER CHÂN TRÌ NGHIÊM

*In August 2023, Sr. Luc Nghiem from Plum Village, France, and Sr. Tri Nghiem from Magnolia Grove Monastery in Mississippi, USA, were invited to take part in the 9<sup>th</sup> International Meeting of the Parliament of the World's Religions (PWR) which took place in Chicago, USA. Sister Tri Nghiem shares about the experience and what it meant to her.*

One hundred years later, in 1993, the second PWR took place, also in Chicago. Since then, the Parliament has convened every few years in different cities around the world. The 2023 Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago marked the ninth international gathering and was attended by over 8,000 people from more than 95 countries, representing over 200 religions and spiritual traditions.



Sr. Luc Nghiem invites the bell during the Climate Repentance Ceremony in plenum

## What is the Parliament of the World's Religions?

The Parliament of the World's Religions (PWR) is a gathering of religious leaders and spiritual practitioners from around the world who aspire to create cross-cultural, interfaith friendships and connections, as well as further mutual understanding and help bring about a more tolerant, peaceful, just, and sustainable world. The historic first convening of the PWR took place in Chicago in 1893, creating a global platform for interfaith dialog and engagement, which many consider the beginning of the modern Interfaith movement. Numerous scholars feel that Swami Vivekananda's call for religious tolerance at this inaugural event was a major contributor to the growth of Eastern Religions in the West.

## Thay and the Parliament of the World's Religions

The connection between Plum Village and the PWR began in 1993 when Thay, along with other world-renowned spiritual leaders such as His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, was invited to contribute to the formulation of a global ethic<sup>2</sup> that could be applied across all world religions and spiritual traditions, and could serve as a moral compass even for those with no affiliated religion. This was a reminder to religious leaders and spiritual practitioners of their responsibility to transform violence, oppression, and discrimination within themselves and their societies, and help to prevent war. Then, during the 2009 convening of PWR in Melbourne, Australia, Thay presented the Five Mindfulness Trainings as a viable, nonsectarian proposal for a global ethic<sup>3</sup>.

## What did we do at the PWR?

Sister Luc Nghiem and I were invited to the Parliament by the Elijah Interfaith Institute<sup>4</sup>, an international association of faith leaders and scholars, founded in 1997, dedicated to furthering interfaith dialogue and friendship, as well as climate, environmental and social justice initiatives. Our diverse group consisted of more than 20 leaders and scholars, including highly esteemed representatives from Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and the religions of India. We took part in daily workshops and plenary sessions and discussed the role of spiritual teachers and leaders

2. Towards A Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration, <https://parliamentofreligions.org/globalethic/>

3. Thay delivered this talk by livestream from Lower Hamlet, Plum Village France in December 2009.

4. The Elijah Interfaith Institute was founded in 1997 by Rabbi Dr. Alon Goshen-Gottstein, one of the world's leading figures in interreligious dialogue today.

today, and the challenges they face in accomplishing their missions. We met with this group every morning, and in the afternoon, we were free to attend general sessions offered by the Parliament<sup>5</sup>. We were honored to bring the teachings of Thay and the Plum Village practices into this group and were delighted to witness how well they were received.

Our contributions to the general Parliament included offering the practice of “Beginning Anew with the Earth” led by Sr. Tri Nghiem as part of the *Climate Repentance Ceremony*<sup>6</sup> in full plenum, and another plenary session, the *Friendship Across Faiths Initiative*, where Sr. Luc Nghiem spoke of the love we need to have in our hearts for dialogue to be possible, sharing examples and experiences of interfaith friendship from her peace pilgrimage to war-torn Ukraine in spring 2022.

### Who did we meet?

Being a part of the Elijah Interfaith gathering meant that we were able to meet and converse with some of the most influential figures in the Interfaith world today, most notably, *Karma Lekshe Tsomo*, an American Tibetan Buddhist nun, co-founder of the Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women and the founding director of the Jamyang Foundation, which supports the education and livelihood of Buddhist women and girls in the Himalayan region, the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, and elsewhere; *Norman Fischer*, Soto Zen priest and former co-abbot of San Francisco Zen Center and founder of Everyday Zen Foundation; *Her Holiness Amma Sri Karunamayi*, a much loved and highly revered Hindu spiritual leader with millions of devotees who consider her a

fully enlightened manifestation of Vishnu, and who has created countless humanitarian, educational, food, health and housing projects for the poor and disinherited in south India.



Sr. Tri Nghiem: Beginning Anew with the Earth

Other distinguished guests we met included *Maureen Goodman*, programme co-ordinator at the International Centre of the Brahma Kumaris in London, England; *Marcia Hermansen*, Professor and Director of Islamic World Studies, at Loyola University Chicago, USA; *Bishop Philipp Huggins* of the Anglican Church of Australia, Melbourne; *Antje Jackelen*, former Archbishop of Sweden; *Feisal Abdul Rauf*, an Egyptian-American Sufi imam, author, and activist who served as Imam of Masjid al-Farah, a mosque in New York City for 26 years from 1983 to 2009; *Jinwol Lee*, Zen Master in the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism; the incumbent Archbishop of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in western Ukraine and, of course, *Rabbi Dr. Alon Goshen-Gottstein*, the founder and director of the Elijah Interfaith Institute – the person who invited us all to the PWR and continues to bring luminaries together from all over the world. As you can see, it was a very culturally and spiritually diverse group.



The group of guests invited by the Elijah Interfaith Institute

5. The 2023 themes centered on the defense of freedom and human rights.

6. [youtube.com/watch?v=tcfpaSXGz-Y](https://youtube.com/watch?v=tcfpaSXGz-Y)

It was so inspiring to witness the mutual respect, love and friendship between the different members of the group. No one was trying to assert their way as the best way, no one was trying to be “number one.” There was just mutual respect, trust and admiration for the accomplishments of others, as well as a desire to learn from each other.

### A transformative experience

Meeting so many activists and engaged practitioners from other countries and spiritual traditions at the Parliament, and learning about the work they do, their projects and visions for the future, their challenges and their successes, as well as learning about what inspires them and keeps them going in their work, was an incredibly enriching experience for me. It opened my eyes and mind and helped me realize that we are not alone on this path. Being together with over 8,000 other spiritual practitioners from so many different faith traditions, all working towards the same goals – climate, environmental, social, educational justice and human rights – gave me hope, gave me faith in the future.

Thay spoke repeatedly about the need for a collective awakening in order to save the world – or at least to slow down its demise – and I mistakenly understood that it was my job, and the task of our monastic and extended Plum Village community, to bring this about, ‘single-handedly.’ No wonder I used to feel so much despair and overwhelm! In Chicago, I realized that there are hundreds of thousands, if not millions, who are already working towards the collective awakening that the world so urgently needs in order to survive. We are a drop in a much larger river. My experience at the Parliament helped me realize how small my thinking had been. I suddenly understood that Buddhists do not have a monopoly on collective awakening: wisdom is wisdom, insight is insight, and love is love.

What I witnessed in Chicago was religious tolerance, the cultivating of siblinghood and dialogue across faiths, the celebration of diversity, and the mutual respect for each other’s beliefs and practices. What I learnt to see were the similarities amongst us rather than the differences. Yes, we may all look different – have different skin colour, speak different languages, come from different cultures, follow different spiritual teachers and practices – but at the root, we are all seeking the same: ways to

heal ourselves and the planet, to liberate ourselves and others from suffering and to cultivate awareness, love, freedom and compassion.



Sr. Tri Nghiem and Her Holiness Sri Amma Karunamayai

### Other personal highlights from the week

- Taking part in the *Climate Repentance Ceremony* offered by our Elijah Interfaith group helped me realize that repentance is a necessary part of any healing process, including our relationship with the Earth. It is an essential practice to help us get in touch with our grief and the guilt we feel about the destruction we have caused and continue to cause. In short, it is the practice of recognizing and embracing our suffering relating to the Earth, our mother, the first step towards healing and transformation. Bringing up to consciousness our grief, regrets and other unpleasant feelings and forgiving ourselves for our shortcomings and past actions can free us and help us move towards right action, allowing us to search for sustainable and equitable solutions to the climate and environmental challenges we are facing.
- Being able to share our practice of mindful breathing and Thay’s practice of ‘Beginning Anew with the Earth’ to an international, multicultural, multifaith, multigender, multiracial audience and feeling that they were touched and were able to come home to themselves with the sound of the bell was extremely nourishing and validating.
- When others were speaking about strategies to further racial, gender, ethnic, social, climate and environmental justice, Sr. Luc Nghiem spoke about the need to have love in our hearts. The gentle voice of Thay was alive in the hall and reverberating through space and time.
- Listening to an Interfaith group of American women<sup>7</sup> of all ages and faiths who went to Afghanistan one month after the US withdrew their troops in 2021 to speak to the Taliban about ensuring the right for girls and women to have education, and about protecting educational

7. Female Religious Leaders Meet with the Taliban: The Collective Power of Women in Peacemaking

institutions for girls and women filled me with awe and admiration for the strength, determination, fearlessness and courage of these women.

- Watching the premiere of a documentary film, *With This Light* about a Catholic nun in Honduras, Sr. Maria Rosa Leggol, known as the “Mother Teresa of Central America” for her work providing education, housing, healthcare, love and hope for young girls in Honduras. Sr. Maria Rosa is a beacon of hope, faith and joy in a world of poverty that is so often lacking in these things. She is an inspiring role model of how a woman with faith, joy and determination can achieve anything. Nothing is impossible when we have a path, and when we have love in our hearts.
- Seeing so many sessions on the program relating to women’s rights, cultural and ethnic minorities and indigenous rights and voices, earth and climate justice, and initiatives about transforming gender-based biases<sup>8</sup> in Christian and other communities renewed my faith in religious and spiritual communities’ capacity to respond to pressing social, environmental and gender issues and address the rapid societal changes we are witnessing. It was refreshing and inspiring to see the amount of attention paid to these issues, and revealed what religious institutions are willing to explore, and how they are searching for partners in their work.



Some members of the Elijah Interfaith panel in plenum

### **Sangha is everywhere**

I came away from the Parliament with the feeling that I had made friends across cultural and spiritual boundaries, ‘Spiritual Friends without Borders,’ like the organization ‘Doctors without Borders,’ working together for a common cause. I realized that my friends on the path are not only Buddhist or mindfulness practitioners, but they are *all* spiritual practitioners. And there are so many of them. Together we can make a difference in the world. My notion of ‘sangha’ and ‘beloved community’ has expanded in ways I didn’t know it needed to.

The language that unifies us is that of love. Love and compassion is our common message, our common cry. Only love can heal us. Only love can save the Earth. For us to grow our love, we need to heal ourselves and help others heal. We need to cultivate peace in our hearts. We have a lot of unlearning to do to allow our true Buddha nature to shine but together it is possible. ☸

# The door of Compassion

BROTHER CHÂN MINH HY

*“Please call me by my true names,  
so I can wake up  
and the door of my heart  
could be left open,  
the door of compassion.”*

*—from the poem “Please Call Me By My True Names”*



The door of compassion is the door of our hearts. We can open or close that door to any person. We have the right to love or to be angry or sad. When we love, we have more space inside ourselves; whereas when we are angry, we have less space. To be angry or sad also gives us a unique space to be in; however, at times it may seem cramped, confined. Sometimes we want to run far far away to escape that confinement. Sometimes we want to burst into a fit of laughter to shatter that confinement, to empty out the depths of our hearts.

The heat in Central Vietnam can be very unpleasant if you are not used to it. You have to stay there long enough—that is, figuratively speaking, you have to be accustomed to the spicy and salty cuisine of the region—to be able to get used to that scorching heat. Sometimes, it is so hot that there is no escape no matter where you sit. It’s hot in the house. It’s hot in the garden. It’s hot in the daytime. It’s even hot in the evening. At night, we leave all the doors and windows wide open hoping for a cool breeze to blow in to chase away the heat. Once in a while, a gentle breeze blows in and we fully savor that refreshing sensation. That is a moment of happiness.

The door of compassion and the door of anger are one and the same. Whether it is open or closed is up to us. If we want to learn how to love, then we have to leave the door of our hearts wide open. Even when our hearts—that is, our houses—are burning with irritation, if we leave the door open, then a few gentle breezes are bound to blow in to soothe the discomfort. Those light breezes may be the things that are wholesome and beautiful about that person; we simply let those things naturally enter our hearts. We accept them and make the most of their beauty.

We tend to only welcome the cool breezes into our houses. We do not like the unpleasant breezes; so we push them away. But where will they go? They will not go anywhere at all; they will still be there. We have the impression that if we hate them, then those unpleasant things will leave our home; but, in reality, they do not go anywhere at all. We can hate a dry breeze but we cannot push it away. Only a refreshing breeze can chase away that dryness.

That unpleasantness might not come from that person. It might have originated from various unsatisfactory incidents that happened over many days and years. Think about it. Just within today, how many things have happened that we consider unsatisfactory? How many of those things come from that person and how many come from other sources? Upon waking up, there is already something we find unsatisfactory. All the way till when we go to bed at night, we are still not satisfied; there will still be things that cause us to toss and turn in bed, to worry about. Who knows when we will ever be satisfied with that displeasing thing!

If there was a person who came from an even dryer region, the same dry breeze would not bother them much. Therefore, to be pleased or to be displeased is not the issue. It depends on the way we perceive it. If we know how to perceive things with compassion then everything will become pleasant.

☪



# a day of alms

BROTHER CHÂN TRỜI ĐỨC ĐỊNH

## Favorable conditions

A few years ago, during a hike with some of my monastic brothers and sisters in Thénac, the small village where Upper Hamlet is located, the idea came up that we might one day walk from house to house asking for alms from our neighboring friends, as is a tradition that dates back to the Buddha's time.

At the beginning of this Rains Retreat, I suggested that we do it, and in this way beautifully end our 3-month retreat. At first, I was surprised at how easily and happily the brothers agreed to it. Very soon we had an enthusiastic organizing team of three monks and five lay friends. Throughout the whole project, we were supported by favorable conditions and had very few challenges. It seemed that the conditions were ripe for us to gracefully flow as a sangha. I was astonished that a project involving so many people could manifest so harmoniously.

## One body, one heart

On the Saturday morning of 13 January 2024, two groups of brothers took our alms bowls and walked to the village of Thénac, through the countryside of France, when all the trees, grass blades and the whole landscape were covered with a white layer of frost. After receiving offerings from one household, we offered them a chant "May the Day be Well," bowed in deep gratitude and continued to enjoy our walk.

As we silently walked together in procession, I could feel that we were one body and one heart. I could feel our connection and shared happiness. We walked side-by-side in two rows, with the bowls in our bags during long stretches, and when we arrived at the houses, we switched to a single line, with the bowls in our hands. It was a kind of dance, we would flow together. When the first brother stopped, we would all stop and take our bowls out in unified movements. I instinctively knew when everyone behind me was ready just by hearing the peaceful silence.



## Watering the seeds of gratitude and generosity

When we came back to Upper Hamlet, the rest of the sangha, composed of the 3-month retreatants, long-term residents and local sangha members, were absorbed in a joyful service meditation to prepare the hamlet: some were setting up the meditation hall for the whole sangha to have lunch together after the alms round, while others volunteered to cook for the rest of the residents. There was also another group cooking at the nearby sangha organic shop. Some neighboring friends even brought delicious homemade food. The day before, as I took a walk in Thénac, I passed by the home of several practitioners, and saw them cooking through the window. I thought they might be preparing something for tomorrow's alms offering. I was moved with gratitude, thinking there might be many more of our friends preparing food at that moment for the community with a generous heart.

We then had a final procession in Upper Hamlet, all the monks in ordination order receiving alms in their bowl from the lay practitioners. As I received the food I felt slightly nervous but also very happy to see our friends so wholehearted in serving food to the brothers. After the brothers, our friends also received food and we all entered the meditation hall to eat. We had a silent meal, where we also shared the dried fruits, nuts and other offerings we had received at the houses in Thénac.



The whole event was a chance for many brothers to connect with our friends who live close to the monastery. In daily life and Days of Mindfulness, brothers don't necessarily have a chance to recognize who is who, especially if they don't speak the same language as the local friends or don't attend the same Dharma sharing groups.

I am thankful to the organizing team of this alms round event; everyone embodied the spirit I believe They would have suggested to us: we worked together relaxedly, joyfully, harmoniously, efficiently but not caught in expecting certain results. I also feel grateful to my two brothers who joined the team, offering great support. I enjoyed this opportunity to connect with them while serving the sangha together.

### **Beautiful in every way**

At the first of our friends' houses, I received food in my bowl from a close friend, who actually ordained as a monk the same day as me, and later founded a family. A part of me wasn't too comfortable for an instant. I didn't really know where to stand, where he was, what sort of relationship was manifesting between us now.

As our team was organizing for the day, we reflected upon the relationship between monastic and lay practitioners. We thought of the potential for each human being to truly realize the path of practice, regardless of whether they are lay or monastic.

Growing up in my society, relationships based upon generosity, gratitude and freedom from complexes were not always obvious to see and to learn from. Now looking back, and thanks to the teachings we receive and practice together, I can generate a clearer understanding. As monks or as a lay person, we are already wonderful — and thanks to the practice, we have a chance to live a wonderful life with understanding and compassion.

A lay friend is not only a lay friend. As a lay friend, one can offer food and material support to the sangha. They can also offer their practice, as we encourage everyone to do. Or they can offer both. In either way, they contribute to the continuation of the Buddha, of the teachings, and of the Sangha. We monks and nuns are happy with whatever they chose.

As a monk, I can offer my wholehearted practice and learn to understand and embody the teachings and the great love that our ancestral teachers are



transmitting to us. When I receive an offering, it reminds me to engage wholeheartedly in what I wish the most for myself and for everyone. When a friend makes an offering to the sangha — or pays their contribution for a retreat with their hard-earned money — they can be reminded of the very same thing: their deep aspiration. This is truly wonderful. We can see our interconnectedness, feel it, be moved by it, and smile.

We have this gatha in our tradition:

*The bowl of the Tathāgata  
held in my two hands,  
I vow to practice with all my heart,  
seeing giver, gift, and receiver are one.  
—from Stepping Into Freedom*

I wasn't at ease receiving food from my friend, as I saw each of us as separated. But as I received, I was not only myself receiving — I was much more. As he offered, he was not only himself. Consider the butterfly and the flower. Should we take one out, the other wouldn't exist anymore. They have come to depend on each other to manifest; if they are to evolve, they will evolve together. They are neither superior, inferior, nor are equal.

My lay brother and I, we inter-are and there is this wonderful relationship happening that is one of connection, gratitude and generosity. There is the whole world in us as we interact today. I don't need to feel awkward about myself, I can enjoy the experience.

The monastic order, too, cannot be seen only by itself. It is not really a thing, and it is not separated from the lay order.

Here is a fruit of my practice, challenges and contemplation during this Rains Retreat:

*When I can see the bonds of love between beings —  
latent or manifested  
The intrinsic connection between seeds in my store  
consciousness and what flowers in my daily life:  
situations, people, challenges...  
The oneness of my true needs and what I receive  
Then I can fully receive the alms  
And bless the person who offers it  
With a true smile*

## The alms round is a Dharma door

A number of us asked ourselves, “Is this only a symbolic act we are organizing? Do we cultivate the idea we are doing like the Buddha, while, in fact, we have more than enough food and comfort in the monastery?”

I found one element of response in observing how we went about organizing and practicing on that day. I saw we were watering wholesome seeds, individually and collectively. For example, by asking these very questions or as we put our care into harmonizing our views, listening to each other, being and acting in mindfulness, watering seeds of generosity, gratitude, humility, aspiration, determination, and understanding.

The second element of response I found is given in this sentence of the Vimalakirti Sutra: “It is not in order to eat that you make the alms-round.” They further explain, “The alms round is a practice in itself and is not essentially a means for obtaining food to eat.” It is in order to do the alms round that we do the alms round, not essentially in order to eat. Likewise, it is in order to make an offering that one makes an offering, not essentially in order to feed the monks or to generate some merit.

We organized this in order to enjoy it deeply, and I think we did.

On this day of alms, we could also be mindful of our relationship to food, our own feelings, and take the opportunity to reflect upon our true needs as a practitioner, and our true needs as a community that shares the practice internationally through numerous means.

“*Living simply,  
in body and also in mind,  
is a deep wish of mine,  
a means to living deeply.*”

Thank you, dear beloved Sangha, for being my spiritual family, and for making possible countless wonderful moments such as this day. We can celebrate our happiness and commitment to walking the path together. ☸



# Awakening the Source of Love

SISTER CHÂN THUẬN NGHIÊM

*Four monastics, Sr. Thuan Nghiem, Sr. Trang Linh Di, Br. Troi Pham Hanh and Br. Troi Ruong Phap, embarked on a mindfulness tour in Israel and Palestine from 17 September to 9 October 2023 when the Israel-Hamas war broke out. The editorial team had a chance to interview Sr. Thuan Nghiem about the trip.*

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## Sharing the Dharma in Israel

The local sanghas organized mindfulness retreats and Days of Mindfulness for the people of Israel and Palestine. The first retreat, lasting four days, took place in Israel with the help of Ms. Hagit, a member of the Order of Interbeing. This was a retreat for only Israelis. Due to limited housing, we could only receive about 40 people.

Before the retreat started, a few women shared that they did not want to harbor hatred in their hearts; therefore before the first Dharma talk, the monastics offered the Namo Avalokiteshvara chant to calm their minds. Everyone's face at the retreat

was filled with stress and worry. Many cried after listening to the chanting. The words of the chant had sprinkled drops of compassion and softened the listeners' hearts. The retreatants shared that they wanted to continue to listen to the chants; so, we offered a chant before every Dharma talk. We also invited the two lay Dharma teachers present to join us in the chanting to fortify the collective energy of the chant.

Everyone expressed their longing for peace and a sense of safety in their daily lives. In response, the brothers and sisters shared about concrete practices to cultivate peace within oneself, as well as understanding the interconnectedness between one another, all living species and the environment. Although the retreat was short, we witnessed a lot of transformation among the retreatants. They had tasted the essence of the Dharma. If a person practices wholeheartedly, the Dharma has the ability to help heal and soothe the burning pains of the heart.



## Day of Mindfulness in Neve Shalom

Over a hundred people attended this Day of Mindfulness, several of whom were Palestinians. Everyone put their hearts into practicing walking meditation, eating meditation and deep relaxation. The event ended after a session of Questions & Answers with many practical questions. Many Palestinians shared that they deeply yearned for events like this in their regions so they could learn how to generate peace in every breath and every step.

## Sharing the Dharma in Palestine

The brothers and sisters drove a rented van from Israel to Palestine, crossing many checkpoints. At each stop, everyone in the van could sense the wariness and unease of the young Israeli soldiers who checked our documents. Since we did not have local sanghas in Palestine, except for a few young people who had attended retreats in Plum Village, there was much confusion and many mishaps in the logistical planning. Upon arrival, the brothers and sisters stepped in to guide and coordinate the organizers.

There were about 30 Palestinian women who came to the Day of Mindfulness. They were very curious and surprised to find out that the sisters were not married or had children like them. They seemed to carry so much anxiety and unrest in their bodies that no matter how much the sisters tried, they could not relax. Through conversations and sincerity of the sisters, the women slowly set aside their reservations and opened up about their difficulties and suffering. They don't know how to listen to each other; everyone only wants to speak their thoughts, making communication within their families very difficult. Yet, after a few minutes of listening to the bell, they were able to practice deep listening and became much calmer. They allowed the sisters to finish sharing without interrupting as before. After two hours of practicing together, all the women must go home to cook for their families. They wanted to continue the mindfulness practice but find no support from the surroundings.

The sangha groups from Palestine and Israel hosted two events for people from both sides to attend. Those who attended from Palestine were mainly social activists in various areas, such as the environment, non-violence, etc. All together, there were several dozen Palestians at these two events. Everyone was interested in practicing breathing meditation, walking meditation, and eating



meditation. We hosted Dharma sharing in the afternoon for everyone to have a chance to listen to each other. The friends from Palestine shared that the utmost thing they wished for was peace, but it seems like a dream beyond their reach.

When the Israelis interacted with and listened to the Palestinians, they realized that they took so many things for granted, they can enjoy the freedom of movement, residing and travelling while those from Palestine were not even granted these basic human rights. Upon seeing that, many Israeli friends began to empathize with their counterparts and wanted to collaborate with the Palestinians to advocate for non-violence so that they could regain their rights to live on their land.

Those two events were like two drops of water in the middle of the desert. Nevertheless, they were opportunities for the two sides to sit down, listen to and understand each other's difficulties, especially the difficulties of the Palestinian friends. On a larger scale, the world needs to listen to and understand these difficulties. Being on-site and in touch with the daily realities of the people helped us deepen our understanding. If we rely solely on news reports to learn about the state of the war, then we might not be able to fully understand the suffering that the Palestians have to endure. However, not only the Palestians, but also the Israeli people suffer. One thing we can see is that there is still much violence, hatred and lack of understanding about the war.

There are two ethnic groups living together on the same land. If they can see that the people of both sides share the same need to live a peaceful and happy life, then both sides can support each other to live peacefully together. In the past, they had lived relatively harmoniously together on this land without conflict; but now, that has become a dream. Especially for the people of Palestine, to be recognized as citizens has become a distant hope.

### **When the war broke out**

On 7 October, we were planning to host the last Day of Mindfulness for the people of Palestine and conclude our tour.

That morning, we were driving to the site of the event when we suddenly heard a loud boom in the sky. We did not know what had happened or where the explosion came from. Around us, people were pointing to the sky where missile fragments were falling in all directions. These missiles were fired into Israel from the Gaza Strip, a region governed by Palestine but with Israel monitoring its airspace and seaway. At that moment, everyone knew a war had broken out.

The Palestinian people were very worried because they knew Israel would avenge the attack but no one could predict the extent of the destruction and massacre that was to ensue in the following months.

The sangha in Israel knew the brothers and sisters had not gone back to Plum Village yet due to the flight cancellations; they continuously contacted us to ask for livestreamed practice sessions to help calm the worry, fear and hatred swelling up in their hearts. It was miserable for them to constantly hear gunfire and bombs exploding on a daily basis; or hear about the killing and kidnapping of hostages.

Throughout our remaining days there, the sound of bombs and gunfire echoed all day and night. Both sides attacked each other mercilessly, especially at night. In those moments, our hearts, liver, lungs... felt fragile from being bombarded with distressing sights and sounds. In those circumstances, the brothers and sisters tried their best to maintain their mindfulness practice. We endeavored to diligently stay with our conscious breathing, focusing our attention on the movements of our bodies to generate the energy of peace in order to offer it to those around us, in-person and online.

The brothers and sisters did all they could to help our friends calm the disquiet, hatred, and hopelessness in their hearts. The Palestinians living in Israel could not travel farther than one kilometer radius from their home to a pharmacy or market. They had to repress immense feelings of hatred and fear.

A young Palestinian who attended a Wake Up retreat in Plum Village shared, "My ancestors, grandparents, and parents have lived on this land. Yet, their children's generation have to live in fear. We can be killed at any moment, not knowing whether or not we will live till tomorrow. The feeling of hatred is surging in me."

When living with such hatred, we cannot possibly have peace. Upon arriving on this land, the brothers and sisters aspired to bring the Dharma, especially the teaching on inter-being, to share with the local people, hoping it would be able to transform the situation and remove the hatred and anger. If we can see that the other person is us and we are the other person, then we will not kill each other and be able to live peacefully with one another. The people we met here really longed for the mindfulness teachings. They were very happy to have the brothers and sisters come to their homeland, and the monastic group was fortunate to have three peaceful weeks to share the teachings before the war broke out.

There were many lay Dharma teachers active in the local sanghas in Israel, some of whom had known Thay and practiced mindfulness since 1997. They were the ones who helped Thay organize the teaching tour in the region that year. To this day, they are still applying the practice in their daily lives. However, it seems that Palestine does not have any local sanghas yet.

I believe the monastics of Plum Village will have more opportunities to visit this region in the future and share the mindfulness practice with the people there, so they can know more about how to generate peace within themselves in each moment of daily life. If they practice effectively, their fruits of the practice will radiate to the entire community. Perhaps, one day, the people of Palestine will be able to fulfill their dream of having a nation governed by their people and not resort to violence to achieve that aim. ☸

# Land of the Ancient Olive Trees

SISTER CHÂN TRĂNG LINH DỊ

11 October 2023, Neve Shalom, Wahat Salam

Dear respected Thay,  
It is your continuation day today.

We, four of your monastic children, are in the Holy Land as the war erupted four days ago. We are safe. We have water, food, shelter, and dear sangha friends. Yet a mere 50 kilometres away, there is no more water, food, or safe haven. We know children are dying. Day and night we hear the missile interceptors and feel the vibration of the ground as missiles land. I close my eyes every time and pray fervently, “May there be peace and compassion in the hearts of all.”

Life feels like a sand painting that has just been turned upside down and we do not know how the next moment will manifest.

I am also afraid, dear Thay. I do not know if I will see my mum and dad again. Lying there in the dark, my breath deep and even, I see you, standing amidst the village ruins and urging the villagers to rebuild again and again. I see the sangha touching the Earth in a sea of golden sanghati robes. And I hear my grandmother, who brought seven children out of a war zone, smiling and whispering: “You will be alright, my child. You have my strength.”

We came to the Holy Land to understand life here, to help bring people together, to breathe, walk, and listen to each other in peace.



There was the day when we walked in Wadi Khana, an oasis of ancestral olive groves. Issa Souf, a Palestinian peace activist who is paralyzed after having been shot, shared with us that this lush

valley was once open for grazing goats and cultivating olives. In the past few years, illegal settlements sprung up on its hills and Palestinians no longer had the rights to cultivate olives there.

It was a Jewish holiday that day and many settler families picnicked by the stream. Young fathers held babies in one arm and toted machine guns in the other. We looked at each other. I breathed peacefully and kept my gaze open and friendly. This was their vision of happiness and my taking sides would only strengthen seeds of discrimination and separation.

Our group of peace activists and sangha friends walked stably and calmly in the oasis. Aisha, Issa’s wife, later shared that the practice of meditation allows her to face each day anew. She worries for her two children and when they go to school in the morning, she never knows if they would return alive.

We were humbled by the depth of their suffering and strength to persevere. The people of this land are of the same elements as the thousand-year-old olive trees that stand stoic on parched hills and continue to bear fruit.

“How do we hold the sorrow in our hearts when it feels unbearable?” “How do we express our pain without hurting the ones listening?” “How do I answer my child each night when she asks me if a peace treaty has been signed?”

We didn’t have answers, but we listened with all our compassion and held the space for each person to speak their heart. We brought “tools” from our life in Plum Village to soothe those aching hearts.

There was the day we went to the Dheisheh refugee camp and met a group of young Palestinian women living there. Most of them had between four to nine children and they were exhausted from taking care of their families. I spread out yoga mats and invited them to lie down for deep relaxation. They giggled and hesitated. Fortunately, we had foreseen this awkward moment and had asked the brothers to not come that day. Nonchalantly, I lied down first to “demonstrate.” They eagerly followed.

With continuous guidance and songs, they managed to stay calm and relaxed for half an hour, then sat up with beaming smiles and many thumbs up.

We met many people from all backgrounds who understandably did not feel safe. One small moment left a strong impression on me. We were in Bethlehem. It was lunchtime and the sisters looked to buy simple falafel schwarmas (sandwiches). Two local boys of around 12 years old were nearby, holding newly bought schwarmas. I pointed to one of their schwarmas, smiled and asked in a friendly voice: "Where is this from?" The boy immediately clutched the schwarma to his chest and quickly stood behind his friend, his eyes glaring with fear.

Oh dear child. How you must have endured hunger and struggled for food throughout your young life! I have never experienced a single day of hunger in my whole life! Yet, knowing that children like you are in hunger and fear everywhere, I am even more determined to live and share a simple life.

When we met the Catholic priest and peace activist Sami Awad, he shared that through his years of working with peace activists, he realized many were not creating conditions of peace, but of security – that their peace activism was driven by fear.

The adults who came to our retreats and Mindfulness Days hid their fear better. Nonetheless, we saw that some were very troubled when their "safe sitting spot" was taken by another; some could not feel at ease in deep relaxation while others were easily startled at sudden sounds.

We simply walked, feeling the weight of our body shifting from side to side, feeling the ground beneath our feet, feeling all the sensations in the body that were not "fear."

We simply sang, "I've got peace like a river, I've got peace like a river..." digging deep into the Earth to touch its vast embrace, and sang from this solid and inclusive place.

We simply ate in mindfulness, giving thanks to the miracle of being nourished. Giving thanks to sangha friends who sheltered and fed us even when they themselves did not know if there would be food as the war continued.



Wherever we went, people remembered the harmony of our group above anything else we shared with them.

I was surprised how the Plum Village daily practices such as listening with openness, speaking without blaming, checking our own perceptions, taking time to understand, and letting go have permeated our beings. Though the four of us joked that on any given day, only three of us were solid; we certainly benefited from the fruit of those practices.

Harmony often asked of us to refrain from saying or doing certain things, and it wasn't easy.

Like the night we first tried to drive into the West Bank: the navigation system tried to reroute us, the main checkpoint was closed, the internet signal was fading in and out, and we couldn't read the signs in Hebrew. It also became apparent that some of us resorted to information and technology to solve problems, while others preferred speaking to people.

We knew it wasn't a moment for "being right," but for focussing collectively, so we stopped giving diverse suggestions. Instead, we sat quietly to breathe and remain aware of the surroundings and listened to the needs of the driver so we could support, rather than overwhelm. And bless our elder sister who set an example for all of us – she remained silent the entire time!

Harmony also asked of us respect and humility, in the smallest ways.

One day, in the middle of a retreat, our elder sister asked me, "Su em (younger sister), do you think we can chant 'May the Day be Well' tomorrow?" "Sure!" "Could you please check with the brothers?" "Ok." I quickly sent out a message to the brothers in our message group, "Dear brothers. Tomorrow morning, we will chant 'May the Day be Well.'"



Seeing that message, my elder sister laughed and gently said to me, “Su em, it is not very kind or respectful to speak to the brothers like that. We are collaborators and we should always ask each other for their ideas rather than tell or demand. If we are mindful of these small things, we will not let tension build up during the tour.” I bowed in gratitude and typed out another message, “Dear brothers, apparently it is not very respectful to just tell you what to chant ... so ... are you ok to chant ‘May the Day be Well’ tomorrow? ☺”



Harmony is born from understanding.

There was the day three of us went hiking through the olive groves along the Terraces of Battir. We had just held a Day of Mindfulness the previous day, so I asked the brothers for feedback on my Q&A responses. Though they shared in a very constructive and calm way, I somehow felt pained. Unfortunately, at that moment a group of local visitors passing by, asked if I was from China and

eagerly crowded around me to take photos. Part of me wanted to run away as far as possible and didn’t care if it would worry the brothers, but the “practitioner” part of me was stronger. I walked quietly to one olive tree a little away, sat down, and breathed while gazing at the beautiful leaves. When the visitors had gone, I walked back to where the brothers were. They were also sitting.

“Would you like to share?” one asked. Tears welled up and it dawned on me why I was pained, “Being here in the West Bank, so many things are so similar to parts of China. The poor villages with small concrete houses, the plastic bags everywhere, the ‘flexibility’ of road rules ... And hearing feedback from a ‘white’ person made me feel 12 again. I had just arrived in Australia and didn’t understand English. When the other children teased me, a voice inside was crying out ‘I am not stupid!’”

“Thank you dear Sister, for sharing. You know that you are deeply appreciated, and the beauty of our community is that we can be mirrors for each other. It is exactly moments like this when we can heal and grow.”

Yes. I understood.

Dear respected Thay, thank you for cultivating a community of understanding, harmony, peace, and compassion. You have seen the immense suffering everywhere on the land. You have given us practices to keep our hearts open and face suffering with courage.

*With gratitude,  
Your disciple - Tr ng Linh D *



# a friend on the path

SISTER CHÂN ĐÀO NGHIÊM

For many years, I have had a wonderful friend by my side. We meet almost every morning when it is still dark. We share tears, smiles, laughter by candlelight, a cup of warm tea by our side. It is a presence that guides me, supports me and helps me to gain clarity, understanding and a deeper, more meaningful relationship with myself. This friend is my journal.

I sit in the early morning and just let my hand write what is there without thinking about it, writing down thoughts as they flow through my mind. It has been a very healing process over the years. It's a very personal experience that can take many forms. I have pictures of people I love, my family members who have passed away inside the journal. There are inspiring quotes that nourish me, for example:

May I offer my care and presence unconditionally, knowing that I may be met with gratitude, indifference, anger, or fear.

May I see my limitations with compassion, as I see the suffering of others.

Our practice is to focus on arriving at freedom. We just need to practice one method: to put our mind at ease. Everything we do has the mark of

ease. Whatever you undertake for your spiritual life should have the mark of freedom and ease.

Our place of refuge is our capacity to feel joy in being alive, our capacity to accept to live anywhere and still to be happy. The most solid place of refuge for us is our own person. We take refuge in the Buddha in ourselves. This means we take refuge in our own stability, ease, freedom, peace, and joy.

I write about the highlights, the lows of my day, my thoughts and feelings, or something that inspired me, insights from books I read, people I am grateful for, difficult relationships I need to work through, my fears, dreams, things I love. Sometimes it comes as a drawing or poem. Here is a poem I wrote this past November:

“ *Song of the rain*  
*Song of the Earth*  
*A cup of tea*  
*It's still night*  
*In my heart*  
*Sadness*



When I ruminate on some thoughts or something that touches me and causes me discomfort, pain, journaling allows me to get “outside” of my head, helps my mind not to dwell on it and turn it over and over again. It helps me to process the joys and sorrows I experience, to learn valuable lessons from my experiences, and when I read what I wrote, months or weeks later, I can see the regular pattern of my mind, practice with it and thus understand my mind better. It is an outlet to release heavy emotions like anger, frustration, or sadness. Putting these feelings on paper frees me from having them linger in my mind.

I regularly look back at what I wrote, whether it was last year or many years ago. It has been a help in my understanding of my pain. Reflecting on what I have written gives me a greater sense of clarity and insight. I have found this to be very powerful. Through this self-reflection, I can reflect on my thoughts, desires, intentions, and actions, and then take appropriate steps based on that reflection.

For example, reading something I wrote last spring brought back to mind the insight that I had then and the power of walking meditation with the sangha. I was having a difficult time caught in a situation of doubt. This is what I shared with my friend the next morning:

“Yesterday, as I was walking with the sangha, the question ‘What am I doing here?’ as in, ‘What am I doing in this community? Why am I staying here?’ came up. I let the question come and it became ‘What am I doing here?’ in the present moment. ‘Walking, walking, walking,’ each step completely in my own rhythm, which was slower than the sangha’s, but at the same time I was receiving the benefit of the collective energy. The fields with their tall grass, the blue and yellow flowers, the gentle breeze making them sway. The magnificence of Mother Earth. Completely present! The pain and also the steps, the breathing ‘What am I doing here? Breathing, breathing...walking, walking... What am I doing? Listening, listening...’ the chirping of birds, the sound of the wind... ‘What am I doing here? Embracing, embracing...’ Calm mind, fully present. Every step. ‘What am I? Emptiness. Who am I? Emptiness...’”

Journaling helps me understand and work through my emotions, especially when I am feeling anxious or sad. It helps me grow, become more self-aware. It is a powerful way to do inner work. It has



led me to meaningful insights and breakthroughs and helped me process difficult emotions and situations.

It helps me to focus on the present moment. Being present without worrying about the past or the future is a very calming and peaceful feeling that relaxes my mind and body. It gives me a chance to slow down, breathe, turn a new page, and be honest about my thoughts and feelings.

With my friend’s unconditional compassion and presence, my return to the many conditions of happiness that I have in the present moment is natural. ☺



# Love as Thay Loves

SISTER CHÂN UYÊN NGHIÊM

*Sister Uyen Nghiem ordained in 2005 in Prajna temple, Vietnam and belongs to the Sunflower ordination family. She received the Dharma lamp transmission by Thay in 2013 in Plum Village, France. Currently, she lives and serves at Deer Park Monastery, California, USA.*

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## Thay's love

Talking about love, I cannot help thinking about Thay. Usually, whenever the monastic brothers and sisters, including myself, talk about Thay or the sangha, we tend to become emotional and shed tears easily. I began attending Thay when he was preparing for a tour in the UK. I was very new, and my practice was not strong enough to have a good sense of Thay's needs. During that time, Thay was residing at the Hermitage to rest and work.



The morning Thay departed for the UK, Sr. Chan Khong was the driver. Before leaving, Thay called me into the library to assist him with a few things. After that, we went around to make sure all the lights were off, doors were locked and gas valves were turned off,... When we felt that everything was done, we got into the car and were ready to go.

On the way to the airport, Thay said to me, "My child, tell me. Do you have joy in your practice lately? How are the brothers and sisters getting along?" So, I started telling Thay one thing after another, and we had a good time laughing together. Halfway to the airport, suddenly Thay asked: "Did you bring Thay's shoulder bag?" Startled, I replied: "Dear Thay, no."

Thay's bag had a voice recorder. On Thay's teaching tours, his talks would sometimes be video recorded, and other times not. Regardless, the recorder was usually brought along so that Thay could record the talks himself. First, it was for documentation purposes; second, Thay knew that it would be the inheritance he would leave behind for future generations. That day, I had so much fun being with Thay, I completely forgot and was unaware of what I needed to prepare for Thay.

The moment I heard Thay's question, I transitioned from a state of elation to one of regret, self-blame and fear. I was so afraid that I did not even dare to say "sorry" to Thay, especially when Sr. Chan Khong said that it was too late to return because we would be late for the flight.

I was shaking and speechless. Then, from the front seat, Thay extended his hand toward me in the backseat and asked, "Where is your hand?" At that moment, my hands were shaking and stone cold. I put my hand out, and Thay held it in his own. His hand was very soft and warm. He said, "No problem, my child. Perhaps the brother attendant brought a backup. But if he didn't bring one, it doesn't matter either." Hearing that, my heart felt much lighter. I will never forget that moment. I feel that to Thay, recording the Dharma talks was important, but nourishing his disciples' hearts was even more essential. He did not want me to feel bad or guilty. He always wanted his disciples to have beautiful memories.

Thay taught through love. His love motivated me to learn from my experiences and resolve never to repeat the same mistakes. I also promised myself that when I become a teacher, I will endeavor to love my disciples and younger siblings in the way Thay had loved us. Nevertheless, this is truly challenging to realize because my practice is still weak. Despite having good intentions, sometimes I unintentionally hurt my younger monastic siblings. However, having known the path and Dharma doors, I only need to have faith in the practice and do my best.

## There is an adult who is not yet mature

When I was little, I often wished to grow up quickly. I liked the idea of being an adult. Because I didn't like vegetables, my grandma used to coax me, by saying "Eating vegetables will help you grow up fast."

When I received my first identification card at age 16, I had the impression that I was already a grown-up. Hence, the first thing I did as a grown-up was... to run away from home to become a nun. But I was wrong. When my parents came to the temple to look for me, *Sư bà* (the senior venerable nun) told me to go back home and continue my schooling since I was not yet 18 years old. My parents could sue the temple if she ordained me. I thought to myself, "So only when you are 18 will you be regarded as a grown-up, mature person."

However, only when I turned 30, and had already been a nun for quite a few years, did I understand the real meaning of "being mature." At that time, I was very angry with my younger monastic sister, I was intent on reprimanding her. I even prepared a "proper reprimanding lecture." However, upon arriving outside her room, I suddenly turned around and went back to my study desk, sat for a long time and cried. After that, I wrote the following

sentence on a piece of paper: "There is a child who doesn't want to grow up, and there is an adult who is not yet mature."

I cried for my younger sister, and I also cried for myself. I cried for her because I saw that although she had every favorable condition to make progress in her practice (guidance, care and reminders), it seemed she was unwilling to receive them. She refused to stand on her own feet. No matter how much she was embraced by love, it still seemed to not be enough.

I cried for myself because regardless of my years of practice, I was still not able to take care of my reactions. Suddenly, I thought to myself, "What's the use of reprimanding my younger sister? She won't grow up overnight because of it, and reprimanding will also not make me happy." Right at that moment, I realized that I was not yet mature.

That was the first time I understood that maturity in the practice meant having the ability to deeply understand myself and others, and take care of my emotions, perceptions and mental formations. Only then could my practice be called mature. It is very possible that a 50- or 60-year-old person can still behave like a child and hurt the people around them.



Maturation is a process that everyone – children, parents, grandparents alike – has to learn. Nobody is perfect, and it is only through training that we can improve day by day.

### Dharma friends

In our monastery, we refer to our senior elder brothers as “sư cha” (Dharma father), senior elder sisters as “sư mẹ” (Dharma mother). They have lived in the sangha for a long time, with many Dharma years, and are capable of embracing, loving and taking care of younger monastics. They play a role similar to elder brothers and sisters in a family, but also serve as parental figures. Additionally, there are “sư em” or younger siblings, who may be younger in Dharma age, but from whom we can also learn. So we can also regard them as our teachers. Even if just newly ordained, a novice’s solid and fresh mindfulness practice can help me transform my afflictions. This is when my “sư em” also becomes my teacher.

There is another term, called “sư bạn” (Dharma friend). Anyone who comes to the monastery to practice is also a teacher from whom we can learn. Living in the sangha, everyone is our friend, and each person can teach us certain lessons. Even the one we think is the cause of our anger becomes a teacher who shows us that we are not patient enough. I am thankful to that teacher who tests my compassion and patience. I am thankful to the one who can embrace and forgive me, because they help me understand what true love is. In the sangha, we

can call each other “sư bạn.” Whenever I see my monastic siblings in the sangha, I join my palms together and say “Hello, sư bạn.”

*“A lotus for you, a Buddha to be.”*

All of us have the capacity to love and understand, as well as the capacity to offer our compassion. We all know that in everyone, there is Buddha nature. In our current time, people often talk about “self-love.” To me, self-love does not mean pampering ourselves with nice clothes, a fancy house, or a beautiful car, but rather the ability to come back and take good care of ourselves. From this foundation of loving ourselves, we will be able to extend our love to others.

### The future Buddha is already here

Shakyamuni Buddha is the Buddha of the past, Maitreya is the Buddha of the future, symbolizing compassion. People used to ask Thay: “When will Maitreya Buddha manifest to help alleviate the suffering of the world?” The state of societies today reflects the increasing violence and anger in people; social injustice seems to escalate daily.

Thay replied that the future Buddha is already here. Because we are not truly present, we are not able to recognize them. The future Buddha is not an individual, even though that individual may be extraordinary. The future Buddha takes the form of a community of practice. Only a collective power has the sufficient capability, wisdom and compassion to heal the world. All of us are members of that community. Together, we contribute to that collective endeavor. ☸



# Growing a Beautiful Multifold Sangha at Deer Park

BROTHER CHÂN PHÁP LƯU



Rock-climbing. Deeply sharing the Dharma in the heart of the mountain. Breathing, and keeping our minds clear. Siblings on the mountain chanting for the morning sit, spread out atop boulders. Coyotes singing in the chaparral. Walking the paths, clearing new ones.

I've been reflecting on how we can realize collective awakening – I mean really, *truly* do it. They set out this great task for us, and we *are* doing it every day: by showing up for walking meditation, for sitting meditation, by opening our hearts to shine light on each other, by eating together. These are small but powerful gestures. Each day, each session I show up for, my individual self – this concept that still surfaces in moments of pride – is diminished, and the harmonious whole of the Sangha shines brighter. Every day at Deer Park we see this manifest. And each of us becomes more whole as a result. Feeling the energy of the Sangha, I feel grateful that we do not choose to reinforce divisions but rather see how we can immerse ourselves in the collective body and energy of the Sangha, like a drop of water in the Pacific. There is great joy in this.

Surrounding us in the hidden mountain are bushes of chamise, black sage, and ceanothus. Laurel sumac does not tolerate frost, and early European American farmers looked to it as an indicator of where they could grow citrus. Indigenous peoples used chamise as kindling, as it splinters easily and burns green thanks to the aromatic oils in its resin. Black sage, a type of mint, makes a flavorful infusion. Each plant species has its beauty and lives in harmony according to its own particular properties. This is our Sangha.

Looking at myself, I see that I have particular qualities: I can write, give Dharma talks, sing and play and write songs. I love taking long walks, and spending time in nature. And while many of my monastic siblings also enjoy these things as well, there are many who are more skillful than I am at each. For collective awakening to become a living reality, an authentic experience, I need to celebrate the joy of these qualities in myself and in others, without discrimination. I praise my brother's new song. I rejoice in my sister's powerful Dharma talk. I smile knowingly when I see my brother sitting in

meditation on a boulder behind Solidity Hamlet. Together, we rejoice in and see the beauty of each person's practice, and its flowers and fruits.

Recently, I've been encouraging my father to buy a house near Deer Park, so that he could stay close to the community in his old age. He will soon turn 82, and he cannot walk all over, up and down the mountain as he once could. My monastic siblings love him very much, and are so kind to him. When he visited recently, he only attended breakfast and a caroling session before Christmas. He loved to hear the monastic choir learn the Coventry Carol. Even though he does not participate in sitting or walking meditation, he still feels the energy of mindfulness generated by the Sangha. He is being healed, and he tells me so. I rejoice in his healing. Every day he heads out before dark to walk laps around Solidity Hamlet. The brothers got accustomed to this, his daily constitution. Every time he comes back to Deer Park, he reminds me, "The food is better in Clarity!" The greatest gift I could imagine, for him, would be to transition from this life surrounded by the Sangha.

He loves breakfast; it is the activity he attends without fail: toast, jam, oatmeal, and fresh fruit. Every breakfast he leans toward me and asks, "Can we talk?" And every morning I remind him that we eat breakfast in silence. It's our morning ritual.

Brother Minh Niem and Stephen, a long-term lay friend, are becoming bread-making masters, with a *masa madre* fermenting throughout the Rains Retreat regularly folded into fresh dough, kneaded then left to rise. The folded layers are visible when you peel back the baked crust of the baked loaves. Brother Dao Phuong returned from Italy with extra virgin olive oil; add some of it with salt to the hot bread, et voila! Enough for brotherhood, and happiness.

Tonks and B, also longterms here, are exploring an alternative career: community. They help lead our mindful backpacking trips, and are essential now to the yearly teen camp. What does it mean to be a couple, growing on the spiritual path, in a monastery? They are providing themselves with a doctorate in Right Living. Without community there is no future for our planet, and more and more young people like them are realizing this.





The Toyon Family is an embodiment of this realization. They are solidly Midwestern, hailing from the prairies of central Canada, the music studios of Nashville, Tennessee, and the school hallways of Rust Belt Ohio. One from Toronto, and one from East Los Angeles, with Vietnamese and Egyptian parents, respectively. One was raised in a Hindu community. Just like in the 50s and 60s in Vietnam, young people are coming to the practice to find community, and to community to discover the practice. Clearly, political change is not enough: we need to trace the arc of transformation in the world with our own lives.

*“How wondrous is the robe of freedom!  
It is the field of all good seeds.  
I bow my head to receive it today,  
and wear it lifetime after lifetime.”*

Aaron, formerly Br. Phap Man, lives here, and has been gently guiding the lay friends during the Rains Retreat. On Lazy Day Mondays he can be found hanging out – literally *hanging on* to the cliff of the waterfall! – on climbing ropes. I come out with him bringing tea and enjoy the morning in the shade of a mountain, putting on climbing shoes and hitching the rope to my harness to start the climb. *Breathing in, I reach for the tiny crack in the rock wall. Breathing out, the rock and I are not two. In, crack in rock. Out, rock and I are inseparable.*

Here we are, at the cusp of a great flowering of Buddhism in America, and the Plum Village tradition is sending down deep, diverse roots. As I walk on the red ground of the valley, moving through the fragrant chaparral, I remember Thay’s words: “The ancestors have already prepared everything.” With each mindful step, their will becomes manifest. ☸



# The Profound Silence of Dharma Mountain

SISTER CHÂN TRĂNG TAM MUỘI



*Sister Tam Muoi helped organize a 7-day silent retreat at Dharma Mountain, a small mindfulness practice center located in the Cevennes mountains in the south-east of France. The following are excerpts from her journal.*

## Sunday

The first day of silence. At first, I was too busy to notice. Offering the first and only dharma talk, facilitating a sharing circle, organizing the texts for the meditations, my “busyness” continued. Even so, while sitting in meditation this morning, when a deep silence filled our spectacular meditation hall (a yurt perched high on the rocks), as I watched the clouds playing hide and seek in the valleys below, there was a letting go and tears fell. Tears of gratitude that this wonderful practice center exists, Dharma Mountain, hidden high in the wild mountains of the Cevennes, as well as gratitude for the support of so many who have enabled this retreat to happen.

Throughout my monastic life, I have kept this dream warm of one day facilitating a silent retreat that would be as nourishing for the monastics as for the retreatants. It felt risky because we do not offer silent retreats at Plum Village. I felt I would be venturing off the beaten track. However, my monastic sisters encouraged me and showed their trust. Sister Dao Nghiem and Sister Hien Duc were motivated to help organize and to support in addition to the 27 French retreatants who signed up with enthusiasm to invite more silence into their lives.

Time to do nothing, to be. To slow down. To put away the phone.

The schedule was different to a Plum Village retreat. Every day we were all committed to practicing three silent meditation sessions in the hall. The morning and evening session were one

hour long, the midmorning session lasted 1.5 hours. Each session starting with the reading of a short text by Thay from either *The Art of Living* or *Healing the Inner Child*.

After the reading, we would each be free to continue to meditate while sitting, standing or practicing very slow walking meditation at the back of the hall. This element of choice was crucial in the retreat along with the transitioning between positions. What do I need in this moment? To embrace my restlessness and continue to sit like a mountain? Or to silently stand and feel the torrent of bodily sensations cascading through my limbs? Or to walk so slowly, inching along without a sound, catlike, up and down behind the seated practitioners? Arriving, from foot to foot, massaging the earth, stopping, no thinking.



I was quite nervous, could our friends – all Plum Village practitioners – and my monastic sisters accept this different way of practicing? Patience, I reminded myself; embracing my anxiety. Wait and see...

## Monday

I could feel the settling in around me, the joy was palpable and our concentration was deepening. The 16 exercises of the Discourse on the Full Awareness of Breathing was our guide for the week. We each had a copy on our meditation mat as a road map in case we lost our way; the one and only Dharma talk/orientation on the first morning was about practicing with this discourse. The Buddha invited us to dive deeply into our bodily sensations and to observe our breath and body with curiosity and wonder.

In the hall there was a growing sense of having a lot of time and the space to just be. As the sun rose, we watched the changing display of light and color across the mountains. We enjoy. We hear the blackcaps sing “chuk, chuk, chuk” and nuthatches “ouiee, ouiee, ouiee,” greeting a new day.

At the close of the midmorning session, a huge thunderstorm broke overhead. We all spontaneously lay down, allowing the driving rain, the wind, the thunder to resonate through our silent bodies. We surrendered to the Earth, to the rock beneath our backs. As suddenly, the storm passed. Torrents were spurting from the mountainside, trees were dripping... Silence. A rainbow was stretching from mountain to mountain.

The inner silence was growing, we were truly arriving. I felt gratitude and relief as my monastic sisters shared their enthusiasm and support. In the first of three Dharma sharing circles the retreatants expressed their gratitude for this new opportunity to deepen their practice, even though it was challenging at times.

## Tuesday

Joy was with us and around us. Master Linji reminds us that we are already enough. We gazed through the wide windows looking out over the valley, but today they were blank and resembled huge, grey computer screens. A thick mountain mist enveloped us. Nothingness. Not knowing. Time stood still but slowly the landscape mysteriously revealed itself. Alpine swifts dived carelessly into the pooling mists of the valleys below and soared back up and out again into the clearing sky, flashing white as they turned. The purple of rain-washed heather vibrated against the acid yellow of lichen and silver grey rock.



Falling in love again and again with our beautiful planet; here, it is easy to gladden the mind.<sup>9</sup> Breath became a friend ever present in my body. Walking slowly up and down in the meditation hall, my feet felt huge and soft, like I was padding with a lion’s paws, with nowhere to go. “*We are already what we want to become.*”

Later, our sharing circle was silently journaling, together under the pines, responding to questions: “What, where and how do you feel in your body? What is alive in your senses? What resistances are present? What cows (attachments) would you like to let go of? What conditions for joy do I already have?”

A hornet buzzed and steered its way right through our circle, curious to see a group of humans so still. But no one reacted, such was the quiet and concentration.

## Wednesday

“Lazy day” in silence with no scheduled activities. I hiked alone and scrambled up to a ledge on the peak. While drinking tea, flocks of alpine swifts accelerated up the mountainside and whooshed past my head, perhaps in surprise to find me up there, before they dived down the other side for

9. A reference to the 10<sup>th</sup> exercise of the Discourse on the Full Awareness of Breathing.

another mosquito feast. I leisurely ate my picnic under the darkening sky, and returned home just before the rain crashed down.

Before the last meditation session of the day, we listened to a reading by Thay inviting us to bring our inner child with us, to allow that child to come close and sit on our lap, so they could be heard, soothed and comforted. Let our inner child accompany us as we walk in the forest, lay on the rocks, or bathe in the icy water of the waterfalls and rock pools.

That evening, I sat easily for an hour. I was surprised when the bell was invited at the end of the session. The Dharma was soaking into us like the rain swirling over the mossy mountain. We contemplate impermanence.

### Thursday

The first day of autumn, truly the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness. Throughout this week, we have tasted the fruits of stopping, relaxing, looking deeply, living together as a community, renewing our confidence in sitting meditation, meeting all that comes up in our minds with friendliness and compassion, and inviting all the parts of ourselves to come to the table with no discrimination. In the last session of Dharma sharing, a friend shared that he had never been able to get in touch with his inner child, but here, he invited his young self to walk with him on the mountain tracks and to play with him by the stream. He had listened to his inner child for the first time and his heart opened with love, understanding and compassion for the child, himself, and his ancestors.

This week we touched healing, held by the everchanging landscape. The beauty of the wilderness cracked our hearts wide open, and allowed us to experience the profound silence of the mountains and the deepening silence within.

### Friday

As the end of the retreat approached, we were invited to gently ease out of our silence. Our gratitude and happiness were expressed — some in the songs of their ancestors, some in the ancient Occitan language, or with heartfelt words:

*“Silence and the landscape opened up a vast space inside of me.”*

*“Connecting with the elements wind, rain, storm. I became one with them.”*

*“A magical and inspiring place, the presence of nature supported our practice.”*

*“I was so nourished to discover this new way of practicing, to travel together on the path of inner silence...”*

### Saturday

Before our last sitting meditation session, we listened once more to Thay’s encouraging words: “Sitting meditation is an act of civilization... It is priceless. You simply sit there, not doing anything. You are happy to be aware that you are sitting on a very beautiful planet, revolving in a galaxy of stars. You are sitting in the lap of the Earth and over your head there are trillions of stars. If you can sit and see that, what else do you need to sit for. You are in touch with the universe, and your happiness is immense.” ☪



# Entering the Field

SISTER CHÂN TỪ NGHIÊM

*Entering the field,  
The path of mindfulness is before me.  
Making mindful steps  
In the forest of life,  
I feel  
Thay is walking beside me.*

*Entering the field,  
The path of kindness is before me.  
Smiling at life,  
The good and the bad,  
All acceptance,<sup>1</sup>  
It's the ancient wisdom.*

*Entering the field,  
The path of peace is before me.  
Mind calm,  
Heart at peace.  
Coming and going in freedom.*

The field can be any field we see in daily life. A field of sunflowers glowing in the warmth of summer, a field of daffodils nodding in the fresh spring breeze in Upper Hamlet. But it can also be understood as our mind. Thay wrote, "The mind is a field in which all seeds are sown."

By recognizing what seeds lie sleeping in the depths of our Store Consciousness, the field of our Alaya Consciousness, we can choose what seeds to water, what path to follow and how to practice on this path, this is how Thay lived his life so mindfully, so beautifully as the last verse in this poem hopes to convey.

<sup>1</sup> All acceptance was described by a Zen master as the "key to the gateless gate" ☸



# A Drop of Water in the Sangha River

SISTER CHÂN TRĂNG TÂM ĐỨC



## The monastic retreat: What a joy!

It was the first time I got to see many brothers and sisters from other practice centers in Europe. We studied, practiced, played, and worked together in different groups: rotation teams, games teams, soccer teams, groups by rooms, and Dharma sharing families. The retreat had yet to begin but in our hearts we already felt the joy and happiness of coming together.

Although my rotation team was in charge of cooking on the day towards the end of the retreat, the menu was already set at the start of the retreat. Many options were suggested in case any of them get taken up by the prior teams. Our team finally settled for making pizza for lunch. That morning, we met in the dining hall, lit some candles, and drank tea before getting ourselves busy. It was the first time I made pizza from scratch: from putting the ingredients together, kneading the dough, making the base, cooking the sauce, preparing the toppings, operating the wood-fired oven, to jiggling it out of the oven and washing the fireclay-stones. While washing the stones, I felt so much love for it because there had to be many favorable conditions available for it to be here and present in each of the bread “*made in Upper Hamlet.*”

It was also thanks to this retreat that I got to enjoy the sunrise from the veranda of our dear Thay’s Sitting Still Hut, as well as gazing at the starry night sky at dawn while enjoying tea with a sister from my ordination family before the first scheduled activity of the day. Looking at the twinkling sky with a hot cup of tea in my hands and my sister sitting beside me, I smiled out of peace and happiness, while silently sending Thay my deep gratitude for bringing us together from many places around the world. One morning, while I was walking down a valley with an elder sister, I was astonished by the beauty of “a sea of clouds” — a thick blanket of fog shrouded the entire valley. The further down I went, the more things were revealed to me. The delicate spider webs, after a night shrouded by the dew, turned into strings of sparkling jewels under the hazy morning sun. I believe no architect, no matter how talented, can create such a breathtaking work of art.

How fast time flew! On the way back to the New Hamlet, we sisters shared how happy we were after a week of being fully present for one another. All year-round, Plum Village opened its doors to welcome lay friends from all over the world to come practice with us, so a monastic retreat like this was such a rare occasion for us Dharma siblings to get together. How deeply nourished it was to be amidst such powerful collective energy of the morning and

evening sitting meditation sessions, highlighted by Dharma talks reinvigorating our monastic aspirations and showing us ways to nourish and build siblinghood. We had opportunities to “break the ice” with siblings we had yet to talk to and share our joys and yearnings. Dharma sharing sessions were done with open-heartedness, and heartfelt sharings were embraced without judgments. Delighted sounds of laughter while playing group games chased away the cold of the winter. The delicious and healthy meals were cooked and offered by many monastic master chefs. I even got to walk and visit Monbos Church on the lazy day. How beautiful our sangha is, reminding me how blessed I am to be a drop of water in this sangha river.

### **Food talk is never-ending!**

After the monastic retreat, Plum Village opened its door again to welcome lay friends to come and join us in the year-round retreats. One day after lunch, a man my uncle’s age approached me excitedly sharing that he wished to see the cooking team for that day. He came to the New Hamlet with his seventeen-year-old daughter. At that moment, the seed of worry came up in me, not sure if it was because they had problems with the foods we cooked as many retreatants had food allergies. It turned out he wished to express his gratitude to the sisters because the food was superb. Because the cooking team was occupied at the time, I suggested that he write his gratitude on the whiteboard so the sisters could see his message. “If so,” he said, “*I want to thank not only today’s cooking team but all the cooking teams because every meal has been so good!*”



Many other lay friends also expressed their gratitude either in-person or on greeting cards to the sisters for not only sharing with them the joy and freedom of the practice but also offering them such wholesome and delicious foods. They shared that they had eaten at many other places, but for

some reason the food in Plum Village was always better. I believe that because the sisters had put so much joy, love and harmony in preparing the food that the lay friends not only could taste the delicious flavor of the food but also the energy of love from the sisters.

The cooking retreat this year was a joy as the New Hamlet welcomed many friends. Nature generously offered daily midnight rain that provided for the cool the following day. A woman who was a bit senior in age, on learning of this retreat at the very last minute when the registration link was already closed, had pleaded with the office team to allow her to sign up. She said that it didn’t matter if she couldn’t sleep in the dormitory or even had to pitch a tent on the hamlet’s grounds. She only needed a space near the vegetable garden for her tent as long as she could participate in the retreat. I felt so much compassion for her when I heard about her situation. In the end, someone canceled their registration last-minute, so she was able to register for the retreat after all.

Before the retreat started, the monastic sisters worked hard to test the recipes and invited the sangha to sample the food in the kitchen, with the slogan “*happy cooking, happy moment.*” Thanks to the skillfulness of the MC, the interactions between the monastic chefs and audience were filled with fits of uninhibited laughter. The recipes were not too complicated, but the joy, sense of humor, and ease of the sisters while on stage left many unforgettable memories for the lay friends. Everyone was delighted to not only get to learn how to cook the dishes but also to find them on the serving tables the next day.

Throughout the week, aside from the cooking demonstrations, everyone also received nourishment from the Dharma talks, Dharma sharing sessions, and the presentations on the Five Mindfulness Trainings and Beginning Anew. Embraced by the collective energy, I believe each member of the retreat more or less could taste the fruits of the practice.

### **It’s summertime!**

The most packed and fun retreat of the year was indeed the summer retreat with many families bringing their children to Plum Village to practice. The sight of big and small tents pitched all over the hamlet reminded me of the camping trips during my school-age years. While sitting on the bus, a woman my aunt’s age shared with me that from the

time she discovered Plum Village, she no longer had to think hard about where her family would spend the summer break because Plum Village was the place to be.

In the first week, I was in the Dharma sharing family for the parents of teenagers. Already in the first session, many were in tears while opening their hearts with us because of the overwhelming number of problems with their children in their teenage years. The parents suffered because their children spent all day on their phones, seemingly living more in the virtual world. They didn't have much communication with each other. They no longer had meals together. As I listened to these sharings, I felt much compassion for them, and at the same time, found myself fortunate to have chosen the monastic path. It is truly not easy to bring a new life into this world with all the hardship in raising them from infancy to school-age and through to the teenage years with all the physiological and psychological changes, subjecting the parents to many trials and tribulations.



In the following Dharma sharing session, a mother shared that for several years she had had difficulty communicating with her adolescent daughter. And yet, that morning, her daughter came up to her and gave her a hug thanking her for bringing her to Plum Village. Seeing tears roll down the mother's cheeks roused compassion in my heart, and I felt happy for her.

While in Plum Village, the teens had to hand their phones over to the sisters for the entire week. These young friends were so accustomed to having their phones that they felt a strong sense of deprivation at the beginning. After a few days of participating in the scheduled activities from

morning till late, many of them no longer felt the need to use their phones. They had time to enjoy the beauty of nature and learn ways to come back to themselves more frequently to recognize whatever emotions there may be inside. A parent shared that Plum Village was a rare place where young people didn't use their phones for an entire week. They were grateful that Plum Village had created such a wholesome environment for their families to come and practice with each other.

What nourished me those three weeks was also the presence of the little angels aged 6-12. One evening in the dining hall, upon seeing a group of little friends enjoying each other's company over cups of drinks, I came over and asked:

*"What are you drinking?"*

*"We're having Earl Grey," said an older one in the group.*

*"Will you be able to sleep if you drink tea?"*

*"I only use a little bit of tea."*

Before I could ask anything further, the youngest in the group, probably 6, said cheekily:

*"I drink lots of tea and I don't need to sleep,  
I stay up all night."*

*"Really, you don't need to sleep?  
So how can you grow up?"*

*"You see, I haven't slept but I've grown this big."*

Then the little boy spanned out his little hand to measure himself from head to toes. Then the older boys in the group huddled around him, teasing,

*"Come on! You slept so deep that your Mum had to wake you up, and you say you don't need to sleep?"*

Witnessing this funny scene, I thought how innocent, mischievous, and lovely these kids were! I had the feeling as though my five nephews in Hue (Vietnam) were also present in these young boys. Plum Village had brought them here, playing with one another as siblings of one family for one week. I hope the fond childhood memories they had in Plum Village will lay a strong spiritual foundation early on in life; so when they grow up, whenever these memories come to mind, they will smile and feel warm inside.

### **Do the sisters feel overwhelmed?**

This is a question many friends often ask after finding out that Plum Village has reopened its doors year-round, and that the sisters organize one retreat after another, welcoming people from many



walks of life. I often smiled, sharing from my personal experience that the retreats brought me much joy, they were opportunities for me to learn new things and fueled my motivation to practice. I consider the retreats as opportunities for me to be of service and to deepen my own practice. It is thanks to friends who come here that I get to learn about the violence, fear, anger, hatred, and greed going on in society. I get to learn about the pain and suffering they encounter in their daily lives so that when I reflect, I can see living in the embrace of the sangha is a great fortune.

Just being present in the Dharma sharing sessions and at the dinners with the Dharma sharing families, listening wholeheartedly and sharing my own experience in the daily practices, I feel that can already be of help for them. Suffering is overflowing on this planet. Perhaps I may not be able to reach out and help them directly, but if by being in the monastery I learn ways to live harmoniously and happily with the sisters around me, and generate inner peace and joy in my heart, then I can send that wholesome energy to those who are suffering. *Peace in oneself, peace in the world.* I use that gatha to remind myself that no matter

what I do, looking back on the day, I can see whether or not I have peace and joy in myself. Only when I truly have it can I offer it to someone else, especially to my blood family and the monastic sisters around me.

Many times, when I look at the hundreds and thousands of people coming to Plum Village to learn the practice of mindfulness, I see the depth and breadth of Thay's life of service and his work in Sangha-building. I remember in a Dharma talk, Thay said if we have a dream, the sangha will help us make it come true. As a small individual in this big world, no matter how big my dream is to help the world, I still would not be able to do much on my own. Now, being able to live in the sangha, learning and practicing and being of service, to me that is a great blessing. Waking up every morning, I only have to be aware that I am a monastic, living in the embrace of the sangha, for gratitude to immediately rise up in me. I am grateful to Thay and the sangha for allowing me to be a drop of water in this multicolored, multicultural river so that every day I get to breathe, smile, and generate inner peace and joy, for myself and to offer to those around me. ☸



# Running: Another Way to Stop

SISTER CHÂN TRĂNG LÂM HỖ

This year, the Rains Retreat is particularly challenging for me as it seems to live up to its name: it is raining almost all the time and it is difficult to find enough time for exercise, especially going for a run. At one point, when I had the feeling of being completely stuck in myself, my thinking became narrow and my thoughts started orbiting around “little” worries and problems that seemed to grow very big. In these moments, I lose perspective about why I am here and how I actually want to live my life and train my mind. I decided that I can’t wait for better conditions before exercising. I just needed to move and to run regularly. I prefer being “wet and sane” over being “dry and stuck,” and to remember that “there’s no such thing as bad weather, only unsuitable clothing.”

What helped me to get started is knowing from experience that physical activity helps me to get out of this stuck state of mind, to “change the peg,” as Thay said. For others, it may be singing, playing music, painting, crafts or some other kind of exercise, which helps us to open up a “bigger window” in our mind again and not to be lost too much in our daily concerns.

It is almost as if I am discovering running and physical exercise again as a new Dharma door for me. It is not that I run super fast, very long distances or for a long time. But it is the easiest way to bring me to inner space, to see things from a wider perspective and just let go of the grip of repetitive thinking about something that is occupying my mind at the moment. This could be having a difficulty with someone else, just some imagined worries or some thoughts about things that I would like to be different and are difficult for me to accept.

After coming back from a run, I can be with people again, I am able to listen and be more tolerant of others and of my own limitations. Mainly everything seems to be more in balance inside of me. If I don’t move and the energy doesn’t flow, my mind also becomes more and more stuck, judgemental and narrow. I was also wondering if I am running away from something. However, simply moving my body a little bit faster through the countryside actually allows me to come back to my



body and feel more alive. The benefits of physical exercise are extremely great. Endurance sports helps to calm the heart beat, deepens the breathing and supports our hormonal balance, just to mention a few. Moving, walking and running is just in our human nature.

Sometimes, I dread Days of Mindfulness, knowing I would be sitting through morning meditation, Dharma talk, formal lunch and Dharma sharing without moving much, thinking something must be wrong with me as it seems to be no problem for others. Though there is “exercise time” in our daily schedule, in my opinion, the dense program and my own laziness often do not support such physical exercise. Running is a more solitary activity, and one has to be determined to do it.

Running as a physical exercise has always been a part of my life in a very ordinary way. I guess I was often thinking that I would be done with it at some point and move on to a more interesting kind of sport. As I am not very competitive, it seemed to bring me nowhere. I did a half marathon once, but most of the time I was one of the last runners, at the end of the widely spread out field of participants. I would only speed up and overtake the second last

person in the race in order not to have the broom wagon behind me. I originally studied sport science. Because sports are so competitive, many of us lose the joy of exercising. In my studies, we would look at various research articles about the effects of sports and physical exercise on different illnesses and the positive effect of physical exercise on cardiovascular diseases, cancer patients, depression etc. Although, I know that the benefit is extremely high, especially in societies where we mainly sit in cars and in front of screens; sometimes I would almost get annoyed with the constant “proclamation” that sport is the remedy for all sorts of illnesses.

Something I still like to explore and discover through the practice of mindfulness is how to find a way of being more and more aware while running, how to enjoy the action in itself more, rather than looking forward to feeling spacious after the run. One step in this direction is to deliberately run slower than I naturally would. Most runners start off running too fast. Running slower, I observe the sole of my foot touching the ground and being

aware of this little flying phase while running. It helps me be more curious about how this movement is really happening and not to be too attached to the distance that I run, but to run with the attitude of “nothing to do and nowhere to go.”

A quite extraordinary example of a woman of faith living a very sporty, active life is a Christian nun, Sr. Madonna Budder, also known as the “iron nun.” She started running for fun when she was 48 years old. Over time, she got more and more involved in different kinds of races and triathlons. Trying to find a way to also live in accordance with her vows, she was seeking counsel from her bishop, who said, “Sister, I wish some of my priests would do what you’re doing.” She is now 92 and has completed more than 340 triathlons.

Though it is helpful to live an active life from early on and to build a habit of exercising, we can also simply enjoy ordinary running and moving. I run mainly because it helps me to stop: stop being lost in thoughts, stop negative ways of thinking and to come back to being in touch with life through all my senses. ☺



# Music: a Dharma door

BROTHER CHÂN PHÁP HỮU

*In 2023, Plum Village monastics went on their first music tour across North America, titled “The Way Out Is In: A Musical Meditation.” It offered a unique blend of contemplative music, poetry and short, inspiring teachings. The tour started on 21 April in Baltimore, went on to Washington D.C. and Boston, and ended with a concert in Toronto, Canada on 1 May. The following is a summary of an interview the editorial team conducted with Br. Phap Huu on 2 January 2024.*

## Flexibility and openness

When we started, we had a vague idea to weave music into the reading of Thay’s poetry about the story of a river, very much in the same way we had done for various music and meditation offerings in Plum Village retreats. However, Sr. True Dedication and I — the two MCs — realized that 90% of the audience wouldn’t understand the poem because it’s quite deep. We’d have to explain it. It worked in our retreats because the audience — retreatants and monastics — were already familiar with the Plum Village metaphor of “going as a river.” But on tour, people might come to the event because they heard about it from their friends. We felt that the poetry of Thay wouldn’t really land with them.

Fortunately, one of the highlights of the tour was our flexibility and openness. We decided to weave what mindfulness is and what our Dharma is into what we called “bite-sized Dharma talks” for five or seven minutes, which would then lead into the music. It helped set the foundation. We started off with “Who is Thay?” because our promotional leaflet spoke of the tour being a dedication to Thay’s legacy. Then, we shared about the spirit of Engaged Buddhism, of Thay’s creativity and openness to make sure that the Dharma continues to bring joy to people.

In the early days, many people knew Thay as a peace activist and a poet rather than as a monk. His poetry was his way of channeling his experiences during the war. His first communities were young activists working in war-torn villages, seeing death, orphans and bodies dismembered by bombs on a daily basis. That is where our Days of Mindfulness in

the Plum Village tradition come from. Our teacher had the insight that we needed to come together once a week as a community to celebrate the miracle of life — Buddhism as a way of life. The weekly gatherings were meant to highlight the beauty of the present moment, as well as to shine the light of mindfulness on suffering, to see its roots, to care for it, to transform it, and to cultivate new insights and wholesome seeds inside ourselves. On those Days of Mindfulness, Thay allowed the young social workers to bring guitars and drums to make music and sing together. A lot of Thay’s poems were put into music. He also brought in a lot of artists, songwriters, singers, poets, who later became very well known in Vietnam. Music was very important for Thay. Making music was one of Thay’s side quests. He was an amazing artist himself.

## A bridge to bring more people into spirituality

After an introduction to Thay, we spoke about mindful breathing because the first song was about the sixteen exercises of mindful breathing. Mindfulness is always mindfulness of something, so we then talked about mindfulness of suffering as it led into a song, called “Night of Prayer,” based on a poem by Thay. Sometimes the spoken words would be accompanied by the cello or piano. These contemplative moments created an experience of the Dharma infused with music and meditation.

We were lucky to have a group of monastics who were previously professional musicians, like Br. Phap Linh (Br. Spirit) on the cello and Sr. Trai Nghiem on the violin. It was a complex ensemble of songs that integrated melody, strings, rap, and drums, with the flavor of pop, hip-hop, and contemporary culture. It was very diverse — a dynamic bridge to bring more people into spirituality. For the younger generation of practitioners like us, spirituality doesn’t just mean becoming a Buddhist or following a religion. Spirituality is the capacity of awakening in everyone, which is to learn the art of stopping, to connect with our suffering, take care of it, and transform it with compassion.

Many people shared after the sessions that they experienced a deep sense of peace and groundedness. Since we were monastics, many people expected very slow, contemplative music. So the moment we threaded in a more upbeat song and some rap, people were taken aback: 'Wow!' They couldn't believe that this was a part of it. It helped reshape their viewpoint of the liberation and freedom monastics have to offer the Dharma in creative ways, to bring the language of Buddhism, of awakening and mindfulness, into the mainstream of society. Moreover, the tour helped us break free from our own view of who we are. As long as it still touches the core principles and wisdom of the Dharma, we should have the courage to just do it. This is our teacher's wisdom.

### **"This is my kind of Buddhism"**

The beauty and the fear we all had when starting this tour was, "Are we good enough? Is this too ambitious?" One of the highlights of the tour for me was the joy of having the courage to do something that was not considered "normal." It required trusting in the Dharma and the Sangha. Deep down, I knew Thay would be very supportive. I remember in the summer retreat of 2012, when we celebrated the 30th anniversary of Plum Village, the norm was to offer beautiful melodic songs, but not hip-hop. Some of us, Thay's young students, who had grown

up with hip-hop and pop culture, took a chance. We wanted to bring a new flavor to the celebration. So, we practiced two songs: a rap song by Lupe Fiasco, called "The Show Goes On," about empowering people who suffer with oppression and discrimination; and another by Jessie J featuring B.o.B, the "Price Tag," about not being caught by the desire for wealth and consumerism. When we offered these two songs, the audience went wild... in a mindful way. People were just so happy.

But in the monastic circle, it was very new. Some raised their eyebrows, thinking "What just happened? Is this even allowed?" and went to tell Thay. A few days later, I had tea with Thay at the Hermitage. When I came in, Thay had this look on his face like "you just did something and we're going to talk about it." As I sat next to him, he looked at me and said, "So, Phap Huu, I heard a few days ago you and some young monastics did a song that was not particularly normal in our tradition, and apparently you guys were dancing." I thought to myself, "I don't think we were dancing." But when we were feeling the vibe, our bodies moved to the beat. So I just said, "Yes Thay, we did it." Then he said, "Well, some monastics had opinions about it and told Thay." In my mind as a young monk, I thought that I was about to get canceled, and would never be allowed to perform or offer this kind of



music anymore. But Thay looked at me and said, “Well, do you know how Thay responded? Thay looked at them, smiled and said, ‘This is my kind of Buddhism.’” To me, that was the greatest recognition, acceptance, and approval a young monastic could receive; Thay trusted us. He also said to them, “This is a new generation. Allow them to express themselves through their own language, their own experiences of what moves them.” I think this story illustrates the depth, the love and the vision of our teacher.

From then on, we either chanted with various instruments or rapped in Thay’s presence on many occasions, including in front of the venerable monks and nuns visiting from Vietnam. For me, it was a statement. Thay wanted to show that this was the kind of monasticism he wanted to cultivate and nurture among the young and the youthful hearts, filled with energy. As elders, we should allow this to evolve in the community in a Dharmic way and allow music instruments to become a part of the monastery life.

The wisdom of Buddhism has succeeded for 2600 years and survived to today by adapting to contemporary cultures. If we look back, we can see that poetry, calligraphy, gardening, bonsai, archery, martial arts, and music have been integrated into many Buddhist traditions. For example, in Vietnam, different string instruments have been brought into the chanting. When Plum Village implemented the revised chant of Namó Avalokiteshvara, it began with just a guitar and a djembe. Later, when Br. Phap Linh and Sr. Trai Nghiem became monastics, Thay said, “Don’t throw your talent away. Bring it into the Dharma. Allow it to be a transmission.” As a result, our chants and songs of mindfulness incorporated cello, violin, piano, guitar, djembe, etc.

Thay taught that what we were doing was nothing new, but actually very traditional. For example, drums were used during wartime as signals and so on. However, it also became the Prajna drum for important events like monastic ordination ceremonies. Give something a new meaning, a new purpose, and it will embody a Dharma power.

### **Smile with me, cry with me**

The tour also helped me grieve for the loss of Thay’s physical form. One of my favorite songs during the tour was “Unborn And Indestructible.” I even said half-jokingly that I wanted this to be my funeral song. It talks about how nothing is lost. In

Washington, D.C., I cried when “Unborn And Indestructible” and “Oneness” were sung. When I heard the line “smile with me, cry with me” from “Oneness,” my heart dropped; I felt a release from within and was able to be a practitioner in that moment, to listen and feel the sadness of loss. Mindfulness is all about knowing what is present in us, to acknowledge it, and have the courage to embrace it. The tour helped me know how much I missed Thay, how much I wished Thay could be there with us. It was healing for me to realize that I didn’t have to finish grieving for Thay in order to give, to be a solid Dharma teacher.



This was the first big tour since Thay’s passing. It was a moment of real togetherness for many of us young Dharma teachers on the tour. We collaborated and served as one body. None of us was trying to be the leader or outshine anyone else. We learned to work harmoniously as the fingers of one hand. It was so beautiful and rare. Ofosu — the artist and rapper Born-I, who joined us on the tour — said, “I’ve never been a part of a group where there’s so much togetherness; there’s so much unity.” From the perspective of service, siblinghood and togetherness, this tour holds the legacy of real continuation.

In Boston, one of my greatest joys was to see Sr. Chan Khong support us. Everyone stood up at the end of our session, and Sr. Chan Khong pushed herself up from her wheelchair to join in on the applause. It was very humbling. As we bowed to everyone, the audience chanted, “One more song, one more song...” and Sr. Chan Khong also went along, “one more song, one more song...” The whole band went up to her and offered her our gratitude. We introduced her to everybody, “Today we have a legend with us. One of Thay’s earliest companions, a bodhisattva of our time, is still with us, and she will offer us an unexpected gift, a song ‘The Smile’ that she has always sung on tours with Thay.” When she finished, she received a standing ovation. It was so

heartwarming. She shared, “I am so happy to still be alive to witness this.” I almost broke down and cried. But there was so much joy in that moment. I was overwhelmed by her presence.

We gave our last concert at the University of Toronto, where one-fourth of the audience were students, many of whom never had any contact with Plum Village. A young Canadian with Chinese roots shared with us, “First of all, I want to thank you for what you’ve offered. I’ve never experienced anything like this. And can you explain to me what was that Namo’valo, because I cried like a baby, and I am a young 23-years-old, ambitious, nonreligious, and suddenly I just found myself crying and crying and crying.” I said to him, “Don’t even try to understand it, just experience it. You touched something very profound in you, and sometimes words are not important to understand what that is.”



### Where is the album?

Many people asked us, “Where’s the album? I want to hear this. I want this on Spotify. I want this on Apple Music. I want to be listening to this song as I drive to work, or when I have an emotional moment. I want this music for me to take refuge in.” Normally, bands need to have an album first for people to know about them, because when people like the music, then they will want to hear it live. Some couldn’t believe that we didn’t have an album. A couple felt so inspired and asked, “How can this be beyond luck? How can it reach beyond the Plum Village circle? What do we need?” After some reflections with Br. Phap Linh, we realized what we were missing was a producer. We have the talent, but we needed someone to thread everything together. This became one of the beautiful fruits of the tour: a birth of a new album, called “A Cloud Never Dies,” which we will release in the spring of 2024.

Jack Peñate, who is an amazing artist himself, became the chosen producer. During the 3-week recording process, some of us regularly sat together, lit incense, drank tea and shared about our deepest aspirations. Being in the spirit of Thay’s embrace in the Toadskin Hut, everything felt energized by Thay’s Dharma. It was a beautiful atmosphere. We wanted the music to take people on a journey, holding a space for them to pray, to grieve, to feel whatever is in them, but also a space for them to cultivate hope and to inspire action. It was our deep intention for the music to be an act of service in itself.

Jack realized that we were attached to our performances during the tour, and encouraged us to let go of the past, to enjoy jamming together to capture something fresh, and allow the music to come naturally.

At first, we kept saying we’ll allow one year for the album to ripen. But by day eight or ten, Jack and I looked at each other and I said, “I think we have an album. I think it’s coming together.” And Jack said, “Br. Phap Huu, I didn’t want to say it because I didn’t want to jinx it, but I think you’re right. I think it’s there. Wow!” I’ve never met anyone of Jack’s talent; yet, he’s so humble. He even came back just for Thay’s birthday to play bass for the concert we offered at the end of the climate retreat. When we invited him, he said that “it would be his greatest honor” because he felt this was now also his Sangha, his family, and he wanted to give homage to such a beautiful spiritual teacher.

Jack said what he learned from the music and his time spent with us was compassionate leadership. He saw how much respect we offered him, and how much we allowed him to lead. He said, “I thought I was coming to grieve. But what I learned was siblinghood, togetherness, compassionate leadership, deep listening, loving speech, and also to trust, continue to trust.” That also was a learning experience for me.

At one point, I mentioned to Jack that Thay often said, “Let the ancestors move you.” I really felt throughout this whole journey from the concert to the album that we have been supported by our ancestors, spiritual and genetic. The path is always there, but sometimes we have to sweep the ground for that path to reveal itself. ☪

# The Presence of Thay

SISTER CHÂN TRĂNG BỒ ĐỀ

*Sister Trang Bo Đe is of Vietnamese origin. She ordained in 2016 in the Kanikonna Tree ordination family at Thai Plum Village. She has been residing, practicing and serving at New Hamlet, Plum Village, France, since 2016. She is great at playing with children, as well as having fun in teaching Vietnamese to her non-Vietnamese monastic siblings.*



*“Under the illuminating blue sky  
I suddenly feel  
The presence of Thay...”*

The walking meditation paused at the top of the hill; everyone was gazing at the serene blue sky and enjoying the warm sunshine. There was no sense of a separate self in that moment. In the garden of the sangha, each person has their own way to continue Thay; so much so that sometimes it seems difficult to have a consensus. Nevertheless, I think as long as we still treasure Thay’s teachings on mindful

walking and breathing, treasure the value of participation in the sangha’s scheduled activities such as walking meditation, then the sangha will still flow in the same direction.

The sound of the town church bell in the distance echoed at intervals across the spacious sky. The sangha breathed in synchrony at that moment.

During this Rains Retreat, the time for walking meditation on our monastic Days of Mindfulness truly became an opportunity for me to practice the art of stopping, to let go of my thinking and mental to-do lists, and return to the present moment, to simply be aware that I was walking. After two morning classes, there was nothing more wonderful than being outdoors, breathing in the fresh air and playing with nature. Walking meditation was the time to play for me.

*“The bell is calling.  
Our feet kiss the Earth.  
Our eyes embrace the Sky.  
We walk in mindfulness.  
Ten thousand lives can be seen in a single instant.  
This is still springtime,  
when everything is manifesting itself  
so rapidly.  
The snow is green.  
And the sunshine is falling like the rain.”  
—from the poem “Cuckoo Telephone”*

I remember during grade school, my friends and I would long for the school bell to ring so that we could immediately close our books and pour into the canteen to buy snacks and sweets. The two morning classes on the monastic Day of Mindfulness brought me back to the elementary school days when I learned to befriend the written words, blackboards and white chalk. For the sake of the younger monastics, the elders converted the classic schedule of morning Dharma talk and afternoon Dharma sharing sessions into classes on various topics throughout this Rains Retreat. There was a class on how the mind and brain affect our lives by Sr. Hoi Nghiem, a class on Buddhist psychology by Sr. Tue Nghiem, a class on comparative ethics by Sr. Hien Nghiem, and a handful of other classes. These



classes had succeeded in sparking enthusiasm among monastics, kindling a unique vivacity for this memorable Rains Retreat.



### 10 parts studying to 1 part understanding

The enthusiasm of the Dharma teachers leading the classes seemed to be endless. Right after leading a class on an in-depth understanding of the precepts, Sr. Chan Duc immediately went to the next class to teach Pali to a smaller group. Sister Chan Duc taught us the Pali version of some of the familiar sutras, such as the Discourse on Turning the Wheel of the Dharma, Discourse on Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone, and Discourse on the Full Awareness of Breathing with immense patience and inclusivity.

Reality proved that the enthusiasm of the transmitter was unlimited; however, the ability of the receiver was... limited. I often could not help feeling embarrassed over my ability to understand only one part of the ten things taught. Usually, we took turns to read one sentence in Pali and then translate it into English based on our understanding. Whenever it was my turn, I did my best to express good intentions to befriend the Pali alphabet. Despite my sincerity, those alphabet friends were determined to ignore me as though we were strangers, causing me to mumble and stutter incoherently, desperate to find an escape from my tangled mess. Many times, my reflexive, come-what-may, do-or-die answers would make the class burst into laughter.

In fact, we brothers and sisters “functioned as one body” in the class. Whenever, one person was “in crisis” with a Pali question, the whole class would rapidly toss their “life jackets” to rescue our sibling; but alas, there would be so many life jackets at once that the sister or brother would not know which one to take. Luckily, Sr. Chan Duc compassionately let us pass regardless whether our answer was right or wrong. And I breathed a sigh of relief.

Despite my ability to learn only a fraction of what was taught, after three months of using diligence to make up for not being a smart learner, along with the guidance from Sr. Chan Duc and encouragement from fellow monastic classmates, I was able to gather a few Pali words for my pocket and memorize a segment of the “Four Recollections” chant:

*Itipi so bhagavā araham sammā-sambuddho,  
Vijjā-caraṇa-sampanno sugato lokavidū...*

### Every hour in class is a source of joy

After five sessions of in-depth learning about the Great Bhikshu/Bhikshuni Precepts, the brothers and sisters had three classes to choose from for the first of the morning classes. We could either choose to continue with the class by Sr. Chan Duc to further discuss the precepts and offer our insights on how to revise the Great Precepts; attend the class by Br. Phap Huu on Plum Village monastic culture; or join the workshop by Br. Troi Bao Tang and Sr. Trang Tam Muoi on how to apply Thay’s teachings to contemporary issues in the West. Skimming through the three topics, I felt curious and inspired to learn more about monastic culture. So I signed up for that class. Although it was different from how I imagined it would be, I still felt that each hour in class was a source of joy.

We got to hear about the “origin stories” of the 5-year monastic program, of hugging meditation, of the annual tradition of the monastic brothers and sisters taking turn to touch the Earth in front of each other in the Lunar New Year ceremony<sup>10</sup>, of how Thay simplified the religious Buddhist practices so that the teachings of the Buddha could be applied in Western society on the basis of mindfulness practices, etc.

10. A Plum Village practice for the monastic sangha since 1999. During the annual Lunar New Year celebration, the monks would stand facing the nuns, while the nuns sit still with joined palms. One monk would read aloud a text recognizing the presence of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion, in every nun, and declaring the vow to practice their precepts properly to protect their monastic path and the monastic path of the nuns. After the reading, the monks would prostrate three times in front of the nuns. Then the nuns would do the same, but reading aloud a text recognizing the presence of Samantabhadra, the Bodhisattva of Great Action, in every monk; subsequently, the nuns would prostrate three times in front of the monks.

Through his easygoing demeanor, witty storytelling ability and open-mindedness, it was captivating to listen to Br. Phap Huu share about Thay and the traditions of Plum Village. “Did you know, brothers and sisters, that when I and a group of young monastics performed a rap song for the first time in the history of Plum Village, a few monastics in the audience questioned whether or not it was appropriate for the monastic fine manners and if it was suitable for the environment of a monastery? This reached Thay’s ears and he invited me to see him at the Toadskin Hut. Sitting across from Thay, I thought Thay would surely reprimand me. But, no. Thay only smiled and said only one thing: “This is my kind of Buddhism.””

Beyond the words shared, I could see the everlasting fire of enthusiasm Thay had successfully ignited and nourished in the young disciple Phap Huu of the early days so that now that fire could be transmitted to this younger generation. I could also see Thay’s image, mannerism and insight reflected in the heart of the Br. Phap Huu of present-day. I sensed that the things Br. Phap Huu endeavored to transmit to us was the spirit, insight, and the person Thay was.

## The Net of Indra

Learning to look with the eyes of non-self, the presence of Thay permeates the sangha: on the walking path lined with pine trees, on the Buddha hill, and at the Sitting Still Hut; however, the place where I can see the presence of Thay most vividly is perhaps in the hearts of my elder brothers and sisters. If someone said that “Thay is conservative, always wanting to preserve the essence and beauty of Buddhism,” I would agree. At the same time, if someone said that “Thay likes to experiment, always willing to try something new,” I would also not hesitate to agree.

Each disciple interacted with Thay at different times and stages of Thay’s life, not to mention Thay’s forms, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness also continually changed like everything else in the flow of life. I think no one could confidently assert that they had 100% understood Thay, because Thay was an ever-changing manifestation that could not be grasped. Perhaps, the thing that we preserve is the image of Thay in our mind. It is neither real nor unreal.



I remember Sr. Chan Duc shared that after returning to Plum Village from a trip in India, Thay gave her a Pali dictionary. That was when she began learning Pali. I think, aside from Thay's immeasurable love, the thing that is profoundly instilled in the heart of each disciple is Thay's deep understanding of his students. Thay understood the personalities of his students; and, accordingly, placed them in positions suitable for them to be themselves while developing their strengths and contributing to the career of sangha-building.

For me, the sangha is the Net of Indra with each person as a multifaceted jewel reflecting the image of Thay, as well as their own. Whenever I hear stories about Thay, I do not need to think whether or not it is correct; but, rather, depending on my state of mind at that time, I will decide the direction in which I want to go. Throughout my journey on this path, I think I have, once in a while, touched the essence of Thay.

### Thay's presence in me

I have never experienced war. I was not there with Thay in the early days of Plum Village. I was not even there with Thay on the teaching tours. Nevertheless, there are times when I feel profoundly connected to Thay.

*"The one who bows and the one who is bowed to are both, by nature, empty.  
Therefore the communication between them is inexpressibly perfect."*

The presence of Thay in me is like the bright moon amidst the dark night sky. Even if the clouds completely obscured the moon and stars, I would still see Thay light up the torch of faith and hope in me.

*"Who knows that in the pitch-dark night there is a child quietly crying."*

In the thick of a storm, Thay transformed into poetic verses to calm and comfort me, offering me warmth and understanding, and gently helping me soothe the hot tears.

*"I hold my face in my two hands.  
No, I am not crying.  
I hold my face in my two hands  
to keep the loneliness warm-  
two hands protecting,  
two hands nourishing,  
two hands preventing  
my soul from leaving me  
in anger."  
—from the poem "For Warmth"*

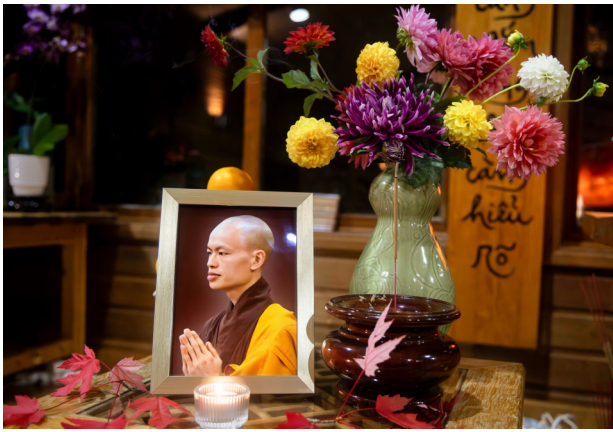
The great poet, Nguyen Du, once wrote, "The body may have transcended, but its essence remains" (*Thác là thể phách, còn là tinh anh*). Thay is an incense that has burned to its end, but its fragrance will permeate the air for eternity. ☞



# I Have Arrived, I Am Home

BROTHER CHÂN TRỜI HẢI THƯỢNG

*Brother Troi Hai Thuong was born in 1990 and passed away in 2023 at the age of 33. He was ordained as a novice at Thai Plum Village in 2014 in the Red Oak ordination family and received the Great Precepts to become a bhikshu in the “I have arrived, I am home” great precepts transmission ceremony in 2019. After several years of practice and service to the sangha in Thailand, he volunteered to transfer to the European Institute of Applied Buddhism (EIAB) in Germany to help continue Thay’s dream of building sanghas. It was here that Br. Troi Hai Thuong unexpectedly passed away on the morning of 15 October 2023.*



*Although Br. Troi Hai Thuong no longer manifests in the physical form, we can still get in touch with him through his writings, reflections of a sensitive spirit that earnestly loves life.*

*The following is a translated excerpt from the Giếng Nước Thơm Trong (Fragrant Well) Newsletter #2 of Thai Plum Village.*

## Monday

I lay on the green hammock along the corridor right next to the garden at the center of the monks’ residence. The hamlet is usually filled with people, but the lazy days turns it into a deserted place. Everyone was gone so I didn’t need to look for a peaceful space anywhere else. After a long while, a brother passed by seeing me engrossed in reading, he teased, “Are you truly being lazy?” Knowing the brother was only teasing, I just smiled. “Being lazy” is the opposite of “being diligent.” How interesting to think that at the beginning of the week, while

everyone out there was preoccupied with getting back to their work to earn a living, we did not have any scheduled sitting meditation, walking meditation, or eating in noble silence.

Brother Kai Li shared that when he first came to Plum Village, he was shocked to learn that there was laziness at a monastery! Wouldn’t people usually strive to encourage each other to be diligent? It wasn’t that there were no such things as lazy monks; but to have a “lazy day” as part of the schedule for an entire monastery was something worthy of mention. At that moment, Thay said very earnestly to Br. Kai Li, “Yes, you should be as lazy as possible.” Later, Br. Kai Li realized it was a very deep practice indeed.

Once in a while, we hear people say, “Don’t just sit there, do something.” This is a common thing because our society is a goal-oriented society. We tend to always want to go toward something and always have a specific goal in our minds. On the contrary, Buddhism teaches us the practice of wishlessness. Practitioners of mindfulness would often say, “Don’t just do something, sit there.” Not doing anything is in fact doing something. This teaching reminds us that we do not need to set a goal to run after because everything is already present in us.

I tend to be more successful in being lazy than when we practice noble silence as a whole sangha, when everyone leaves books, pens, papers, internet, devices alone. To be honest, I usually use Mondays as a rest day, to take a break from “work” or to go on outings, not quite in the spirit of “nowhere to go, nothing to do.” Having attended school and worked, participating in the hustle and bustle of society, I still feel guilty being idle. If there are 15 or 30 minutes to spare, I will try to make the most of the time by finding something to do. On the other hand, Zen masters would spend several hours just for tea meditation, being aware and enjoying each movement. Only after becoming a monastic did I realize the image of a monastic sitting doing nothing was in fact not what it seemed. The “business” of monastics is different from that of people in society.

Evening came and the residents of the hamlet had returned from their hidden corners. A few brothers and novices, in their long robes, were chanting and offering food in the Hungry Ghosts Ceremony. The rapid rhythm of the wooden fish drum harmonizing with the chanting voices was very satisfying to the ears. Tonight, there was a scheduled activity, so Br. Tam Nguyen invited me to go for a walk earlier than usual. After asking around, we ended up with four people for the walk. The reverberating sounds of the bell and wooden fish drum had not yet ended, and the chanting lingered:

*“May we be born now in the Pure Land within the heart of a lotus flower. In the moment when the lotus blooms, we touch the reality of no-birth and no-dying.”*

Brother Tam Nguyen, who used to be a novice in a Buddhist traditional temple, explained that Thay did not make those lines up on his own. To help open the minds of the listeners, our patriarchs had brought into the rites and rituals teachings like:

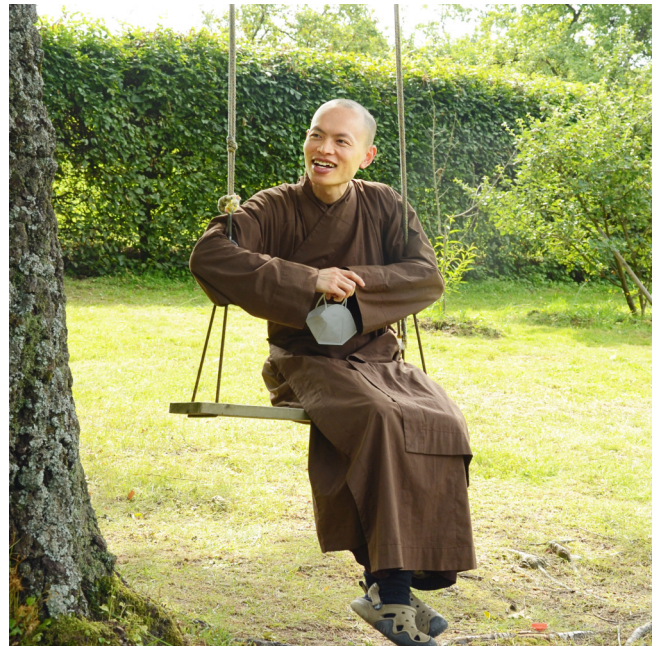
*“The Pure Land is already inherent in the true mind. Amitabha Buddha appears from our true nature, illuminating the three times (past, present, and future) in the ten directions; yet, it does not leave the present moment...”*

I was happy to see how much Br. Tam Nguyen had grown. He had become calmer, knowing how to come back to himself, and was an avid reader. As he grew up in a countryside temple that only practiced invoking the name of Amitabha Buddha, I was worried that he would have a difficult time adjusting to the Plum Village environment when I first introduced him to it. But now I could see that he was able to harmonize these two streams.

## Friday

I left my room early to go to sitting meditation so that I could enjoy each step on the path to the echo of the Great Temple Bell still reverberating, accompanied by the chanting. Upon arriving at the meditation hall, I saw somebody already there practicing Touching the Earth. Today, many elder brothers have gone out of the monastery, so I felt a little uncomfortable having to sit nearer to the altar during chantings. Being used to living in both a large and a small sangha, I treasured the atmosphere of a powerful chanting each morning calling forth the bright morning light. Each chanting session usually consisted of a chant and a sutra reading.

In Plum Village, we are not required to memorize the sutras or precepts; nevertheless, they seep into our hearts through the repeated practice of sutra reading and chanting throughout the year. Phrases like “We vow to touch the Pure Land with every step, we promise at every contact, to be in touch with the ultimate dimension” may not require much time mulling over the books to understand, partly because they are written in everyday language. If we use the Sino-Vietnamese version, then it would be no different from learning a foreign language because the pronunciation sounds familiar but the meaning is completely different.



This morning, there was only me in my room because all the novices had gone to their language classes. I turned a few pages of a previous edition of the Plum Village newsletter on Br. Tam Nguyen’s study desk to look at the photos. I was drawn by a commentary from Thay on a poem by Bang Ba Lan. It was just the exact thing I had been looking for:

*“Who doesn’t need a dream?! According to the practice of Plum Village, we need to find a way to realize our dream today... I myself, I think I can reach my hand out to touch my dream at any moment in my daily life.”*

This paragraph reminded me of a time in Germany, when a laywoman asked Thay now that he was advanced in age if he had any dream that was unfulfilled. Thay answered,

*“Everyday, Thay is able to live and do the things he likes. Thay no longer has any projects or dreams.”*

What Thay emphasized was that, we could touch our dreams right away if we wanted to. How? Thay had already thoroughly taught us. Countless times, we, monks and nuns, sang “It needs you to breathe gently for the miracles to be displayed” (from the song/poem “Our True Heritage”). During a sitting meditation, we might again hear Thay’s warm voice in our ears:

*“Dear Lord Buddha... when I breathe in, I see that I have arrived. When I breathe out, I see that I am home. I have come home to the present moment. This is my true homeland. I have arrived, in touch with the wonders of life, with the Pure Land in the present moment. This can be done within one in-breath or one out-breath. If I am able to arrive, to come home, then what more do I need to do? I can enjoy myself as I please in the Buddha Land.”*

Like the word “happiness,” the phrase “right away” has become so familiar to the ears that many people in our sangha have forgotten its true value. Was it just meant to fulfill the preferred taste of “instant noodles” of modern day? The teachings of the Buddha transcend time, if we cannot eat them right away in this moment, then we will never be able to taste them. *Now or never!*

I was planning to reserve Friday evening to find the last few pieces of information for my article. I felt partly pressured, partly relaxed. I went to the online temple, “the Country of the Present Moment,” ([plumvillage.org](http://plumvillage.org)) to look for Thay’s calligraphy but none seemed satisfactory. There must be good ideas I could pick from the storage of Thay’s Dharma talks; but it was so vast, how could I locate them?

Wandering around, I coincidentally came across an article by Br. Minh Hy sharing about something Thay taught:

*“The first fruit of the Plum Village practice ‘I have arrived, I am home’ is a little different from the fruit of the traditional practice ‘Stream-enterer.’ With ‘Stream-enterer’, one still has to continue going, whereas with ‘I have arrived, I am home,’ one no longer needs to search for anything more. ‘No need to search further’ (Người chẳng tìm cầu chi nữa) – this is a very good phrase; we need to write it down. It would be a pity if we lose it. Whoever has realized this fruit of the practice, looking at them we would know right away; no need for them to say anything.”*

The entire parallel verses were as follows:

*Tịnh độ nơi đây thích ý rong chơi người chẳng tìm cầu chi nữa.  
Bản môn bây giờ phi lòng an trú ta há theo đuổi gì thêm.*

*The Pure Land is here, roam as you wish; no need to search further.*

*The ultimate dimension is now, dwell here to your heart’s content; no need to pursue anything more.*

I was not sure which meditation hall they were in. Unable to find the calligraphy I needed, I was about to give up. It probably doesn’t really matter whether the article has calligraphy or not. The computer room was empty, except for one younger brother watching a recording of an evening of meditative music. There are many kinds of entertainment in Plum Village. These evenings of meditative music are of the highest quality, because more has been invested in the content of each performance. My computer had no speakers and the headphone jack was broken, so I watched a small segment from his computer. He told me that the entire evening only had one short story which was read in several parts weaving in between pieces of music. It turned out, Thay had a short story, called “The Tale of a River” (Câu chuyện của dòng sông):

*“During the night, the river went back to herself. She could not sleep. She listened to her own cries, the lapping of the water against the shore. This was the first time she had ever listened deeply to herself, and in doing so, she discovered something very important: her water was made of clouds. She had been chasing after clouds and she did not know that clouds were her own nature. The river realized that the object of her search was within her. She touched peace. Suddenly she could stop. She no longer felt the need to run after something outside herself. She was already what she wanted to become. The peace she experienced was truly gratifying and brought her a deep rest, a deep sleep.”*

When we chase after an object, wanting to grasp it, we will suffer. When we do not have anything to pursue, we will also suffer. If you have been a river, if you have ever chased after a cloud and suffered, lamenting because you felt lonely, please take hold of your own hand like you are holding the hand of a friend. Contemplating deeply, you will see that the thing you are looking for has been here all this time, that is yourself! You are already what you want to become.

It was still a story of the seeker and the thing being sought. “Who seeks, yet who attains?” Looking for a quiet place, I took my hammock and a few books with me: *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, *The Sun My Heart*, *Fragrant Palm Leaves...* to review the most distilled insight of Thay’s early teachings that I had marked for my article.

*“[We] are used to living in birth-and-death, and [we] forget about no-birth-and-no-death. A wave also lives the life of water, and we also live the life of no-birth-no-death. We only need to know that we are living the life of no-birth-no-death. All is in the word ‘know.’ To know is to realize. Realization is mindfulness. All the work of meditation is aimed at awakening us in order to know one and only one thing: birth and death can never touch us in any way whatsoever.”*

—from *The Sun My Heart*

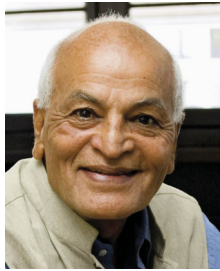
Closing the book, I looked up and saw in the large glass door a reflection of myself lying in the hammock under the eaves; my back turned toward the sunlight, blending colors for the hills to be green and floating swirls of clouds white. Leaves were falling everywhere as I hung in midair. The lofty white clouds were beautiful; surely somewhere there was a river holding onto the clouds in its heart and yet was still restless. The reflection of the clouds drifted by; someone’s small calligraphy behind the glass door in the room caught my sight: “What more are we looking for? This is it!” (Ta còn tìm cầu chi nữa? This is it!) Right there, that’s it! ☸



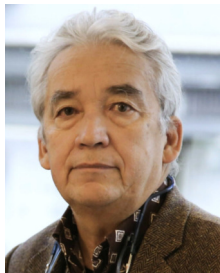
# Resilience, Community and Spirituality

SATISH KUMAR, THỌ HÀ VĨNH AND REHENA HARILALL

The following is an excerpt of the panel conversation on the theme of Resilience, Community, and Spirituality that took place in June 2023, during the “Love is Freedom” Earth Holder Retreat. Our three panelists were:



**Satish Kumar** is the founder of Schumacher College for ecological studies. In 1962 he went on a peace walk of over 8,000 miles for two and a half years, from New Delhi to Moscow, Paris, London, and Washington, D.C. He is the author of the recently published book, titled *Radical Love*.



**Tho Ha Vinh** received the Dharma lamp transmission from Thay in 2001. He was the former program director of Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Center and is the author of the book, titled *A Culture of Happiness*.



**Rehena Harilall** joined the Order of Interbeing in 2016. She is a member of the Heart of London sangha and Colors of Compassion sangha, and actively brings racial justice and climate justice together. She founded “Buddhists across Traditions,” a BIPOC-centered collective in the UK in 2019.



**Sr. Lang Nghiem (facilitator):** In our current global state, there is much despair, anger, blame, and disappointment. How do you continue to act from a place of love?

**Satish Kumar:** First of all, I always ask, what is the impact of anger, blame, fear, anxiety on myself? If I'm angry with someone, what is the impact on myself? Acknowledging that it makes my whole being upset, uncomfortable and unhappy, I can ask, is that what I want to choose?

Love begins with loving yourself, to be your true self, recognizing yourself as a spiritual being, capable of loving. Loving yourself is not egoistic, but the starting point to learn to protect yourself. In my childhood, I was a Jain monk for nine years. Everyday, I trained to look at the world with a positive mind, to see how I can serve the world, and to learn to handle feelings of anger, fear, doubt and a judgemental mind.

I recently wrote a book, titled *Radical Love*. There are two kinds of love: moderate love and radical love. Moderate love is to love somebody who loves you back, and with whom you agree. That's a good love and necessary, but radical love goes a step further. Radical love is unconditional — you love without expecting anything in return. I love, because love is the right way to follow. Radical love is also unilateral, you love even those who don't love you back, or you don't agree with, even those you dislike.

It was a great privilege and honor for me to meet Martin Luther King, Jr. when I was walking from India to America. He told me, “I am against racism, I am against injustice, but I don't hate anyone.” He said hate is too heavy a burden to carry, because anger comes and goes, but hatred lingers. When I saw that a man, who was such a great radical activist, fighting against injustice and racial discrimination, could still be an embodiment of love; that was a great example for me. From then on, I started to practice radical love. Hatred, anger and fear have created wars. We had an Afghanistan war, an Iraq war, a Vietnam War, the first and second World War all based on hatred. We have institutionalized hatred.

I think we have to find our way and answer in love, and learn to love even people you may not like. Hatred cannot transform. Hatred can kill, but love can transform.



Hatred starts when you see others as separate from you, but we are not separate, we are all “inter-beings.” There is no separation between humans and nature, between Buddhists and Christians, between blacks and whites, women and men, old and young, past and present. It’s all a continuum. It’s all relationship. Recognizing that eternal truth, we can follow the path of love.

**Sr. Lang Nghiem:** How do you prevent yourself from falling into anger, despair, blame or hatred?

**Rehena Harilall:** I think I can’t prevent anger. It is an emotion that arises and falls away. My journey started off as an activist, who fought for justice from a place of anger. Practicing mindfulness, I saw that anger can be a source of wisdom, helping me discern what is being activated in my body. What is causing me to react in this way?

Thay talks about taking care of anger. What is the impact if I respond with this type of emotion? Am I perpetuating the same energy of division, anger, and hatred that someone else has acted on me? We can practice loving, like a little muscle. If we practice every day, it increases. Mindfulness helps me to listen to who I am, to see who I am, to understand who I am. Love comes from understanding.

The journey to love outside is also the journey inside. Suppose there is a person whose views are the most diametrically opposed to mine. That person is still a human being, who is connected to me, whose life has shaped their suffering and experience, who is trying to do things in a way that they believe is the right way. I like to see and separate an action from an individual, because we all have anger, and also the capacity to love and to be compassionate. The important thing is, what do I do every day to increase my compassion and joy, to open my heart to everyone? I think to love is to be in service. If compassion is overflowing, if it comes with the right intention, there is no compassion fatigue.

**Sr. Lang Nghiem:** Thank you for explaining how you practice with anger. When we act from a place of love, rather than anger, we in fact process the anger; when we acknowledge it, when we don’t suppress it, it becomes the source of our love and compassion. Tho, what sustains you, and what keeps you from engagement fatigue?



**Tho Ha Vinh:** The Four Noble Truths can be our starting point. The root cause of suffering is separation. Thay has emphasized inter-being as the core of his teaching.

Satish explained beautifully how true, radical love is unconditional—it is not just an emotion, or a matter of preference. If we touch what is the deepest in us, our fundamental humanity or spirit, then we can also become aware that it’s present in every single other being that we meet, human beings and all other life forms. When you truly love, you become one with the object of your love, overcoming duality and separation, and transforming loneliness.

Love needs to be based on understanding. Rehena described it beautifully. Even someone whose ideas, perceptions or viewpoints are radically different from mine, if I make the effort to understand them, there is no duality, no feeling of antipathy, anger, etc. What sustains me in being engaged without engagement fatigue is the deep conviction of the non-duality between what lives in me and in the world.

It’s easy to blame economic or political systems. However these systems are but an expression of our collective consciousness; the way we as humans think, feel, act and relate. This is why, by transforming our own consciousness, however modest, we can help transform those systems. Mindfulness empowers us to develop kindness, compassion, generosity and inclusiveness, giving us tremendous strength.

**Sr. Lang Nghiem:** Some activists have doubts about the role of spirituality in systems change. Where do you see the intersection between personal transformation and systems change?

**Satish Kumar:** At Schumacher College we say that inner transformation and outer transformation are two sides of the same coin. You cannot have outer transformation, systems change, political change, economic change or social justice without inner transformation, namely cultivating qualities like compassion, love, kindness, generosity and understanding.

There's no duality. When we cultivate that cosmic mind, we start to think of the whole cosmos as my country, the whole Earth as my home. "Eco" means home. Humans are as much nature as trees, mountains and forests. Before I'm a Buddhist, Christian, or any other religion, love is my religion. When you have that kind of understanding, you can bring social justice, build equity, and work for economic justice. There's no separation between me and the world. Therefore, changing the world and changing myself are two aspects of one single reality.

**Rehena Harilall:** I grew up in apartheid South Africa. From the time I was four years old, my entire life was focused on social justice. I learned that as activists, we need to look at the energy we are bringing. Are we using the same energy that has been used to create the suppression, the separation, to change the systems outside of ourselves? If so, we are just replacing one system with another, we're not really changing anything, because there is still an attachment to my view as being the right view, the only view, and the dominant view. Recognizing this has been most important in my own activist career.

Coming to this tradition has helped me understand that I was clinging to my ego, that I thought getting it my way is the right way. I have learnt to relinquish some of that. When we are engaging in systems social change, we're doing it in a way that is compassionate, rather than destructive. Part of changing a system is to create a working alternative, with the right energy and intention.

Despair comes from thinking, "Nothing I'm doing is making a difference. This is inevitable." In fact, every little bit actually makes a difference. Every breath, every step, every action does make a difference. Realizing this generates hope, because there is always something I can do directly in the present moment.

**Sr. Lang Nghiem:** While bringing the ethical component into new narratives, have you met with resistance and how do you navigate around that?

**Satish Kumar:** Crucially, inner transformation also includes changing our world view. At the moment, our world view is that humans are above nature. Therefore, we can do to nature what we like and as we like. Nature is considered only a resource for the economy, it is only a means to an end. How we see nature is an ethical question. We need to be prepared to change this worldview. Nature has its own sanctity. Nature is life itself. Our modern industrial, materialist worldview has not only changed nature into a resource for the economy, it has also changed humans into a resource for the economy. That world view has to change. Human dignity and integrity of nature is an essential part of a new ethical world view. The economy needs to be in the service of humanity and nature.

**Tho Ha Vinh:** The vast majority of conflicts have economic roots, the will for domination and power. We act now as if growth and wealth is the goal. But the economic system is just one of the subsystems in human society and should be serving the happiness and well-being of all human beings, and beyond that, of all life forms. So we need a reversal in narrative and refocus on the right goal. One way to express this is *happiness for all people and well-being for all life forms*. This is an ethical choice: What value do we put in the forefront: economic growth, competition, etc., or kindness, compassion and generosity? That's why I developed the Gross National Happiness program in Bhutan.

Systems change has three main dimensions. One is we need a new narrative that is putting the right values in the center. Second, we have to have little experiments that show that it is possible. For example, Plum Village is demonstrating that it's possible to live simply and happily. The monks and nuns don't have money, so it's not the richer, the better. For many people who come to Plum Village this is a life-changing experience, because they realize that it's feasible for a community to live in harmony, to live mindfully, to live compassionately. In the same spirit, we've created a lay community in Vietnam, called The Peaceful Bamboo Family, which is a lay community and includes people with disabilities. The third aspect is to change the system from within. This is what the Happy Schools project in Vietnam is trying to do, to transform the educational system from within.

**Sr. Lang Nghiem:** Could all of you offer us some words to fill our hearts with hope?

**Tho Ha Vinh:** My own three sources of happiness and well-being are to live in harmony with myself, with the people around me, and nature. It starts with giving myself enough time to practice mindfulness, compassion, and trying to live a life that is the manifestation of my deepest values and highest aspirations. That's the first pillar.

The second one is living in harmony with the people around me, beginning with my families and friends, making sure I spend enough time with them. I just had a weekend with all my children and grandchildren, celebrating my lovely wife's 70th birthday. Cultivating meaningful, kind, loving, and generous relationships with all the people whom I meet is the second source of happiness and well-being.

And thirdly, living in harmony with nature, taking enough time to be in nature, in the forest, in the mountains, in the woods or just in a little garden, if that's all we have.

**Rehena Harilall:** Hope is something that needs to be cultivated. Building my resilience is a sign of hope for me. I love dancing. I love music. So, it gives me great happiness to start the day with a dance and a song that gives me joy for the rest of the day. Emotions may come and go, but I can still remember how I started my day.

I try to be very aware of the intention behind my actions, because if I do an action with a mindset of acting without expecting to get a benefit for me, then I'm in service, because my action already has the spirit of unconditionality that I want to see in the world. That gives me active hope and joy.

When I am feeling despair, I go for a walk in nature. Sometimes I just lie on the ground and say, "Oh, just hold me." Feeling the connection with something larger than you are, puts so many things in perspective. Life continues, whether I'm here to reap the benefit of what I have done or not. In the Zulu tradition, when people die, they say "we kneel" because someone else can climb on our shoulders. When I transition on, when we all transition on, we've laid some foundation for someone else to stand on and continue the work, that gives me hope — there is a continuation.

**Satish Kumar:** I became an activist at age 18 by joining the Gandhian movement and Vinoba Bhave. Now I'm 86 years old, and I want to remain an activist until the last breath of my life. To be an activist, you have to be an optimist. Pessimism does not lead to activism. Whether the world changes or not is not in my control, but action is in my control. I act out of love, out of compassion, out of kindness, and out of my responsibility. So, I'm an optimist. I have active hope. I act every day in the service of humanity, of planet Earth, and this for my own fulfillment and joy, because they're all interconnected. ☪



# My Path to Wake Up Schools

JOOST VRIENS



*Joost Vriens (Dharma name is Attentive Mountain of the Heart) lives in Eindhoven, Netherlands. He was a teacher at a secondary vocational school for 40 years. He supports Wake Up Schools and is a co-founder of a Dutch online Education Sangha. He also writes a weekly blog for the NIVOZ about the connection between mindfulness and being a teacher.*

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## When reality hits

When I took my first steps into the classroom in 1982, I was a 22-year-old teacher of religion, idealistic, full of expectations and driven. But the reality was not heaven, but a learning environment. The school system I stepped into was in essence a delivery system. I talk, you listen. I know, you accept. There was such a strong conditioning that the students, even as adults or adolescents, were afraid to share, give, or express themselves.

My school was a vocational secondary school with students aged 17-23. They were going to work with disabled people, in childcare, youth care or education. It is a very transformational period, because they have to learn how to apply their knowledge, to grow from knowing to being. They are faced with an important question: What kind of professional helper of others do I want to become? So it is a very personal journey.

After a few years of teaching I started noticing something. The students not only silenced themselves out of habit, but also because the schools and the teachers didn't listen to their hidden needs, their pains, their wounds. Then,

another insight lit up. The teachers, many times uncertain, stressed, also hid their real thoughts and emotions upon entering the school. After 15 years of struggling with the system, I felt lost. I felt like I was shrinking, I became more defensive, the fire of the young teacher was almost extinguished.

## Bells of mindfulness

Then one of my teachers, Sjef Bloemers, crossed my path. He was a psychiatric nurse with a lot of experience with (hidden) inner processes. I was by then an experienced teacher and could express how alienating and insular the teaching culture of the school was. He in turn taught me how to observe, understand, and connect. We were such a good team that the school offered us the opportunity to outline a new curriculum. We were lucky, the windows were open to the winds of a new approach.

The challenge was to transform the talking teacher into a listening, supporting coach. There was no existing protocol for that, neither for the students nor for the teachers. And that was a blessing. Our main task as teachers was to encourage students in a group to take the lead, to become aware of their own learning process, and to wake up to their potential. Sjef and I also started to share our personal histories with each other and with our students in the classrooms.

After six years, the wind changed again and became conservative. Our experiment had to stop and the angry warrior in me woke up again. Then somebody gave me a small booklet by Thay, called *The Long Road Turns to Joy*, about walking meditation. Slowly, slowly my eyes opened and I started looking inside myself. "Why are you so angry?" Sjef asked me this question once. He said, "You can explain Freud to those young people in such a way that they understand it. But the real practice is: How do you apply this process to your own behavior?" That was a very strong bell of mindfulness. I can still hear it within me.

During that period, there was an even stronger bell of mindfulness. Sjef became seriously ill with prostate cancer and I had to take over his duties. Six months later, I also walked out of hospital with a

challenging diagnosis—pancreatic cancer. An intense treatment process followed. I survived this health crisis because I was able to listen to my body. Once, to keep me alive, they gave me a life threatening medicine. One morning, I woke up at 5 AM with a strange feeling in my belly and one thought: *I must stop this medicine*. It felt like the only place left in my body was a small circle around my belly button. Four doctors didn't believe me, the fifth doctor was a young woman who would listen. She consulted her mentor and they decided that they should listen to this patient that listens to his body. The next morning, the blood results showed that I was right about the danger of the medicine.

### **In the sharing is the learning**

I joined a small Plum Village sangha in Eindhoven. I looked at the facilitators and I noticed that they chose themes from the practice of Plum Village that they themselves were working with. To teach is also to work on yourself. Then I had enough courage to step forward and became a facilitator myself. That was a form of coming home to myself. After a while, I noticed that I became freer and more grounded in my work as a teacher/coach. During those sangha meetings I found my own voice. The lesson I learned was “*In the sharing is the learning*.”

“*To teach is also to work on yourself.*”

As I deepened my practice in the sangha, I noticed that if I was not open and vulnerable during Dharma sharing, the Dharma sharing was quiet and superficial. If I was open, accepted the pain and my not-knowing, the sharing was rich and deep. A similar understanding of the school system grew in me. The students could not be vulnerable because the teachers and the system were not. During that time I also started to see that my students were submerged in a mindset of “I am not good enough.” I became curious about the internal processes of the students, how they were struggling with themselves, society, and the wounds they had. I then started to share my own growth process with them.

### **An intergenerational buddy system**

I also started working with a very bright, talented young teacher, Ingrid. She was 28. I was 61. It was a very nourishing cooperation. She was very grateful for my experience and ability to look deeply into a situation. I loved her because of her strong questions, her vigor. She was very straightforward and open with her students, a sort of a peaceful



warrior. We had very deep discussions of what was the best next step for a student. One day, early in the morning, we met with a student. The day before she had had a chat with both of us. We both gave her, independent from each other, the same advice. She wanted to check if we had planned that. We hadn't and felt very touched knowing this.

Perhaps we can have “an intergenerational buddy system” in schools where a younger teacher is paired with an older teacher to support each other's waking up.

The next step on my path was bringing mindfulness into the classroom. I felt I was ready for this, but the students were not. The classroom was not a safe place. The school was not a safe place. The school was not ready for it yet. Most of the teachers were not ready for it yet. I continued the struggle, because I remembered Thay who was so diligent in pushing boundaries and transformed obstacles into deep practical insights.

### **A gift from the universe**

Well timed, Wake Up Schools stepped into my path. Somebody gave me the book *Happy Teachers Change the World* and Richard Brady's very inspiring *Walking the Teacher's Path with Mindfulness*. I also followed a teacher's retreat with Tineke Spruytenburg and Miles Dunmore. I used the practices in the book and

combined them with my own insights. While reflecting on my path of waking up as a teacher, the word “vulnerability” was very often there. Basho’s frog<sup>11</sup> was finally jumping into the pond.

One day the universe sent me a gift. The gift was a young male student who was facing deep personal difficulties. I shared with him that I saw his suffering and was available for a chat. Three months later, he suddenly stood at my door and wanted to take a walk with me. He shared something very personal with me and was very vulnerable. I was deeply touched. He told me he was able to share because I had shared so openly about my illness, my doubts and about the challenges in the school system. That sharing changed his life and mine.

### **Vulnerability as a way of being**

Looking back on this small but important encounter, there were two things that I learned. First, vulnerability is not a skill, not a trick, but a way of being. I “teach” this way of being to my students. Second, just like Master Linji, sometimes the host (teacher) becomes the guest (student) and the guest the host. My students also teach me something. From that moment on I stepped into the classroom with curiosity: What am I going to learn from them today? The core of my practice had been mirrored back to me by a vulnerable young man. Being a teacher became a joy.

With the students and teachers, I felt like I had become an artist, not literally, but metaphorically. I could feel the energy shifting in me, in the students, in the school. A bridge between the ultimate and historical dimension had manifested.

### **A new blend of the warrior, the meditator and the artist**

In 2022, Baltus van Laatum invited me to join him in founding an online Educators Sangha in the Netherlands. During our first session, I felt like I had come home. Something deep inside was opening up. At first, people came to the online sangha because they were searching for mindfulness curricula, but we did not provide that. However, some decided to stay even though it was stressful and new to look at themselves. They felt vulnerable but they made steps forward. For them the safety was provided because everybody present was familiar with the situations and the challenges of being a professional teacher.

So our approach was to listen first, then offer questions. What kind of a teacher do you want to be and why? Are you happy with where you are now? What do you need? Can you see the causes and conditions? A teacher who can listen to another teacher is a very good contribution, because this person knows when you are stepping out of being yourself and falling into the trap of meeting expectations. Realizing the importance of exchange between teachers (and between teachers and students), I became a new blend of the warrior, the meditator and the artist.

### **Time for a new path**

One morning, while walking to the school, I felt muscle pain in my back. Listening to its message, I understood that it was time to step onto another path. A voice within said, “You can be of more value within the community of Wake Up Schools. There you can give voice to the teacher’s insight and make a bridge to the practice.”

When I was at the Educators’ retreat in Plum Village in August 2023, I was a panelist during one of the sessions. Suddenly the two worlds connected, the monastic energy intertwined with the presence of teachers, in conversation. I looked at all those teachers that were looking at us and I saw their potential. They were filled to the brim with insights, practices, and questions. How to wake up that potential? How to light this fire? How to connect with all these potential Buddhas?

### **Going forward**

Exchange and connection are what the education field and the Wake Up Schools community need most at this moment. My wish is that when teachers come to a retreat, we help the teachers to arrive at their own insight. The retreat can be more than just coming to receive teachings and practices. To do this, we would need facilitators that are able to inspire and create a safe and open ground so that teachers can ask deep questions, express their needs, their experience, and come to their own insights into how they can help each other. We could start with deep listening sessions, energized by questions like: What kind of teacher do you want to become? We could also choose to focus on one challenging situation that one might face within the typical ‘education’ system. We would collectively identify and understand what is needed there to help the situation. This can be a practice in vulnerability (which is difficult at school) and in

11. A reference to Basho’s Haiku *Frog in the pond*: “The old pond; A frog jumps in—The sound of the water.” Translated by R.H. Blyth

offering and accepting support from a colleague-practitioner. Then the next step in the retreat would be connecting these needs and insights with an applied mindfulness practice. We can also create a support system for each other that will continue outside of the retreat. This way, Sangha and practice become a learning circle.

The image that keeps coming up in me is the teahouse in Upper Hamlet, where many conversations happened during the program breaks. I saw the light of connection there, the space to talk about visions and systems (of different types) and then people shared about themselves. My question would be: How would one manifest that light of energy and wakefulness into space, words and forms? ☞



# Plum Village and Our Art of Saving the Planet

BROTHER CHÂN TRỜI ĐỨC NIỆM

*The first of its kind in extent and content hosted by Plum Village, the 7-week online course “Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet” (ZASP) was curated in 2022 and later launched publicly in October 2023. Brother Troi Duc Niem was one of the monastics who participated in the course along with approximately 1,600 lay participants from nearly 50 countries on six continents.*

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I remember one moment during my first summer retreat in Plum Village in 2013 very clearly: Thay shared in a Q&A session that “Maybe in 100 years there will be no more humans on this planet if we continue to live like we do now.” I was deeply impressed – not only by the clarity with which he described this reality, but especially by the way he said it. Thay radiated such peace, lightness and calmness when he spoke out this heavy truth, it had a deep and lasting impact on me. In my heart, an aspiration was born in that moment: I also want to cultivate and embody such peace and equanimity so that I can remain peaceful and compassionate even when the world seems to fall apart around me.

One big question and koan for me is: How can I and we have deep peace inside while not closing our eyes to the unprecedented suffering from a climate breakdown that is unfolding around us?



In recent years, the wish in my heart to help save the planet has manifested in very concrete and beautiful ways: Plum Village now offers the Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet (ZASP) online course and climate retreats on a regular basis (the next ZASP course will start in March 2024).

In this article, I would like to share about my own experience in joining the ZASP course, explore how it has started, and how it has supported people and groups in the climate community. We will hear feedback from ZASP participants and will reflect on the role and contribution of Plum Village in the climate movement and what teachings have been effective in this area.

To explore these questions, I interviewed Sr. Hien Nghiem (Sr. True Dedication) and Jo Confino, who are quoted throughout this article.

### A new way of seeing

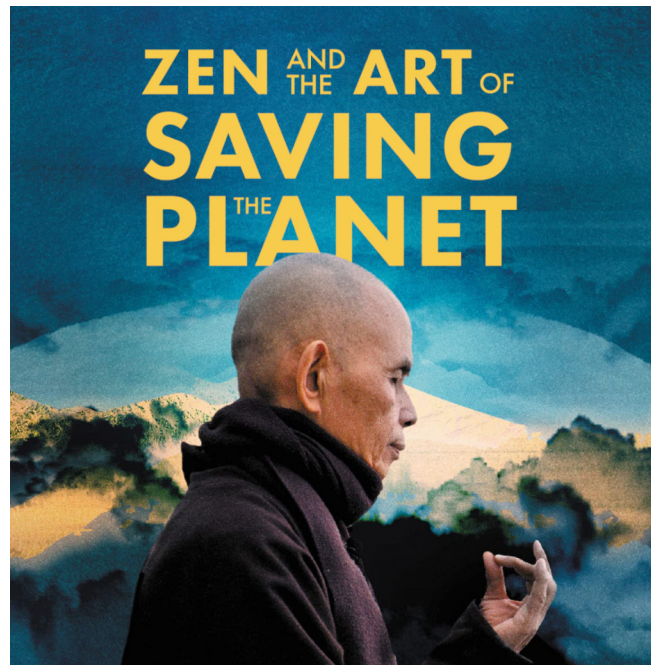
The scientists say it very clearly: We as humanity have only a few more years left to stay below 1.5°C in order to avoid catastrophic climate breakdown and destabilization of the fragile balance of our biosystems. This means we need to radically change our ways of living. Reading about the state of our planet and the big challenges we face have caused quite a lot of fear and despair in me. Listening to the videos of the ZASP course has helped me to have more hope, clarity and to see the situation with new eyes. This is also one of the core messages at the beginning of the course — we hear Thay speak at the House of Lords in London in 2012:

*“It is my conviction that we cannot change the world if we are not capable of changing our way of thinking, our consciousness. That is why awakening, collective change in our way of thinking and seeing things, is very crucial. And that is why learning to change our way of daily living so that there is more mindfulness, more peace, more love is very urgent and we can do that now, today.”*

I got a better sense why changing our way of seeing things is so important in our pursuit of saving the planet. I also notice that we should be careful of thinking in terms of pursuing a goal, *even if the goal is to protect Mother Earth*. In the welcome video, Sr. Hien Nghiem reminds and invites us to approach this course with a spirit of aimlessness (letting go of results/expectations). Right from the beginning, the online retreatants are being exposed to what we sometimes call the deeper teachings of Buddhism. This makes the course very enriching for both long-term practitioners and those who are completely new to the practice. So the question that came up for me was about how this special new course actually manifested.

### Q: How was the idea of the Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet (ZASP) online course born?

**Sr. Hien Nghiem:** *After the pandemic, we saw the potential of people to have a meaningful practice at home and to really transform in the online retreats, and also for us to reach a new audience. When we started seeing people from Mongolia and South Africa and Asian countries, we realized that there are just so many people who will never be able to come to Plum Village, but they*



would also like to touch the Dharma. When Plum Village started reopening in 2023, we saw how hard it is to do both online and in-person retreats at the same time.

So we wanted to experiment with a course that would be something that can allow us to serve this wider population while also hosting lots of in-person retreats in Plum Village. In that way, realizing Thay’s vision of the online monastery with a slightly different model. We asked ourselves how we can offer deep Dharma journeys online? I think what’s really important about ZASP is that we wanted to make a slightly longer journey. One reason to do that is because Thay’s Earth teachings are so powerful and so deep that they actually require a certain amount of time and practice to absorb and to apply. So with the course, we want to equip a new generation, in particular young and engaged people, with these insights so that it can inform their work wherever they are in the world. We also had the support and experience of Christiana Figueres (one of the main architects of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement and student of Thay) in designing the course for it to be really pegged and appropriate to the climate movement.

### Touching stillness and the wonders of life

I have not been involved in creating the ZASP course, so autumn 2023 was my first time of seeing and experiencing the course. What struck me immediately at the beginning was the beauty and elegance of the beginning of each video: scenes of majestic mountains with snow, green bamboo swaying in the wind and the gentle rising of the sea that flowed harmoniously with the beautiful sounds of the violin and cello. It helped me to instantly



touch stillness, peace and the wonders of life – the bells of mindfulness of Mother Earth that are calling us to stop and look deeply.

Another thing I noticed was the high quality of the videos and short teachings by the various Dharma teachers – they went straight to the heart of the matter, sharing concisely and concretely relevant insights and practices with vivid examples from their own lives. One video that directly spoke to me was when Br. Phap Dung shared about the meditator, the artist and the warrior and how we can cultivate these energies in our lives. I realized that it would be beneficial for me to allow the artist in me to manifest more, e. g. by playing music sometimes, so that the creative and joyful side of me can flourish more and balance the more serious analytical mind of mine.

**Q: What insights did the curating team have while they were creating the ZASP course?**

**Sr. Hien Nghiem:** *I think that our shared insight gave us the courage to offer deep Dharma right away. In the course, already in week two we go into the end of civilization and the Diamond Sutra and so on, because we had a lot of faith in people’s courage to touch the deeper Dharma. Thay was also committed to sharing the deepest teachings on no birth and no death in every retreat and I feel that it’s really important to continue that legacy to offer not simply mindfulness practice just to cope with strong feelings but the deep insights that help us transform the feelings.*

**Transformative journey**

The feedback we received from the course participants, showed how transformative the journey was for many of them and how they were able to touch deep insights within themselves:

*“Only non-violence can cure violence – to myself, to my relationship with family, also hopefully to countries and to the world! The strongest thing in the world are not any weapons, but our heart.”*

–China

*“As some parts of my body are hurting, there are other parts that are not hurting, and that actually feels pleasant. It is the same with nature, and with all social movements. There are moments of despair, but in other parts of the world, there is hope, commitment and activism to make the planet a better place. I learned that both tensions are part of the same coin.”*

–Colombia



*“This course was a profound and extraordinary experience for me. For years I have been teaching, engaging my students in social activism... This course helped me to realize that I was pursuing dreams and a radical awakening without being awakened myself... I am not sure I have ever been so excited by a course and the invitation for change inherent in the teachings... The talks were personal, challenging, soft-natured, evoking curiosity and openness. The online presence of the monastics and lay dharma teachers became a comfort day after day, week after week.”*

–USA

I experienced one transformation happening in regard to fear. In week two, Thay teaches that in order to overcome fear we must be courageous to face the potential end of our civilization. I found this video of Thay to be extremely powerful and I was happy that I could pause at certain moments and watch the video in my own time to really allow the tough truth to sink in.

I have been practicing the Five Remembrances regularly and it has helped me to be more at peace with this unsettling prospect of a potential breakdown of our societies and the ecosystems. It feels less scary and I am not too overwhelmed by the thought of it and the underlying fear anymore. I feel a new sense of freedom and clarity emerging.

In my Dharma sharing group of ZASP, the other participants have shared similar things. The teachings and meditations have helped them to change their way of life, reset their priorities, understand more about their relationships and the importance of taking care of their body. Already in

the first session we had a very beautiful and deep sharing even though we were all complete strangers to each other. Over the seven weeks a strong connection manifested and my group continues to meet even after the end of the course.

**Q: What do you see as the role and contribution of Plum Village in the climate movement and in helping to save the planet?**

**Sr. Hien Nghiem:** I remember one time when Christiana Figueres was here and I asked her: "How can we support you?" And she said: "You just need to keep Plum Village going. Because the climate movement needs a place of spiritual refuge, we lack a place where we can take care of ourselves and take care of each other and touch deep healing and peace." So primarily, what we offer in Plum Village is spiritual sanctuary, a sort of wide-eyed, brave, fearless, deep-seeing spiritual sanctuary. And that means that as a community, we also need to stay well-informed about the climate to understand the situation. So when we are with the activists, researchers, and policymakers, we can offer real deep understanding of their pain and struggle, and bring the Dharma to embrace that suffering. I think that's really our primary role.

**Jo Confino:** I think the most important thing is that most people in the climate movement are trying to change technology, trying to change policy, but they are doing everything outside of themselves and they're not doing any inner work or seeing really the transformational value of inner work to drive outer transformation. I see that many, many people in the environmental sustainability movement are burning out, they are feeling powerless, they are feeling an urgency of time. They're trying to convince people of the need to change. All of it is a bit like pushing a very big rock up a very steep mountain. It feels like too much to do, that the weight is on their shoulders. They can't get the change at the speed that's necessary. They are experiencing so much grief and a feeling that they can't win, there is a sense of existential personal crisis in it. So I think that's the problem that's being faced.

And now, Thay and Plum Village is coming along and offering balm to all those wounds and showing that actually the best way to be effective in the world is to slow down, and offering simple practical practices that allows people to embrace their suffering and to find a pathway through. In their rush and their panic to create change, they lose connection to their center and they feel strung out, literally strung out. So the first thing the retreat in Plum Village does is to allow them to spend time together

and relax their bodies and minds to the point where they can start to have new insights. They realize how important it is to come back to a place of calm and centeredness, that actually that is where their power and energy lies. A lot of them talk about the importance of regeneration but they have not seen the value of regeneration for themselves. The other thing that Plum Village is doing is creating a sense of community in these practices. So when they're going to meetings like the COP talks they are arranging times to sit in meditation, times for walking, and that it's giving them new ways to see the world, new ways to act in the world, and new ways to find togetherness.



Vulture Peak, India, 2008, Photo Courtesy by Börje Tobiasson

What Jo Confino is sharing resonates with me very much. When they came to the climate retreat at Plum Village, I also sensed that there is so much pressure and stress on the people in the climate community who are on the front line of saving the planet. For the young activists in particular, I feel a great deal of sympathy and admiration for their courage to speak truth to power and to not give up on helping the world to wake up. Seeing their pains and struggles touches my heart of compassion and I am very grateful that we as Plum Village have found concrete ways to support them and other changemakers with ZASP and the climate retreats.

**Q: How have the climate retreats manifested and why are they important?**

**Sr. Hien Nghiem:** I think one reason why these retreats are really important for our community to do is because Thay is considered a leading voice for climate spirituality and the Dharma. His Dharma has really inspired so many climate researchers, climate policymakers, climate leaders. So we have a sort of responsibility to keep Thay's Dharma body alive for them. And I think it's important to Plum Village, because Thay is one of the very few spiritual leaders that is offering real practices and insights that apply to the climate problem.

We're all working at the forefront of the climate emergency. And so it feels very important to be able to do our best to support them.

**Q: Which teachings of Thay have proven to be effective for people in the climate movement?**

**Jo Confino:** One teaching that has really helped people is the teaching on ripening. A lot of people in the climate movement can feel sort of growing anger or despair or hopelessness because they're taking action but they're not seeing the result of that. People have really recognized the depth of the teaching, that we can't determine the timing of when a change can happen, but we can make a contribution. It gives people a sense of ease. The second teaching that I think is really helpful is Thay's teaching of the ultimate and the historical dimension and a sense of letting go. They realize that letting go of the outcome doesn't mean you stop caring, it doesn't mean you stop putting in the effort, it actually frees you to put in the effort without the need for what success or failure looks like. It's not about whether they have succeeded or failed, but that they are part of a continuation and they are doing their best to support living beings on this planet.

**Sr. Hien Nghiem:** It turns out that some of the people leading the exclusion of fossil fuels in the last COP-28 text had been to one of our climate retreats at Plum Village. So all the courage to persist and to endure and that faith and idealism to do that new thing came from people who've been in Plum Village, who then help each other. Some of them said it has really helped shift the landscape at the COP because there's basically now a body of people who know how to breathe together, touch their idealism, presence and solidarity and that's starting to actually affect the very mechanics of the COP.

I have attended two Zoom sessions with a group of them while they were at COP. Some of them met every day to sit and breathe together. They have shared that the Sangha they had at COP and knowing that they are part of a larger global Sangha have made all the difference. Hearing this gives me a lot of hope and trust.

**Touching peace and acceptance**

I still keep the question and koan in my heart about how can we have deep peace inside while not closing our eyes from and being overwhelmed by the suffering of the planet and its many crises. The engagement with the topic and ZASP help me see an answer that is slowly emerging: By taking care of my body, feelings and mind in this present moment, by being aware of the impermanent nature of myself and our civilization, and allowing the suffering in myself and in the world to be embraced by the love and compassion in my heart, I can touch peace and acceptance. Being in touch with the beauty of Mother Earth and hearing the birds still singing nourish my heart. However, if I do not act, I will experience what scientists call cognitive dissonance, a feeling of unease because there is a big gap between what we know and what we do – or as Thay says: *Insight needs to be followed by action*. So only when I am able to contribute something concretely to saving the planet – like by supporting the climate movement by offering the ZASP course or climate retreats – can I be fully at peace, because I know in my heart that we have done our part. ☸



# Greeting the Dawn

INTERVIEW WITH THE DAFFODIL ORDINATION FAMILY

On 5 November 2023, ten young people shed their hair to become novice monks and nuns of the Daffodil ordination family in Plum Village France. The editorial team had a chance to interview them after their ordination to learn about their journeys, transformations, challenges, and aspirations.

**Editorial team:** Could you share with us how you came to realize, “This is it! This is the path that I have been looking for?”

**Br. Nhat Nguyen (True Source of Oneness):** When I found Thay and started to meditate — that was one and a half years before I first came to Plum Village — I quickly enjoyed the benefits of meditation, finding calm in my body. In the book, *You Are Here*, Thay explains interbeing, and I immediately felt it was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard. Those two made me feel I found my path in life, a big bright path for me!

Before, I had never felt like having a clear path. I often acted out of fear and stress, trying to survive in the world. But this path was just there for me to walk very calmly and joyfully. The feeling was very much one of letting go of fear. Deciding to become a monastic felt very light and freeing.

**Br. Nhat Moc (True Tree of Oneness):** To make a long story short; I read many of Thay’s books and I felt I wanted to become a monk, even though I had never been to Plum Village. I thought, even if Plum Village is only half as good as I think it is from reading the books, it’s still the place I want to become a monk at. So on the first day of being in Plum Village, I said, “I want to become a monk here. This is the place.”

**Editorial team:** We remember you approached one of us, (enthusiastically) “I wanna become a monk, how do I do it.” And we said: “OK. OK. Arrive first.” (laughter)





**Br. Nhat Thanh** (*True Clarity of Oneness*): In 2019/2020, I was a long-term at Healing Spring Monastery for nine months. Following that, I became a resident at a Tibetan meditation center in Belgium for two years (Les Jardins de Méditation

de Samyé). I came to Plum Village to volunteer for the 40th anniversary of Plum Village retreat, and have been staying at Upper Hamlet since then. I was in love with the Dharma and with Thay's teachings and presence, but becoming a monastic was not obvious to me yet. After attending the class for those with an aspiration to ordain and receiving encouragement from friends, I thought I could do it. Given my history of anxiety/fear and difficulty making commitments, I was at first a bit uneasy with the lifetime monastic commitment. However, after sharing more with some brothers, I felt more at ease.



**Br. Nhat Xuan** (*True Spring of Oneness*): One and a half years ago, I practiced in Plum Village as a long-term. Knowing Thay's teachings, I had already let go of many different things, e.g. relationships that were not conducive to

my well-being. I was only 20 years old at the time, and so saying I wanted to become a monk was quite a statement. It was also important for me that it be accepted by my family. When they came to visit me for my birthday in April, I allowed them to arrive first, then after one week I sat down with my mom to share that I wanted to become a monk. She was very happy saying, "Wow! This suits you so well." The same was true for my older brother. He looked at me and hugged me, saying "Wow! Wonderful." This was a big support, knowing that the people I love the most can support and encourage me.

While as an aspirant, I told myself, "Regardless of whether I get accepted or not, I want to become a monk." Knowing that I want to continue on the path strengthened my commitment. This was a beautiful moment.



**Sr. Don Hanh** (*True Kind Action; Sr. Don Hanh has come as a monastic from another Zen tradition*): When I was 20 years old, I was going through a difficult period in my life and, looking for something to help me rediscover my

inner balance, I found a meditation centre in the Japanese Soto Zen tradition in Madrid, my hometown. I remember very well the feeling of peace and joy I felt the first time I sat in zazen. Without having any idea of Buddhism or meditation, I felt somehow that I had finally found what could help me.

I continued to practice assiduously, going every day to the dojo and monthly retreats, and little by little I was able to reestablish an intimate connection with myself and find inner peace and happiness.

Somehow, I fell in love with the practice and the monastic aspiration came naturally. I had found good medicine for me and my greatest desire was to dedicate my life to continuing it and sharing it with all the people who might be going through difficult times in their lives.

I am very grateful to my former teachers in Madrid and in France, as well as to my Sangha, for nurturing the seeds of my monastic aspiration and supporting me on my Path.

**Editorial team:** But why Plum Village?

**Sr. Don Hanh:** Thay's teachings have accompanied me since I was a teenager through his books and Dharma talks, and have always touched my heart directly. They are clear, simple, beautiful and very deep, with concrete practices that respond to the real needs of our world.

On the other hand, because in my former tradition we were only three nuns (the founder of the monastery, the abbess and myself), I have been able to understand the importance of the Sangha and how precious it is. I knew that alone I couldn't really fulfill my aspiration to transform myself and to serve all beings.

For these two reasons, I decided to take refuge in the Plum Village tradition and... I am very happy!



**Sr. Dang Hanh** (*True Radiant Action*): I knew clearly for a long time that the practice was going to be a central part of my life. When I was living in New York, I decided that every year I wanted to spend the days around my birthday at

Blue Cliff Monastery. I had already read *Stepping into Freedom*, and even *Freedom Wherever We Go*. I was attracted to the idea of becoming a nun, but it was still very much an ideal.

After one of my birthdays at Blue Cliff, I remember sitting in the big meditation hall. I reached a place of deep calm and thought, “This is the moment when I can ask a clear question.” I invited Thay to sit with me and I asked, “Dear Thay, I have a happy dilemma. No matter what I choose, the practice will be there, as lay or monastic. But which one shall I choose?” Up until that point I had all these little doubts, e.g. Would I be able to let go of my music, my skirts, and belongings? What if I wanted to travel whenever I want? Would I be OK looking bald? Then there was this booming voice that said, “Darling, you’re focusing on the little doubts and not the great aspiration.” Thay was so clear that I immediately started crying. Relieved, I answered, “Yes, Thay.” Straight away I went to Sr. Gioi Nghiem to ask her how to become a nun.

In the ordination ceremony, when we were waiting to stand up and walk in procession to the altar, I told myself, “Let go of all doubts and step into freedom!” I knew I had wanted this for so long, to the extent that if I died today, I would be happy. I did my best. Everything else was beyond my control. Now there is no more incessant talking in the back of my head saying “Ohh, but...” It is very relieving.



**Br. Nhat Luong** (*True Refreshing Oneness*): The question of how I ended up in Plum Village is like a box full of surprises. Already as a young teenager — 20 years ago — I wanted to ordain. I first encountered a Chinese Zen

Master from the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in California. I was very impressed reading his books, but I couldn’t get a visa to enter the US.

So I went to a monastery in Malaysia. It was quite a difficult experience because the culture is so different and the style of Buddhism is very traditional, full of rituals and embellishments. I was a bit disappointed that I didn’t fit in and ended up going back home.

I then tried a monastery in Hong Kong in the mountains outside the city, where I spent three months. It was amazing, but I did not end up staying there either. Then I went to the Thai Forest Tradition in 2012 and ended up ordaining as a novice for four months. But again, I did not fit into the culture, and the way of practice seemed too rigid to me. At some point I could not sleep at night, I became depressed, and ended up leaving.

I took ten years to reevaluate, but even though I opened my mind to things besides Buddhism, the desire to ordain never disappeared. I have since made much more progress and relate to myself in a different way. When Thay passed away — without knowing it — I started crying in meditation, and I asked myself, “Why is this happening, who died?” Then I found out Thay had passed away. I eventually came to Plum Village for a retreat, thinking this could be a good place to ordain.



**Sr. Dieu Hanh** (*True Wondrous Action*): Seven years ago, I was lucky enough to discover Maison de L’Inspir, and often visited to practise. I also came to Plum Village, especially in the summer and for the Rains Retreat. I

don’t exactly know when the wish to ordain came up. I had the strong feeling inside of me that this is really a path that I want to follow, because it helped me so much.

I only saw Thay once in his physical form on my very first retreat. I’ve learned so much about the practice from the Sangha. I really feel the sangha is his continuation and that I would not have learned so much or be here without all the brothers and sisters practising and guiding me and all the love and support I receive.

Unfortunately, my parents are not supportive of me ordaining, and I know it is going to be difficult for them. I practice being patient. After listening deeply to myself it became clear that I would regret not having at least tried to be a nun. I was very happy at the ordination. It felt like a relief.



**Br. Nhat Van** (*True Cloud of Oneness*): Eleven years ago I had a strong event in my life that awakened me to spirituality. I attended my first spiritual retreat in Portugal. I was really impressed by the peaceful and loving environment,

and how much compassion and understanding the monks had to face all the challenges of daily life. I stayed connected to monastics in different projects, like volunteering to teach basic English to children, giving support in a kind of ecovillage, helping in a vegan restaurant at an event, and attending yoga and meditation sessions. I felt a strong spiritual calling. There were signs during my life that pointed to monastic life, showing me that this is a right choice. When I found Thay, I felt a lot of peace and the practice gave me a lot of joy and stability. I came knowing that I would enter monastic life, it was a step of trust. I'm very happy to be here.



**Br. Nhat Vu** (*True Rain of Oneness*): I had practiced and even taught mindfulness for a long time already, trying to help people who suffered from chronic pain in hospitals and also employees in companies.

Being totally on my own, I quickly got exhausted, because there was so much suffering. That is how I came to consider monastic life, in order to be part of a Sangha, experienced and deeply rooted, so that I could be stronger in the practice of love and understanding, develop joy and happiness and then be of a better support for more people.

**Editorial team:** There are people who feel that it's easy to take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, but not the Sangha. Community life is quite challenging, especially for those coming from the West. How is your experience of living with the Plum Village community? How is your experience of sharing rooms with many people?

**Br. Nhat Van:** I grew up in a boarding school, which hosted hundreds of children, from age ten and only coming home for weekends. I was sleeping in a dorm of around 30 to 100 children. So I'm used to wearing uniforms, short hair, fine manners, ceremonies and living together (laughter). I made strong friendships for life there; it taught me

brotherhood, sisterhood, and siblinghood. So sharing in a community is being at home completely for me and I am very happy living together.



**Br. Nhat Moc:** Sweden is considered very individualistic in the minds of most people. I had a nice apartment just for myself, was very happy with it, but also felt very lonely. So last year, before coming here, I decided to

live together with friends. Sharing rooms in Plum Village, I would sometimes appreciate having more space. I guess it will never be perfect. But one thing is for sure, this is much better than feeling lonely.

**Br. Nhat Thanh:** It was clear to me that sharing a room is not going to be easy, that it is going to be challenging. But there's also a strong sense that it's a condition for growth. I always try to keep this mindset, remembering that living together helps me improve my communication, helps me to learn to resolve conflicts, helps me to demand less from others.

On Days of Mindfulness, I sometimes feel overwhelmed by the amount of people present. I am learning to respect my limits and finding ways to be more spacious. We were asked in class how to take root in the Sangha. Do I want to have tea in every room, every day and get to know everyone? Or is it okay to let people approach me? I don't need to always take the first step.

**Sr. Don Hanh:** I treasure living together as a very important part of the practice, because it helps me to open my heart, understand my sisters' needs, and how to support each other. I am also learning to listen to myself, and to respect my limits. Especially on busy days in the summer, I have found going into the woods with my hammock to be most beautiful and refreshing. Oh, so good (laughter).

**Sr. Dang Hanh:** Ever since I was 11 years old, I've had my own room. What I know about myself is that I scan my surroundings, trying to look for ways that people might judge me, wondering "Am I doing a good enough job?" and "What are they thinking about me?" Being alone is one way that I protected myself. Coming into the Sangha has been a continual practice for me to transform this anxiety. It helps me to tell myself things like "Not everyone is interested in you and everything that you're

doing” or “People are quite busy with their own thoughts and don’t care that you are taking a nap or they do not care which book you are reading and they don’t have an opinion about which book you *should* be reading. They are busy reading their *own* book.” (Laughter) I’m surrounded by some of the kindest of people in the kindest of environments.



**Br. Nhat Nguyen:** As a child, I spent some time in a spiritual community and I think I always wanted to come back to that. Coming from Sweden, I’m very aware of how it is to be alone. It’s horrible,

actually. From that point of view, I don’t understand how people manage *not* to live in a community.

Some of my difficulties living in a community revolve around how to behave socially. Do you say “Hello” or not? Is the other person ready for me to share my joy with? Living together is the best way for me to understand myself, who I am, how I behave. When I go to bed, I like to think about my roommates and extend love to them. Those things make me so happy.

**Sr. Dieu Hanh:** I clearly see how living in community and especially sharing a room supports my practice and makes me very happy. It is so much easier to practice in such a calm and mindful environment. When my blood sister saw my room, she said, “Now you’re sharing a room again.”

Of course, it takes some time to get to know everybody. I enjoy always having many new people to connect with, but it can also be a little stressful for me not knowing how to behave, since I do not want to disturb anybody. I also see my tendency to get used to this good environment quickly, and overly concentrate on some small little difficulty. Then, I remind myself about how good the conditions are, and if I cannot be happy here, where can I be?!

**Br. Nhat Vu:** After living alone for the last 20 years, I have to admit that the first year in a dormitory with seven people has been more than challenging. The noise, the rhythm, the feeling of not having my own refuge space — I had to unlearn and relearn everything. It is a good practice for my individualistic mindset. On the upside, sharing resources and being able to take refuge in the sangha is quite a relief and brings me joy.

**Editorial team:** We felt touched to hear from your families and friends who came for the ordination. How has being with your family been for you? Are there things that have changed in how you respond in family situations?

**Br. Nhat Xuan:** I can share about the relationship with my blood brother. I am 22, he is 25. We grew up sharing the same room and are quite close to each other, but it has not always been easy. I noticed over the last years practicing in the Plum Village tradition that my expectations for him diminished, e.g. wanting him to be or to do what seems right to me. I think these expectations make me suffer. Having less expectations really helps our relationship be enjoyable. I don’t want to wait ten years to enjoy a moment with my blood brother in the present moment.

**Sr. Dang Hanh:** After I had been practising for a few years back in the US I felt that I had a lot of transformation. I was listening to my mother more deeply. I was accepting my father more. I felt more space. Nowadays, when I call customer service, I make the representative laugh. I think I interact with people so differently now. I once asked my father, “Do you feel that I changed in the past year?” I felt we were not fighting or getting into arguments as much as before. And he just said, “No.” (Laughter) But I do feel a difference.

When I announced to my dad that I wanted to become a nun two years ago, it was a huge shock for him. He is an immigrant and worked really hard. He said, “You know, I’ve lived this way and I was successful, but I don’t really know if I would recommend it to anybody either. You’ve made me think back on the way that I thought was the right way to live. I don’t even know why it is the right way to live.” I don’t think my father would have had that kind of conversation with me if I hadn’t made this decision.

**Br. Nhat Nguyen:** One of the big reasons I like this tradition is because family is treasured. The practice of seeing my parents as a 5-year-old child has changed my life. Being in the sangha for one year helped me see them very differently. Because of my growing stability, I was brave enough to see their instability. Before, I would suppress this or become angry at them without understanding why. Something in me wanted them to be that stability for me, that would take care of me. But now, it feels like I don’t need that from them. I could see their instability and from that arose a lot of compassion



and love. My mother didn't have to be perfect. It healed the relationship with my mother. I'm very happy with this. My mother is so sweet.

**Br. Nhat Van:** My family couldn't come, but they watched the ceremony online. In the beginning, they were asking, "When are you coming home?" But now I think they understand. I told them that I

feel at peace here. They have always accepted my choices. I hope they can come next year and see that it is much better than they can imagine.

**Br. Nhat Vu:** My blood family is basically my son. He is well aware of my path since he grew up with me and I raised him according to the Five Precepts. So, he feels me. He can see me blooming in the sangha, in this new life. He told me last August: "To love - this is a cool job, Dad!" ☸



# The Calling

SISTER CHÂN HIỀN HẠNH

*"The cosmos is filled with precious gems.  
I want to offer a handful of them to you this morning.  
Each moment you are alive is a gem, shining through  
and containing earth and sky, water and clouds."  
—from the poem "Our True Heritage"*

The window slowly opens. The brisk cold brings me back to reality. Looking at the rain on the distant horizon this morning stirs something in my heart. How beautiful and poetic the rain is. There's an upsurge of inspiration, urging me to jot down a few words. The rain had woven a path, taking me back to a memory. The rain is me, is the sunshine, and is the entire galaxy.

That day, after coming home from a faraway trip, I felt such warmth and spaciousness. It was home indeed, like the expression in the West: "Home sweet home!" Holding a cup of tea in my hands, I savored the refreshing air like that of the autumn in France and a pleasantly familiar feeling returned. Oh! I was in my hometown, yet I had allowed my mind to wander off. I smiled to myself and continued to enjoy this moment with the tea.

The tea was finished. I stood up and looked off into the distance. Oh, water... It was a familiar sight as my hometown is used to flooding during this season. I didn't pay much attention to the weather. The rain created the conditions for me to stay inside to explore, to learn; otherwise, whenever it was sunny, I would happily go to the garden, tending the bushes, trees or planting saplings. From a distance, I heard the sound of the telephone ringing. It was a friend of mine asking about the floods. I took a picture and sent it to her, and also sent my sense of not-worrying to the universe. Then, I returned to a few unfinished tasks.

Toward the end of the day, the water came up into the front yard. I started to worry a little bit. There were a few things I needed to prop up, but how could I do it by myself? They would be ruined by the water. Looking outside, I saw an old friend leisurely rowing a small boat around. I called out to ask for his help. The two of us carried a few things up to a higher place and smiled to ourselves. He was



a childhood friend who used to fly kites and play Mancala board games with me. Now he had a family of his own, residing afar, but he would come home every weekend to take care of his elderly mother. It had been over 20 years; it was a joy seeing one another again. We all implicitly understood the difficulty of our shared hometown.

In my hometown, every time someone called for help, somehow everyone would respond. I had been away for a long time; now coming back in the form of a monastic, the interactions with the neighbors became different. Nevertheless, the neighborly love would still be ever close and authentic whenever any one of us needed help.

My friend went home. I looked around at the state of disarray. But first, I must find something to eat before continuing rearranging the house and propping things up. Oh, the floodwater had entered the house. How quickly it had risen up. Looking at the stream of water, the memory of when I was seven or eight years old returned, when the water had risen up to the windows. Grandma was wading through the water at the level of her belly to retrieve a few things that were floating around. I could see Grandma shivering while trudging through the water. Meanwhile, Mother was placing the clay stove on a tin table to cook rice using rice husks as fuel. The little girl, me, was enjoying playing with the water; despite being scolded, she was still carefree. The memory of Mother and Grandma was alive as though they were present right beside me now.

The floodwater rose even higher, but I remained calm. Then, a few loved ones from faraway called. Seeing the level of water through the video chat, they felt sorry for the situation, but I remained as joyful as before. Whatever will come will come. Such is the presence of a stable and unwavering spirit.

I fumbled around until late. Where could I lie down to rest a bit? There was only a wooden table that was both high and sturdy. I climbed onto it and lay down. After just over an hour of peaceful sleep, a few mosquitoes started buzzing around me.

I reached for the clock and saw that it was almost 3 AM. I sat up to go boil some water. Hmm, the power is out! I found some candles and lit a few around the house. The candlelight shimmered on the water. I felt like I was sitting on a floating rock on a deserted island, gazing at the vast sky spread out over the ocean water with myriad stars above. Silent and incredibly beautiful!

I thought of finding something to improvise a tea table with. Looking to the side, I saw a little table. As I was standing up to carry it over, I suddenly saw — in the corner of my bed — two eyes looking up at me! A snake! Frightened, I jumped at the sight. Normally I would run away if I saw a dead snake on the side of the road. What was I going to do with one that was still alive? I calmed myself down, and after a short moment, dared to look at it again. I realized that it was also scared of being pulled away by the floodwater. But what if I touched it by mistake and it bit me? I remembered a sutra that recounted how the Buddha once invited a snake to leave, so that the monastics may rest there. I tried to imitate the Buddha and whispered to it. It writhed a bit and then skillfully coiled its body to be more comfortable. It didn't seem to hear anything I was saying. Should I befriend the snake?



I neither came close to it nor pushed it away. I just looked for another corner to drink my tea. Looking over there, I saw a colony of ants clinging to a broomstick. In another corner were a few dazed grasshoppers being buffeted by the water. And the snake in that corner. *"In this solemn moment, the wind was still, the birds were silent!"* There was only me with myself.

The words of Thay's teaching echoed in my heart:

*"I am a frog swimming happily in the clear water of a pond.  
And I am the grass-snake that silently feeds itself on the frog.  
I am a mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river.  
And I am the bird that swoops down to swallow the mayfly."  
—from the poem "Please Call Me By My True Names"*

With a peaceful heart, I was imbued with Thay's insight: "I am one with all living beings." Aware of my deep and gentle breath, I felt the presence of Thay and my mother in me.

*Breathing in, I saw that this body my mother had given me was still healthy and at peace.*

*Breathing out, I saw that my spiritual practice and insights continued to be nourished by Thay.*

Thay and my mother manifested in my heart at the same time. Thay and my mother were one, warm and sweet as in Thay's *A Rose for Your Pocket*:

*"Mother, you are a gentle stream.  
Mother, you are an angelic song,  
a cool shade from the high canopy,  
a beam light of the moon and stars,  
the torch in the night when I am lost."*

The candlelight was still flickering. The cup of tea was slowly emptying. I deeply understood the countless causes and conditions that supported every step I took. Joining my palms, I sent Mother Earth the most fragrant flowers and the sweetest fruits (of my practice) to everyone. The love of Thay, my mother, and friends was forever pure and fresh.

The weather is quite cold this Christmas season. I light a candle, enjoy some tea and wrap my gratitude onto the pages of this journal. There are no gifts or sweets to send to my beloved, but my heart is at peace. Thay is already in me and the people I love through serving together, understanding and empathizing with one another. We have been a part of each other since beginningless time. ☪

# Blossoming Trees

BROTHER CHÂN TRỜI THIÊN CHÍ

*On 5 May 2023, a group of four brothers and four sisters set off on a 5-week road tour throughout the UK (England, Scotland and Wales) and Ireland. Here are the reflections from a dear monastic member of the tour.*

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## Where is my home?

How exciting to be on my first mindfulness tour as a monastic! Right at the start of the journey, I was reflecting in the van about where my home would be now. I felt that the answer was my heart. If I was connected to my heart, I could also connect to the hearts of my monastic brothers and sisters and to the hearts of the people we would meet along the way. If there is understanding and love, I feel that my home will be everywhere.

## A mirror

I was happy to experience so much harmony and lightness in our mini sangha of eight. This harmony was sweet and precious. It gave me a feeling of relaxation and stability. I can see that this very harmony was the pillar of the tour and all of our offerings.

This tour was like a mirror in which I could see the state of my practice — how open, flexible and simple I was or was not. Could I flow with the group? What were my limits and difficulties? It was also an opportunity for me to learn new things and be courageous to offer in ways I had not done before.

## Presence

In the teaching on the Seven Factors of Awakening, the Buddha advises us to cultivate joy and ease. On this tour, I understood how joy was an essential element for the well-being of our group. Laughter helped us to relax and open up; it enabled us to build friendship and trust. As a result, we were able to understand ourselves better and flow easier together.

I enjoyed the first Dharma talks in Chagford and Exeter, England, very much. Thay said, “The Sangha is my continuation,” and I only understood it intellectually. But now I could experience it clearly in the way we held the space, in the way the monastic siblings gave Dharma talks, in the way we introduced and adapted the practices to different places and people. I could also see Thay in the way the lay friends enjoyed being with us.

I loved it when we stopped at gas stations to have coffee together. Sr. One Way (Sr. Trang Mot Phuong) was our treasurer and we called her “Sr. Generosity” — just for fun. She bought us drinks and sweets, so every gas station was a mini celebration.

Sr. One Way also often offered us a special kind of Oolong tea. A really happy moment. We felt like kings when she poured us the fragrant tea. But I’m still not sure which is more fragrant — the tea or our togetherness?

## Children in the mud

I remember Sr. Tam Moi saying once during our tour, “Do you notice that? It’s like spring lasts a long, long time. We’ve been on the road for several weeks and the trees are still in bloom. That’s because we’re traveling from the south to the north.”

Let me name just a fraction of the places we visited: ancient beech forests with carpets of bluebells; hills with big boulders on top; meadow of green grass and brown ferns where wild horses graze freely; sacred cathedrals with gardens of pink rhododendrons; national reserves; hidden stone beaches; small art bookstores; world-famous museums and streets; a university where the students showed us a meditation hall filled with poetry books and the on-campus redwood forest, and then invited us to participate in blessing the food before dinner.

We did walking meditation on a beach where seals played in the water; by streams with clear water; near Tibetan stupas on an island with wild

horses; in university botanical gardens; in parks with rabbits in the heart of a city; in old cemeteries; by ponds; in forests with ancient trees and by puddles where small children played — completely covered in mud.

As monastics, we could go into the heart of a major cathedral in Durham, England, under the guidance of a Christian priest. We had the opportunity to offer events in churches, monasteries, universities and town halls, modern recording halls, chapels, tents, retreat centers and even in a round building made of mud and straw.

### Preparing and letting go

When we were in Belfast, Ireland, Sr. Tai Nghiem invited me to talk at the end of a Dharma talk about how I practiced the art of stopping. I was nervous and tried to prepare myself well. Then my sister asked me to speak at the beginning of the talk, instead. A few hours later after all the preparations I did, she said to me, “Now brother, let go of everything you have prepared. The most important thing is that you connect with the people in the hall and speak to them. You don’t need to try to remember what you’ve prepared.” That was a hard lesson, but very important.

### Eyebrows, tea and fame

My insights often come in unpleasant packages that I usually don’t want to open. Before the event in Belfast, I felt a lot of tension in my face. This tension was related to an upcoming event where I had to present something. I was worried and anxious, but luckily, I was able to find some time to sit just before the event. I started to relax my body and focused my attention on the unpleasant sensations in my face. As an aside, in my *Shining Light*<sup>12</sup>, the brothers shared with me that I often frowned when I didn’t think anyone was watching. At that moment in Belfast, I asked myself, “What was behind this tension in my eyebrows?”

I could sense an uneasiness about my upcoming participation in the event. I felt like I already decided that I wasn’t going to like what I was going to share, no matter what the outcome might be or what my monastic siblings might tell me afterward. Slowly, I felt an icy cold feeling of hatred in me — hatred toward myself. A destructive energy that was generated by my mind directed toward myself. It was like a general ordering the troop to attack itself.



Photo Courtesy Twan Peeters



12. To learn more about the practice of Shining Light, see Thich Nhat Hanh, *Stepping Into Freedom*, Parallax Press.

I had a similar experience in Cambridge, England. Whenever we distributed the tasks before the events, a part of me wanted to take on an “important” responsibility but another part wanted to be humble and moderate. I most often get a very unpleasant feeling after the tasks have been assigned. It took me several long early-morning tea-drinking sessions to recognize the unpleasant package of an insight. Oh, what a surprise — a search for fame, recognition and admiration. I was looking for love from the outside that I could not give myself; there was a need to be seen and appreciated by others. Of course, I didn’t want to have these needs, especially as a monk. I aspired to be humble and relaxed and practice equanimity.

How could I harmonize these opposing energies in me? Sometimes, it felt like a war from which there was no way out... except to simply accept the suffering. Relax in the suffering. Embrace and understand it. Let it manifest naturally in me but not identify with it.



Photo Courtesy Twan Peeters

## The painter of reality

My mind is a painter. When anger arises in me, the whole world becomes a place full of injustice. When sadness is there, I see only suffering and despair. When the sun of joy shines, the world is colorful and beautiful.

In Brighton, England, I noticed that I was starting to feel angry toward a brother. I could see the internal knot growing fast because we were together all the time. My ego was upset and was telling me stories about how rude and unfriendly

his behavior was. Part of me wanted to listen and agree with it, but there was also a voice telling me, “You’re upset. Do *Beginning Anew*<sup>13</sup> to calm down.”

Throughout the tour, we were together all the time. We planned and led events together, ate together, rested and traveled in the same van for five straight weeks! So it would not work for me to take time to reflect on what exactly was happening between me and my brother and contemplate about where it was potentially my fault, etc. In order to continue living together and focus on our events, I had to do *beginning anew* with him. I followed my intuition, shared my appreciation for him, and expressed my feelings and wish for harmony.

Once in Ards Friary, Ireland, I was late for the chanting before the Dharma talk; so the monastics started without me. Oh, I felt so bad when I entered the hall and saw my brothers and sisters chanting. Feelings of guilt, of not being worthy, of being excluded and of being useless swept over me all at the same time like a flooding hurricane.

There were only four of us organizing a retreat for 60 people. I felt I had to speak to my brothers and sisters right after the Dharma talk, despite the presence of all those feelings still alive in me. I knew that if I didn’t speak out, I would isolate myself from the group and get very upset.

Ards Friary is a wonderful place, like a paradise. The ancient forest almost reaches the beach. The ocean, like a giant amoeba in a gray-blue dress with thousands of veils of foam, leaving majestically in the morning and returning in the evening.

On this retreat, I understood that sometimes I needed to protect my brothers and sisters from my strong emotions and wrong views. Maintaining harmony requires open communication, sincerity and flexibility. In my experience, the practice of mindfulness is the only way to recognize how the painter creates a masterpiece with the colors of his emotions.

## What is happiness?

Since I was a novice, I have always tried to rediscover what happiness is. As a layman, I simply followed my desires believing that their fulfillment would make me happy. I used to desire being surrounded by and owning things I liked, being with people I loved, going to places I admired, etc. But as a monk, I can’t take refuge in that kind of

13. To learn more about the practice of *Beginning Anew*, see Sister Chan Khong, *Beginning Anew*, Parallax Press.

happiness. A monastic practices to look beyond these desires and discover a deeper happiness. If I am not able to be with the things and people I love, then where should I search for happiness?

The UK and Ireland tour has helped me realize that love was something I used to associate with people, objects and places. In reality, love, like compassion, is something that my mind and body generate. As a monk, I aspire to keep practicing to get in touch with these qualities within me and to train my mind to see them around me. They said that “understanding is love’s other name.” So, I continue to practice listening more deeply to myself.

If I nourish the seeds of love and compassion in me, then I will continue to see the world as a beautiful place and be able to connect with others, as well as help them recognize their seeds of love and compassion. The stronger these seeds grow within, the easier it will be for me to recognize them in my surroundings.

My greatest happiness during the tour was interacting with people. Learning about their way of life and hearing their stories, alongside breathing,



laughing and crying with them. I learned and am still learning from them about how to be open, authentic, vulnerable and solid; how to let go, how to go through downfalls and depression, how to get up again and again, and how to love and live deeply. Being a monk offers me access to all these wonders of human experiences. I have had the privilege of connecting deeply with others on a spiritual level and collaborating with many to help build sanghas. In this way we can support and nourish each other, we can heal ourselves and help those around us to do the same. ☪



Photo Courtesy Twan Peeters

# I Walk for You

SISTER CHÂN LẠC HẠNH

## What is the right thing to do?

In Plum Village, France, we have just finished the 2023 - 2024 Rains Retreat in which ethics was the central theme. And more specifically the Buddhist approach to a global ethics. As monastics in this tradition, we commit to living our lives according to a certain ethical code, coherent to the novice or Bhikshu or Bhikshuni precepts. For me, living in such a way not only protects my mind-body-spirit and its three karmas of thought, speech, and action in the present, but also transforms the residue of my past, assuring a brighter, clearer future, less tainted by regrets and remorse. It is about living my life in a way that is deeply rooted in well-being, wholesomeness, understanding, compassion, love, and peace, and continuously orientates me in that direction.

## What is the right thing to do?

I feel like this is a question that I have faced many times in my life. Suddenly I would find myself inert on a seeming crossroads, paralyzed with the realization that whatever decision I make would take me into very different directions and shape the

course of my life's journey. My heart and mind would be in conflict as I agonized over what to do, as I imagined the possible outcomes and weighed the pros and cons. I always grappled in making big decisions, as I always felt that there must be "a right thing to do," although it was not always apparent and somewhat elusive to me.

## What is the right thing to do?

On 29 December 2014, I met my birth mother. Or re-met her. After being with her for the first year of my life, I spent the next 40 years apart from her. Our lives had unfolded in drastically different and unexpected directions and yet we met again in the city where she had given birth to me. When we met in the assisted-living hospital where she lived, she was paralyzed and unable to speak after having had a cerebral stroke about 15 years prior. Everything that I had been piecing together over the past years crumbled in that meeting. All hopes of discovering more details about my origins narrative, which had fueled my birth family search, and that I had learned to some degree through the reunion with my birth father two years before, dissolved in an instant.





Trying to understand the past no longer became so important. “What do I do now?” and “how do I move forward?” became more relevant. And I had no idea. What kept rising in me was laden with “shoulds” or what I perceived was expected of me. All were figments of my imagination, as no one was voicing to me what they felt I had to do. My birth mother was alone and couldn’t speak, so she was not telling me what to do. Her blind elder brother (her guardian, whose permission I had to obtain in order to meet her) and his family also never asked for anything from me. Because I was adopted and was not raised by her, my family and friends couldn’t fully understand why I felt responsible in some way to take care of her.

But I did feel responsible in some way. And also completely helpless in what was the right thing to do given the complexities of that situation. I was her daughter by blood, but I now had another mother. I was not able to speak her language in order to communicate with her, nor did I understand the intricacies of Korean culture and families. Most importantly, I didn’t know anyone who had even remotely been in a similar situation to guide me through this unknown territory and journey that I was facing.

### **What is the right thing to do?**

The suffering that arose from those experiences completely overwhelmed me into a state of inertia and despair. It is what brought me to Plum Village for the first time. I had been reading Thay’s books since 1999. His teachings and practices accompanied me on my Ashtanga Yoga path that I was committed to practicing and teaching over the same amount of years. I deeply resonated with Thay’s teachings that were born out of a war-torn country – divided by ideologies – and his life in exile as he refrained from taking sides, always calling for peace. Peace for his country, peace for the world, peace within oneself.

I had always wanted to go to Plum Village, but the conditions were never sufficient. Even though I already had a spiritual practice, it was not wholly nourishing nor transforming my intense suffering after reuniting with my omma (birth mother). I reached out to close friends in my international Ashtanga Yoga community, curious about what had helped them in deep crises when they felt our practices were not enough. I received a deluge of responses, spanning all realms of healing the body-mind-spirit from diverse traditions and cultures.

One friend, who had delved deeply into Vipassana meditation practices with me over the years, sent me a link with no written message. When I opened it, it was for an article reporting that Thich Nhat Hanh had just left the hospital in Bordeaux to return to Plum Village after having recuperated sufficiently from his stroke. I instantly knew that I too needed to go there.

### **What is the right thing to do?**

I arrived in New Hamlet at the beginning of the Spring Retreat in 2015. Already during the first week, I was beginning to experience a slight shift in my despair and gradual transformation of my suffering through the daily practices and teachings, as well as with the support of the Sangha. I ended up staying the whole Spring Retreat during which I received the Five Mindfulness Trainings, which I felt were a beautiful expression of how to live an ethical, compassionate, heart-centered life of understanding and peace.

I also recognized and felt my latent monastic seed being watered. However, I was still embedded in the material world. I had a beloved partner, who had accompanied me through everything during the past eight years, and I was still not fully resolved about what to do about my omma. Over the next few years, I continuously sought ways to return to Korea to be geographically closer to her and to learn more about myself and ancestral culture; and also returned to Plum Village to deepen my practices and to reconnect with the Sangha.

Through Ashtanga Yoga, I was invited multiple times to teach in Korea. It was such a powerful, healing experience to share the yoga practices there. Simultaneously through Thay’s teachings of how to practice with grief, how to heal the wounded inner child, how to practice transforming the transmissions of ancestral, generational, cultural and collective suffering, etc, I was slowly able to heal some of my internal spaces.

However, I always felt a bit blocked and slightly resistant whenever Thay’s teachings spoke about a mother’s unconditional love and care for her baby, or how to practice with our mother as a 5-year-old child, or how to walk with our mother. I could not fully connect with my omma through those practices, because in my mind, it did not reflect my experiences with her.



For me, the beauty of the mindfulness practices and teachings, done continuously over time, is that I start to drop out of the mind and into the heart to a deeper level of understanding and healing. On one trip to Korea, the hospital told me that my omma was now bed-ridden and unable to eat solid foods since January 2017, and was being fed by a tube through her nose. By this time, it had been about 20 years since her stroke, and I was amazed at her resilience of spirit and often contemplated what it meant to be alive and what it was that kept her living.

In 2018, I made the radical decision to move to Seoul, after receiving an invitation to teach Ashtanga Yoga there indefinitely, even though my partner, Bruno, decided not to accompany me. Although it was a heartbreaking decision, I inherently felt that a deeper healing was necessary and had to be faced by myself. Who I was and how I was perceived in Korea alone was radically different than when Bruno was by my side. And strangely enough, somehow our separating was also a way of saving our relationship and keeping our love intact, as my constant coming and going was starting to take a toll on our togetherness.

### **What is the right thing to do?**

Living and teaching in Korea was one of the most difficult things I have ever done because of the myriad of subconscious and unconscious, latent seeds that were touched and triggered in my store consciousness. It was also one of the most beautiful and enriching experiences, as I was able to connect with the immense generosity, kindness, warmth, and love of the people and culture, healing the abandonment and separation that lay deep in my heart.



The unforeseen COVID pandemic radically interrupted life as we had known it. The local and global restrictions brought into question again the trajectory of my life. Due to the social-distancing regulations, I was unable to visit my omma in the hospital and I began to reassess my situation and my life path. During this time that the world came to an unexpected, collective pause and we all relied on a more online rather than in-person presence, Plum Village resurfaced in my consciousness and I reconnected with my deepest aspirations.

As the pandemic drew on and life became more uncertain, I dove deep within once more for guidance and clarity. Even though I had originally thought that I would stay in Korea at least until my omma passed, I decided to move back to Europe and join the 2021 Rains Retreat in New Hamlet to see if my monastic aspiration was still extant. Before leaving Korea, as the world was beginning to open up again and restrictions were slowly lifting, I was allowed a 20-minute farewell with my omma, in which I expressed my love and gratitude.

I was told that even though she had been able to eat semi-solid food again, she had not opened her eyes for the past nine months. I immediately wondered what it was that she didn't want to see. As I held her hand, gently speaking to her in my newfound, limited Korean, I thanked her for giving me life and for coming back into my life, and wished her peace in letting go. I knew that it would most likely be the last time I saw her in that form. I left Korea, my heart heavy, yet full and open, and relatively at peace.

### **And that is the right thing...**

My omma passed away on 30 July 2022, while I was an aspirant in New Hamlet, a few months before I was ordained as a novice nun in Thai Plum Village. Sister Chan Khong was present at my ordination and cut the first lock of my hair before my head was shaved. Sister Chan Khong had been a pivotal force in why I had chosen New Hamlet when I first came to Plum Village in 2015. After reading her inspiring book, *Learning True Love*, her author's biography stated that she resided and practiced in New Hamlet. That was the only guidepost I needed.

She is a warm, compassionate and inspiring presence; and to this day, she is still an indomitable force. After having sustained a fall and hip surgery, she's often in a wheelchair. Through various forms of physical therapy, she could be seen practicing

assisted-walking around the hamlet. One day, after formal lunch, I was moved to tears when she was able to walk the whole length of the meditation hall in Lower Hamlet with only the support of her walking sticks.

I later expressed to her that something inside me was profoundly touched as I recognized that during the reunion journey with my omma, there was a deep, unspoken and impossible hope that she would one day get up from her wheelchair and walk into my arms to embrace me. Sister Chan Khong opened her arms and folded me into a comforting hug. Her determination and perseverance in recuperating her mobility were inspiring. Witnessing this process, something deeper inside me was also healing. One day after formal lunch, when she was able to walk unassisted the full length of the Upper Hamlet meditation hall, I was again moved to tears.

Since my omma has passed, I have been better able to touch her inside of me and to feel that she is inherently a part of me. She is no longer confined to a wheelchair or bed or hospital room. All the grief and helplessness that I felt throughout that journey has started to ebb and transform through the varied Dharma doors and practices, especially during walking meditation with the sangha.

I feel that sometimes we don't necessarily experience transformation and reconciliation with the intended person, but somehow we are able to heal internally through the various situations that arise, and the people we come into contact with. And often when we least expect it. The words Thay has shared in the guided meditations and practices and that he has written in his calligraphy no longer lie flat on the page. "I walk for you" are no longer just four meaningless words to me. They are alive at the core of my being when I am present and remember to practice. With every step, through every breath.

Sitting here and looking back, I'm not sure if there is ever a "right thing" to do. Life and its unfolding are so subjective due to different causes and conditions. However, when we can abide by certain ethical and moral codes that are rooted in understanding, compassion, and love, and move us toward wholeness, rather than fragmentation or division, I feel that in any given situation, there is really only one thing we can do. And *that* is the right thing. ☞

# A Spiritual Family without Borders

BROTHER CHÂN TRỜI ĐỨC HIỀN

*The following are excerpts from a diary written during the 6-week Latin America tour in the spring of 2023 with five other monastic brothers and sisters from Plum Village.*

## Province of Santa Catarina, Brazil

We just spent the afternoon with sangha members, many of whom were meeting monastics for the first time. I feel that they were deeply touched by our presence and the fact that we had traveled so far to meet them. We began our session with some Plum Village songs in Portuguese. Immediately the atmosphere relaxed and the connection of hearts lit up each face with a sweet smile. Many of them had tears in their eyes. Their sharings and questions were imbued with deep solemnity, and a real quest for meaning in the face of their difficulties.

After a friendly and joyful dinner in a vegan restaurant run by a member of the sangha, they invited us to share our experience of practicing with the confronting realities of daily life. To our great surprise, the amphitheater was filled with around 400 people!

The organizer of this evening invited a group of young musicians to start off the evening with the chanting of mantras to the beat of local rhythms, which was met with much enthusiasm.

I was very touched by the communal energy which was slowly taking hold, giving us confidence to take turns sharing — with the help of a translator — about how the practice inspired us, and allowed us to welcome life as it manifested itself inside and around us. On the bus back to our accommodation we shared the wonder and deep gratitude that we felt after such an encounter.

I felt truly blessed and honored to be part of this group, and to become even more aware of the power of our commitment to “awaken humanity to love and the reality of interbeing.” I saw more clearly how the precepts and monastic robe offered me the opportunity to be, without needing to appear, to



exist by myself. I could simply allow every moment of this multifaceted, collective movement to manifest and shine through, smiling to life.

A few days later, we facilitated a retreat with 80 people, including the group of young musicians who generously accompanied us for the five days of practice with their songs, guitars and percussion. Music, for me, is a vehicle of joy and prayer, of direct connection through the heart, so you can imagine my happiness. Of course, I joined them on several occasions to share Plum Village songs revisited with a Brazilian groove.

As was often the case in our retreats, we met in the afternoon for Dharma sharing. We had the great fortune to sit outside at the foot of a 60-meter high waterfall, which accompanied us with its powerful roar. Mother Earth watched over us, that was undeniable. Nature was abundant and I felt transported by this lush beauty. Little by little, everyone opened their hearts, suffering was expressed and embraced by the collective energy. As always, the alchemy of hearts did its work!

Just before closing the session, a young woman spoke with great intensity about her pain of having lost her big brother three years ago in an accident. For the first time, she allowed herself to cry and to feel the lack of his presence. She had locked everything up inside her heart. She told us that she was very surprised to find herself gradually opening

up and finally let herself be embraced by the collective energy of compassion. Her body relaxed, her eyes softened, grief could finally be welcomed, and a wave of sweetness and tenderness ran through the entire group. I was deeply touched and happy to witness such a rebirth of life. It reminded me of my own journey with grief.

The next morning, her mother, who also participated, shared with us her joy of finally finding her daughter alive again. It is true that the transformation was striking! We saw her again a few days after the retreat and celebrated this little miracle together with eyes full of tears and hearts of gratitude.

### Province of São Paulo, Brazil

After a few hours of traveling from the center of São Paulo with more than 12 million inhabitants, we got off the bus a little groggy. I couldn't believe my eyes — we had arrived in Nazaré Uniluz, a paradise on Earth! The tropical vegetation is sumptuously extravagant, everything is a harmony of colors, shapes, scents and in beautiful collaboration with humans.

Located in Nazaré Paulista, in the countryside of São Paulo, this secular spiritual community was founded 42 years ago (the same year as Plum Village), inspired among others by Thay and the practice of mindfulness. Around 30 people lived there, not including the 50 some young volunteers who were there for long stays!



The host who welcomed us spoke French very well. He had traveled a lot and ended up settling there. He is now one of the coordinators of this practice center. Like Plum Village, they also welcome retreatants throughout the year. There reigned an atmosphere of beauty, serenity, united in joy. I very quickly felt a deep synergy with this place and its inhabitants.

Early Sunday morning, 70 people, including 10 young residents, received the Five Mindfulness Trainings. On average, 80% of participants in our retreats in South America made this commitment. As usual, the space was charged with spiritual intensity that connected our hearts and dissolved the boundaries of the mind. Moving testimonies of gratitude follow the ceremonies.

I met two women activists committed to indigenous populations. Deep in their eyes shone a spark of determination and love that warmed the hearts of the most deprived. The youngest of them shared with us her admiration for Sr. Chan Khong and aspiration for monastic life. In fact, she arrived in Plum Village at the start of the Rains Retreat with the intention to join the aspirant program. How wonderful!

Another moment of pure grace happened during walking meditation. I was hand-in-hand with a little girl, accompanied by her mother, who was so happy to be able to join us. The little girl sent me a drawing which now hangs above my bed. A smile is guaranteed when I wake up!





### **Buenos Aires, Argentina**

After an hour and a half of traveling in traffic jams, we arrived at a Catholic university and were welcomed by the local sangha in a small room. There were around 30 people practicing here once a week! We bowed reverently and right away I felt a deep warmth in my heart. There was something intensely familiar and comforting. I hardly knew anyone and yet the deep and joyful sense of being part of this spiritual family allowed me to feel at home. The atmosphere of brotherhood and sisterhood was authentic and reassuring.

I realized the extent of Thay's transmission which allows us to be at home in any community in the world — a bell, a few cushions, a photo of our master, a candle, a little incense, flowers, caring smiles and the depth of the practice brought us together that evening. We shared a deep aspiration to cultivate mindfulness, to learn, to understand and love better. Most people had never met Thay, or even had the chance to come and stay in Plum Village. Yet I could feel the presence of our beloved teacher in the looks, the words, the quality of listening, the heart vibrating with compassion and the bodhicitta of the members of this beautiful assembly.

The following Sunday, we met for a Day of Mindfulness in a park, near a 6-lane road, which was rather noisy. Fortunately, there was a space with very beautiful trees to welcome the participants. To our great surprise, nearly 250 people joined, including a few families with their children. We quickly forgot the urban atmosphere that surrounded us and practiced together with enthusiasm. I was amazed to see that within a very short time our small group managed to generate an atmosphere of attentive presence, calm, joy, relaxation, depth and togetherness.

At the end of the day, the smiles were generous and abundant, and many people came up to us to express their gratitude for this precious moment of communion and simplicity. I realized how touched I was by these magical moments that happen when our differences fade away and reveal a great pure heart that radiates love for all beings. As a Zen monk and disciple of Thay, I feel honored to be able to embody this ancestral wisdom, and am impressed by the simple conditions needed for happiness to manifest.

## Santiago, Chile

We concluded our tour with a multitude of meetings, public events, workshops and a beautiful 4-day retreat, all organized by the Chilean sangha. A group of young teachers who teach mindfulness in public schools shared their enthusiasm with me. There are eight government-funded teachers involved. Amazing! I was deeply inspired by the depth of their practice and the beauty of their commitment for future generations.

A few days later, we visited a mindfulness based school, created by another bodhisattva more than 10 years ago, for immigrant children from a disadvantaged neighborhood. Without this initiative, most of them would have had great difficulty integrating. As soon as we arrived, we were greeted by the smiles and curiosity of the children. I took out the guitar and we happily shared some Plum Village songs. They invited us to dance and we were off into an endless round of happiness. Spontaneously a small group took me by the hand, showed me all the classes, and then invited me to have lunch in the canteen. I was jubilant with gratitude and my inner child was in nirvana.

We returned to Plum Village with a happy heart accompanied by our young driver, who took care of us from the beginning of our stay in Brazil. He has since joined the Happy Farm program in the Upper Hamlet and his presence among us is truly enchanting. ☸



# Am I Tofu?

SISTER CHÂN TRẮNG HIỀN TÂM

I woke up to find myself in a remote countryside factory. It was a tofu factory. White, squared, smooth, and steaming hot tofu lined up neatly on long, massive conveyor belts circulating nonstop. I crouched between the tofu cubes, gliding along on the conveyor belt as if on a hot water slide in an amusement park. Everywhere I looked — in front, behind, up, or down — there was nothing but tofu. Even before I realized what was happening, I instinctively contorted my body into the shape of a tofu. I told myself, “I am tofu.” Knowing that, if the factory manager discovered I was a person, there would be anger, I pretended to be a steaming hot cube of tofu. Finally reaching the end of the conveyor belt, I jumped off and escaped the factory through the back door, running headlong through the vast open field before stopping just at the edge of a cliff. The factory manager shouted after me, “You’re not tofu. You’re a person!” Overtaken by fear, I replied, “No, I’m tofu,” before obediently returning to my place on the now familiar conveyor belt inside the factory.

## Dream interpretation

Since childhood, I harbored a complex about what it meant to be a good student and a good daughter. Following my parents’ advice, the ultimate achievements during my childhood and adolescence were to excel in academia and receive awards. I felt stressed and pressured to conform to society’s ideal image of a citizen and a woman.

Upon becoming an adult, I declared to myself that “from now on, I will only do what I want to do” in my studies, possessions, and mode of dressing. During my seven years of working at the KBS and SBS broadcasting stations in South Korea, I lived as I liked without being concerned about fitting into any “tofu-like” ideals from my family or society. It was also around this time (in my early 20’s) that these childhood dreams of conformity stopped recurring, until resurfacing again in 2018: the year I became a novice nun in Plum Village.

As a side note, the brothers and sisters in my Beech Tree ordination family often analyze my dreams as they are particularly vivid and animated like those in the movies.



## Pretending to be tofu again

The initial years of my novicehood were challenging despite the fact that I freely chose this path. Drastically changing the lifestyle I was used to for over 30 years was a shock to both my body and mind. Hidden pains and unpleasant memories began to resurface. I cried almost everyday. I even ran in the opposite direction just to avoid meeting and greeting the elder sisters. I openly expressed discontentment, complaining about discrimination when each novice was given two avocados while each bhikshuni received three. Reading the hundreds of fine manners and precepts, I grumbled, “Aren’t they too detailed? It’s like being in the military.” It seemed like all the teachings were forcing me to be tofu, conforming to the same color, shape and consistency as everyone else.

Every night before sleeping, I asked myself, “Is this truly my path?” However, an inner voice whispered, “Just give yourself a chance to practice for five years. If it does not work out, you can always return to your previous profession.” But the doubts in my mind were not content with the plan to try it for five years. I continued to complain about the



monastic life, constantly protesting, “It’s too strict. It doesn’t make sense. Should I move to another center?” I kept harboring these thoughts, feeling annoyed by the fine manners and teachings.

For the first time I began to see the workings of my ego. I was trapped in the idea that I was always right, and thus others were always wrong. For example, I used to rely on Google for answers, but I had to break that habit because getting access to the internet was difficult. I could not easily go online to research about the topics I wanted to study more deeply. Getting permission to use the internet during lazy days or lazy evenings, by having to fill out a piece of paper stating “I have permission to use the internet for these reasons:...” felt ridiculous. I rebelled against it, almost completely avoiding the use of the internet for about two years.

Getting permission for everything else was equally complicated. To be able to go outside of the monastery meant I had to get permission from my mentor, the mindfulness observer, and transportation coordinator, in addition to securing a second body to go with me. If it was during the Rains Retreat, then I would additionally have to perform the final step of standing in front of the entire sangha to ask for permission by stating my intention for going out, on which day, to where, with whom, and estimated time of departure and return.

My point here is not to complain about the complexity of the process but rather to point out the workings of my ego. At every step of the

process, I heard my ego shouting, “I’m the one who should decide what to do and what not to do. I must always come first!”

Since I did not like these constraints, I knew I could just leave the 5-year program and return to my previous lifestyle. That was the easy option. Instead, however, I chose to face the real challenge: to break free from all the actual constraints that did not make me feel free. Those constraints were not about the type of work in the monastery or not having a salary; they were the thoughts in my head and the reactions of my body that made me feel stifled. So I focused on what was happening in my mind and body, managing my six senses and practicing noticing before reacting whenever my ego screamed, “I am right here! Don’t ignore me!” Over time, my tendency to react surprisingly slowed down.

Gradually, instead of checking my phone for messages upon waking up in the morning, I would smile and silently recite the “Waking Up” gatha. When taking the first step off the bed box, I would practice being aware of the cold stone floor under my feet. Trying not to wake my roommates up, I practiced taking mindful steps in the darkened room and quietly opening the bedroom door. The simple lifestyle of a nun significantly simplified my life: just eating while eating, just cutting vegetables while cutting vegetables and just listening while listening to Dharma talks. Even when I did not want to follow the guided sitting meditation, I just did it. I just allowed myself to do it. The various sounds of the bells around the hamlet often reminded me to pause and come back to myself when I might have forgotten my mindfulness, lost in nonstop thinking.



Slowly, the past image of me scrolling through the news while watching a Netflix series in a shaking subway began to fade away in my mind. Just like the name of my beloved teacher, Thay (“Nhat Hanh” means “one action”), I committed to practicing one action at a time for the duration of the 5-year monastic program. It was like a 5-year sabbatical after living a totally different lifestyle for 30 years. From the fourth year onward, conflicts with the sisters began to decrease as I focused more on looking into myself instead of complaining about the people and the hamlet—I would like to express my deep gratitude to those who supported me during those years.

I was determined to focus on three key practices: living harmoniously in the community, generating the energy of mindfulness in daily life through conscious breathing and body awareness, and looking deeply into the nature of interbeing. Occasionally I had doubts about the practices of Plum Village because it was a little different from the typical Buddhist practices in Korea. The people I met in France were more interested in the practical side of the Dharma than intensive exploration of Buddhist doctrines; whereas in Asia, especially Korea, Vietnam, Japan, and Taiwan, it was common for novices to focus on Buddhist doctrines and various scriptures during the first four years at Buddhist Universities. I worried that when I returned to Korea, the Koreans I met might feel that I had not studied enough Buddhism. Coincidentally, I had a chance to test my understanding of the practice when I went home to help take care of my parents after my father was diagnosed with cancer.

### Going back to Korea

When I heard the news that my father was diagnosed with cancer, I cried the whole day. I knew that I needed to return to Korea to help my parents. Fortunately, with the wholehearted support of the sangha, I was able to go very soon after the request. The country had changed so much since I left four years ago; the flow of society seemed busier and the people were expressionless. Among the faces of passersby, it was challenging to spot anyone smiling or greeting each other with a smile; it was as though everyone was wearing an emotionless mask. Their looks were unresponsive like bare frozen fingers in the depths of winter.

Seeing my parents again after four years was incredibly joyful, though it would have been better if it were a casual home visit. Nevertheless, the important thing was that we were reunited. Dad

looked different. His hair had turned white, but his eyes sparkled brighter than any of ours. Remarkably, Dad remained positive about being diagnosed with cancer, considering it as a spotlight on life, not death. It was surprising and inspiring to witness his uplifting attitude, focusing on doing his best without being overly concerned about the results.

There was anxiety in the air during the days leading up to the surgery; however, we did our best to continue with our daily routine. I learned in Plum Village not to let worries take over my mental state, understanding that dwelling on thoughts of anxiety would not help make things better. Dad made plans to study Buddhism with me during his recovery.



Sr. Hien Tam with her parents on ordination day in 2018

When Dad was in the operating room of a big hospital in Seoul, I did what I could not to allow thoughts of worry to crowd my mind. I held Mom’s hand and quietly practiced breathing. Next to the surgery room was the intensive care unit, which was filled with families visiting loved ones who faced death. Seeing the sad faces of the families going through the last moments with their dying relatives while hoping for Dad’s successful surgery made Mom even more anxious. To ease her nervousness, I gave her noise-canceling AirPods and played Plum Village songs and chants. Music has the ability to help soothe those who are not able to soothe themselves. I thought it might be helpful for Mom as well.

Fortunately, Dad’s surgery was successful. When he woke up, his first words were about the Twelve Nidanas! These were Buddhist terms he had asked

me to memorize in Korean as part of our Buddhist studies together. The days in hospital passed quickly. Supporting Dad with the basic tasks like emptying the urinal, helping him wash, and assisting with his bowel movements were nothing compared to the repetitive tasks Mom and Dad had done for me throughout my childhood.

It took several months for Dad to recover. Dad also began to express his feelings openly about how much he missed me during the five years I was away. During Dad's recovery, I felt like I was going through a Korean Plum Village Rains Retreat. One of the reasons was that my parents built a house in the deep mountains after retirement. Much like a temple nestled in the remote mountains, the surroundings are truly tranquil and pure. Morning sitting meditation, mindful eating, walking meditation, exercising, tending the garden, and listening to Dharma talks were part of the daily routine. Dad also wanted to teach me Korean Buddhist terms, basic Buddhist theories, and applied psychology, including those from early scriptures. The schedule was tight, but Dad enjoyed it, saying that studying was easy because it made both him and Mom happy. While reading unfamiliar sutras and Buddhist terms, I realized that I had already studied these in Plum Village. The expressions were different, but they were the same teachings, much like different fingers pointing to the same moon.

Dad and Mom's favorite meditation was hugging meditation. Although typical Korean fathers feel embarrassed to openly express their love for their children and rarely hug them, Dad was strangely hugging me quite a lot every day, sometimes too much. After sitting meditation, after breakfast, after walking meditation, and after listening to Dharma talks... he kept wanting to hug me. At one point, I even joked that I would limit the number of hugs to a maximum of five times a day. I realized that my unexpected trip to Korea was not just about caring for Dad but also about self-healing.

### **Once again, am I really tofu?**

I want to share about another dream I had. It is a secret, but since there is no such thing as a secret living in a community, I will tell you a little bit about it. It happened the night before I received the Great Bhikshuni Precepts in February 2023. Personally, I

do not interpret dreams as mysterious occurrences; I think dreams are reflections of our inner thoughts. In the dream, two friends and I were overlooking a vast frozen river, surrounded by dense green tropical forests and mountains. We were observing this scene from a helicopter in the sky.

In the dream, I was a man with dark skin. My two friends suggested, "Let's jump together into the icy river below!" After taking a closer look, there was a large hole in the frozen river, and its depth appeared almost black or extremely deep blue. Despite thinking it was like being told to die, I strangely felt I could jump into the water with my two deeply trusted friends. Without hesitation, the three of us held hands and dove into the icy water. "Splash!" To my surprise, the water felt warm like a hot spring and was incredibly clear. When I opened my eyes underwater, I saw that one friend looked like Buddha and the other looked like Thay. We could not speak underwater, so we just smiled and enjoyed swimming freely together.

The one year as an aspirant and the five years as a monastic seemed to pass in the blink of an eye. And here I still am, swimming in the hot spring of the community. It is as if I have just finished a long bath, shedding the residual dust of the mind, leaving my entire body feeling light and renewed. Even after completing the 5-year program, I still find myself sitting with the Sangha, laughing, chatting, and practicing, just like in one of my other dreams. I'll tell you about it another time.

To this day, I am still hasty, occasionally lazy and sometimes grumpy and discontent, troubling the sisters around me. However, I still enjoy flowing with the sangha. My trust in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha continues to grow. Living and practicing with people of different personalities, I have many chances to look deeply at my ego through the diverse forms and colors reflected in the mirror of other people's speech, bodily conduct and thoughts. Looking closely, I realize that within their mirror, I exist; and within my mirror, they exist. It is challenging, but I learn every day that the path is beneficial for my personal growth.

So, I continue to ask myself, "Am I still a factory tofu, or have I leapt off the conveyor belt to play with others like the children we all are at heart?" ☺

# Transforming Resentment into Compassion

BROTHER CHÂN TRỜI ĐỊNH THÀNH



Last year, in January 2022, a few days after I ordained as a monk and moved to the monastic residence, I asked my ordination brother, Br. Dinh Tuc, to craft a calligraphy for me with the words “Beloved Community.” This phrase was used by Martin Luther King, Jr. to refer to the Sangha, the community of practice.

I posted this calligraphy on my bedroom wall in order to remind myself of inter-being rather than that of separate individuality. It worked for a while, but over time it became too familiar and I forgot the intended message. It needed to be renewed.

This calligraphy soon found a new vocation during summer. It all started with an intuition that dawned on me while chanting Namó Avalokiteshvaraya with the community. In the third round of chanting, I made an effort to extend my compassion to some individuals I resented in the political, media, and financial spheres for their deeply harmful actions. Indeed, as an observer and actor in the field of ethics of my society, at times, the sight or evocation of certain figures in the media-political field tended to provoke anger and resentment in me.

## Man is not our enemy

I wished to connect with these individuals in a more profound way: to connect with their humanity. I searched the internet for their photos and selected those in which they appeared at their best, that captured their most humane moments, for example, when they were children, in their family, or with their partner and children. I printed them and wrote their first name — rather than their surname — underneath the photo: ‘Bill’, ‘John’, ‘François’...

Then, I placed all the photos around the calligraphy “Beloved Community” as if to say: “I want to include you in my beloved community, regardless of what you’ve done, regardless of what you do.” It felt like a prayer.

I also placed next to the collage a quote from Thay:

*“There is a virus called CC, craving and corruption”*

## Everything in the world is interconnected

As weeks went by and photos were added, my relationship with these people transformed. The charge of resentment and anger toward them dissipated and gave way to empathy and greater

space in my heart, notwithstanding the inhuman acts I attributed to them. I no longer saw their acts as isolated, but collective, caused by a collective disease, by the same viruses. I saw that their actions were driven by greed and fear — fear of loss, fear of deviating from the group to which they belonged, and conflicting loyalties. I realized that if I had been born into the same family, if I had been influenced by the same people, educated by the same mentors, I would be just like them, and I would undoubtedly have participated in the same atrocities.

### “We, Sons of Eichmann”

My contemplation also helps me see that the photos placed around the calligraphy are only the visible faces of a profound dynamic that involves many others, active or passive accomplices, who are not visible. Without the passive complicity of the population, of which I am a part, could these acts have occurred? Why, then, keep an emotional charge against these individuals alone?

In “We, Sons of Eichmann”<sup>14</sup> Günther Anders proposes the following reflection:

“What do I call monstrous?”

1. That there has been institutional and industrial destruction of human beings; and by the millions.
2. That there have been leaders and executors for these acts: servile Eichmanns (men who accepted this work like any others, and exonerated themselves by referring to orders and loyalty) [...]
3. That millions of people were placed and kept in a situation where they knew nothing about it. And didn't know because they didn't want to know; and didn't want to know because they had no right to know. So millions of passive Eichmanns.”

The atrocious and long war in Vietnam would not have been possible without a sufficiently favorable American public opinion — sufficiently favorable because the public was kept under disinformation. Hence, Thay's courageous departure for the United States to reinform the American public and call for a halt to the war — a departure which earned him exile from his country.

Thay's example is nourishing in many ways. Before acting, he took the time to analyze the situation in depth, in order to obtain the most



Br. Dinh Thanh, Br. Dinh Tin, Br. Dao Son

accurate vision possible. In his book, *Lotus on a Sea of Fire*, published in 1967, Thay wrote no less than 70 pages analyzing the historical framework of the Vietnam war and looking deeply into the difficulties of the time he was writing, before making concrete proposals and taking action.

Following this contemplation, I continue to do my best — according to my ability and availability — to inform myself in depth and speak openly about the attacks on human dignity in my society, as the 14 Mindfulness Trainings invite me to. I note that following my creative experience with the calligraphy, I no longer fall so easily into the bias of resentment against political and media figures. I see them in myself, I see the causes in myself and around me, in my society. It's a real transformation, which is necessary to reestablish the human connection and enable me to take just and beneficial action, however modest. Here, in the beloved community of Plum Village, the multifold Sangha, it seems to me that we have the best conditions to do just that.

“The only thing worthy of you is compassion  
 –invincible, limitless, unconditional.  
 Hatred will never let you face the beast in man.  
 One day, when you face this beast alone  
 with your courage intact, your eyes kind, untroubled  
 (even as no one sees them),  
 out of your smile  
 will bloom a flower.  
 And those who love you  
 will behold you  
 across ten thousand worlds of birth and dying.”  
 –from the poem “Recommendation” ☞

14. Translated from the book “Wir Eichmannsöhne: offener Brief an Klaus Eichmann” by Günther Anders, Page 19

# My Novice Robe

BROTHER CHÂN TRỜI BÁT NHÃ

*Brother Troi Bat Nha ordained on 27 January 2022 in the Mimosa ordination family and currently resides and practices at Từ Đức Temple, Vietnam. He wrote the following letter on 20 December 2023.*

Dear beloved Thay,

Autumn is almost ending, and though winter has not yet arrived, there is already a little bit of chill to this cozy and warm temple, Tu Duc.

Beautiful moments in the early morning, relaxing and free steps in meditation, pleasant weather with the backdrop of the blue sky... A few leaves fall gently in the breeze, while morning dew drops embellish this serene space. My heart embraces them all with much peace.



The time that I live in the heart of the sangha as a 23-year-old novice, full of ideals and aspirations, is indeed precious. It is precious because we all share a mindful lifestyle and the same ideals. Everyday, I am able to collect and store little joys and simple happy moments.

Dear Thay, I feel so lucky because there are many novice monks (*śrāmaṇera*) and novice nuns (*śrāmaṇerikā*) at the temple. We are always working side-by-side, attending activities and creating our “childhood” together. I never forget the reminder our elder brothers and sisters have given us: “Novicehood is the most beautiful and powerful time, please treasure it when you still have it in your hands.” I was very happy and joyful to hear those encouraging words. My love and appreciation for these precious moments grow bigger as I live and practice as a novice in the sangha.

## **As long as there is gratitude, there is happiness**

Dear Thay, I feel fortunate to be your disciple. I love my novice brown robe. I deeply cherish the lifestyle infused with understanding and compassion that you, Thay, and the sangha build everyday. Thanks to this lifestyle, day by day, I have been nourished and able to grow in the love, embrace and support of the elder brothers and sisters.

A significant memory I hold dear is receiving the novice robe from the sangha after my ordination. Every time I fasten the eight buttons on my robe, I send my gratitude to the Buddha, the Patriarchs, Thay, the sangha, my blood family, all vegetation, minerals and the cosmos. Each button reminds me to generate gratitude for one element. I practice this daily to water the seed of gratitude within me, and to appreciate what is available to me. So that, when faced with difficulties, I will remember the beautiful and precious wealth I possess.

Through the novice brown robe, I can get in touch with the Buddha, the Patriarchs, Thay, and my spiritual family. Many times, I think, “If I share my thoughts, people will probably laugh at me.” I am often not sure whether to practice the gatha of wearing the robe, or continue with what I have been practicing with the eight buttons. Then suddenly, I realized that as long as I wear my robe with a clear awareness of being in touch with my spiritual family through the robe, that is practicing mindfulness in itself. My heart blooms like a flower, and that flower manifests on my lips everyday.



### Looking at each other in great siblinghood

I once had a difficulty with a monastic brother due to a misunderstanding while we were working together. Mental formations of blaming and self-pity came up in me, manifesting through my facial expressions, gestures and other behaviors. I wanted my brother to understand my feelings. I realized how childish I was in my way of behaving! Over the next three to four days, I practiced noble silence, sitting still to look deeply into myself and observe the mental formations manifesting and subsiding.

Reflecting on what I had said and done, I sometimes also recognized that this seed has been transmitted to me from my mom, that seed from dad, or my grandparents, which helped calm me down. However, despite this practice, every time I saw this brother, I still showed my “not beautiful” face and behavior. So, I went into the toilet and looked at my face in the mirror. I clearly saw my angry and upset face, which was not pleasant at all. And yet, my brother had had to endure my unpleasant behavior and face for the past three to four days. Suddenly, I felt much lighter in my heart.

I smiled to myself in the miraculous mirror and thought: “Hello, dear friend. Sorry to let this unpleasant face affect you and your beloved.” After that, I practiced touching the Earth in front of the Buddha and Thay. I whispered to Thay, “I will be present for my brother and definitely practice Beginning Anew to restore our communication today.”

After a few days of not talking to each other, I invited my brother to sit down and spend some time together. He had just finished mindful service, covered in sweat, and compassion for him rose in my heart even more. Sitting together, sharing and

listening to each other, our communication was restored. In moments of misunderstanding, when words clash and friction occurs among siblings, I believe we can take it as an opportunity to understand each other better and improve. Thanks to such an experience, I have this simple and nice story to recount to you, dear Thay.

### I have met Thay

Once, I saw Thay in my dream. At that time, I was in isolation from the sangha because of COVID-19. That evening, in my sleep, I saw Thay sitting silently in a room, having tea with someone. Upon seeing me, Thay told me to come and sit by his side. I looked at Thay attentively to see Thay clearly and to make sure whether or not I was really sitting with Thay. A dream for eternity! I have always wished for an opportunity to be Thay’s attendant. In the dream, I just sat there, listening to Thay’s sharing, which I cannot remember. Upon leaving the room, Thay gave me his walking stick. I thought, “I can’t remember if Thay ever used a walking stick.” Then Thay said, “Would you piggyback Thay?” I heard it very clearly in the dream. So, I piggybacked Thay and walked slowly without feeling tired (of course, because it was in a dream). Thay put his cheek next to my right ear. Suddenly, a question in Br. Phap Nguyen’s story about being Thay’s attendant, sounded next to my right ear: “Do you know that you are very lucky?”

I woke up startled, tears streaming down my face. I cried because I felt overwhelmingly happy. I quickly found my journal and pen to write down the details of that dream; it was just past four in the morning. I wrote down each word, and within me surged a profound belief that indeed, Thay was present in me, and I was in Thay.

I know that I am very fortunate to be born as a human, to encounter the Three Jewels, and to be a disciple of Thay. I see that all the miraculous conditions and teachings of Thay have been transmitted to me, igniting the flame within me so that I can become a “little novice” in the embrace of the sangha. I am grateful to you, dear Thay, I am grateful to the sangha, and to all conditions that have come together for me to manifest.

Your disciple,  
Chân Trời Bát Nhã ☸

# Flowers of peace

LAURENT BERNAYS

*Laurent is a musician and practitioner who has been with the Sangha for more than 20 years. In 2023, Laurent helped to oversee the “tree project” in Lower Hamlet. This letter is a reflection of his experience during his stay in Plum Village. He currently lives in the Pyrenees with his family.*

Dear Thay, Dear Sisters, Dear beloved Sangha,

This letter is to thank you with all my heart for welcoming me to work on renewing the Plum orchard in Lower Hamlet. Today, a marvelous meadow of flowers has appeared on the open hillside from which we can contemplate the sunset, showering us with its colorful cosmos as we walk meditatively through the ever-changing seasons.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the Tree Family team for working with me on this collective adventure, and especially to Sr. Luc Nghiem for her great commitment, and following through on her deep vision for the hamlet and taking care of Mother Earth.

“The flowers of peace bloom in beauty” is engraved on the Great Temple Bell. It has now manifested as this three-hectare meadow and resonates like the poem throughout the entire cosmos. Like the wind joins the songs of the Great Temple Bell, so does this field of flowers join Thay’s poem. These two were my commitments as a Bodhisattva: to cultivate the Earth and cultivate loving speech through song, cultivating the flowers in the Earth and in my soul.

This poem is my mantra when I cultivate the urban gardens in the poor neighborhoods of my city, and is spread among visitors in schools, hospitals or retirement homes like an invisible wave, or as a silent song of presence, when children and parents come to sit on the benches.

During my stay in Lower Hamlet, I took advantage of the opportunity to deepen the practice with song I’ve been engaged in for 25 years, to rediscover the evergreen old source of Western



songs, to rediscover the natural modes of ancient or Pyrenean songs, and little by little to hear again with a new, deeper, finer listening.

## Listening to the Great Temple Bell

My practice was to listen deeply to the Great Temple Bell at Lower Hamlet as often as possible with the Buddha’s ears. Discreetly, at the end of the evening meditation, I would come and sit by the apple tree, on a bench or a step of the bell tower, turning my gaze towards the starry sky, the clouds, or the soft moon. Heedless of rain and wind, I would find a place to sit and enter fully into the sound of the bell and the chants. It is a simple practice I have invented for myself out of the sheer joy of entering into sounds, then sounds within sounds.

First of all, I hear – without seeing – the steps of the sister who comes to chant at the Great Temple Bell, perceiving the sound from the movements of her getting ready to chant, and entering into



concentration on the noises of the night. I listen deeply without naming. I am taken by surprise to hear the first bell resound, that seemingly comes from nowhere, making the particles of the air vibrate and carry its harmonics into space. This first sound, inviting you into the night, is like an immediate deep vision into where everything begins to vibrate, “penetrating the entire cosmos,” and reaching “the darkest places” of our individual and collective consciousnesses. This sound, while in essence empty, resonates like the voice of the Buddha, it is said, and can free all beings from sorrows and fear. Listen beyond words to this sound of pure vibration, the resonance of a natural sound that lets us touch our true nature in an instant.

I listen to the chanting and the bell until the last sound, and to the slightest intonation of the person chanting, who tries – each day a little more – to unite perfectly with the Buddha’s voice, advancing closer to the pure vibration of this bell. I continue to listen until she walks away on the small gravel path, which, in turn, makes a melody.

I then move closer to the bell, wrapping my arms loosely around it like a tree, a few millimeters away, and allow the low harmonics to penetrate my skeleton, my cells, the pores of my skin, soothing me to deep peace. I continue by stepping onto the Earth and reciting the gatha I have composed for myself.

“With each step,  
I enter into deep listening  
to the song of the world.

Each step brings me into this song of the world, which changes in every moment, and has no beginning or end, and I can then return to my true home, attentive to all beings, be it the food processor in the kitchen, a bush full of birds, the chainsaw, the sound of flowing water, or a crowd.

Everything becomes the voice of the Buddha, the sound of the rising tide, or sometimes even a sudden silence as after the Lion’s Roar.

### The tree of praise

The second practice I would like to share with you is what I call the tree of praise. When I prune trees – my friends – I begin by meeting the tree, or it meets me, or we meet. If trees, like humans, do not receive proper care, end up darkened in their heart, especially fruit trees. They become bush-like, a tangle of branches, and the tight rubbing of the branches will cause injuries or illnesses. So, after greeting the tree, I begin to get in touch with its heart, freeing the stem one branch at a time, and little by little rays of light shine through again. When it seems to me that the tree is breathing again, I breathe with it, then meditate with it, flooding myself with light. I become the tree, and offer a song of praise, an improvisation or a whisper.

This, dear sisters, dear Sangha and dear Thay, is what I wanted to share with you from my heart about my practice of deep listening and loving speech in singing. It is a path of study that I will continue to explore in this life. I will end my letter with a praise for the birds:

*The one that came out of my mouth as a child.  
The bird that later, as a young adult, invited me into a garden to make sounds while listening to the chirping.  
The bird that appeared in a dream and told me to go and look for it in the Pyrenees.  
The primitive bird of my Lakota friends who sing on the ground.  
The bird that landed on To’s flute, a tale written by Thay  
The bird that one morning sprang from the mouth of a Vietnamese sister and soared like the Nightingale.*

The bird in the words of the poet René Char:

*“At the height of the storm, there is always a bird to reassure us. It is the unknown bird, it sings before flying away.”* ☞



# The Sunny Days

TIÊN NGUYỄN

*Tien is a young lay friend in Australia. From time to time, Tien comes to Stream Entering Monastery in Melbourne to practice with the sisters. Her joy and transformation manifest as gently and naturally as the misty spring rain. Below is a letter, in which Tien shared her reflection with a sister.*

Dear Sister,

Last time you asked me what I thought about the sisters, but I didn't have a chance to answer; so, I'll do it in this letter. ☺

The limitations of language can complicate things. I don't know how to say it adequately – too succinct is unsatisfactory, but too long-winded does not achieve anything. Nevertheless, in a world beyond language, we already have each other in this moment. Everything feels gentle like a beautiful dream.

Yesterday, I had dinner with several young friends from work. I was glad they didn't hesitate to take food from my plate as though they were at

home enjoying a family dinner. Seeing everyone huddled around, sharing joys with one another, I breathed out a sigh of relief. Luckily, I didn't become what I imagined I should be according to ideals of success in a professional career; if I had obtained everything I wished for, I might have turned into a monster.

The young friends reminded me of my early twenties. Regrettably, I was not as innocent then, not earnest enough with life; there were only struggles and doubts. At times, I would be at the height of my success, yet I felt like I was sitting in the abyss. I truly had lost so much (more than I ever imagined). The consequences and impact of suffering were spreading like a storm; they inherently were not worthwhile for this short life.

I'm beginning to see the connections in me spreading out and connecting with everything around. The blocks of logic have slowly disintegrated. The disjointed confusions in me at times naturally reconnect like a swollen river flowing over the parched land, smoothing out the crusty earth.



I've also stopped rejecting the imperfect loves that do not meet my expectations. It was at this place of acceptance that I felt the presence of the sisters around me. These miracles I've experienced are continuations of the things the sisters have helped me see, and also of the lovely things that have come into my life.

There is no need to keep people near me. No matter where they go in the world, they will always be in my heart.

People often say that I am smart and I also see it in myself. Yet, I didn't want to study anything when I was at the monastery. The sisters sweetly spoiled me. They cooked delicious food for me, allowed me to sleep wherever I preferred, let me make mistakes and be silly, allowed me to love and always welcomed this mischievous little child who did not yet know how to flow along.

To me, the sisters' compassionate tolerance is like a superpower. It is a type of love that is full of openness and freedom. Being embraced by that love, all knowledge, logic, comparison that I have suddenly disappears, leaving me speechless. Anything I say seems inappropriate. I therefore, would just sit still and enjoy the tenderness of the heart, tasting the sweetly gentle happiness that is not describable by words.

Suddenly, I feel so much love for the Buddha, our ancestral teachers and Thay. They had to find ways to encase such beautifully simple things into the limited and complicated confines of languages in order to share them with us, because our hearts have been blind for so long. A truly extraordinary endeavor!

I'm grateful to the Buddha, our ancestral teachers, Thay, the sisters and everyone who has been a continuation of this path so that we have the conditions to meet each other amidst this great big world.

There are spectacularly sunny days and there are days of endless rain. However, I'm now simply doing the things that the sisters have done for me. I know I will still make mistakes, encounter stormy days, and wander around. There will be times when my hands become so thorny that they will inflict wounds on whatever they touch. During those times, I hope we can sit together to enjoy a meal or ice cream in silence, or laugh together watching a koala bear outside the front door...

I hope that all may have lasting peace. ☸



# Barriers and Bridges

PHI VÂN KIỀU TRINH



*I am sitting by a pond full of lotus flowers. This year is already half over, yet the buds of the lotus flowers have still not bloomed. They take their time.*

*The sun shines on the lush green and bowl shaped lotus leaves. Yesterday, I saw water collecting in these leaves, swirling around with the wind.*

*I gaze at the forest behind the pond. The enormous trees reach almost to the light blue sky. Their leaves rustle, as if they are all waving to me excitedly.*

*I smile back. Alongside the pond a bird hops through the meadow. Even though he can fly, it must be beautiful to wander on the Earth sometimes.*

*I feel how Mother Earth holds me. Throughout my life and until the end of my life she will do so.*

*Since my arrival here (Plum Village), I have realized that I have found another paradise on this Earth.*

*Surrounded by nature and by mindful and loving people I feel safe and so alive.*

*This place in southwestern France reminds me of my two homelands (Germany and Vietnam). Here lotus flowers and bamboo trees grow along with a few banana trees amidst Western European flora.*

*Here, nuns and monks in dark brown robes and shaven heads live. Most of them speak Vietnamese and I feel a slight heaviness because even though we share the same homeland, I hardly speak their language.*

*I feel that it is easier for me to connect to the Western nun because all my life I have tried and learned to adapt to Western people, so that I can be a part of them.*

*Those who are now unfamiliar to me are those who I share the same roots with.*

*I go inwards repeatedly. Bells ring regularly in this place. They remind us to pause and return to ourselves. Over time I learn that there is a home that needs no words, where language barriers do not become walls. That is the place within me.*

*In Noble Silence we spend the time from dusk until morning. During this time I learned that the most important language is that of the heart.*

A very wise sister once said to me: "It's like the leaves. One day they fall from the branches down to the Earth. They want to get back to their roots." The sister could not have described better how I feel as a German-Vietnamese and how much I long to find my way back to my roots. The first time I went to Plum Village for the Asian Retreat, I felt like my search had come to an end. Between the silence and my breath, a space was created in which so much

could unfold. Suddenly my ancestors, my homeland and my roots were very close to me. I was able to experience that everything I had longed for was not only to be found on the other side of the world, thousands of kilometers away. What I was looking for also existed inside of me. With the help of the practice, the Sangha and Thay's teachings, I can be close to my roots in every moment. ☸

# Retreats Calendar 2024

PLUM VILLAGE COMMUNITY

## Plum Village – France

- 23.02 – 24.05 Spring general practice weeks
- 26.04 – 03.05 Wellness Retreat: Well-being of Body and Mind (New Hamlet)
- 03.05 – 10.05 Young Asian Diaspora Retreat: Nourishing Our Roots (Lower Hamlet)
- 03.05 – 17.05 Happy Farm deep ecology retreat (Upper Hamlet)
- 07.05 – 24.05 Happy Farm week (Lower Hamlet)
- 17.05 – 24.05 Vietnamese Business Retreat: Right Livelihood (Upper Hamlet)
- 01.06 – 15.06 June Retreat on Applied Ethics
- 09.07 – 01.08 Summer Opening for families with children & teens; individuals & couples
- 10.08 – 17.08 Wake Up Retreat
- 20.09 – 27.09 Retreat for BIPOC practitioners (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color)
- 09.10 – 07.01.25 90-day Rains Retreat
- 20.12 – 27.12.25 Holy Season Retreat
- 27.12 – 03.01.25 New Year's Retreat

For more information, please visit: [www.plumvillage.org](http://www.plumvillage.org)

## Healing Spring Monastery and Maison de L'Inspir – Paris, France

For more information, please visit: [www.healingspringmonastery.org](http://www.healingspringmonastery.org) and [maisondelinspir.org](http://maisondelinspir.org)

## European Institute of Applied Buddhism – Germany

- 28.03 – 01.04 Easter Retreat
- 10.04 – 14.04 Course on Thay's life story and what we can learn from it
- 03.07 – 07.07 International Walking Retreat
- 23.07 – 28.07 International Retreat: Doing Nothing is Something
- 05.08 – 10.08 Dutch Retreat: Be a Gift for This World
- 12.08 – 17.08 German Retreat
- 04.09 – 08.09 Vietnamese Retreat
- 02.10 – 06.10 Hiking Retreat
- 17.10 – 20.10 German OI Retreat
- 27.12 – 02.01.25 New Year's Retreat: Celebrate Life

For more information, please visit: [www.eiab.eu](http://www.eiab.eu)

## Asian Institute of Applied Buddhism – Hong Kong (Lotus Pond Temple)

- 27.07 – 30.07 Family Retreat
- 19.10 – 23.10 Health Retreat

For more information, please visit: [www.pvfhk.org](http://www.pvfhk.org)

## Blue Cliff Monastery – New York, USA

- 24.04 – 28.04 OI Retreat: The Art of Happiness
- 31.05 – 02.06 BIPOC Retreat
- 12.06 – 16.06 Wake Up Retreat
- 10.06 – 14.06 Family Retreat

For more information, please visit: [www.bluecliffmonastery.org](http://www.bluecliffmonastery.org)

### **Deer Park Monastery – California, USA**

- 20.03 – 24.03 International Online Retreat: At Home in the World
- 07.04 – 13.04 Wake Up Retreat
- 18.04 – 21.04 Climate Action Mindfulness Retreat
- 08.05 – 12.05 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary BIPOC Retreat
- 14.05 – 14.06 Vietnamese Wake Up Tour
- 26.06 – 30.06 Family Retreat
- 10.07 – 14.07 Teen Camp
- 28.07 – 03.08 Mindful Backpacking Retreat
- 11.09 – 15.09 Vietnamese Retreat
- 13.10 – 12.01.25 90-rains Rains Retreat
- 29.12 – 02.01.25 Holiday Retreat

*For more information, please visit: [www.deerparkmonastery.org](http://www.deerparkmonastery.org)*

### **Magnolia Grove Monastery – Mississippi, USA**

- 15.09 – 15.12 90-day Rains Retreat
- 10.10 – 14.10 Silent Retreat
- 28.12 – 01.01.25 Holiday Retreat

*For more information, please visit: [www.magnoliagrovemonastery.org](http://www.magnoliagrovemonastery.org)*

### **Thai Plum Village – Thailand**

- 28.04 – 04.05 Wake Up Retreat
- 02.06 – 09.06 Retreat for business people
- 17.07 – 23.07 Family Retreat
- 01.08 – 29.10 90-day Summer Retreat

*For more information, please visit: [www.thaiplumvillage.org](http://www.thaiplumvillage.org)*

### **Mountain Spring Monastery – Australia**

- 29.03 – 01.04 Easter Retreat

*For more information, please visit: [www.mountainspringmonastery.org](http://www.mountainspringmonastery.org)*

### **Stream Entering Monastery – Australia**

- 08.03 – 11.03 Healthcare Professional Retreat
- 29.03 – 01.04 Family Retreat: Harmony at Home
- 25.04 – 28.04 English-speaking retreat for adults
- 10.05 – 12.05 Cooking Retreat
- 17.05 – 16.06 1-month retreat for those with monastic aspirations
- 02.06 – 31.08 90-day Summer Retreat
- 26.09 – 29.09 English-speaking retreat for adults
- 11.10 – 13.10 Wake Up Retreat
- 22.12 – 26.12 Christmas Family Retreat

*For more information, please visit: [www.nhapluu.org](http://www.nhapluu.org) ☞*

