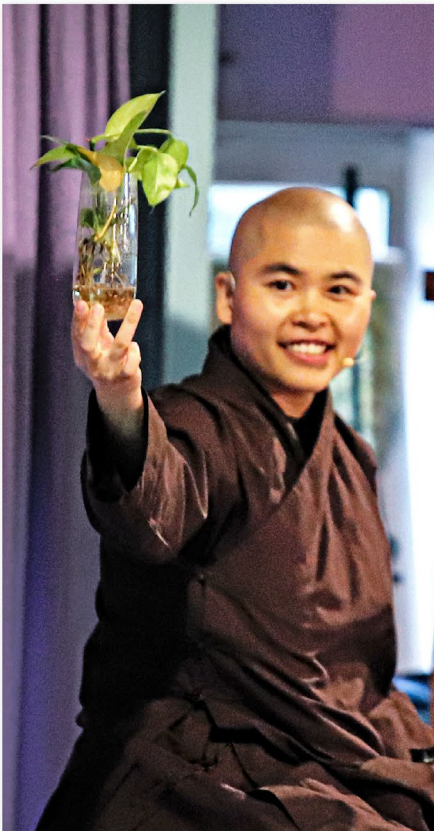


Clum Village  
newsletter

#48

2025







each breath  
gives life



each step  
brings healing





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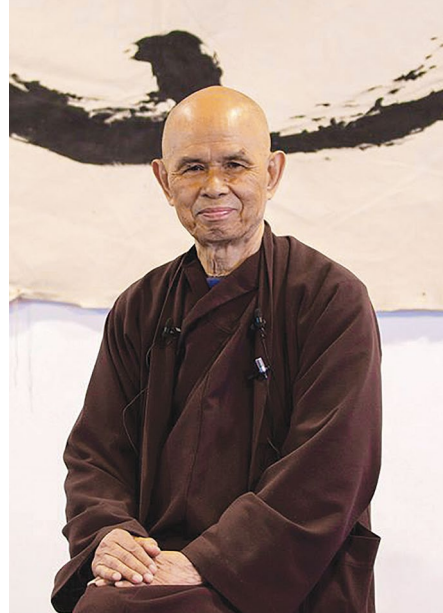


# Reclaiming your Sovereignty

## A Dharma talk by Thay

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Dear sangha, today is the 25th of November, 2001. We are in the Upper Hamlet of Plum Village. This is our first Dharma talk for the three-month Rains retreat. It's wonderful that we have the opportunity to come together for a three-month retreat. Not many people in the world have the opportunity and the chance to do so. So, we must rejoice and be aware that we are very lucky. We have all the conditions so that we can succeed in our practice of being peace and making peace within us and in our community. This is the foundation for peace in the world.



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### Brotherhood and sisterhood as our daily food

Our practice is to build brotherhood and sisterhood, because without it, happiness cannot be possible. We don't need someone to tell us whether we are succeeding or not in our practice, because we are capable of seeing whether brotherhood and sisterhood is being built every day or not through our way of talking, acting, and living our daily life. Brotherhood and sisterhood nourishes us and helps us to have enough energy in order to be happy and to go far in helping people around us and in helping society. So, everything you do should help in creating more brotherhood and sisterhood, and this can be done only by building peace within ourselves.

### Taking care of yourself: the first action for peace

There is a kind of energy that we should be able to generate in our daily life: the energy of mindfulness. The energy of mindfulness helps us to be fully present in every moment of our daily life. This is very important, because in our daily life, we are very seldom there for ourselves. Our body, our feelings, our perceptions are there, but we are not there to attend to them. The practice is to go home to ourselves in order to attend to

our body, to our feelings, to our perceptions and not run away from ourselves. Running away is the tendency of the world today. Our practice is to go home to ourselves in order to take care of our body, our feelings, our perceptions, etc.

Without the energy of mindfulness, you cannot be there. If you are really there while drinking tea, you are really drinking your tea. If your mind is lost in the past or in worries about the future, you are not really there to drink your tea. You are drinking your tea like a machine and you are not aware that you are drinking your tea. That is why the practice is to go back to yourself and drink your tea in mindfulness. Everyone can do it.

Unless we really practice, we will follow our habit of running away from ourselves: we do not drink our tea mindfully, we do not cook our breakfast mindfully, we do not look at our friend mindfully. Mindfulness is the energy that helps us to be there in order to be aware of what is going on. What is going on is that I am drinking my tea, and my friend is sitting in front of me. What is going on is the blue sky or the sound of the bird. I have to be fully there in order to recognize their presence. This energy of mindfulness is generated by the practice of mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful drinking, mindful eating. Therefore, we should learn how to do everything mindfully.

## Reconnecting with the body

When you breathe in, bring your mind back and become aware of your in-breath:

*“Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in.”*

This is mindful breathing. Your in-breath and out-breath is the door by which you can come back to your body and take care of it. Going back to your body by the way of the breath is the royal way, the best way.

Your body, your feelings, your perceptions, your mental formations and your consciousness constitute the territory of yourself. Your territory has been occupied not by yourself, but by despair, by anger, by frustration, by illusion. That is why you have to go back to your territory in order to restore your full sovereignty.

This territory comprises five elements. *The first element is form.* It means your physical body. We should be able to look at our physical body as a river, because it's always flowing. Every cell of our body is a drop of water in that river. Our body is flowing. It's changing every minute, every second. We have to go back to our body in order to become aware of what is going on, to embrace our body, and to allow our body to calm down, to relax.

*“Breathing in, I calm my body.  
Breathing out, I smile to my body.”*

This is an exercise proposed by the Buddha. You have to go back to your form and make peace with it, because there is war in your body. You have made war with your body by the way you eat, by the way you drink, by the way you work. You have abused your body. It is very important to go back to that part of your territory in order to make peace.

## The art of deep relaxation

Whether you are walking, lying down, or sitting, learn to go back to your body by mindful breathing. Embrace your body tenderly. Allow it to rest and to restore itself.

You have to treat your body with compassion. Mindfulness can create compassion in order to

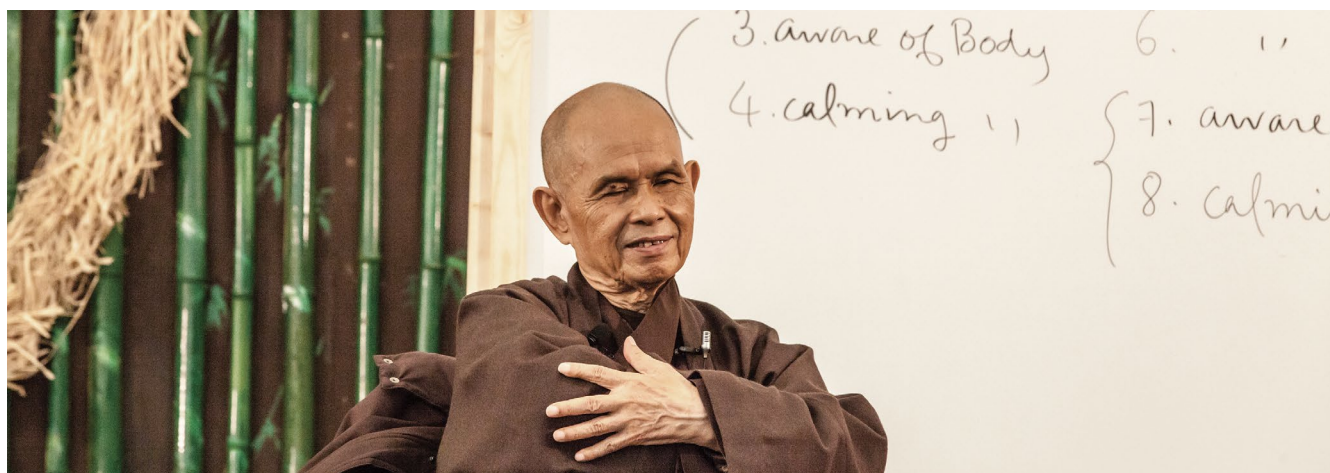
embrace your body. It's like a mother embracing her ailing baby. So, you should learn the art of total and deep relaxation of your body. This is an act of compassion, an act of peace.

In the medical school of Harvard University, there is a group of people who have studied the effect of meditation on healing the body for the past 35 years. They have found that when you are in a state of concentration - if your mind is not assailed by thinking of the past or the future and not caught in your projects or your worries, if you are concentrated on your breath with your mindful breathing, and you allow that mindful breathing to be there and to embrace yourself - then these are favorable conditions for healing. Your body has a natural ability to restore herself, to heal herself, and to renew herself - if only you authorize your body to do so.

These conditions are the kind of conditions that are the opposite of the conditions that have made your body sick. If you allow your body to be carried away by worries and fear, then the conditions for sickness will be created. If you know how to concentrate, to allow your body to be free and to rest, it will be able to restore itself.

## Embracing feelings and emotions

The second element of your territory is called feeling: painful feelings, pleasant feelings, neutral feelings, mixed feelings, all kinds of feelings. Here, you have another river flowing day and night within you: the river of feelings. Your feelings are born and affect the other sections of your territory. There are feelings and emotions; and when they manifest, you are very seldom there to take care of them. You are afraid of your feelings. You are afraid of your emotions. When you have an unpleasant feeling or a painful emotion, your tendency is to run away, to try to run away and to take refuge outside of yourself. You don't know the art of going back to yourself in order to recognize your emotions and your feelings, to take good care of them, to embrace them tenderly, and to allow them to calm down.







Another exercise offered by the Buddha is:

*“Breathing in, I’m aware of my feelings.  
Breathing out, I calm my feelings.”*

Our feelings are like a suffering baby in us who has been left alone. We don’t know how to take care of our feelings and emotions. Not only do we have war in the realm of form, of our physical body, but we also have war in the domain of our feelings. We have to come home to our feelings, recognize each of the feelings and embrace it - not try to fight or suppress any feeling, but recognize, embrace, and help it to calm down before we can go further.

### **Liberating ourselves from wrong perceptions**

The third section of the territory is perception. We perceive realities. We have an image of ourselves; that is a perception. We have an image of the other person or group of people. We have images of everything in the cosmos created by our own perceptions, and these images are often very wrong. Because of our wrong perceptions, we suffer very deeply and we make the people around us suffer deeply.

Our perceptions are also at war with each other. There are a lot of contradictions within

the domain of our perceptions. We perceive something, and the object of our perception can start a lot of suffering within our body and mind. Suppose you are walking in the twilight and you see a snake. It may or may not be a snake. In the twilight, you think that it is a snake, but it may be a piece of rope.

Wrong perceptions happen in our brain. They cause an electric current, a nervous current, to go through your brain. That current touches the adrenal gland, and causes the gland to release a chemical substance called adrenaline into the bloodstream. With the adrenaline in the bloodstream, your heart begins to beat very quickly. When adrenaline reaches the liver, the liver releases a lot of sugar. All of these are preparations for you to fight. You are in a position to run, to fight, and your muscles need more sugar. Then, there is a contraction of the small veins in the digestive system, and the act of digesting the food in your stomach begins to stop. That is why indigestion happens. It can last for two or three hours like that.

So, a perception happens in your brain and can cause your body and your feelings to be in a state of panic, of war, of fear. Meditation allows us to go back to the river of perceptions and to look deeply into the nature of our perceptions. Wrong perceptions are the foundation of many

unpleasant, painful feelings and emotions; and we have allowed them to be like that for a long time. We have not had the habit of going home in order to recognize them, to embrace them, to calm them down, and to look deeply into their nature. This is what it means to meditate.

Understanding will liberate us from wrong perceptions and from the suffering caused by our wrong perceptions.

## Understanding mental formations

In the Buddhist tradition, our physical body is called a formation. Formation, *samskara*, is a technical term. It means anything that manifests on the basis of conditions, like this flower. This flower is a formation, based on conditions like the earth, the grain, the compost, and the gardener. Many, many conditions have come together in order to help this flower to manifest itself like this. So, this flower is a formation. Our body is a formation. It's called a physical formation.

Our body is a physical formation. Our feelings and our perceptions are mental formations. According to Buddhist psychology, there are 51 categories of mental formations. When I was a novice, I had to learn all 51 by heart. One is perception, another is feeling. Mindfulness is also a mental formation, too. It is one we should work on and develop, because that will bring about transformation and healing. There are negative mental formations like anger, despair, jealousy, and fear; but there are also positive, wholesome mental formations like loving kindness, compassion, mindfulness, concentration, etc.

## Reclaiming our sovereignty

The fifth domain of our territory is called consciousness. Consciousness contains all kinds of seeds that can manifest into mental formations. It is like the soil that is keeping all the seeds within itself. When the rain falls, these seeds will be touched by the water and manifest in the upper level of our consciousness, and become mental formations.

So, you see that the territory of our person is very large. If we do not know how to bring peace and order and well-being into our territory, we cannot help a friend; we cannot help a brother or a sister to do the same. That is why to restore peace, to restore order and bring well-being into our territory is the first act of peace. Without this practice, peace outside will not be possible.

Outside is also a territory. If the territory inside is occupied, we have no more sovereignty over it and it becomes a mess. When it becomes a mess, it contributes to the situation of war outside. The territory outside is just a projection of the territory inside, because the land in which we

live is a collective creation of our consciousness, of our inner self. Suppose we are 100 people who are peaceful. We are capable of smiling and loving each other. Then, the piece of land in which we live will become peaceful. The Kingdom of God inside determines the Kingdom of God outside. Paradise is a collective manifestation, and hell is also a collective manifestation. It depends on our territory inside.

We are the king or queen who rules our territory, but we are not very responsible. We have abandoned our territory. We have lost our sovereignty over our territory. We have allowed war and violence and conflict to take over. It's very important to go home and reclaim our territory, and you can rely on the support of your sangha to go home. If you go home alone, you might not be strong enough to restore and reclaim your sovereignty.

Go home by what? Go home by the energy of mindfulness.

*“Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.  
Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.”*

You begin with some shyness, making the attempt to go home to yourself. You hesitate a little bit, but you want to go home to yourself. You are a little bit shy because your territory has become very strange to you, and that is why you make an attempt to breathe in mindfully and breathe out mindfully. Your in-breath is already part of your territory. You really become aware of your in-breath and you become aware of your out-breath. And while breathing, you don't pay attention to anything else. You just embrace your in-breath and become fully aware that this is your in-breath and this is your out-breath. Just breathing like that for half a minute, you see the situation differently.

Your in-breath has become a little bit deeper; your out-breath has become a little bit longer. There is a little bit more peace in your in-breath and your out-breath. When the quality of your in-breath and out-breath has increased, there is more harmony, more peace in your breathing. Then, you can step into your body and channel to your body a little bit of the peace and harmony you have already created. That is the practice.

When you practice mindful walking, you create a little bit of harmony and peace with your steps. Then, using that amount of peace and well-being that you have acquired through the practice of mindful breathing and mindful walking, you give it to your body. If you are in a sitting position or a lying position and continue to breathe in and out mindfully, the peace and well-being in your breathing begins to flow into your body and your body begins to experience peace. The energy of mindfulness will begin to come and recognize



every part of your body: “Oh dear, oh dear, I have abandoned you. I have let you down for a long time. Now I am back. I am sorry, but I am finally back.”

So, with your in-breath and out-breath, you embrace your body as a whole. You embrace each part of your body:

*“Breathing in, I’m aware of my heart.  
Breathing out, I smile to my heart.”*

You stay with your heart for one or two minutes. Maybe this is the first time you have come home to your heart and embraced it tenderly with your energy of mindfulness. In the past, you have not shown your sympathy, your love, and your care to your heart. You smoke, you drink alcohol, you worry too much; you were not very kind to your heart. Now, you come back to your heart with your full presence, embracing it tenderly, smiling to it, promising that you will take good care of it. This is the practice of love and peace. If you don’t succeed with your body and with your feelings, how can you succeed in bringing peace to society or to your family?

Our society is organized in such a way that encourages us to do the opposite. Television, magazines, music, everything helps you to run away from yourself. You have 10 or 15 minutes, and if you don’t have anything to do, you turn on the television, pick up a magazine, or listen to music. You are afraid, because you know that going back to yourself, you will encounter the war within. You have been running away from your kingdom.

## **The role of the sangha**

If you know how to equip yourself with the energy of mindfulness, if you know how to make use of the collective energy of mindfulness of your sangha, then you can go home to yourself without fear. That is why the Buddhist practice of meditation needs the sangha. You may be overwhelmed by the energy of pain and despair in yourself, but with the amount of energy of mindfulness given to you by the sangha, you’ll be able to go home and make peace with your body and feelings by learning how to embrace them.

Learn how to make use of your energy of mindfulness and the collective energy of mindfulness of the sangha. That is the advantage of living and practicing with the sangha. If you throw a stone into a river, it sinks right away. But if you have a boat, you can carry many tons of stones and yet you don’t sink. You think that you are going to sink because of the amount of suffering in you. But if you know how to make use of the boat of the sangha, you are not going to sink, no matter how big your sorrow, your pain, and your despair.

Taking refuge in the sangha is not a declaration of faith. It is a practice. You know that the sangha is made of elements that are practicing mindfulness. They generate the energy of mindfulness together. Allow the sangha to embrace your pain, to transport you, and not to worry. It’s very, very important.

You have the capacity of building a sangha, too. When I first came to the West, I was all alone. I came in order to call for a cessation of the war in Vietnam. I was alone. I was not allowed to go home because of what I had said. I knew that I should be supported, so I began to build a sangha. And now, our sangha is big; it is everywhere in many, many countries. But we should always remember that peace and well-being begins with ourselves.

For me, the next Buddha can take the form of a sangha. When we join the sangha, we are determined to abandon the old way of seeking individual happiness. Individualism is the characteristic of our civilization, and it has created so much suffering. Learn to live as a sangha. Look at the sangha as your body. Surrender yourself to the sangha. Take the joy and happiness of the sangha to be your joy and happiness. You’ll be free from most of your suffering, and we’ll be able to flow to the ocean as a river. We are sure to arrive at the ocean. But, if we keep being a drop of water, we have no hope of arriving at the ocean. We will evaporate before that.



# The Great Architect of the Culture of Peace

Vũ Đức Tâm - Former Ambassador of Vietnam to UNESCO  
**In memory of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh**



*This article was originally published in January 2023 in the commemorative book Đến Đi Thong Dong (Coming and Going in Freedom), honoring the life and legacy of our beloved Teacher on the occasion of his One-Year Memorial.*



As part of its 2006 International Day of Vesak in commemoration of the 2550th anniversary of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and parinirvana, UNESCO was preparing to hold the International Buddhist Conference in Paris to acknowledge Buddhism's role in and contribution to the practice of peace and nonviolence. Ambassadors, Representatives, and Permanent Delegates of UNESCO's Buddhist member countries were invited to the rehearsal meeting. Although leaders, directors, and presidents of many Buddhist monasteries, Dharma institutions and secular universities around the world were present at this event, Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh (Thay) was not.

On my inquiry with the head of the organizing committee, I discovered that as a renowned spiritual leader, Thay was always busy. During that time, he was unfortunately not in France. "The organizing committee would very much appreciate it if you could invite the Venerable to the conference," added the committee's head. I couldn't promise anything by then, only say I would try my best.

With that, my wife, Pham Binh Dam - Secondary Secretary cum. Deputy Head of the Delegation (Vietnamese Consul General in Hong Kong, and former Director of Vietnam's Department of Translation and Interpretation DOTI) - and I were en route to the Plum Village monastery. We were warmly received and shown around the different hamlets of the monastery by Thay himself, Sister Chan Khong, and Brother Phap An. Located 600 km from Paris in southwestern France, Plum Village was a picturesque landscape tucked peacefully away from all of the city's hustle and bustle, making it a perfect environment for turning inward. The rudimentary temples - juxtaposed with beautiful trees, bamboo groves, and lotus ponds - bore a resemblance to the great sceneries only seen in the Vietnamese countryside.

During our stay in Plum Village - besides sitting meditation, walking meditation, and Dharma talks - we had many opportunities to spend personal time with Thay. At the earliest opportunity, I expressed UNESCO's fervent wish to have Thay's presence and public speech on the practice of peace at the conference at the UNESCO headquarters. After a momentary pause, instead of giving us an answer, Thay said he was disappointed with UNESCO's talking the talk but not walking the talk and he was at a loss for words. Only then did I realize why Thay had turned down UNESCO's invitation from the beginning. Though quite downhearted, I still encouraged myself, "Don't despair, dear me!" (a song by Trinh Cong Son).

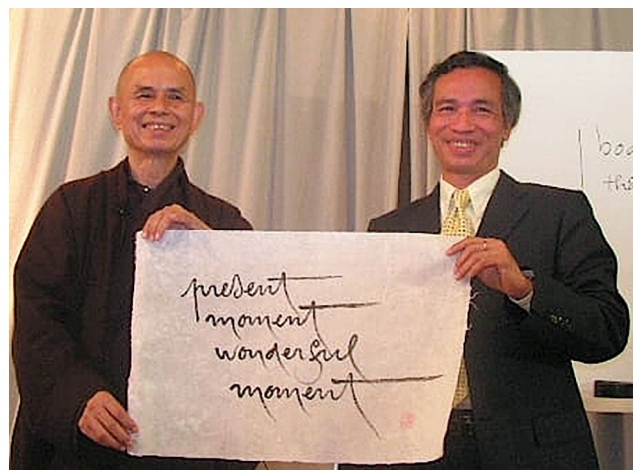
In the lighthearted discussions that followed, besides those about Vietnamese culture, we mainly focused our sharings on Plum Village. Thay emphasized Plum Village's walking the

talk with concrete actions: both monastic and lay practitioners not only lived side by side and practiced peace and nonviolence, but also welcomed thousands of people - including children, college students, parents, teachers, police officers, businesspeople, congresspeople, etc. - around the world to join them. Thay spoke of some important Plum Village retreats, such as those for police officers, correction-centers administrative personnel, members of Congress in the US, and most importantly, the Palestinian-Israeli retreats, which had seen many transformations.

After two weeks - of breathing, sitting and walking mindfully together, listening deeply to one another, and using loving speech - everyone from both sides came to realize that they all suffered the same, and the root cause lay in the wrong perceptions they had of one another. They could - little by little - eat side by side and walk hand in hand in meditation. Before leaving the monastery, they made it a point to contribute to the lessening of suffering back in their countries by encouraging others to practice the same.

By the end of our stay in Plum Village, Thay still did not confirm as to whether he would attend the conference, but he invited us to a Dharma talk. At the end of the talk, as I was still wondering whether he would say Yes or No, Thay unexpectedly called on me to give a short speech to the host. Knowing that I could not say No, I quickly improvised some key points I had in mind. I first introduced UNESCO and the culture of peace. As violence and conflicts were prevalent in many places around the world, UNESCO recognized the even more important role that the Buddha's teachings were playing in building a culture of sustainable peace. What Plum Village had been doing aligned well with UNESCO's long-term goals.

After that, I went over a few points I most appreciated in Thay's talk, especially the story of the Lady of Nam Xuong. The husband - having been pushed around by his complexes and not listening deeply to his wife - eventually found himself in an appalling tragedy. Lady Nam Xuong took her own life and the family ended up being broken.





The greatest victory was victory over ourselves. Although it was never easy, I believed it was very important to curb our sense of self-importance to truly listen to the other person so that right understanding and true love could be possible.

After my short speech, Thay thanked me and gave me a few books, along with the calligraphy “*Present moment, wonderful moment*”, one of the core teachings of the Order of Interbeing and the school of Engaged Buddhism he had founded. Finally - and also what I’d looked forward to the most - Thay asked what one should talk about if one were to attend the UNESCO conference. Unhesitatingly, I said, “Please roundly criticize UNESCO as much as you’d like and talk about the Plum Village practice, dear Thay. That will already be more than good enough.” Thay paused for a moment and said he would have to cancel his tour to America to join this conference. On hearing that, every one of us breathed a sigh of relief, as the aim of the visit was fulfilled.

The International Buddhist Conference was held at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris in October 2006 as planned. Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh of the Plum Village tradition was one of the conference’s keynote speakers. Unlike the majority of speakers who read their speeches from paper, Thay mindfully ascended the podium, glanced around the auditorium, and - without any script - began sharing about what he and the monks, nuns, and lay friends did every day at Plum Village. Then, he proposed three concrete practices to realize a culture of peace.

### **Proposal 1: An Institute for Peace**

Fully aware of the outstanding role education is playing, Thay proposed a UNESCO Institute for Peace be established in each UNESCO member country. Plum Village is always ready to send Dharma teachers over - unconditionally - to aid this process. The syllabi will be based on the textbook on the practice of peace and nonviolence, which Thay and other associates drafted at the UNESCO Director - General’s invitation, and the Manifesto 2000 on the same topic formulated by Thay and a few Nobel Peace Prize Laureates.

### **Proposal 2: Middle Eastern Summit**

Thay believed violence and conflicts in the Middle East are motivated by a religious imperative and have their roots in fear and hate, which are born due to many wrong perceptions. From what has been learned from the Palestinian - Israeli retreats in Plum Village, Thay proposed that UNESCO sponsor a summit hosting Muslim, Jewish, and Christian leaders where everyone comes, lives, eats, walks, and breathes together for a few weeks in mindfulness, where they can listen attentively and nonjudgmentally to one another to deepen mutual understanding, to eventually come to banish wrong perceptions about one another, and hopefully call - in unison - for the end of hate and conflicts.



### Proposal 3: Global No-Car Day

The destruction of Mother Earth happening at an alarming rate also fuels conflicts. We have to wake up and act immediately to alleviate the pain inflicted on our Mother and to do our share in leaving a green and beautiful planet to our children and grandchildren. One of the ways to achieve this is a No Car Day. Plum Village and other practice centers already hold a No Car Day every week. Thay suggested that UNESCO should have a monthly No Car Day. “Don’t just talk. Walk the talk.”

Having been to many UNESCO conferences and seminars myself, this was the first time I had ever witnessed something this unusual. While Thay was delivering his speech, the audience was completely enthralled. Many times, Thay had to pause because of the rapturous, prolonged applause. The conference organizing team was so captivated by the enthusiastic vibe in the auditorium that they didn’t even realize Thay’s speech was nearly twice as long as the time limit.

It’s been 18 years since that conference. The “Great Noise Maker” at UNESCO that day has now entered parinirvana. Today, I dedicate these words as an incense of the heart in memory of Thay. Indeed, Thay is not far away - he’s closer to us than ever. We can still feel Thay’s peaceful breaths, warm voice, and gentle steps wherever we happen to find ourselves in life and in the world. Like Thay once told us, “Thay is not a fixed reality, but still manifesting and present everywhere. Wherever there’s mindful walking, mindful sitting, Dharma discussions, eating in noble silence, or earth-touchings, there’s Thay.”

Meanwhile in my home, the calligraphy “*Present Moment, Wonderful Moment*” hanging on the living room’s wall brings Thay’s presence to life more than ever, reminding us:

*Breathing in, my mind is still and quiet  
Breathing out, a half-smile is born on my lips  
Dwelling peacefully in the present moment,  
I know this is a wonderful moment!*

Hanoi, May 01, 2022





# Walking with Thay in Hiroshima

## Sister Chân Trai Nghiêm

From Intergenerational Trauma to Intergenerational Aspiration



Rie Ishikawa, Br. Pháp Khởi, Sr. Trai Nghiêm, Sr. Trắng Mai Điền, Sr. Linh Nghiêm, Br. Pháp Dung, Br. Trời Đức Bản and Sr. Kính Nghiêm

*Hiroshima: a name indelibly linked to the atomic bomb, a place that witnessed an atrocity unparalleled in human history. Each year, over two million people visit this city, pausing in solemn reflection with bowed heads before the Peace Memorial Cenotaph, inscribed with the words: “Let all the souls here rest in peace, for we shall not repeat the evil.”*

### Thay’s vision

Since my novice ordination in 2009, Thay often spoke to me about his vision of going to Hiroshima as a sangha to bring our energy of healing, just as he had done for his homeland of Vietnam with the Great Requiem ceremonies in 2007 to heal the wounds of war. Thay knew that every year, countless tourists visit Hiroshima, while politicians and activists gather for peace conferences, summits, and demonstrations. However, Thay believed that we, the Plum Village practitioners, could offer something unique.

Looking intently into my eyes, Thay said, “We don’t go and talk about peace. We are the peace. As practitioners of mindfulness, we know how to generate the energy of peace with every step and every breath. When we offer this energy as a community, we can help bring healing and transformation to the land where there was great suffering. We must do this for our ancestors and for future generations.” Perhaps Thay had intuited that he might not live long enough to realize his vision and wanted to engrave this profound message in his



disciples. I immediately shared his message with the then-small Japanese sangha. While everyone agreed it was a wonderful idea, they also felt daunted by the scale of his vision. They were uncertain how to approach it, given the limited resources and the absence of a local sangha in Hiroshima, a city located at the southwestern tip of mainland Japan, 800 kilometers from Tokyo. “Yes, maybe one day,” was our conclusion at the time.

### A true test of bodhicitta

Organizing teaching tours in Japan seemed to be a true test of our bodhicitta, as we encountered repeated setbacks. In the spring of 2011, Thay’s teaching tour was on the verge of realization but had to be canceled at the very last minute due to the tragic Tohoku tsunami and Fukushima nuclear disaster. Undeterred, sangha members made another attempt to invite Thay in the spring of 2015. This time, however, six months before the planned tour, our teacher suffered a stroke.

By the spring of 2020, the conditions finally seemed ripe for us to visit Hiroshima - or so we thought. A sangha member expressed her aspiration to organize a peace walk in Hiroshima, and several organizations showed interest in collaborating with Plum Village. Everything appeared to be moving forward smoothly. Yet, in February 2020, the entire world came to a halt with the global lockdown. Once again, surrendering to forces beyond our control, we had no choice but to postpone the tour.

Each time the teaching tour was canceled, it served as a bell of mindfulness for all of us involved in organizing - monastic and lay practitioners alike - to reflect on whether we were truly practicing according to Thay’s guidance. Thay often reminded us that the process of organizing is the practice and that the process itself is more important than the success of the events. Every step of organizing is an opportunity for us to deepen our own practice, to touch joy and happiness on the path of service, and most importantly, to cultivate siblinghood by learning to work with one another - understanding, accepting, and loving each other as true members of one family. When we are able to work in this spirit, we know that nothing is lost, and even if things don’t turn out as we had hoped, we are not overcome by despair.

Through my own contemplation of why the “stars don’t seem to align” for sharing the Dharma in Japan, I learned about and became deeply inspired by one of our ancestral teachers, Jianzhen [鑑真] (688–763), the Chinese master who made six attempts to cross the sea from China to Japan to bring the precepts and the Dharma. His journey was repeatedly thwarted by unfavorable conditions and government intervention, and he even lost his eyesight in the process.

### We have arrived


In March 2024, all the conditions seemed to finally come together, and we found ourselves standing on the soil of Hiroshima. We were hosted at a Jesuit Catholic monastery on the outskirts of Hiroshima City, which had also suffered damage during the bombing. At the time of the bombing, the monastery served as a temporary hospital, offering refuge to many. Built in 1938, during a period when Catholicism was still a minority faith in Japan, the monastery was designed in the style of a Buddhist temple to blend harmoniously with the surrounding rice paddies and local architecture. This design approach was reminiscent of Plum Village in rural France, which preserved its original French farmhouses and barns without converting them into traditional Asian-style temples. In this serene sanctuary, we were warmly welcomed by the nuns and priests. Our tour began with an evening of interfaith practice led by Sister Linh Nghiem, bringing together two spiritual traditions in an intimate, traditional tatami-floored chapel.

### Peace is the way

We stayed in Hiroshima for a week, engaging in five public events, including a peace dialogue with young peace activists from Peace Culture Village (PCV), many of whom are third-generation descendants of atomic bomb survivors.





A woman in a white jacket and dark pants is smiling and showing a historical black and white photograph to a group of people. The photograph depicts a large building, likely the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, with many people gathered in front. The group consists of several people wearing dark winter clothing and brown knit hats. One person in the foreground is wearing a wheelchair. They are standing on a paved area next to a river. In the background, there is a large, modern building with a grid-like facade and a bridge over the river. The sky is blue with some clouds.

The young friends from PCV are trained to offer more than just guided tours of the Peace Memorial Park. They incorporate personal stories from their ancestors, invite reflective questions for curious visitors, and inspire us to think about how each of us, in our own small way, can contribute to building a safer, more peaceful world. We were deeply touched by their positive outlook, full of hope, despite their well-researched understanding of Hiroshima's tragic history.

During the guided tour, we spontaneously decided to have a picnic lunch by the riverside, an act that, while not forbidden, is rarely practiced in Japanese cities. Our gathering attracted curious questions from passersby. This joyful moment of sharing a meal together was also deeply meaningful - not just for us, but also as an offering to the land and its ancestors. We were aware that almost 80 years ago, on this very spot, people threw themselves into the river to cope with the excruciating heat of the atomic bomb.

Peace does not need to be confined to an official event at a designated time. We can create peace at any moment. If we live every moment of our daily lives in this spirit, it is as though we are constantly creating "flash mob" peace demonstrations, touching the hearts of those around us. Our own body and mind benefit from the joyful and peaceful energy, which has the power to heal.





## Symbol of resilience and peace

At the International Conference Center in Peace Memorial Park, Brother Phap Dung offered a public talk, sharing about the practice of taking care of our inner bomb. Through intimate anecdotes about his own healing journey with his father, he touched the hearts of many, as so many in Japan struggle with broken relationships with their parents. After the talk, we walked across the park to the riverside, where we had our picnic and offered the chant of Namo'valokiteshvara before beginning the walking meditation.

For this special occasion, I had the honor of accompanying the chant on a violin that had survived the bombing. This "Hibaku Violin" (literally, "violin exposed to radiation") is kept at a music school in Hiroshima and is only lent out for special events related to peace. The violin originally belonged to a Russian violinist who fled the Russian Revolution and settled in Hiroshima. Though the violinist did not survive the bombing, the instrument did; and it has since become a powerful symbol of resilience and peace. The violin had a soulful, resonant tone, and as the simple melody of the Namo'valokiteshvara chant filled the air, the cool breeze from the river gently eddied, mingling with the warm air from the park. I felt the presence of generations of ancestors, transcending time and space, joining us in the chant.

The chanting was followed by walking meditation around the memorial park, which had once been the bustling heart of Hiroshima, filled with buildings before the bombing wiped

everything away. Thanks to the efforts of sangha members, the entire event was live-streamed worldwide, allowing friends from across the globe to join us in this walk of peace. In our present-based practice, we can bring healing and transformation to the three times - the past, present, and future.

The walking meditation concluded at a bell tower, where Sister Kinh Nghiem led the big bell chant. We ended the day spontaneously with a hugging meditation. Although hugging is not a common practice in Japan, everyone embraced it wholeheartedly. Tears filled many eyes, and as evening began to fall, people lingered, not wanting to part ways.

Brother Duc Ban's grandmother was a survivor of the A-bombing. Like many survivors, she had endured unimaginable atrocities and suffering from the war and had never spoken about her experiences with the family. Brother Duc Ban shared that, despite living in Japan for many years, he had always avoided visiting Hiroshima. However, this time, he joined the delegation of monastics, and during the walking meditation, he was overcome with emotion and began to cry. In that moment, he felt he could finally connect with his grandmother's suffering. Seeing his tears of healing was a testament to Thay's deep aspiration for us to practice as a Sangha in Hiroshima. I was deeply moved by Thay's love for his monastic children. Perhaps the tour could not have been realized earlier because one essential condition was missing - for Brother Duc Ban to be present.





## The power of shared aspirations

Back at the Catholic monastery, we gathered to reflect on the day. Without exception, all the monastics shared that they had a vivid experience of Thay walking with us in the Peace Memorial Park. Thay often shared his profound visions with us, some of which took years to manifest. In the early stages, when the conditions aren't yet visible in our mind's eye, we may be faced with challenges and forces of resistance, and the way forward may seem blurred. However, once the seed is planted, the necessary conditions gradually emerge in their own time, and the fog begins to lift, revealing the path ahead.

I've come to understand that the shift in consciousness occurs when Thay's aspiration becomes our own. When we think we are "doing something for our teacher", no matter how humble and faithful it sounds, and no matter how deeply we love and respect our teacher and serve with all our heart, we are still caught in the idea of separateness between teacher and disciple. In this state, we are not acting as free people. It is only when we act from a place of truly owning the visions and aspirations as our own, and are ready to take accountability for our actions, that the path emerges with clarity. We can see the way forward, and our actions are supported by many elements, often invisible at the outset.

## Transcending the illusion of separateness

In the light of non-self, in which we can see someone else's vision and aspiration truly as our

own, we transcend the illusion of separateness. In this realm, we are able to experience what Thay means by "Acting with the urgency of today and the freedom of eternity." When an aspiration is shared, we feel free - even with much work - because we tap into the unlimited reservoir of collective selflessness. In this spirit, we also know that if the desired outcome is not achieved in our lifetime, we can be at peace, knowing that the next generation, to whom we have entrusted the seeds of aspiration, will continue our work. We are no longer a small self working "for" something or someone outside of ourselves.

I have learned this lesson through repeated mistakes, often resulting in bitterness and exhaustion. In moments of stillness, I began to recognize a pattern of behavior in myself, becoming acquainted with my inner hypocrite - the one who seductively deceives me by convincing myself that I am a good person, daughter, or disciple because I am 'selflessly' working for others, in the spirit of self-sacrifice.

This is also true for the parent-child relationship. I often listened with resistance when Thay invited young adults to ask their parents, "Mom, Dad, what is your deepest aspiration? Can I help realize it for you?" I found this way of communicating with parents to be too influenced by the Confucian ideal of filial piety, a value that is prevalent in Asia. I used to think this way of teaching was not only ineffective but also harmful because, in my view, many unhappy parent-child relationships stem from parents pressuring their children to pursue careers that fulfill their own dreams and needs.



It took me more than a decade to finally understand the true value of Thay's teaching. I was still caught in the idea of separateness on a historical dimension, which prevented me from tapping into the magic of intergenerational aspiration - a powerful source of energy, if harnessed skillfully. When we zoom out and see that our lives extend beyond the confines of this physical body, which is limited to a lifespan of around 80 years, we develop a different relationship with time. Each day becomes an opportunity to contribute to something greater than ourselves, and this awareness, in turn, allows us to connect with more beauty in every moment.

In today's world, we are deeply aware of intergenerational trauma, and this awareness helps us see our wounds and suffering with a broader view, embracing them with a deeper sense of compassion. At the same time, in the work of healing, we also need to find ways to deeply connect with intergenerational aspirations in order to balance the darkness with light and to tap into the energy of healing, joy, and hope that our shared aspirations offer us.

We concluded our stay in Hiroshima with a Day of Mindfulness on Miyajima Island, just a ferry ride away from the city. Also known as Itsukushima Island, this UNESCO World Heritage site is known for its large Shinto shrine that appears to float on the sea at high tide, reminiscent of the cathedral at Mont Saint-Michel in France.

The teaching tour continued eastward, with various events of different natures in Kamakura, Tokyo, and Nagoya, each leaving us with many memorable moments and deep connections. The tour was a great success, not only because the events were well organized and well attended, but also because, by the end of the journey, we had a deeper understanding of each other as siblings. We cried, got angry with each other, practiced beginning anew, and, above all, laughed a great deal throughout the journey.

My heart is filled with profound gratitude for everyone who supported this journey: the wonderful team of monastics gathering from three continents - Brother Pháp Dung, Sister Linh Nghiêm, Sister Kình Nghiêm, and Brother Pháp Khởi; our Japanese monastics, Sister Trăng Mai Điền and Brother Trời Đức Bản; Brother Pháp Khởi and Rob Walsh for their work in documenting this historic tour through their lenses; all the temples, churches, and other organizations who supported the tour from every direction; the dedicated team of translators; and the remarkable lay organizing team - though I may not have space to mention every name, you know who you are, and your contributions are appreciated beyond words.

A tour is made of non-tour elements, and I am also profoundly grateful to our beloved sisters who remain at the monastery, supporting everyone in all directions with their steady practice energy. With a deep bow of reverence and gratitude, I thank Thay and the ancestral teachers for their continued guidance on this path of peace.







(Photo credit: Rob Walsh)



# Resilience and peace

## Interview with Linda Skinner

*In this interview, Linda Skinner, an old friend of Thay and Sister Chan Khong, reflects on her memories from the 1970s and 80s. Her heartfelt stories offered a glimpse of the challenges Thay encountered within the peace movement, highlighting his remarkable inner strength and volition.*

**Newsletter Team:** You first met Thay and Sister Chan Khong when you were 19. Could you share how you met them?

**Linda Skinner:** In the early 1970s, I was working at the Paris Quaker Center, an informal gathering place for people working against the Vietnam war. One day, a young woman (Cao Ngoc Phuong, later ordained as Sister Chan Khong), followed by a slightly-built man, came down the external steps to the basement meeting room. This was the first time I saw Thay.

Thay came to lead a meditation class for five of us. He was invited by the Center's director, who knew Thay through his peace-making efforts and was interested in the link between meditation and the Quaker practice of silent worship. Thay first taught us to be aware of our breath and how to count our breathing in and breathing out. He offered us short teachings, then we would sit



for about 30 minutes. Once the course of classes ended, my then husband and I remained good friends with Thay and Sister Chan Khong. They were working night and day to try to get aid to Vietnam, constantly receiving letters and other communications from there. They may have been living in Paris, but clearly their hearts and minds were in Vietnam.



Thay at the International Conference for Peace in Vietnam, Fontainebleau, France, June 1969. (Photo credit: Fellowship of Reconciliation - FOR)

**Newsletter Team:** *What was your impression of Thay the first time you saw him? And what did you learn from him during your time with him?*

**Linda Skinner:** Quiet, humble, unassuming. He drew no attention to himself. He seemed calm and extraordinarily still. I had never met anybody like this and knew there was something very unusual about him.

What did I learn? Over five decades and a work-in-progress: how to listen, how to hear, how to look, how to see!

Thay invited us frequently to their small apartment in the Paris suburb of Sceaux, where we helped with their work, ate together, meditated and sang. Mobi Warren (Ho) was living with them, helping in their efforts to end the suffering in Vietnam. Laura Hassler and Jim Forest were among frequent visitors from the US. The apartment's main room was always strewn with papers from Sister Chan Khong's many projects trying to raise money to send aid to Vietnam. It could be chaotic at times! Mobi and I helped type the first copies of *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, which was originally titled *The Miracle of Being Awake*. We made 24 copies, in A4 booklet form, on a duplication machine. Thay's room was at the back of the apartment, where he could work and write poetry in peace and quiet. There was another small room at the front of the apartment, where Sister Chan Khong and Mobi slept, amongst yet more copies of fundraising newsletters and documents.

As the war dragged on (late 1972, having started in 1955) Thay's unwavering pleas for a ceasefire were rejected by those who feared that the killing was never going to end. The Vietnamese people continued to suffer so much. Some in the US peace movement felt it was too late to call for a ceasefire, that Thay's position was 'naive.' They became convinced that the only way to end the war was to support the PRG (Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam). Because the PRG was supporting another Buddhist master, Thay stopped being informed when some peace activist visitors came to Paris. It was hard to see this happening in a Quaker setting, but we were powerless to help, other than to sustain our close personal connection with Thay and Sister Chan Khong.

**Newsletter Team:** *You and Thay were friends; do you remember when you started seeing him as a Zen teacher?*

**Linda Skinner:** Perhaps when I saw the first draft of *The Miracle of Being Awake*. Also, his ability to surprise us was very Zen. We would be talking or eating and suddenly he would say something totally 'unconnected' or so it seemed, and it would often be very humorous. During discussions, if we asked Thay's opinion, there would be a long silence. We learned to just sit and wait until he was

ready to respond. His answer was usually quite unexpected! I remember the first time I joined him for a walk around the rather boring local streets. He would suddenly stop dead in front of a colourful flower in someone's garden and say admiringly: "Đẹp quá!" (Very pretty!)

On Saturday evenings, we would recite the 14 Mindfulness Trainings, either in English or in French. Gradually, I learned more about who Thay really was. I learned about his life in Saigon, that he had founded the *School of Youth for Social Service* (SYSS). Two of his SYSS students, who had been severely wounded during the war, came to stay. Their presence made me realise that I knew very little about his past. He did not talk about it. Later, it slowly became clear that Thay would not be allowed back to Vietnam, even after the war had ended. Now, with the benefit of decades of hindsight, I can see that the seeds of Plum Village grew out of this soil of suffering.

Please understand that it was a time of raw emotions. A student/teacher barrier didn't exist between us, as such. Thay did not have any students then. He was involuntarily exiled in France, prevented from returning home, and feeling powerless to help his people. We shared both difficult and happy times, witnessing Thay and Sister Chan Khong working tirelessly to alleviate the suffering in Vietnam. Perhaps because of these 'intimate' and intense experiences, to me he was a friend, as he was for the other supporters including Laura, Jim, Mobi, and Pierre Marchand. We did our best to help, to walk alongside them, to share their burden a little.

Yet, Thay also nourished us by his presence. He managed to remain 'fresh,' to find joy in the present. Looking back, I can see how he never deviated from his path.

**Newsletter Team:** *Through Sister Chan Khong's writing, I got the impression that a lot of young people surrounded Thay, and even though they received all the news from the war in Vietnam, he always tried to create joyful moments of singing.*

**Linda Skinner:** Yes, exactly. We managed to have many joyful moments, despite always being acutely aware of the sufferings of war being endured in Vietnam. Thay fostered a sense of joy. Routinely, after we'd finished any work that needed doing, we had supper. After supper, we would sing. By that, I mean that Thay would not let us leave until we had sung something! Mobi and I often sang 'Banks of the Ohio' - a particularly bloodthirsty song - but Thay loved the melody and our harmonies, so we had to sing it for him, again and again! Thay had learned from Laura and Mobi that people involved in the peace movement loved singing. There was one "naughty song" I used to sing. In the tradition of British folk music, there are many songs about



romantic connections that are not committed relationships. So they're often quite rude, quite "risqué". (In English we would say 'bawdy'.)

*(Linda sings):*

*It was in the month of May,  
When the birds began to play.  
I took a walk, so fresh and bright,  
In the early morning light.*

*The blackbird and the thrush,  
Sang out from every bush,  
"Keep your hands upon," they warn,  
"Your little ball of yarn."*

Thay liked that song because he said the melody and rhythms were familiar, like Vietnamese songs, and he would ask me to sing it often. I said, "but Thay, how can I sing this to you? It's a naughty song." After that he would always say: "Linda, sing the naughty song." I always hoped he didn't understand the words!

**Newsletter Team:** *Did you meet Thay on your first visit to Plum Village?*

**Linda Skinner:** Yes. I first came to Plum Village in 1989 with Mobi and her children Emily and Bruce. Thay invited us to join him in his meditation hut. I remember sitting quietly with him, and the beautiful view across the valley. Also, the small, peaceful Dharma Hall, and the pretty basic dormitories! It is humbling to see the Upper Hamlet now, as it has blossomed into a place of inspiration for so many.

Prior to this visit, the first inkling I had that Thay's teaching was entering the 'main stream' was in the US, where I lived from 1979 to 1989. In 1988, in the Seattle University Book Store I wandered (probably absent-mindedly!) over to the Mind Body Spirit section. There I suddenly spotted a copy of *The Miracle of Mindfulness*.

How to describe the emotion of that moment? It was 15 years at least since Mobi and I had typed up the original version in the tiny flat in Sceaux. It slowly dawned on me that Thay's teaching was being released into our broken, wounded world. I made contact with Arnie Kotler and Therese Fitzgerald, whose hard work and vision had led to their publishing Thay's work, sharing his teachings and wisdom.

I felt very proud of Thay when I first came to Plum Village. I mean no disrespect when I say this. I had witnessed first-hand Thay's suffering when his pleas for an immediate cease-fire were rejected, his pain as the years of exile rolled on. There was no clear way forward, just the unending frustration of not being allowed to return to Vietnam. Can you imagine being in that position? Even so, Thay didn't give up. It's astonishing that Thay's resilience

allowed him to survive, and that eventually he had the vision to put his energy into Plum Village. Look at his teachings, look at what he has given the world! Anyone without his self-discipline and self-mastery would have been defeated. So my first reaction when arriving at Plum Village in 1989 was: "Yes! Thay, you've done it! You suffered so much, but now look at how many people's lives you have touched, how wide your arms have opened, how clear and deep your teachings are, how many people you are helping." To have witnessed his early years of exile, and then to see what had emerged from that suffering was extremely moving. "No mud, no lotus," I suppose he might respond.

**Newsletter Team:** *Can I ask you to zoom in more on the moments when Thay suffered big setbacks and he was very low.*

**Linda Skinner:** When he was sidelined by the peace movement, Thay was told, basically: "Your message is irrelevant. We don't need you. We are going to win this war in a different way." It was so distressing to witness this step-change. People who had historically embraced non-violence gradually felt compelled to reject Thay's position. He was not expecting this and it caused him great pain. However, Thay learned first-hand that some in the peace movement were not able to be peaceful in their conduct. I feel certain this contributed to his very clear teaching for Westerners in his subsequent books.

**Newsletter Team:** *When you said "they," do you mean those who used to be in the peace movement with him?*

**Linda Skinner:** Yes, very sincere and well-meaning people in the peace movement, who became more and more desperate and heartbroken as the war dragged on.

**Newsletter Team:** *They thought the peace movement wasn't working, and they started to move away from it. Then Thay became more isolated.*

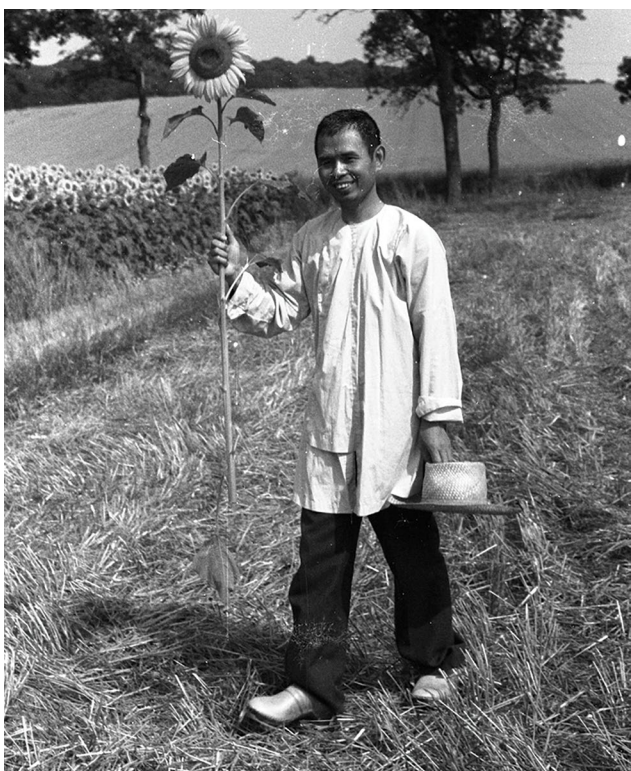
**Linda Skinner:** Exactly. People were sorry, and reluctant at first, but eventually saw Thay's non-violent position as 'naive.' To put a very complex situation simply, those on the political left suspected he was supporting the right, and those on the right accused him of supporting the left. He was told: "You keep saying, 'Peace! Cease fire!' It's not going to happen." Thay felt he had failed, that all his efforts had amounted to nothing. The war was raging on; the situation felt very desperate.

**Newsletter Team:** *What did you observe about Thay during that difficult time? How did he conduct himself?*

**Linda Skinner:** Thay's manner remained outwardly calm. At no time did I witness him react with anger or other negative emotions to those who had withdrawn their support. He continued to be himself, to write poetry, to recite the

Mindfulness Trainings, to be present. He did not give in to despair.

The other setback I witnessed was in 1977, following his efforts to provide aid to the Vietnamese 'Boat People' who were in great danger on the South China Sea. In 1975, Thay had moved to his new residence, *Les Patates Douces* ("Sweet Potatoes"). This was a very different experience to Sceaux. It was a more rural setting, in a small village called Fontvannes, 16 kilometres from Troyes (the nearest town) with no public transport. Thay was finally back in nature, which was deeply nourishing for him. It was here that Thay was able to retreat and take care of himself after those hard experiences. He wrote *Old Path White Clouds* during this time.



*Thay at Sweet Potatoes. (Photo credit: Jim Forest)*

Daily life was far quieter, with fewer visitors. It wasn't a place where people could just drop in, as it took considerable effort to reach. Whilst Western visitors were more rare, I recall that Vietnamese families were starting to visit and stay at the weekends. I would say that awareness began to shift more towards the needs of the Vietnamese community in France. Being a house, *Les Patates Douces*, had a larger living space, and it was finally possible to have sitting meditation in larger numbers. By that I mean possibly up to 20! This is the first memory I have of formal meditation led by Thay. When you were invited to stay you joined in with the daily meditation periods, morning and evening, sitting behind Thay, who sat in front of us on the left-hand side. I can remember the quality of the silence to this day.

**Newsletter Team:** *What was your impression of Sister Chan Khong when you first met her?*

**Linda Skinner:** A bit scary! She was so powerful! I was like, whoa. \*laughter\*

**Newsletter Team:** *Powerful in what way?*

**Linda Skinner:** She was completely focused on Vietnam, 24/7. She would relax a little in the evenings at supper, but you knew that her mind and heart were still in Vietnam. If she could get you to do something to help her work, you'd be grabbed. You'd arrive at Sceaux, you'd be in there for two minutes and she would say: "Can you start putting these papers together? Linda, can you type this?" It was intense.

**Newsletter Team:** *How was your feeling when you saw Sister Chan Khong in Plum Village for the first time?*

**Linda Skinner:** It took a while to find her because she was so busy. She was rushing around solving problems as usual! But time fell away when I saw her. She was just the same, except now she had no hair and wore her monastic robes. 54 years is a long time to know someone. When I see her, there is no separation.

**Newsletter Team:** *When did you hear the news about Thay's passing and how did you feel?*

**Linda Skinner:** I heard it from the Plum Village website, which I'd been checking constantly, and I felt profoundly sad. I had been very fortunate to visit Thay at Tu Hieu in October 2019. My beloved husband Stephen had died suddenly eight weeks earlier, while undergoing heart surgery in London. The day that he died, obviously I was in very deep shock. It happened that Sister Annabelle was in England giving a retreat at a Quaker conference centre. A dear friend was there, and informed Sister Annabelle. She rang me, and tried to give me comfort; I remember she sang to me. She told me she would inform Sister Chan Khong.

That evening, Sister Chan Khong called me from Paris. She also comforted me and sang to me. She said: "Please come and see Thay." Stephen was Australian, so I accompanied his body home to be buried near to his children and grandchildren. It was a very lonely journey and my heart was broken. The one solace came when I was able to fly from Singapore up to Vietnam en route home, and visit Tu Hieu Temple. Sister Chan Khong generously took me to visit Thay very briefly in his room, where attendants were caring for him night and day. She also arranged for prayers to be said for Stephen by the entire community as we sat in meditation which gave me immense comfort.

When Thay died, I felt great relief that he had been allowed to go home. His many years of exile had ended, and from those years of anguish, what beautiful seeds have been sown. I am in awe of the immense influence of his teachings. I look at the arc of his long life spanning the world, showering us with compassion.





# What is an Engaged Buddhist Response to Suffering?

Brother Chân Pháp Linh



*An excerpt from Brother Pháp Linh's Dharma talk in the 2024 June Retreat, with the theme: "Ancient Wisdom for Modern Times: Applied Ethics."*

Today, I would like to speak a little bit about action, activism, and Engaged Buddhism, and I want to talk about faith.

What do we mean by faith? I want to address it because it's something that I've struggled with and it's a word that initially put me off. I thought of Buddhism as kind of rational, analytical. We're not asked to have faith. Indeed, Thay speaks about faith as not being a leap of faith or blind faith, but as faith which is based on our experience, our practice.

Faith in what? What do we have faith in, based on our practice, as a result of our practice? Are there any obstacles to that faith in our way of thinking, in our worldview? There might be some hidden obstacles to the awakening of that faith because of the time that we live in, the way we may have been educated, the kinds of ideas that are current, the dominant way of thinking. I also want to talk about suffering. Because of how much suffering there is in the world, it can also be hard to have faith in what we are doing.

## **Faith in the Sangha**

Sometimes we recite the Three Refuges and they could seem like articles of faith. This is what we have faith in: the Three Gems. We have faith in

the Buddha. We have faith in the Dharma. We have faith in the Sangha. Or do we?

There was a brother in my ordination family, who used to say, "Okay, I get it: The Buddha gem - sure! Dharma gem - yeah! Sangha - hmm..." He called it the "Sangha coal", not yet a gem. If you take a piece of coal and you put it under pressure for a few million years, it might become a diamond. But maybe we need some more pressure. I think we have enough. I think the Sangha is a gem, but it's interesting to ask ourselves, "Do we always see the Sangha as a gem?"

Sometimes we see the Sangha as an obstacle. We start to think the Sangha is the problem. The Sangha is not this enough, not that enough, isn't doing this, should be doing that. Sometimes we feel part of it. Sometimes we feel that we are standing outside looking in. Sometimes we belong, sometimes we don't belong. There are many faces, many manifestations. Is it the monastic Sangha? The OI Sangha, the Dharma teacher Sangha? Is it your local Sangha? The national Sangha? The Sangha has many identities - many kinds of identification that we make in our sense of belonging or not belonging, in our sense of being in, or standing outside.



## Two kinds of suffering

Given our awareness of suffering as a practitioner, our priority is to determine what is the appropriate response to that suffering. For the moment, I'm going to identify two kinds of suffering. The first is the suffering in the world. We can be more or less aware of many different kinds of injustice and inequality: inequality of access to resources, to education, of power, political and otherwise, inequality of representation, of safety, physical, political and so on. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list. We know this list is long.

And then there's the suffering in ourselves: loneliness, stress and tension - in our body, in our feelings, in our relationships - fear, hatred, anger, anxiety, dread, doom, despair, powerlessness, rage, burnout and suicidal thoughts. When we see the raging inequality in the world, the injustice, the imbalances of power, the hatred, the killing, the discrimination of all kinds, it can make us feel all of these things. So the two are related, and the question arises, "What is the appropriate response?"

We might have a tendency to think not only about what we should do, but perhaps also what others should do, including the field of action of the Sangha. If the Sangha doesn't do the thing we think is the right thing to do, then that might lead us to feel that we no longer belong to the Sangha, and it might lead us to say and do things that make us feel even less that we belong. The more we say and do those things, the less we feel like we belong. Eventually we may conclude, "This is no longer my Sangha. They are no longer practicing Engaged Buddhism. I will create a new group and we will carry the torch of Engaged Buddhism. Plum Village is no longer Engaged Buddhism." Some people have said that recently in more or less subtle ways.

What do we even mean when we say "Plum Village"? Do we mean the monastics? Which monastics? All of them? Some of them? Do we include ourselves in Plum Village? Or do we stand outside and say, "That's Plum Village. They should do this, they should do that." To me, when we do that - when we point the finger - at some level, we are splitting the Sangha. What does it mean to split the Sangha? It's not always obvious, because it's not just what we say and do, it's also how we say and do it. If we don't have much reverence for the Sangha, then we might easily say and do things that split the Sangha, that break it, that cause division, that contribute to forming factions and groups. We might do it thinking that we are acting in the name of justice. We might be very sure. For me, one warning sign is when I'm very sure - that should be the red flag. I get a kind of a righteousness alert. You're very sure? Check again.

The Sangha is so precious. It's not a lump of coal. It is a gem, and we don't want to break it. I hope it's clear that I'm not talking about what is right or wrong to say or to do. My hope is only to offer some parameters that we can check when we want to say something, or do something. Have I nourished my reverence, my faith in the Sangha? Do I still see the Sangha as a jewel? If I don't see the Sangha as a jewel, how do I restore that first, before I do or say anything? How do I build up that faith?

## Are you sure?

In the last weeks and months, the international Plum Village monastic community has more or less indirectly been accused of no longer practicing Engaged Buddhism. The person who is criticizing usually assumes that they know what Engaged Buddhism is, because otherwise they wouldn't be able to say that we're no longer doing it. "I know what it is and you are not doing it."

Very often what we get beaten over the head with is Thay, because there are those who claim, "Thay would have done this, and Thay would have said that." But are you sure? It's tricky to catch a Zen master. I think the one thing that I can say about my experience with Thay is that he never did what I thought he would do. So if you find yourself saying, "Thay would have done this, Thay would have said that," please don't be too sure. It's more likely that he would have done something surprising, something you didn't expect, something you didn't even see was possible.

Certainty, for me, is a sign of confusion. It's a sign that I have narrowed down the options to the point that I think there's only one thing to do - one right thing. It's important to note, from the point of view of neuroscience, that certainty is an addiction. We love certainty, we love being right, and we love being righteous - because physically it feels good. Certainty is not the product of rational evaluation, but a feeling. This is why people can be certain about things which are very clearly not the case. And certainty is highly resistant to evidence. In fact, the more certain we are, the more we feel we don't need evidence. You can show people the evidence and they say, "No, no, but I know. You can't prove me wrong. I know what's true." It's a feeling which we like - a pleasurable feeling - a feeling we are addicted to.

Conversely, uncertainty is not a pleasant feeling - it's unstable, it's complicated, it's challenging. Uncertainty is also a feeling, one that expresses itself in our nervous system, in our bodies. Because we are what we are, we tend to avoid unpleasant sensations and seek pleasant sensations. So we may unconsciously be avoiding uncertainty, including moral uncertainty, moral ambiguity, uncertainty of action - not knowing what we

should do or not do, say or not say. So we fall into certainty because it's less challenging, it's less unpleasant.

Part of my practice is to train myself to accept unpleasant sensations in my body, in my feelings, in my mind, and to realize, "Oh, that's okay. It's not so bad." We can train ourselves every day to be comfortable with discomfort. And it might help us when we face complicated situations, where we may not have all the information - situations in which we don't know what is the right thing to do, what is the right thing to say. If we can tolerate an uncomfortable feeling, then we can allow ourselves to stay with the uncertainty, to be patient, and not to seek to resolve that state of discomfort too quickly.

### **Thay's Engaged Buddhism**

So when we get bashed over the head with "Thay would have done this," very often it comes with a certain historical understanding of Thay's life and Thay's Engaged Buddhism, which goes something like this: "Thay was very engaged in the sixties - in the peace movement. He went for peace marches and joined press conferences with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Then in the seventies, he was engaged in rescuing boat people. After that he did some things here and there, wrote some books, and he founded Plum Village. Then he started focusing a lot on building a monastic community. So I guess from the nineties onward he gave up on Engaged Buddhism."

Some people, broadly speaking, see Thay's practice of Engaged Buddhism as a kind of diminuendo, "It was strong at first, but then he started focussing more on retreats." But I think we do Thay a real injustice if we see him like that. Over the period of years that I spent with Thay, it seemed to me that his insight never stopped growing. So I think it would be safer to assume that Thay's practice of Engaged Buddhism was not a diminuendo, but a crescendo - Thay's Buddhism only got more engaged. Perhaps it just didn't look like we expected. To me, that crescendo is continuing. It never stopped.

Let's assume that as a good Buddhist practitioner, Thay was continually asking the questions: "What are the roots of suffering?" And, "Have I understood the roots of suffering in myself, and in the world? Have I really understood?" This is the basis of our practice. If we don't do that, we certainly can't say that we're practicing Engaged Buddhism.

In 2011 Thay was interviewed by Jo Confino (a journalist)<sup>1</sup>. At one point Jo asked Thay a series of questions including, "How do you wake people up to the climate crisis? What should I do as a

journalist? How do we alert people to the danger?" Thay's answer was very interesting. He said, "They know already." So waking them up to the danger is not the point. They know. Instead we need to understand why they don't act. Part of the moral shock that we are in right now is this confusion: The horror is playing out on our screens every day - everybody can see - and yet we allow it to continue. Why? There's a belief that if we know, then we act. But every day we see that this is not so, and we are in a state of shock at the inaction.

That is why Thay's answer is very important - he said it's not that people don't know - they know - and this could be true of any of the multiple crises we're facing, because they all intersect. The heart of Thay's answer is this: he said that people are already not acting to face and to resolve the suffering in their own lives. They're already not able to reconcile, to release their tension, their stress, so how can we expect them to do something about these other massive structural problems?

### **Show them a happy person**

Jo then asked Thay, "So what do you do, given that people are overwhelmed - given that they're not able to respond even to the suffering of their own immediate circumstances?" And Thay said, "You show them a happy person." "Show them that it's possible to be happy, to be free." That's what we're all meant to be doing, as Thay's students, as members of the Plum Village Sangha. This is a crucial part of Thay's response to global suffering: demonstrating that it is possible to be happy - that it's possible to be free without ignoring the suffering. And it's not individualistic, because by being happy yourself, you allow people around you to experience a moment of happiness, a moment of freedom. When you spend time around a person who is really full of life, full of joy, full of freedom, it is infectious - it transmits. You feel it, you receive it, and you get a little taste.

Thay continued, "Show them that their happiness is not dependent on power, position, fame, profit, sex, and so on. Maybe then they can relax a little bit because they don't have to run after those things so much." You create a little bit of space. You give people the capacity to cultivate a feeling of happiness, to generate a feeling of joy, of gratitude. Thay went on, "Show people a happy community. Give them the practices of mindfulness so that they can cultivate that happiness and that joy and that freedom in themselves." Could this be the evolution of Thay's Engaged Buddhism?

One direct consequence of being able to touch joy and freedom in ourselves is that we become more able to face the suffering inside - the harder kind of suffering - the one that's closer to the

[1] <https://plumvillage.org/podcast/falling-back-in-love-with-mother-earth-in-conversation-with-thich-nhat-hahn-episode-32>





bone. We start to be able to face the suffering that is connected to our ancestors, to our relationships with our parents, our partners, our children, our friends; our relationships with the people that we can no longer talk to, and with our childhood. The joy Thay is speaking about is not spiritual bypassing, it's joy as part of the response to the suffering - joy to accompany the suffering. You touch a little bit of that space of true joy and the first thing that opens up is your capacity to feel the pain.

### **Is it enough? Coming back to faith**

But there may be a question in our hearts: "Is it enough - all of this mindful breathing, smiling, walking, sitting, lying down, and eating - is that it? Can that be enough?" And I understand that we don't feel it's enough. I ask myself the same question - because sometimes it doesn't feel powerful. I take a step in mindfulness, but the bomb still falls - people are still killed. I can't stop it. I feel powerless, and I struggle to accept that feeling of powerlessness. It breaks my heart every day. I can't stop it. So is it enough? Am I doing enough?

What we are really asking ourselves is this: do we have faith in the awakened way of living as the appropriate response to the suffering in ourselves and in the world? For me it's yes and no. It is really hard to have faith in that because it doesn't seem to be a direct response. It doesn't seem to be an engaged response, whatever we think that means - it might even seem to be a response that is only about creating a little island of comfort and safety for ourselves. That's why we worry that it might be like spiritual bypassing. This for me is where I notice the hidden reefs in my mind.

### **How our worldview narrows our minds**

When I grew up, my education gave me a scientific picture of the world, which is that the universe is made up of atoms and electrons and physical laws - it's deterministic, meaningless - a dead cosmos in which life happens to have accidentally sort of farted itself out of the primordial soup, indifferent to everything we hold dear. That, I would suggest, is the dominant view. It is very hard to argue with it, because it seems to have been so successful in terms of the technological breakthroughs it has allowed.

It's a question for all of us how much we live within the story of physicalism, of materialism - that the world is made of just matter and physical forces. Pretty much every story in the news is based on that underlying consensus reality; every political decision - in most countries, though not all countries - is taken on the basis of that underlying set of assumptions. Business decisions are made within the framework of that picture. Decisions about the climate are made within that picture. The point I'm trying to make here is that a materialistic worldview may be lurking in our collective basement, and it may be limiting the scope of the possible.

For example, when we think about war and how to stop it, we may have a tendency to think in terms of laws and declarations and sanctions and the kinds of actions that exist within a world which is made of matter. I'm not saying for a moment that those things are unimportant. They are all important. But when I think that the only ways to stop this war are material, I fall into a deep despair and I cannot but conclude that we, as the Plum Village Sangha, are not doing enough.

## Festival of stars

However, when I look at my teacher's poetry, I notice some things. He left some clues there for us.

*"Today the kingdom of Heaven  
Held a festival for thousands of stars  
I went up to that kingdom  
Knelt down and prayed  
That the anguish, the killing, the disaster  
In our poor land would end."*

*("Little Star" - Thich Nhat Hanh)*

Is that part of Thay's Engaged Buddhism? Does Thay think prayer is realistic? In a materialistic universe prayer doesn't work. But Thay is not an unintelligent man - so what does he mean?

A few weeks ago, I stayed up most of the night lying on my back, looking up at the stars and meditating on this very question. I noticed that when I look at the stars, I have a tendency to see them according to my scientific understanding. I'm looking, and something in my head goes: Great. Giant ball of hydrogen and helium undergoing a massively exothermic cascade of fusion reactions as a result of immense gravitational forces. It's not exactly that I'm thinking it consciously, it's just how what I think I know about stars now conditions and constitutes my seeing. And that way of seeing does produce a certain amount of wonder - but it also situates me in a dead and meaningless cosmos.

But that night the lines from Thay's poem "Little Star" came to me: *"...a festival for thousands of stars. I went up to that kingdom, knelt down and prayed."* What does that even mean? I suddenly realized that my faith was limited by my worldview. The scientific worldview was affecting my ability to see the stars. And suddenly it fell away. In that moment, the stars were revealed to me as blazing awareness - as consciousness. Words and concepts failed me. Suddenly it was just so obvious that they're alive - that they are Bodhisattvas. This wasn't the product of reasoning - it was just clear, immediate awareness.

Until that moment, I had read Thay's poem as metaphorical. But then it occurred to me, "What if Thay's just saying exactly what he did - literally? What if it is not a metaphor at all?"

And there's evidence. When you think about Thay's response to the war in his homeland - to the killing of his brothers, sisters, friends, students - he prayed for awakening. He prayed for a Buddha to be born, because who can respond to suffering, if not a Buddha? Thay prayed for his own awakening - as an active response to the suffering of his homeland - and it worked! And so I asked myself, "Shouldn't that be part of my engaged Buddhism, to pray with all my heart and soul for awakening - not mine, but ours - a collective awakening?"

But this is where we run into these hidden reefs in our collective consciousness, because what is popular right now is secular mindfulness. So in terms of what we think mindfulness can do in the world, I'd like to invite you to do an experiment: Can you hold in your heart and mind for a moment the gulf of meaning between mindfulness as stress relief and mindfulness as the energy of the Holy Spirit?

Just compare them. They are vastly different - they imply different worlds, different realities. Use your imagination to feel into the difference between on the one hand, mindfulness as a function of the brain, that sort of helps us to regulate our emotions, and on the other hand, Thay saying, it's the energy of the Holy Spirit. I'm not exactly sure what the Holy Spirit is, but one thing I can be sure of is this: it's not small. When Thay called it the miracle of mindfulness, his word-choice was very deliberate - he was trying to transmit to us the faith that one breath, that a single step, taken in deep mindfulness, can heal us - that we can break through. He was trying to convey to us his faith that this collective awakening can be an active response to the suffering of the world.

I'm not saying that there should be no material, or practical response. I'm saying our response cannot only be a material response. And above all, if we are standing with one foot outside the Sangha, looking in, this is an invitation to not reduce the field of action of Engaged Buddhism to what is said online. I'm not saying that what is said online is unimportant - I'm saying that you cannot reduce Engaged Buddhism to what is, or is not, said online.

You cannot tell me that a step taken with the quality of awakening is not Engaged Buddhism. We have to see that the coalface of this crisis is in our hearts, and the appropriate response includes how we respond to our own fears and doubts; it includes how we handle the fear that we are not enough, that walking meditation isn't enough, that the miracle of mindfulness isn't a real miracle - that it isn't powerful enough to stop a war. When we blame and we accuse and we project our anger and disappointment onto the Sangha, we disempower ourselves. And we do it because we do not have faith in the awakened way of living.

## Taking refuge in removing views

I believe that our faith in the power of collective awakening is weak because unconsciously we are thinking within the frame of scientific materialism, as a culture. If I stay within the confines of scientific materialism, that kind of faith is inaccessible to me. Because there is no such thing as awakening within scientific materialism.





Our practice is to take refuge in removing views - removing unfounded certainty about the nature of reality - and becoming comfortable with the discomfort of not knowing. If we can do that, the not-knowing gives us an immense space of possibility. If you look at the stars and you don't know what they are, then you have a chance to see them.

And I'm not speaking against science here - I love science - I'm speaking against scientific materialism, because it isn't scientific. But that's a story for another day. For now, in terms of action, what I'm saying is that if you look at Plum Village within the framework of scientific materialism, then yes, the only thing that we can do is make a statement. Within that framework, the field of Engaged Buddhism is reduced to what is said online. But then you are not truly seeing Plum Village. The truth, for me, is that our Sangha is very powerful, and that the scope of our action is vast, but that what is said online is only a tiny, tiny part of what we are really doing.

When you look at the linden tree in Upper Hamlet, do you ask it to make a statement about the bombing and killing in Gaza? Are you dissatisfied with the linden tree because it hasn't said something online? And do you think that because the linden tree has not made a statement it supports the killing of children and families in Gaza or the taking of refugees in Israel? No - that would be madness. All you can ask of the linden tree is to be a real linden tree. And it is. It's doing that very well - it's playing its part. It's beautiful and it's offering a space of refuge to us all.

So please don't decide whether Plum Village practices Engaged Buddhism based on what is said online. Don't make it about that, because then you implicitly make the Sangha's realm of action small. When you look with those eyes, you may not be able to see the reality - which is that our true realm of action is collectively practicing

the awakened way of living. 99.99% of our power comes from how we live together. Why is it powerful? Because our way of living together is founded on the Five Mindfulness Trainings. Our ability to influence the course of history lies in our capacity to transmit this awakened way of living to others through retreats. In the last talk of the retreat for Israeli's and Palestinians in October 2003, Thay said: "The practice of Plum Village is something very concrete. And that is what we can practically offer you - and not a statement."

So let us not limit the scope of Plum Village's action to statements. I think Thay's creation of practice centers in the 80's, 90's and 2000's, and of this monastic tradition, is the continuous crescendo of his Engaged Buddhism. He saw that we would need communities of practice. He saw we would need places of refuge, where the practice is maintained and transmitted by a full-time residential community - because this is not just about what happens this year or next year, it's about what happens in 500 years, in a thousand years. So if you ask something of us, ask us to be real monastics and not just makers-of-statements. Not because statements are not important, but because that's not the best use of the power of the monastic Sangha.

Further, I hope that together we can be a real Sangha, and that we can recognize our true power to effect change in the world. Let us recognize that by practicing powerfully together we are planting the seeds of collective awakening. And as we gradually care for our fear and our doubt - as we dare to feel the discomfort of our unknowing in the face of mystery - I think it is legitimate to pray for awakening. Let us pray for awakening with all our hearts. And as we plant the seeds of this vision in our hearts, in the form of this prayer, we may start to rebuild our faith in the awakened way of living as an appropriate response to the suffering of our times.



# A Safe Space for Healing: BIPOC Journeys in Plum Village

## Interview with Valerie Brown and Juliet Hwang

*Twenty years after Thay led the first Plum Village BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) retreat in Deer Park Monastery, Sister Bội Nghiêm invited Valerie Brown and Juliet Hwang, two US-based lay Dharma teachers to share their experience-based insights on the necessity of BIPOC spaces and groups in cultivating a key sense of safety for practitioners of Color and in preparing the ground for individual and collective transformation and healing. The following is an excerpt from their interview.*



**Sister Bội Nghiêm:** *What were your early experiences as BIPOC participants in Plum Village retreats?*

**Valerie:** My journey with Plum Village began in 1994 when I attended a public talk by Thich Nhat Hanh at the Riverside Church in Manhattan. I don't remember much of what Thay said that day, but I vividly recall how I felt. At the time, I thought, "This isn't for me." The teachings - about cultivating peace and compassion within oneself and sharing that with others - felt far removed from my lived reality.

My life was centered on survival. I was raised by my mother who was a single parent working two jobs and supporting four children. I grew up in New York City with poverty, violence, and childhood trauma. When I arrived at the talk that day, I was navigating my career as a lawyer-lobbyist and was very much caught in fear, aggression, and confrontation, which was the legacy of my childhood. My focus was on making money and becoming "somebody." Looking back, I am not proud of that. I was doing the best I could at the time.

Though I walked out of the talk that day very skeptical, I knew deep inside that Thay's words were true and revealed a path for me. Taking that path would mean change for me - lots of change - and I decided to begin, slowly. In the early 2000s, I started attending Plum Village retreats. Gradually, and with the support of the sangha, I started to feel differently: less anger and hostility, less aggression. Yet, those early experiences were far from easy. I was unlearning so much, and I was learning to really stop and look deeply at my life.

At the time, the retreats were almost entirely white. I was often one of the only BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) participants. I felt like an anomaly. People would ask me questions like, "What are you doing here?" or "Why do you stay?" Some of these questions were rooted in genuine curiosity, but they only amplified my sense of isolation as a Black woman in



a predominantly white space. Many BIPOC participants who attended retreats shared similar experiences of feeling judged or unsafe. Many didn't return.

Despite the challenges, I stayed. The practice benefited me profoundly. I had to unlearn harmful patterns and beliefs, and I am deeply grateful for the sangha and the community that supported my transformation. Early on, I found connection with others like Sister Jewel and lay Dharma teacher Larry Ward, but the experience was still isolating.

Looking back, I see that the environment - while rooted in love, compassion, and service - wasn't fully equipped to address the unique needs of BIPOC practitioners. We bring with us our inherited social conditioning and the habit energies of our experiences, as well as societal legacy burdens of prejudice, discrimination, and more. When these realities go unacknowledged, they can create barriers, even in a space as loving as a Plum Village retreat.

Today, the story is different. There has been a collective effort to increase diversity and create spaces where BIPOC practitioners feel welcomed and supported. Groups like the ARISE Sangha and initiatives for BIPOC Dharma Sharing have flourished. Non-BIPOC practitioners have also engaged in deeper self-reflection, especially after events like the murder of George Floyd in 2020.

Yet, there's still much work to do. Representation in teaching roles and among attendees remains unbalanced, both at Plum Village and in Buddhist centers across North America. Addressing these disparities is vital for the sangha's growth and health.

**Juliet:** My first experience at a BIPOC retreat was in 2004 at Deer Park Monastery. It was the first BIPOC retreat led by Thay and the monastic community, and it remains one of the most profound experiences of my life. I was a pediatric resident, feeling burnt out by a harmful healthcare system. Thay laid out the groundwork for us to recognize, embrace, and transform suffering. He showed us how to heal. He also showed me how I can help others heal by offering my deep presence. The retreat was alive with energy - filled with laughter, joy, and love, alongside deep acknowledgment of suffering and pain.

What made the retreat transformative was the sense of safety that permeated the space. For the first time, I felt safe enough to fully be myself and embrace the depth of my suffering. Reflecting on it now, I see that this sense of safety came from the collective energy of the sangha. It allowed us to be vulnerable, to share openly, and to heal together. I didn't have to explain myself or justify my experiences. I was seen, heard, and held in a way I had never experienced before. That safety

gave me the courage to begin my journey of transformation.

I've also witnessed the harm caused by the absence of such spaces in the past. Many BIPOC individuals who attended retreats before the creation of dedicated BIPOC spaces didn't feel welcome or supported. They often left carrying feelings of hurt and exclusion. This painful reality continues to motivate me to create inclusive spaces where BIPOC practitioners can thrive.

Over the years, I've seen tremendous growth in these efforts. Spaces like the Lotus in a Sea of Fire sangha for BIPOC OI aspirants now provide the support and nourishment needed for BIPOC practitioners to heal and grow. These spaces are essential for cultivating the collective transformation and liberation that Thay envisioned for our sangha.

**Sister Boi Nghiem:** *Can you share a specific moment of transformation from a BIPOC retreat?*

**Valerie:** I remember a powerful experience during an online BIPOC retreat I helped facilitate recently. One participant, a Black woman living in a high-rise building in Chicago, shared that she never left her apartment without carrying her wallet and phone - not even to take out the trash. She lived in a constant state of fear, always bracing herself for potential harm because of her identity as a Black person.

Through the retreat, she engaged deeply with the practices of mindful sitting, walking meditation, and mindful breathing. These practices, combined with the collective energy of the BIPOC sangha, helped her connect with a sense of safety she hadn't known before. By the end of the retreat, she emailed me to share something extraordinary: for the first time in her life, she left her apartment without her wallet or phone.

To many, this might seem like a small act; but for her, this was monumental. This moment represented a shift from living in constant vigilance to experiencing a moment of trust and ease. This transformation speaks to the profound power of a beloved community - where people feel safe, supported, and seen. It is a testament to the strength of collective healing and the impact of creating spaces where BIPOC individuals can feel at ease and be fully present.

Moments like these are why BIPOC retreats matter. They offer sanctuary, a space where individuals can touch a sense of freedom and peace, even in a world that so often denies them these experiences. This woman's story is just one of many, and reminds me of the transformative potential of this practice when paired with the support of a loving and inclusive community.



BIPOC Retreat at Deer Park Monastery, 2024

**Juliet:** One of the most vivid and transformative moments I experienced during my first BIPOC retreat in 2004 was during the collective chanting of Avalokiteshvara. At the time, I didn't know what the chant meant, who Avalokiteshvara was, or what the practice was supposed to do; but the energy in the room was undeniable.

As the sangha chanted, something within me began to soften. It felt as though years of armor - built up to protect myself from pain and harm - were beginning to melt away. I started sobbing uncontrollably, releasing a depth of suffering I had carried for so long. Growing up in a home shaped by the legacies of the Korean War, colonization, and violence, I had never been taught how to process my emotions safely. Crying often brought punishment or shame.

But in that moment, surrounded by the loving energy of the sangha, I felt safe enough to let it all out. The chant, the presence of the community, and the atmosphere of deep care allowed me to access a part of myself I had kept hidden for so long. It was a profound moment of healing - a moment when I felt seen, loved, and held in a way I had never experienced before.

Since that retreat, I've carried the memory of that moment as a reminder of what safety and love can create. The transformation I experienced wasn't just for me; it also taught me how to offer that same safety and love to others. BIPOC retreats are not just spaces of healing for individuals; they are spaces where we can build a new foundation of trust, love, and resilience that radiates outward to our communities and the broader sangha.

A more recent experience was from the 20th anniversary of the BIPOC retreat at Deer Park in May of 2024. The retreat organizers made a mistake and omitted our SWANA (South West Asian and North African) siblings in the Touching of the Earth practice. The retreatants came together and wrote a new Touching of the Earth and presented it at the Be-In on the last night. It was so beautiful and profound. They presented it in such a loving and deep way; it helped transform all our hearts and see how important it is to include our SWANA siblings. All

our siblings came together to remember those suffering from wars.

**Sister Boi Nghiem:** *Why are BIPOC retreats and affinity groups necessary, and how do they support the community?*

**Valerie:** There's a common misunderstanding that affinity groups, like BIPOC, are divisive. It's important to understand that these groups aren't about exclusion. In reality, they're about creating the foundational conditions for inclusion. They act as a bridge, offering a pathway to deeper belonging and connection.

For BIPOC individuals, the nervous system is often conditioned by hypervigilance because of the realities of racism and discrimination. Feeling connected, feeling safe isn't a luxury - it's a biological imperative. When BIPOC practitioners don't feel safe, their nervous systems remain in a heightened state, making it difficult - if not impossible - to fully engage with mindfulness practices.

Affinity groups offer a sanctuary where the nervous system can reset, creating the conditions for openness, healing, and transformation. They are essential for creating safety and trust - especially for BIPOC individuals, whose unique experiences are shaped by intergenerational trauma, systemic oppression, discrimination, and social isolation - providing spaces where people can feel seen, heard, understood, and supported by others who share similar backgrounds and identities.

I've seen the profound impact of affinity groups in my own practice and in the lives of others. These spaces make vulnerability and authentic connection possible, helping BIPOC practitioners heal from their unique, deep wounds. Without such spaces, many feel isolated or misunderstood, which can make it difficult to stay engaged with the practice.

When BIPOC practitioners feel safe and supported, they can bring their full selves to the larger sangha. This not only strengthens the entire community but also aligns with Thay's vision of a beloved community.

**Juliet:** Thay often spoke about "coming back to our true home," a place of safety and ease within ourselves. BIPOC retreats and affinity groups provide the safety net that allows us to begin the journey home. These spaces recognize the specific challenges and traumas faced by BIPOC practitioners and create conditions where we can let down our guard, breathe, and truly relax. Only then can we begin the deep work of transformation.

For me, BIPOC retreats are built on the foundation of truth-telling. They openly acknowledge that racism, colonization, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression are





BIPOC Retreat at Magnolia Grove Monastery, 2022

real and have lasting impacts on individuals and communities. Ignoring these realities doesn't make them disappear. Instead, we must confront them with mindfulness and compassion. These retreats create a container for that work - allowing us to process our suffering, connect with our resilience, and find pathways to liberation.

BIPOC spaces aren't only about healing the wounds of oppression; they're also about celebrating our resilience, joy, and collective strength. They give us the freedom to show up authentically and fully in the larger sangha, contributing to the shared vision of a beloved community. Far from being divisive, these spaces are an act of love - offering the safety and trust needed for individuals to thrive and for the sangha to grow stronger together.

**Sister Boi Nghiem:** *Why is safety such a recurring theme in BIPOC retreats, and how does it contribute to transformation?*

**Valerie:** From my perspective, as someone studying trauma and mental health, safety isn't just a concept - it's a biological imperative, fundamental to the human experience. Without it, our nervous systems stay in a state of hypervigilance, impacting our ability to experience joy, trust, and peace.

For many BIPOC individuals, systemic oppression and intergenerational trauma have conditioned our bodies to be on high alert. (BIPOC too have inherited intergenerational strength, resilience, and joy.) Research shows that perceived discrimination and unsafe environments elevate stress hormone cortisol levels and contribute to allostatic load - that is, physiological dysregulation due to the cumulative burden of chronic stress - leading to long-term health challenges. Safety allows the amygdala, the part of the brain responsible for fear responses, to reset. This resetting creates the conditions for deeper engagement with the practice and for true healing to occur.

BIPOC retreats prioritize creating environments where participants feel safe - physically, emotionally, and spiritually. When participants come to a BIPOC retreat and feel genuinely safe, their bodies begin to relax, their minds open, and their hearts can touch the teachings in a profound way.

**Juliet:** Safety isn't just the absence of harm - it's the presence of love, care, and understanding. It isn't only about the physical space - it's about the environment, the community, and the collective energy. It's about being surrounded by people who look like you, who share similar experiences, and who extend a hand in friendship.

BIPOC retreats provide a space where we can experience co-regulation of our nervous system by being in safe connection with other BIPOC individuals; they create environments where people feel held and supported. They allow people to embrace their full humanity, to connect with the teachings in a way that feels authentic and embodied, creating the foundation where the nervous system can relax and deep healing can occur. These moments of transformation are deeply connected to the unique conditions that BIPOC retreats create. This is why safety is a recurring theme - because without it, transformation cannot happen.

One story that stands out for me is of a woman who shared how she had always felt unsafe walking into predominantly white meditation spaces, which is a common sentiment among many BIPOC. At a BIPOC retreat, she said she finally felt a sense of belonging. That sense of safety allowed her to engage more deeply with the practice and experience a transformation that had eluded her in other settings.

These stories are a testament to the power of a beloved community and the importance of creating spaces where BIPOC individuals can feel seen, heard, and held. Without these conditions, the true potential of the practice remains out of reach for many.





# Anger, Despair and Burnout

## A Dialogue with Christiana Figueres

*On 5 June, 2024 in New Hamlet, Plum Village France we enjoyed a panel sharing on the topic of anger, despair and burnout. It was given in the 2024 June Retreat: "Ancient Wisdom for Modern Times: Applied Ethics." This is an excerpt from the dialogue, featuring questions from Sister Hiên Nghiêm (Sister True Dedication) and responses from Christiana Figueres, climate leader, Costa Rican diplomat, and student of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh.*





Sister True Dedication, Christiana Figueres, and Shantum Seth

## Spiritual activism and the insight of Interbeing

**Sr True Dedication:** Do you identify as an activist? Where does your passion come from? Are you an angry activist?

**Christiana Figueres:** Often but not always. First of all, I shy away from any definition of anything because I find it so unhelpful. But I would say that in my heart I am very engaged in the protection of our beautiful planet.

I have many friends who call themselves “activists” and who would look at me and say, “You’re no activist; you’re a total wimp.” They’re still my dear friends because we need all the different types of engagement that are out there.

To illustrate how necessary that is, let me share an example from one of the international negotiations leading up to the Paris negotiation (COP21) with all countries present. The negotiations were not going well when a good friend of mine - the head of Greenpeace - stormed into my office.

“This is outrageous, what governments are doing!”, he said. “We are going to walk out, all of us - all the NGOs, all Civil Society. We’re all going to walk out and we’re going to demonstrate against you.”

“That is such a brilliant move”, I replied. “Do you have everything that you need? Do you have enough microphones?”

“I have two microphones.”

“I have another six - you now have eight. When are you going to walk out?”

“We’re going to walk out on Wednesday at 2:00pm.”

“Okay, what door are you going to use?”

“We’re going to use door number two.”

“I suggest you use door number four because there’s more media at door number four.”

We went through the idea and improved that statement, which due to the insufficient efforts from governments was absolutely necessary. It turned out to be quite a demonstration and I was just sitting in my office watching all of this unfold, thinking, “This is very good.” And the governments did step up a little bit in response.

At that time, I could not relinquish my responsibility to hold the governmental process - a role that I no longer hold today as my responsibilities have since shifted.

## We all have a role

**Christiana Figueres:** What has always been an important guide for me is understanding that we all play a role, we all have our different positions, our different opinions, our different interests - and they’re all necessary.

Even if I have someone in front of me who believes that we are *diametrically* opposed to each other on a family issue, on a global issue, on a war issue - on anything - I personally find it helpful not to visualize a straight line between me and that person, but a circle.

I visualize that that person finds themselves diametrically opposed to me on the other side of the circle, but it’s a circle. I trust that there is always another person, government or institution that will have a position or an interest adjacent to the one that I’m listening to. And then there will be another one adjacent to that and so on. Very soon we’re back to 180° around that circle. The point is that there is no such thing as mutually exclusive opinions, interests or positions. Because of interbeing, this is true even for those who think that they’re diametrically opposed to me.

I always smile in my little heart and say to myself, “You think you’re completely different to me but actually there’s a lot of me in you and there’s a lot of you in me and actually we agree on a lot.” I just

find that this is the lesson of interbeing and understanding: the hate in another person is a part of *me*, that the despair in another person is a very active part of me.

### **No mud, no lotus**

**Christiana Figueres:** In all honesty, I wake up most mornings despairing at what I'm seeing. The question for me then is: Do I let that control my day? Do I let it control my thoughts, my words, and my actions? Or do I use the despair as the very rich mud to transform into the lotus?

For me, there's no teaching that is as clear as "no mud, no lotus", because that is the kernel of transformation. If we can all give that to ourselves every day, then we can make space for the despair and the anger and maybe even the hatred. At the same time, we may be able to make space for reconciliation and growth in our shared humanity that we all are living.

**Sr True Dedication:** Thank you, Christiana. I am so in awe of what you've just shared. It seems you're speaking of Right View, of the radical courage of the first three of the 14 Mindfulness Trainings, of real openness of heart and mind.

How do you find the strength to keep that openness, especially when you have faced such personal attacks from within as well as from outside the climate movement? What is your source of strength? We've had the insight here, how else do you find the strength to do this?

**Christiana Figueres:** Isn't the insight the strength? I think it is. And yes, I have been the target of many attacks and many criticisms but I do understand the anger. It's a part of me also. It's not like I'm in la-la land. I know the reasons. I know the reasons for anger. If the anger is directed at me, it's probably a good direction because it means that anger will not be reflected back. Preaching is so unhelpful in the field that I am working in. It's all about the internal work.

It's all about the quality of the presence that we bring to that situation, not what we say, not what we preach. It's the quality of the presence that allows the other person to have the space that they need, at that point in time, to express the emotions that are overcoming them at that moment. A seed has grown from many things prior to the moment - things that come from ancestors - and becomes a tsunami of anger.

The boundary of that anger is not necessarily just what we are witnessing right now. It has longer roots and I know that. And those roots are also mine. So, on my best days, I can really embrace and understand where their anger is coming from. What that anger needs is an embrace - an act of love and an act of patience.

### **The miracle of systems change**

**Christiana Figueres:** That anger then has a chance to subside and that is a gift that we can give to that person. But let's also remember that it's a gift that we give to the world, because whatever interaction we have with one person is something that gets mirrored out there in the world. Whatever is in me, I mirror out there in the world - that is the miracle of systems change.

Whatever I do is actually having an effect on the world out there. The alternative is to let the world determine what goes on inside ourselves and I did that for many years. And I can say it doesn't really lead us to very good results. So the invitation is actually to take that responsibility. What is the world inside doing and how do I reflect that on to the outside world?

**Sr True Dedication:** Thank you, Christiana. It's wonderful to hear you explain how our inner landscape is also really that frontier of collective transformation. I also admire that you're not afraid of strong emotions.

You have this kind of courage to lean into them, to befriend them. The sixth of the 14 Mindfulness Trainings speaks about taking care of anger, "We will practice right diligence in order to nourish our capacity of understanding, love, joy and inclusiveness, gradually transforming our anger, violence and fear, and helping others do the same." So you are practicing this beautifully, Christiana. And I want to ask a little bit more about this anger. It seems so important to me how you allow it to be there. You recognize it, you embrace it, you give it space. And maybe not everyone here is aware that in Plum Village, with Christiana's help, we've been hosting retreats for climate activists, especially those who hold different views from each other and might be talking with each other in decision making settings or negotiations.

How have you seen the path of practice here in Plum Village? How does it help with this fire of anger that has its right to be there but may not always be helping? Or maybe it does help. Does the anger help?

**Christiana Figueres:** I think it does. The mud, yes. I call it the *circular firing squad*, a dynamic that we have built among the environmental community where we all feel very self-righteous about knowing exactly what to do. We think, "I have the perfect solution and therefore your solution is not valid because it's not mine," and then we start attacking each other (as though we have the time to attack each other). That is one observation that I started to make several years ago.

It is one of the reasons why those who are dedicating their life to the protection of our planet are very often by now full of anger, of despair, of frustration, close to burnout or beyond burnout.





## In the footsteps of Thay

**Christiana Figueres:** Thay's teachings saved me from suicide. When I look out onto the climate community and I see the depth of the pain - and it's not just climate, it's all environmental and increasingly all social issues - I see this world that has so many challenges. I see so many people dedicating their life to bringing harmony, to bringing resilience, to bringing peace and not seeing that reflected out there in the world.

That leads to huge frustration, to anger, to despair, to judgment, to blaming and to self-deprecating behavior. So I reached out to Plum Village again (just as I did to Thay in 2014) because these people are dedicating their lives, not just one or two hours a day, no, but their lives. They are dedicating their lives.

I know women - and I deliberately use the word *women* - who are 11 years old who are dedicating their lives to protecting the planet. There are also women and men who are 68 or much older than I. And that dedication comes out of this deep love for the home that we all share.

When that is not visibly mirrored in the world - that we are bettering ourselves - it is no wonder then that we have the despair, the anger, the frustration, and even the suicidal thoughts. So I really thank you, Sister, and the entire Plum Village community that has been willing to do the very, very hard work of rescuing hundreds of environmental activists who have been about to give up.

We just cannot give up. We have to see everything that we're seeing as the mud and we have to stand up for the lotus. We cannot drown in the mud. So that's what we're doing. We're doing it with hundreds of brave, courageous, beautiful dedicated people who leave those retreats literally saying to me, "I will no longer consider suicide. I go back to the front line because I have a different way of being active. Now I have a different way of seeing, I have a different way of thinking, I have a different way of acting." And they go back out to the front lines, in Thay's footsteps.



# Yet, this morning

Sister Chân Từ Nghiêm

*The world is burning up  
Or drowning in rain.  
Yet this morning the soft air  
Breezes through the leaves  
Of the tall trees,  
And they swish like  
Waves, reaching  
The amazing shore.*

*Baby blue is the sky  
No clouds are seen.  
The sun sits  
Silently and  
A few leaves are falling  
Announcing autumn  
Is drawing near.  
Yet this morning  
The gentle soft breeze  
Is everywhere,  
Sweeping in happiness for us all.*

September 9, 2024

*This poem was written during the walking meditation when we stopped and looked at the beauty of nature around us.*

*Walking meditation is nourishing and healing when we feel sad and discouraged with the fires and floods happening on mother earth due to the climate crisis. She is still there solid and beautiful, and our feet touch the earth always with much gratitude for her resilience.*







# Visiting Vietnam a bouquet of gifts

## Brothers from Deer Park Monastery

### Sharing by Brother Chân Pháp Lưu

*Brother Pháp Lưu is from the US and was ordained in 2003. He is one of the senior Dharma teachers at Deer Park Monastery*

Deer Park wanted to send a group of young monastics to Vietnam to visit the places our teacher deeply cared about, so we invited all the brothers to attend the Two-Year Memorial of Thay's passing. This is the most important ceremony in the passing of a great teacher like Thay. Over 400 monastics in the Plum Village tradition from around the world gathered at the Tu Hieu Root Temple. It was a first chance for many of our young brothers to meet elders from other centers.

As we were already in Vietnam, we decided to go on a spiritual pilgrimage to Yen Tu Mountain, the center of the Bamboo Forest tradition. Yen Tu Mountain is the place where King Tran Nhan Tong, the only king in Vietnamese history to abdicate his throne to become a monk, went after repelling a Mongol invasion from the North. He wanted to water the seeds of peace in his people instead of the seeds of revenge, so he gave the throne to his son, King Tran Anh Tong.

### Intimate Connections - Sharing by Brother Chân Nhất Ân (Brother One Seal)

*Brother Nhất Ân was born in Canada. He is a novice monk, ordained in 2022*

I didn't have any expectations of visiting Vietnam. I had heard many things from my siblings, especially my Vietnamese siblings, of how beautiful Vietnam is. But I went with an open mind and it allowed me to take everything in. For me, the most important part of the trip was getting in touch with my spiritual ancestors.

While at the Root Temple in Hue, we joined a monastic retreat for over 400 monastics from all of our centers. It was a big retreat full of the energy of practice, of laughter, enjoyment, and togetherness.

During the monastic retreat, all the English-speaking monastics got together and had lunch outside. Even though we were eaten by mosquitos, it was so lovely. We shared our memorable moments with each other and I shared my surprise at touching my spiritual ancestors so deeply at the Root Temple.

One of the sisters asked me, "Are you Vietnamese?" I said, "No". She said, "What do you mean then?" Indeed, when you look on the altars, it was all drawings and photos of Vietnamese patriarchs.

For me though, it wasn't just about those spiritual ancestors, but also those who came long before that. Getting in touch with all the monastics that came before me, from the time in India when Buddhism was still flourishing and monastic life thriving. Getting in touch with those who paved the way for me to be, perhaps, the only Indian monk that many people might see in Vietnam in their lifetime, and having a lot of gratitude for that.

Another thing that was very alive for me was that wherever we went, we were met with so much gratitude and generosity - from the monastics, from various temples, and from the lay people. I thank Thay and the Buddha. I have a lot of gratitude for our many unknown Buddhist ancestors and our practice which continues to touch people deeply.

People saw me, an Indian monk, and they might have thought, "Bodhidharma!" It is not my own merit that brings that about, but the merit of all my ancestors who brought about the belief that monastics are someone you can go to, someone who can help you. People in Vietnam have a lot of faith in monastics.

In Deer Park, we don't go often outside of the monastery, whereas in Vietnam we stayed about 30 minutes away from the Root Temple. On our walks to the Root Temple, many people would come and say "Oh, thầy Ấn Độ", meaning "Indian monk". They would want to offer me tea, or biscuits, or



tell me things. There was so much generosity and smiles and love. Sometimes it was hard for me to accept, especially as a young monastic, thinking - what have I done to deserve this? I am just bald and have a robe. I've only been a monk for a year and a half. How do I merit this?

One realization that's been very strong for me is that I am a vessel. Especially in Vietnam, people see monks and they just want to give a lot, to be very generous. We are a vessel to receive their generosity and to just allow that to happen.

For me, growing up in North America, it's sometimes hard to be generous. You might wish to give something to a person experiencing homelessness and be told, "Oh, why are you giving to them? They might not use the money well." "Well, I just want to be nice." You might try to donate to non-profit organizations and have questions about how the funds are used. Things can become complex when you are simply trying to give.

In Vietnam, people had no second thoughts about giving, because there is a culture of generosity and of giving. It really isn't about what is given, because there is such a range - some people smiling, bowing, saying "hello", wanting to shake hands, or giving me a hug. I accepted all of it with open hands and an open heart. That was very special.

There was another powerful moment for me. One day, at our home-stay, the older lady there looked at my feet and said, through Google translate, "Oh, you have bunions, just like me!" For some reason, she was very surprised to see mine and found it to be a real moment of connection.

I have bunions because growing up, I didn't have appropriately sized shoes all the time. I am 24, and there were times when I wanted to have my feet fixed because I thought they looked weird. But I see now that changing them can remove a

condition for people to connect with me. People might think that monks should all look beautiful and have white, straight teeth. That's why I never got braces, because I would rather look like everyday people, to not remove myself so much from what everyone else in the world looks like.

We want people to be inspired and to relate to us. My bunions are my Dharma doors. Same thing as me being Indian, or being this or that. I don't have to change who I am or be someone different. Someone seeing those attributes in a monastic or a practitioner can come to see themselves in that person. They see those characteristics and they feel a connection, they feel moved.

I feel very grateful for the people who were inspired and moved to help Thai practice and to come back to Vietnam. And for those who continue the practice in Vietnam even when it isn't easy. Not just the monks and nuns, but also the lay practitioners who have found ways to practice, to have undercover retreats. Seeing the strength of their bodhicitta and their heart of practice gave me faith in the practice and in my own role as a monastic. It helped me see what I can offer, how I can support my siblings, support myself in my own practice, and support the lay friends who come here, and those whom we visit.

### **Harmony without Boundaries - Sharing by Brother Chân Minh Nhân (Brother Kindness)**

*Brother Minh Nhân of Mexican descent, was ordained in the Sweet Sage family in 2018*

There were two main reasons why I wanted to go on this trip.

The first one is that I never had the opportunity to meet our teacher, Su Ong, Thich Nhat Hanh. Nevertheless, I was inspired enough, saw enough Dharma talks, read enough books, and could see a lot of the wonders in the community that keeps



our teacher alive. So much so that I was able to ordain, having never met our teacher.

Going to Vietnam allowed me to walk around, to breathe, to try to see with my own eyes what my teacher saw. Whether it was being in the Root Temple, walking on one of the many little roads, or getting lost and finding myself in the rice field, I tried to understand a bit more who this incredible human was.

The second reason had to do with really understanding my Vietnamese brothers and my sisters. I have suspected for a long time that there is a bit of overlap between Mexican culture and Vietnamese culture.

The first time I came to Deer Park, it was Tet, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year. There were monks and nuns around a fire with the biggest pots I've seen in my life, and ash on them! [Cooking earth cakes the traditional way] I had never seen a group of people so happy at 10pm. I didn't know what they were singing; it was in Vietnamese. I remember thinking, "What is going on?" I see family here. I see home here. It reminded me a lot of Mexico, especially my mum's home town, which is a quaint village on the west coast of Mexico. I really wanted to see where my brothers and sisters are coming from; what is it that they call home? I wanted to immerse myself in that reality.

One thing that stood out for me from the Vietnam trip was the harmony in our cluster of brothers. I am not sure if there is anywhere else in the world you can take a group of ten or so men, in our "uniform" without knowing the language, where we were going, or the itinerary, ... and yet, have as much ease as our group did.

After the trip, we realized that harmony was one of the big things that stood out during our time there, especially when we interacted with the local sanghas. They could see a group of foreigners, in Vietnam, united by this practice, smiling, teasing each other, and happy. We heard this from some of the sangha friends in Vietnam.

There was a real power of being able to be there, with our own affinities, our own ways of being, as well as with the practice of deep listening. We were able to be there for each other, and be flexible, which are important aspects of being a monastic. I think we could all feel and see that, and these aspects are not something anyone can get from a book. Until you have lived with somebody, shared a room with them, seen them every day, you don't really know them. Or, as my mum would say about my dad time and time again, "Yeah, he's great and funny, but live with him..."

The practice among us was healthy and green, and our teacher was there, by extension. We had the ability to flow harmoniously, find ourselves in very



interesting situations time and time again, and still be ok. We didn't have to "begin anew" formally; we didn't even have to "begin anew" once!

It doesn't matter if we go to Africa or India or the moon. If we can have a group like this - a group that enjoys the process of getting there, the time we are there, and the time coming back - what we have right there is a testament to what we can do together.

I'd like to think that our teacher was smiling as he saw our ability to have a "successful" trip.

### **Going Far to Come Home - Sharing by Brother Chân Minh Lương (Brother Generosity)**

*Brother Minh Lương who grew up in Laguna Beach, California, was ordained in the Sweet Sage family in 2018.*

They have a saying in Vietnamese - "Đi thật xa để trở về" - you go far in order to come home. Whenever we leave for an extended period and come back to Deer Park, I see how fortunate we are to live here. To have everyone come and practice with us on Sundays as a multi-fold sangha is a wonderful thing.

The trip to Vietnam showed me that we have really deep and strong roots. I know that when Thay passed away, there were people who were worried about what would happen to the sangha and to the monastics. There is a lot more to Plum Village than just our teacher Thay. He is a big part of it and he is living on in all of us.

When we are practicing the teachings that Thay transmitted to us - mindful walking, mindful breathing, arriving, being at home in the present moment - then we are part of this stream of ancestors, of Thay, and of these wonderful teachers - Master Tang Hoi, Master Lieu Quang - who came before us. I was very touched going to this ancestral homeland, even though I was born and raised in the US and didn't grow up with Buddhism at all. I am learning to adopt Buddhism and Vietnam as my spiritual homes.



One of the highlights of the trip for me was the monastic retreat at the Root Temple. It's always been very powerful for me when we have a retreat with so many monastics. Here, in the US, when we are on the US tour and all the monastics from the three centers are together, we have a very powerful collective energy. Those retreats have been very healing for me. The monastic retreat at the Root Temple was like that, but even more so. There were more monastics than I'd ever seen before. I wrote in my journal then that my mind was so peaceful and wholesome during those days.

One very special thing was that we practiced walking meditation at the Root Temple, which is a historic temple about 200 years old. To walk with so many practitioners ... At the end of the walk, I felt so happy, so alive, so present, and I saw our elder brother Thay Phap Dung. I bowed to him, he bowed to me, he took my hand, and we walked to the half-moon pond and just stood there, looking out at the pond and at the sangha. It was such a happy moment; I was almost overwhelmed.

In those moments, I see that there is this amazing depth to all those things. We knew that the Three-Portal Gates, the grounds, the half-moon pond are ancient and are manifesting in the present moment with all their history - and that's amazing. But it's really everything: the grass, the trees, the flowers... just asserting their beauty and their wondrous nature. That image really nourished me and brought me a lot of joy.

Going to Yen Tu Mountain, one of the most sacred mountains in Vietnam, was another highlight for me.

We left at four in the morning so that we could have it to ourselves in the early hours. There are many temples on the mountain. As you climb, you arrive at one, and then as you climb farther,

you get to the next one. We would offer incense at each temple.

Thay Phap Luu was leading the group and we were really walking mindfully like he shared. He also led us in chanting when we arrived at the first temple. It was early in the morning and chanting woke me up and brought the group together. I was happy because there weren't many people around us. But as we climbed the mountain, we got more and more of an audience at each temple.

First, there was one person watching us, then groups of people spread around, a couple of them with their phones out filming us. By the time we got to the top of the mountain, there was a huge crowd. There is an altar there, very small, probably 15 feet square inside with not much room to stand. We were with our elder brother Phap Hoi. He said, "Ok, we will chant the Heart Sutra." I was dumbfounded, because the Heart Sutra is a very powerful chant. It's "cinematic." There were all these Vietnamese people around us talking and it was not a ceremonial setting. I didn't know how people would react to it.

We stood in front of the altar and started chanting. Everyone stopped talking, looked at us, all the phones came out... we went through the whole chant. Brother Phap Hoi said, "That was perfect. Now we do 'May the Day be Well'". I thought, "Ok, we will have a chanting recitation on top of the mountain."

He was so happy. I have never seen him like that before. I think he was really proud of us. That made me really happy. It was a significant moment for him to come back to his homeland with a beautiful sangha to stand before the ancestral altar. It's like - WE were the offering to the ancestors.





# A pilgrimage of gratitude

## Sister Chân Đào Nghiêm



*On January 29, 2024, more than 400 monastics from all Plum Village centers and lay practitioners from over 30 countries gathered at the Tu Hieu Root Temple to honor Thay. These excerpts from Sister Dao Nghiem's journal, spanning January 18 to February 16, 2024, reflect her profound experiences during this unforgettable pilgrimage.*

Preparing for a journey back to Vietnam, I feel a release - a gentle surrender to simplicity and presence. This journey honors Thay, my beloved teacher, and invites me to experience Vietnamese culture with deep gratitude and humility. It is my third visit, a continuation of previous journeys inspired by his teachings, an expression of love and gratitude.

Our group of 15 sisters departs Bordeaux with a mix of excitement and last-minute anxiety. Travel delays in Paris creates uncertainty, but Vietnam Airlines waits for us. It is as if we are carried by an invisible thread of trust. Upon arriving in Ho Chi Minh City, we make our way to Huế, where we are warmly greeted by familiar faces and enveloped by the beloved kindness of our monastic family. A moment of deep joy awaits me as we arrive at the monastery. I see two of my elder monastic siblings standing by the roadside, waiting for a taxi. My heart fills with happiness at the sight of them. One embraces me with a warm, heartfelt hug, and, in that simple gesture, I feel profoundly welcomed - held by the enduring kindness of our community. This

is the essence of our spiritual family - a presence, a smile, a gesture, each one reminding me that we all have a place in it.

Seeing over 400 practitioners gathered for a monastic retreat at Dieu Tram Monastery, I feel profound gratitude for Thay and the spiritual family he has created. It is a touching reunion with our sisters and brothers from around the world. Together, we've shared moments of doubt, mutual support, and growth. Our gathering is a tribute to Thay's legacy, a community connected by practice and love.

The cultural diversity of our sangha enriches us, yet it also requires us to work together to cultivate harmony and understanding. Our commitment to keep the sangha flame alive is grounded in a shared determination to build not only a community but a universal family. The gratitude I feel for Thay is profound, "Thank you, Thay, for teaching me to walk, to listen, to love, to be truly present. In your name, we continue building this sangha, with the compassion and clarity you have bequeathed to us."





During our stay, we visit venerable monks and nuns associated with Plum Village and listen to their heartfelt recollections of Thay, which fill us with respect and admiration for our teacher. The monastic retreat flows harmoniously with teachings, meditations, and Dharma sharing sessions. Near Thay's hut by the lotus pond, I feel his quiet presence in the sunlight filtering through the trees - a silent and benevolent reminder of his teachings.

Honoring Thay's commitment to community, I realize that building the Sangha is a beautiful transmission he has left us. Thay often reminded us to consult the Sangha, teaching us to contribute to and rely on each other. His words, "I am a member of the Sangha," resonate in each of us, inspiring us to preserve and nurture this community.

The ceremonies honoring Thay, where he formally becomes an ancestral teacher in our lineage, begin at dawn. Brothers and sisters gather before the Tu Hieu Temple, forming a solemn procession behind venerable monks who lead the ritual chants. The mantra "I have arrived, I am home" echo in my mind, anchoring me in the present moment and allowing me to savor each step, each sensation, despite the crowd around us.

Later, a peaceful walk with a younger sister in the small streets around the monastery brings moments of lightness and ease as we discover many gardens, old houses, and a large park. I later visit Thay's hut, reconstructed as a quiet sanctuary imbued with his presence. I feel the warmth of his guidance and the soft certainty that his spirit endures within us.

We continue to the Bao Quoc Temple, the Buddhist Institute where stories of Thay's youth highlighted his determination to challenge the conservatism of the time and to choose instead his own path with unwavering conviction. At Lieu Quan Temple, we pay homage at the stupa of one of our main root teachers and feel a deep connection with our own roots. The experience is crowned by a gentle moment when a butterfly lands on my hand, a symbol of grace and presence.

With my fellow travelers, we laugh and share spontaneous moments that remind us of Thay's youthful spirit. His quiet defiance and gentle audacity continue to inspire our paths.

At Vinh Hang Park, where Thay was cremated, a humble stupa and statue mark this sacred place. Hundreds gather to meditate and honor his memory. Thay's presence is palpable in the wind and birdsong. Walking there, I feel that he is among us, quietly affirming the journey of each step we took.

Our pilgrimage continues to Phuong Boi, the original monastery founded by Thay, where his vision for a community dedicated to peace and love began. With reverence, I place my hands on the base of an old meditation hall pillar, a cherished remnant of his early aspirations. Our journey then takes us to Yen Tu Mountain, where we spend two nights surrounded by temples and stupas in a place vibrant with Vietnam's spiritual legacy. Yen Tu's history - of a king who became a monk and founded the "Bamboo Forest" meditation school - reflects a lineage of devotion that deeply inspired our teacher and nourished his strength and courage to pass the Dharma on to us.

At the final stage of our journey, we travel to Phung Xuan Monastery to celebrate Tết. My aspiration for the Year of the Dragon 2024 was to "Let everything flow, let go of grasping, cultivate inner peace, smile at life, recognise the beauty in my sisters, water the beautiful seeds in them and prevent the seed of irritation from invading my mind". This journey, bridging generations, cultures, and spiritual worlds, draws to a close. Yet, in truth, it is just the beginning of a deeper, more rooted journey - one anchored in joyful presence, in which Thay's legacy continues to live through us.

This pilgrimage was filled with profound connections rooted in our spiritual heritage. I felt the presence of my ancestors, and my energy was renewed. In my sisters, I saw Thay's spirit reflected, leaving me with a powerful sense of unity and belonging.







# Roots Nourished, Spirits Glow

Lê Tiết Khánh

*Following the success of 2023's first ever retreat for young Asians who grew up in the West, Plum Village welcomed members of the Asian diaspora back to Compassionate Nectar Temple (Lower Hamlet) for the "Nourishing Our Roots" retreat in May 2024. One retreatant reflects on his journey of healing and reconnecting with his Asian roots.*





## Grilled young bamboo shoots with chili salt

It's been a few months since returning from the "Nourishing Our Roots" retreat for young Asians in the West, but the moments of grilling young bamboo shoots and enjoying them with chili salt alongside the nuns, monks, and fellow retreat participants on a "lazy day" still flood my mind. These memories remain deeply etched in my heart and have become an inseparable part of my journey to reconnect with my roots and nourish my soul.

You may wonder how such a simple grilled dish can hold such power. It's not just because grilled bamboo is a specialty in many Asian countries, especially Vietnam. Nor is it just because it's rare to find in Europe, perhaps only available in Plum Village. It's also because of the love and care with which the brothers and sisters prepared and offered it to us. They cooked with their hearts and their smiles, sharing everything they had, which gave me a profound sense of home. I believe this is the power of love created by brothers and sisters who diligently practice mindfulness.

## The power of mindfulness practices

This retreat was truly special for me. Not only was it designed specifically for young Asians in the West, but it also offered a complete immersion into Plum Village practices. The sisters and brothers guided us through a wide array of traditional activities, including sitting meditation, walking meditation, deep relaxation, mindful eating, deep listening, heartfelt sharing,

and singing meditation. The sense of community was palpable as we embraced mindful work, which turned everyday tasks into moments of meditation. Throughout the retreat, we had ample opportunities to hear Dharma talks, which offered profound insights into how to live mindfully. At the end of the retreat, we had the chance to receive the Five Mindfulness Trainings, in order to deepen our understanding and commit to a mindful life. The retreat fostered a nurturing environment where we could heal, grow, and reconnect with our roots.

I remember a Dharma sharing session with the "Patience" family where Sister Phùng Nghiêem asked us to share a happy moment from our childhood. I took a deep breath, delving into my memories. When I began speaking, tears unexpectedly streamed down my face. I recounted how, despite our poor living conditions, my siblings and I loved and cared deeply for each other, always sharing everything equally. Though I was recounting happy moments, I couldn't stop crying. I believe the nurturing environment created by the sisters and brothers allowed me to look deeply into a wound I hadn't recognized before. The practice of deep listening without judgment created a safe space that enabled me to pour my heart out and begin healing. The warmth and understanding in that space helped me uncover and address the pain hidden beneath those happy memories, starting a healing process I never knew I needed.







Observing the participants, I realized that many seeds of mindfulness had been planted. I saw: smiles during walking meditations on the paths that Thay used to walk, tears of compassion during metta meditation as thoughts of loving-kindness and peace were sent to those in need, eyes filled with gratitude towards Mother Earth during mindful eating, laughter shared during mindful work, and gentle singing of a participant in his tent. All of these moments created a tapestry of peace and connection. To me, these images reflect the profound power of mindfulness practice that brings healing and joy into our lives.

### **Touching the Earth, Touching the Roots**

It's fascinating to realize that I had been practicing Touching the Earth for many years without knowing it is one of the profound practices in Plum Village, a practice we experienced several times in this retreat. When I was a little kid, my mom assigned me a daily task. Around 6 p.m. I was to light and offer incense, and invite the sound of the bell three times. This ritual was a way to honor and communicate with our ancestors, the rising smoke carrying our prayers and wishes to the spiritual realm. Many wishes and prayers from my childhood either came true or drifted away with the smoke, never to materialize. Still, this practice was an important part of my childhood.

Life in the Western world disconnected me from this practice. But in this retreat, as I kneeled and gently touched the Earth, it felt like I was touching the roots that hadn't been nourished for years. In that moment, I saw my father in me, who passed away when I was still a child. I saw my mother in me, who sacrificed her life for my future. I saw myself as a continuation of my

ancestors, dwelling in immense gratitude, just by touching and trusting Mother Earth.

If you are searching for answers to the big questions in your life, I believe this retreat is worth a try. I have received immense love and invaluable lessons. For many of us, it is also a place where we forged friendships with people from similar backgrounds from around the world. After the retreat, many of us continue to meet online once a month to practice together. This regular meeting is also an opportunity for us to recite the Five Mindfulness Trainings.

During the last day in Plum Village, before leaving for home, I attended a Question and Answer session in Upper Hamlet. During the session, a participant asked, "Is Plum Village Heaven?" I found the question amusing. I don't think it's a question that can be answered definitively. However, I am sure that Plum Village is a peaceful place, and that it felt like home to me - a place to nourish my roots.

Being back home, I am happy to continue practicing and nurturing my roots, patiently waiting for them to grow and blossom. See you again in:

*A retreat designed with care,  
For young Asians, love to share.  
In Plum Village, we heal and grow,  
Roots nourished, our spirits glow.  
Touching the Earth, roots embrace,  
Ancestors' love, we retrace.  
A peaceful place, feels like home,  
In mindfulness, we're never alone.*



# The morning sunlight guided me home

## A Conversation with Sister Chân Quy Nghiêm



Sister Quy Nghiem was ordained in 1999 at Plum Village in the Cherry Tree family. Even before becoming a nun, she was known for her meditative songs, such as “Freedom in Every Step” and “Coming and Going In Freedom,” under her Dharma name Tịnh Thủy (Pure Water).

In September 2024 she visited Plum Village and participated in the monastic retreat. The Newsletter team, along with several other brothers and sisters, had the chance to sit with her and listen to her sharings. Below is an excerpt from that beautiful session.

**Editorial Team:** Dear Sister, what conditions first brought you to Plum Village, and what stands out most for you when you think about those early days?

**Sister Quy Nghiem:** In 1987, I was in Belgium and had no idea who Thay was, or what Plum Village was about. A friend of mine knew about Plum Village and encouraged me to visit. Following their suggestion, I wrote to Sister Chan Khong. Back then, Plum Village was called Làng Hồng (Persimmon Village), founded by Thay in 1982. It wasn't until the summer of 1987 that the conditions ripened for me to finally make my way here.

At Persimmon Village, life was arranged in a way that made me feel part of a family. At that time, there was only one retreat per year

in the summer. According to Thay, the Village was established as a place for Vietnamese children who were born or raised abroad, where they could come back to their roots and not lose touch with their heritage.

The summer retreat was held specifically during that season because most children had school holidays. Families from North America, Europe, and Australia brought their children to Persimmon Village in France to immerse themselves in Vietnamese culture. The children learned Vietnamese and familiarized themselves with traditions such as ancestor memorial ceremonies, the Full Moon Festival, and Tet (Lunar New Year celebration). These activities allowed

them to touch their roots deeply. This was the primary intention behind Thay's vision in creating Persimmon Village. Thay often said that a person without roots is like a wandering soul, unsure of where they truly belong.

In the sangha at that time, there were Vietnamese monastics who didn't know Vietnamese very well, such as Sister Huong Nghiem, Brother Phap Dung, and Brother Phap Kham. A few others began visiting the Village at a very young age, like Brother Phap Huu and Sister Man Nghiem. Every summer, they would return, growing up in the nurturing environment of the Village. After some time, they were ordained.

The Village atmosphere was warm and cozy like in a Vietnamese family. Everyone came from the ten directions, got together, connected effortlessly, with a sense of familiarity. This is why the essence of Plum Village's practice is to build the sangha as a family; because without family as a foundation, we can suffer deeply.

When I first came to Plum Village, there were many Vietnamese from various countries as well as people from other cultures and backgrounds. Despite our differences in language and culture, we lived together like siblings in one family.

Since his time in Vietnam, Thay had dreamed of creating a community of practice - a spiritual family living together in harmony and happiness that could support him and help the country. Thay always preserved, nurtured, and transmitted this spirit to us. Seeing this, I felt deeply inspired and decided to arrange my return to Persimmon Village at the end of 1987. At the time, I didn't know how long I would stay or even what I would do upon returning, but there was a sacred calling deep down in me, urging me to go back.

In the early years, there were very few people at the Village. Except Thay, everyone else was a lay practitioner. Sister Chan Khong and Sister Chan Duc had not yet been ordained. It wasn't until the end of 1988 that they, along with Sister Chan Vi, became the first three monastic disciples of Thay. There was also a couple from Switzerland who were ordained much later, Brother Troi Dai Nghia and Sister Trang Linh Tue. They were invaluable in supporting Thay and Sister Chan Khong during those foundational years of building the Village.

Back then, the Village was nothing like it is today. Life was very simple and frugal, with basic meals and no heating system to keep us warm during the cold winters. The surrounding forests and hills were still wild. Yet somehow, I was immensely happy and did not have a single thought of lacking comfort or convenience.

The property was originally an old farm that had been purchased, with many cow sheds. Therefore, we had to clean out cow manure and transform the space. During that period, everyone worked tirelessly.

**Editorial Team:** *Could you please share when Thay began to encourage the monastics to compose music?*

**Sister Quy Nghiem:** When I came to the Village in 1988, Thay had not yet started encouraging us in music composition. During those days, he stayed in the Hermitage, but he frequently joined us in activities like eating, walking meditation ... Thay often told stories to us, yet never spoke about his past journey. There were no books written about Thay at that time, so I knew nothing about him.

And yet, our teacher-student relationship was very deep. As Thay said, it's not by chance that we met. We must have had some kind of connection in a past life, and now, conditions had ripened to bring us back together. "The sunlight of the past guides us home, our ancient aspirations have been realized in a heartfelt reunion at our homeland." Yes, because of these karmic conditions, we cross paths again. Even though we know nothing about each other's background, we still bond easily.

Even with just that small group, the daily schedule was the same as it is now: waking up early, sitting meditation, reciting sutras, walking meditation, working meditation, and Dharma sharing. With just that small number of people, everyone still took turns cooking, cleaning, and doing all the tasks just as we do now. All activities were guided by Sister Chan Duc. We cooked and ate in the small space in the Lower Hamlet's kitchen, which was also where Thay gave Dharma talks. Before Thay's talk, we had to rearrange everything. We had to go into the forest to collect firewood for our only, very old wood heater. Often the wood wasn't fully dry, so the whole room would be filled with smoke. Despite this, everyone was very happy. Life was so simple yet incredibly joyful. No one complained about the lack of conveniences - it was quite remarkable.

During one casual gathering, Thay said, "Anyone who wants to stay on at Persimmon Village must know how to sing. Wanting to stay without knowing how to sing nor creating music is not okay." Before I came here, I had never composed music. When I first heard the song *Twenty-four Brand-new Hours* sung by Ha Thanh, I was deeply moved and felt a surge of patriotic love evoked within me. Through the song, I could also sense Thay's deep love for our people and country. Thay said this song was composed when, out of a sudden, he learned that he could not return to his homeland anymore. When Thay went abroad



to call for peace and end the war in Vietnam, he had only planned to stay for a few months. All his friends, close ones, and sangha members were still in Vietnam; so upon hearing the news that he couldn't return, Thay felt so disoriented, like a tree uprooted.

Later, Thay recalled that for five days after receiving the news, he did not tell anyone about it. All he did was practice walking meditation and conscious breathing - no thinking at all. Thanks to that diligent practice, he regained his calmness. It was in 1966, when he was 40 years old and had been a monk for more than 20 years. That proves how important it is not to underestimate the practice of coming back to our breathing, our steps, to re-establish our peace, regardless of how long we have been in the practice.

In the song *Twenty-four Brand-new Hours*, Thay recollected familiar images of his homeland to nourish himself. Being abroad, everything around him was unfamiliar. Thanks to his deep love for his country and his people, Thay was able to overcome the difficulties. That is the spirit of a spiritual warrior.

The line "My hands are sowing seeds for the next harvest" in the song brings to mind the image of someone sowing seeds at dusk as found in the teachings on the mind by Zen Master Khuong Tang Hoi. He said that our mind contains all kinds of seeds. Without the practice of mindfulness - unaware of what we are doing, thinking, or saying - we are like someone scattering (or watering) seeds in the dark at random. But with the practice of mindfulness, our awareness lights up like the radiant sun. We know which seeds to sow or which to water in our consciousness.

We are of the nature of interbeing, so our speech, actions, and thoughts impact everything around us. Understanding the nature of interbeing helps us develop compassion and prevents us from scattering seeds blindly in the dark, as Master Khuong Tang Hoi described. That's why every time I sing this song, I feel deeply moved and consider it a gentle reminder to myself.

Through the song, we can see that we are just one part of all that is present, one part of everyone who is here. We are nourished by our spiritual ancestors, blood ancestors, and land ancestors. When I create a song, I see that it is not solely my own creation but the collective fruit of countless contributions from countless generations.

Saying "my song" is merely speaking from the historical dimension, with the awareness that the "I" is made of many "non-I" elements. With such clear awareness, even when we say "my song," "my child," "my house," "my family," or "my sangha," we are not caught in the idea of "mine" and are no longer caught in the complexes of superiority, inferiority, or equality.

By keeping our awareness alight in the practice, we can transcend all wrong perceptions. Otherwise, we will forever struggle, keep going in circles, as Thay has said: "No matter how many years you live in a monastery or how long you practice, you may still remain stuck in the complexes of superiority, inferiority or equality. It's such a pity - for both yourself and the sangha."

**Editorial Team:** *What was the first song you composed?*

**Sister Quy Nghiem:** I had the chance to be very close to Thay in a warm and natural way, with no pressure or effort from either teacher or disciple.



The relationship between teacher and student was full of kindness and ease, so the first song I composed was “Coming and Going in Freedom,” which is often referred to as “Looking at Thay, My Heart Feels Light.” The song naturally came to life one day after hearing Thay ask, “Has Tinh Thuy composed a song yet? You’ll need one if you want to stay!”

The song “The Old Oak Tree” was born when one year a beloved ancient oak tree, which Thay deeply cherished, fell during a great storm. The Summer retreat was fast approaching, and many large trees had fallen. Some ancient oaks were even broken in half. The newly constructed Plum Hill building had its roof blown away. Thay said to me, “I want to visit a very old oak tree that I love dearly,” and then walked toward the area that is now the Assembly of Stars meditation hall.

We sat down on the trunk of the great fallen oak tree. Thay said, “May you write a song for the oak tree.” That’s how the song came to life. In the song, there is a line: “I will still weep one day when the tree falls, though many other trees will grow stronger, I will still weep...”

I know that my younger monastic siblings are Thay’s young trees that are still growing continuously. Yet, when a great tree falls, it’s impossible not to feel heartache. Thay liked this song and the song Freedom in Every Step. In the Village at that time, on the road to the farming fields, there were not many houses like now, but fields full of sunflowers on both sides. Very beautiful. Thay (and myself) so often practiced our personal walking meditation on this road.

I composed the music for Thay’s poem “Open the Road Wider” which was dedicated to Sister Chan Khong when she was ordained on Vulture Peak at the end of 1988. From India, she sent the poem to the Village with a message, “Please compose a song for me.”

I read the poem and felt deeply moved, but didn’t begin with the first line, “Hair which is the color of precious wood.” Instead, the music first arose from the lines, “The winds chant this morning on the slope of Gridhakuta. The mind is no longer bound to anything.” That part came to life naturally, with the other lines following later.

We just need to practice wholeheartedly, watering our good seeds, and the store consciousness will arrange everything in a miraculous way. This is very clear in the Manifestation Only teachings. Thay said, “Just practice well, and leave the rest to the Buddha.” The Buddha is none other than our store consciousness. We must be mindful of which seeds

we sow and which ones we water in the store consciousness. We just need to focus on watering the wholesome seeds, then the unwholesome ones will also be cared for and transformed.

When I was young, I learned a little about music theory; yet I had never composed music and never thought I would, especially music related to the practice. And yet, the songs flowed out so naturally. Definitely Thay transmitted that inspiration to me. He knew which seeds we had, and he watered them accordingly. When Thay told me to compose songs, I just simply did it without questioning.

Now, I see that many younger siblings are writing beautiful poems and songs, so I no longer spend time on that. It’s the current generation’s turn to create.

**Editorial Team:** *Please share with us about the Vietnamese chant *Đầu cành dương liễu* (From the Depth of Understanding).*

**Sister Quy Nghiem:** One day Thay came into the room and handed me a handwritten copy of two Vietnamese poems *Đầu cành dương liễu* (From the Depth of Understanding) and *Tây phương không xa cách* (The West is not Far Away). He simply said, “Please compose the music for Thay” without any further explanation. I didn’t know that they were two gathas, nor did I realize the former originated from a verse praising Avalokiteshvara. Even so, I went ahead and composed the music anyway, asking Avalokiteshvara for support. So maybe the song was actually composed by her! This made me realize how true it is that we can leave everything to the ancestors in our store consciousness to take care of.

I composed music for *From the Depth of Understanding* first. I did *The West is not Far Away* afterward and only sang it once for Thay in the Hermitage. It wasn’t until Thay’s second memorial that the sangha heard this song for the first time, not sung by me, but by our three young siblings, Trang Tuong Thanh, Trang Phu Xuan and Trang Quang Chieu in Thailand.

*The Pure Land is not so far  
The Pure Land is right here and now  
All rivers return to the ocean  
And the moon is always there in the vast sky.  
We offer to our ancestors  
Tea from the Fragrant Mountain  
And sweet-smelling rice  
from the Dharma Cloud Temple  
Feeling connected to them  
through the joy of meditation  
Regardless of space and time.  
Sitting there in peace, they remain silent,*



*And yet we can feel their strong support.  
Though birth and death are illusory  
The grief of parting is still painful.*

**Editorial Team:** *You have written many poems yourself, please share with us your art of writing poetry.*

**Sister Quy Nghiem:** As Thay said, art is woven into the fabric of our life. We live and feel life deeply, and it naturally becomes poetic. That is why I don't pay much attention to technique. There was a time when Thay taught us to write poetry, even following the rules of tone and meter. But then he said, just let your feelings express themselves; there's no need to force anything. It's like Sister Hoi Nghiem's poetry - I truly admire hers. As for my own poetry, it comes when it comes; I don't have to think much.

A few songs that Thay told me to compose just came to life naturally, like *The Sun Is My Red Heart*, or *Twenty-four Brand-new Hours*. In the Lower Hamlet, every morning, the sunrise was beautiful. I was also inspired by Thay's book *The Sun My Heart*. We provide our store consciousness (Alaya vijnana) with the data that it needs through our authentic practice. Our store consciousness will retain it and, when needed, poetry will manifest. It's really great. Just like how the Japanese write haiku - they simply describe what they see, concise yet genuine.

Thay told Sister Chan Duc to sing in Vietnamese, so she just kept singing in Vietnamese. That was how she learned Vietnamese. Singing made her so good at picking up the language. So you just need to sing a lot of meditation songs in French and your French will improve. Back then, Thay also made Sister Chan Duc compose songs like *Breathe, You Are Alive*.

Thay wanted all his disciples to be true monastics and, at the same time, artists and spiritual warriors. Compassion, insight, courage, truth, goodness, and beauty must go hand in hand. We should continue Thay in this.

As a monastic, we must learn how to preserve the quality of our practice in such a way that it becomes as graceful as an artist, instead of being rigid or dogmatic.

With the spirit of a warrior, we must equip ourselves with many skillful means in order to overcome challenges and transcend our limitations. True victory is the victory over oneself. All the difficulties and obstacles we face are opportunities to draw our own sword of wisdom. If everything is too comfortable and we are overly protected, we will become as soft as "a strand of cooked noodles".

Therefore, dear younger siblings, the more comfortable the conditions, the more vigilant you should be. Each of us must light up our own torch of mindfulness; no one else can do it for us. Amid negativity, if we can maintain that light, it will be difficult for negativity to affect us. Facing challenges, if we are still able to be grounded and continue the path until the end, then we are truly children of the Buddha and disciples of Thay.

So, do not fear difficulties or obstacles - they are opportunities for us to grow stronger, more resilient, and become true warriors. Thay, and Sister Chan Khong are examples of such warriors. As their continuation, we must hold our swords firmly, never underestimating the power of our steps and our breath.

The Buddha is a monastic practitioner, an artist, as well as a spiritual warrior. As his students, we follow his footsteps. Thay is also a monastic practitioner, an artist, and a spiritual warrior. Surely Thay would want his students to continue this flow transmitted by the Buddha.





# *A hand full of Autumn*

Sister Chân Trắng Bảo Tích

## **Mist**

*the plum hill blanketed  
in bleached mist;  
sunshine, in effort  
Pouring,  
the glistening spring.*

## **Season of Fall**

*spotted branches  
covered the path,  
autumn heard in the rustling footsteps.*

## **The Echo**

*Church bell chiming, an  
exploding -  
a shot.  
The hunt.*

## **The Emigrants**

*flocks and flocks  
spreading wings  
acrossing sunset  
for a warm nest.*

## **Fire-glow**

*flickering flame  
surrounded,  
coziness penetrating  
arisen smoke.*



# Awakening to life's purpose

## Interview with Tulip Tree Family



*On 27 October 2024, seven young people shed their hair completely and took their first steps in monastic freedom before the multi-fold sangha in Plum Village, France. A couple weeks later, the Newsletter Team enjoyed a warm conversation with the fresh “Tulip Tree” monks and nuns about the experiences that led them to Plum Village and the practice, the awakening of their monastic seeds, as well as the support they’ve received from loved ones.*

**Newsletter Team:** *Could you share with us what has led you to the monastic path? How did you get in touch with our teacher and Plum Village tradition?*

**Brother Chân Nhất Từ (True Loving Oneness):**  
I first felt inspired to read one of Thay’s books about 10 years ago when I was studying engineering in Edinburgh. I had the aspiration to try and do something good in the world, but I was getting distracted partying and doing unwholesome things. I wanted to make some changes to my life, but I was struggling. One summer, I thought to myself, “Okay, I’m going to really get in touch with Buddhism.” I read *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, researched and drew maps of interbeing, and felt very inspired by the Five Mindfulness Trainings. I really wanted a fresh start.

After that summer, I transferred to the University of Nottingham and started studying

environmental science and I felt invigorated and alive. Later, I worked as a water environmental officer for about five years, a very similar job to what Brother Phap Lai did before his ordination!

Then, about three years ago, my suffering was building up again. I was having relationship problems, work problems, and some problems with my health. I went on a retreat that helped me get in touch with my suffering, and I was able to touch the simple joy of walking, breathing, and eating. I felt so alive. I thought, “Wow, this is great. I could do this full time.” I started looking for ways to continue practicing and also be able to contribute to society and have an impact. When I came to Plum Village, I was very inspired. I thought, “This feels engaged. It is keeping up with the modern times, and normal people can relate to it. It feels very palatable. You can live as a monastic in this way.” So yeah, here I am!

**Newsletter Team:** *Dear Sister Tri Hanh, you are not the only one in your family who practices. Does it start with family? Where does your journey begin?*

**Sister Chân Tri Hạnh (True Action of Understanding):** I went to a Catholic school growing up, but I wasn't necessarily raised at home with any spirituality. My mother did not connect at all with any traditions back then, so my father's devotion to the practice was something I got to discover more deeply when I became older. As a little child I loved to sing. One day when I saw for the first time a musical on DVD, I thought, "This is what I want to do."

Later on, I got the opportunities to perform, which gave me a lot of joy and beautiful experiences, but it didn't fulfill me in the way that I hoped it would. I recall saying to my father, "Daddy, you seem very happy to me; happy in a different, deeper way. How come?" He shared about his practice with me and I started to become interested in meditating.

The first moment that I really felt the aspiration to become a nun was when my father and I watched a silent documentary about a monastery, I felt so fulfilled! It touched me deeply, although I didn't understand why. I vividly recall my father showing me *Thay* and I was speechless. He was the first Zen master who really resonated deeply with me. At that moment I thought, "Okay, if I ever want to become a nun then it will be in *Thay's* tradition."

After I integrated the practice into my life, I could see that I wanted to experience the life of a nun. The day after I turned 27, I made the decision and I was here a month later.

**Sister Chân Tạng Hạnh (True Action of Treasure Store):** For me, I never asked myself, "Should I become a monastic or not?" It wasn't really a decision. Like Sister Tri Hanh, in my family, there was no spirituality, maybe even an aversion to anything religious. Becoming a nun never crossed my mind except at times when I joked with my friends, "I'll try out life, but if I just want to be happy, I'll become a monk!" Not even a nun! I never seriously considered it.

I came to Plum Village quite randomly. I booked the Wake Up retreat remembering that a friend mentioned Plum Village a few years before. I was very happy at first because I found a place where I felt like I could be myself - perhaps for the first time - and be surrounded by people that are truly kind and have compassion.

The final days of the retreat were difficult because I could see more clearly the disconnect between my way of life outside the monastery and

what matters most to me. I remember listening to the Big Bell Chant one evening in French, and I completely broke down and didn't understand why. My journey has been about accepting that those aspirations are there, that this lifestyle was so aligned with everything I value. My mind was struggling, "A nun leading a religious life? No!" But I trusted and I really worked on letting go while my mind came up with all sorts of fears. Even to this day, I am not 100% at peace with the idea that I am a nun. I am very happy to be on this path, but I still have to let go of many ideas associated with what it means to be a nun. But for now, I'm in the right place.

**Brother Chân Nhất Quán (True Contemplation of Oneness):** The first seed was planted when I read a book by Matthieu Ricard, who is a famous French Tibetan monk. I thought, "I also want to be a monk one day." However at the time I was a teenager in a resort in Cuba, so the conditions were far from being ripe. I thought I would need to go to Asia to ordain because I didn't know about Plum Village. Before starting university, I travelled to Nepal and visited Ricard's monastery, but the culture was entirely different, and I did not feel at home. My mother had given me a book by *Thay* when I was a teenager and I remember feeling that it was too simple. I wanted something more metaphysical, philosophical, something more intellectual.

During one of my travels from Tunisia to Morocco I met someone playing piano at the airport. It was a complete coincidence that she knew about Plum Village and told me that Plum Village was like paradise and that I should go there someday. Back home, I read about Plum Village, including how to become a monastic. I was very curious, but I had to "ripen" before coming to monastic life. I checked off all of my "dream boxes" so I wouldn't crave anything else. For example, my last box was to be an artist, so I studied one year in visual arts. But now I see that I can be an artist as well as a monk. I'm very happy.

**Brother Chân Nhất Ngân (True Resonance of Oneness):** I've been practicing meditation in a Buddhist context for about 17 years. I think very early on I had an intuition that sitting still or walking in stillness was a very important way to allow a different kind of understanding to open up. Up until then I had mostly used my intellect to understand.

I first met a monk when I was in my twenties. It impressed me how relaxed and cool he was. He didn't try very hard for anything, and seemed so at ease with himself. I thought, "Wow, it would be cool to be more like that."





I remember reading *How To Walk* by Thay. I was struggling a lot at that time with shame and guilt. A friend of mine was suicidal, and I had many ideas about how I was complicit in her attempts to take her own life. It still sits quite heavily with me. But I always came back to my intuition that there's something very important about sitting and walking in stillness. One day while sitting, my perspective was able to shift a little bit and for the first time I was able to see what a gift it is to even be able to feel shame, to have a body and to feel gravity. I touched the present moment for the first time. And I thought, "This is the way I want to live my life."

I saw so much suffering in teenagers and also in my colleagues while working at a middle school. This experience convinced me that it would be a good idea to get into a community to practice and the first place I thought of was Plum Village. I met a friend who comes here a lot and she kind of stoked the fire. So that's why I'm here. I want to feel more love and I want to act more like a person who feels a lot of love. I have a deep intuition that this place is very good for love.

**Sister Chân Thắng Hạnh (Sister True Victorious Action):** I went through quite a difficult time in my twenties, a quarter life crisis. I had this image of wanting to be in a serene place like a temple. I searched "Buddhist retreat" online and Plum Village was in the top 10 of the BBC ranking. So when I came here, I was really surprised. "How come there are so many Vietnamese nuns? And who is this person whose picture is everywhere?" I had really no idea about anything. I remember reading articles about Thay and Interbeing, which resonated deeply with what I was looking for in my life but hadn't been able to put into words. I extended my stay for another week, because so many things came up that I needed to process.

Sitting in a Dharma sharing we asked the question why the sisters wanted to become monastics. One sister simply said, "I wanted to live a wholesome life." That really stayed with me. At that time I had been working as an IT and business consultant for five years. Although I was not really happy, I didn't have the courage to change. I also took care of my youngest sister who had cancer at the time. She is 16 now and she came to the ordination. So coming to Plum Village was an anchor for me. I think I would not have been able to handle all these things in my life without the practice. Fortunately, my friends and my partner at that time were supporting and encouraging me.

But I knew I did not want to pursue the monastic path in an attempt to escape from my life. The pandemic helped me to stop and figure out what I wanted to do with my life. I changed cities, I changed jobs and I felt so happy and alive and I wanted to share that merit, to share my experience by ordaining. When I came back to Plum Village after the pandemic I was in a really happy place in my life. I wanted to get deeper into the practice.

Whenever I would hear the Sangha chant in Vietnamese, I would just cry. I didn't know where that came from. I knew I wanted to look into what it means to have Vietnamese roots because it's not part of my life back home in Germany. I could see that there's some part of me that I reject so deeply and needs to be healed. That's why I came here. It is important for me to have a space that is inclusive, open and engaged so that we as a society can heal. That Thay brought that to the West deeply touches me. That's why I really wanted to offer myself to the sangha.



**Newsletter Team:** *What was your family's reaction when you decided to become a monastic? How do they see you in your new form?*

**Sister Chân Tạng Hạnh:** I sought advice from the sisters on how best to tell my family, and I sent a letter to my mom a few days before I went to see her. It was very difficult for her. Accepting for myself that I was going to follow this path was difficult already, but facing other's questions and opinions was even more challenging. I didn't tell many people in the beginning, just my close circle of family and friends. Although it was difficult for my mom, she came a few times during the year, and eventually for the ordination too and she completely opened up to it. Despite my Dad being a very non-religious person, he fully supports me doing whatever brings me happiness. He didn't want to be there for the ordination and I respected that, but he came a few days afterwards. First thing he asked was "Okay, show me your head...Oh, you're really beautiful!"

**Sister Chân Thắng Hạnh:** For me, the most touching moment during the ordination ceremony was when my hair was shaved and my friends were all sitting in front of me. They all shared so many crucial moments in my life with me. Even though I am going to go on this spiritual path, they will still be a part of my life. That was so important for me and it's why I cried out of joy and happiness.

There's so much love around me. However, I think I still have the hungry ghost mindset, fearing that I cannot get it deeply integrated enough, and that it will fade when I am no longer with my friends and family. It's something rooted in my fear of abandonment that I experienced as a young child.

**Brother Chân Nhất Từ:** At first my parents were very skeptical, very resistant. My dad is very logical and I really had to explain, break it down very logically over a number of months, and

I've succeeded in the argument so now he's very supportive. He says, "If it makes you happy, that's great, but I'm doing my own thing over here." My mom is a lot more open. Two of my aunties came to the ordination and the evening before the ordination ceremony, I arranged a guided meditation of 15 minutes and I sang the evening chant. Afterwards in the mud room, both my aunties and my mom were crying. They got a taste of what I was doing here now. They felt how special it was. And then I told my mom that I loved her and she said, "I love you too." And we were hugging. This never happens in my family. We never say "I love you"; we're far too English. I felt so close to my mom and I felt she really understood what I was doing.

**Sister Chân Tri Hạnh:** One aspect that touched me the most was my parents' unconditional love, which I also felt strongly during the day of ordination. Before coming to Plum Village, I was a little bit afraid: "Will we still be close?" But they truly love me for who I am, and I feel so grateful for their love and support. I remember my hair being done on the day of the ordination for the last time. When my mother heard it, she said, "Can I please be there?" And she stood there, watching my hair getting done and I could feel she was emotional. She tried to smile to show that she supported me and she looked at me and said it was beautiful. It was so loving and so touching. When the sisters asked me whether I wanted to keep my hair I said, "No, why would I?" But then I asked my parents and they both said, "Yes", even though my father never cares about hair.

My parents are divorced, and yet they were both present. My father is a practitioner, but my mom is not used to chanting and Touching the Earth. Still, they both participated. I've never seen this before in my life. It was so beautiful to witness.



# The Symphony of the Sangha

## Brother Chân Pháp Chúng

*Brother Pháp Chúng was ordained in 2008 at the Từ Hiếu Root Temple at the age of 18. The editorial team had an opportunity to sit down with him and hear about the 15-year journey of his monastic life. Below is an excerpt from this conversation.*



I was born and brought up in a farming family in the remote countryside, far from any monastery. I only went with friends to Buddhist temples on major holidays like Vesak, Ullambana (Vu Lan), or Lunar New Year (Tet). When I heard that Prajna Monastery in Lam Dong, Vietnam was organizing a retreat, I registered out of curiosity. On my way to the monastery, I saw two sisters walking - their pure-hearted and kind looks showed me a new way of living - I was deeply moved.

Two Prajna retreats later, I wrote to the brothers asking to become a novice monk. At first, I didn't give much thought to it. I only felt there was a strong visceral energy propelling me to become a monk, even though I didn't quite know what monkhood was about. I was in love with monastic life.

Some time after ordination and living in an environment guided by concrete practices, I began to feel the siblinghood and the loving embrace of the sangha. I began to know how to savor and cherish the beauties of nature and life more. It was the joy in the practice that supported and nourished me, allowing me to take long strides on this path and go as a river with the sangha.

### **Many streams flowing into one**

Living in the sangha, I found a palpable siblinghood. Everyone approached one another as practitioners, and the words they shared, though very simple, were genuinely caring. The three hamlets in Plum Village France always supported one another in times of need. Seeing the siblings working side by side touched me very deeply. Even without a leader, everything could still be done well.

In the sangha, elder sisters are like mothers, elder brothers are like fathers, and we are as close to one another as blood siblings. This is what I deeply appreciate about life in the Village. I can play and cook with other siblings, and bring out the inner pure-heartedness in me more. I often spend time with my Western brothers and share with them the beauties of Vietnamese culture, such as the traditional Tet celebration, so they can have a better picture of the monastic life in Vietnam. I feel as if I have been released into a big pond where I can swim back and forth with great ease and delight.

Thay has laid down a foundation, paved the way, and built a spiritual tradition that corresponds well to the Western culture. In this environment, I learn that all monastics are equal and exercise the right to speak their thoughts in meetings, even if they have just recently ordained. There is little distance between an elder and a newly-ordained sibling. This is something very beautiful to me.

When I first came here, I didn't find this easy to witness because I thought some things in the sangha were better addressed by the elders. But slowly, it dawned on me that a young sibling's insights could be as bright and illuminating as an elder's. They only needed to offer it to the sangha, and everyone would listen in order to arrive at a collective decision.

Siblinghood is not only through words, but also through actions and the way everyone treats each other in daily life. Many times, I find a mutual understanding between the brothers without an exchange of words. All monastic siblings in the sangha have enough sympathy and understanding, and support one another in difficult times. It is thanks to this mutual understanding that I can get along well with my siblings in the sangha.

There are times however, that I feel a sense of disappointment in my siblings. Every time that happens, I look back at myself without judging the other person. By doing so, I can be with them in a way that is not affected by my feelings, and I can create a friendly atmosphere and approach them with ease. I feel I have enough soulmates in the sangha who understand me, so there is inner joy, lightness, and nourishment in me as I walk down this path.

One time, I asked Thay why some elder brothers and sisters, having ordained and practiced for a long time in the sangha, still left. Thay said, "Because they don't treasure the sangha." I tucked that response in my heart as a koan. The more I live in the sangha, the more love I feel. It dawned on me that I'm truly blessed to be in the sangha's embrace and guidance. The sangha is a precious jewel. Though difficulties and mistakes cannot be avoided on the path, the sangha's love and siblinghood have nourished me and been a source of motivation for me to go forward.

### **Growing Dharma joy**

After living in the sangha for many years, my steps have become increasingly stable and my joy and Dharma happiness grew steadily with each passing day. The practices - especially sitting meditation and walking meditation, as well as listening to the bell to train myself to stop - are true sources of nourishment for me. Another important practice that brings me joy is maintaining my beginner's mind, my original aspiration since my ordination. That is why in my insight gatha to receive the Dharma Lamp, there were the two lines:

*Original aspiration sets sail for the open sea,  
For the Udumbara - in generations to come - to flower.*



That original aspiration to live the monastic life with contentment and freedom has been a source of energy for me to deepen in the practice. As a monk, I do feel considerable transformation and a sense of lightness in the core of my being. Living in the sangha for 15 years, I witnessed many siblings leave the sangha to practice in other traditions or return to a lay life. I don't find myself swayed. Practicing in this tradition assures me that I will be happy for the rest of my life.

### A transformative journey

Looking back on my monastic journey, I realize there have been many positive changes. One of the biggest changes I find is the growing capability to overcome difficulties, take care of my feelings during undesirable circumstances, and generate joy and happiness. I also find myself more mature, steady, and appreciative of life. There's greater depth to my ways of perceiving and looking at things. I know how to generate joy and happiness in sitting and walking meditation. Without the training as a monk, it would be hard to imagine my being in such a way.

There were times when others persuaded me to practice in other traditions. They promised favorable conditions for me to study and teach and so on and so forth... But I asked myself: What is my goal as a monk? Do I want to be an abbot of a monastery? I listened to my heart and found it utterly unstirred.

To me, being in the sangha's embrace and protection is the greatest blessing. There may be difficulties at times, but in retrospect, they are

so insignificant. When I am in the sangha, I can benefit from the beauties and talents that all my siblings offer.

### Sangha symphony

When Thay was in Magnolia Grove Monastery during his last teaching tour in the US in 2013, I had the opportunity to be close to him as his attendant. It was a great joy to see that wherever Thay went, there was always a delegation of hundreds of monastics behind him. Thay was like a father leading his many children on a great expedition.

Some siblings, like Brother Spirit and Sister Trai Nghiem, also brought along musical instruments. Before Thay gave a Dharma talk, the monastics offered the chants of Namó'valokiteshvara, or From the Depth of Understanding. The sound of the monastics chanting in unison with the cello and the violin accompaniment led an auditorium of thousands to quieten to a near-complete silence. Everybody could taste the love from the monastics. Looking out into the audience, chanting with my palms joined, I could feel the sangha was offering a very precious gift to everyone present.

In Plum Village France, the sangha chants before every Dharma talk and it happens that some chants are in French. Although I don't understand them, standing amidst the sangha, I've always felt my separate self melting into the collective flow. The sound of chanting has been very healing for my body.

There were times when I didn't chant along but only stood there with my palms joined and tuned



in attentively to each chanted word. The sound was like a cool stream seeping into my body and circulating all around; it felt extremely pleasant. In those moments, all sadness and sorrows dissipated. The concerns that I clung firmly to suddenly became so trivial; I could easily put them down, accept them, and let them go.

Most recently when we chanted Listening to the Bell or De la Vision Profonde, a deep joy and happiness rose from within me and infused the surroundings. I simply stood there and enjoyed being present. Living in the sangha's flow, there are such moments of wonder. But only when we are attentive can we recognize and savor them.

### **Inner and outer strengths**

On my monastic path, I've rarely run into dead-ends. There have been a few down moments but they were resolved and I stood up again. At difficult times, the first thing I would do is go to the meditation hall and touch the earth deeply to be in touch with the Buddha and the ancestral teachers within me. Then I would turn inwards to look deeply into the issue. My inner-strength is still limited and when the difficulties were too unusual to resolve alone, I relied on outer-strengths. I would consult my elders, learn from their experiences, and practice according to their sharings. The question is: Do we have enough trust in our elders?

My character is such that if I do not know, I ask. Not about everything, but once in a while when I feel very uncertain, I would consult the elders. I take refuge in their insights in order to advance in the practice. Also, I have a deep appreciation for history. When I am in touch deeply with what former generations have left behind - an ancient house, Thay's calligraphies, or something as simple as a chair, a table - though they may be simple in form, I feel the presence of the previous owners. With this recognition and appreciation, my life becomes deeply-rooted.

### **Thay's love**

One time at Magnolia Grove Monastery, Thay asked me if I remembered all 16 exercises of mindful breathing. I replied that I only had a vague memory. Thay told me that only when I knew these 16 mindful breathing exercises by heart would I be his disciple, be his true descendant. Thay shared that the moment he found the Discourse on the Full Awareness of Breathing, he was the happiest person in the world. Although I still have a long way to go in the practice, I have great trust in Thay's guidance and insights. Slowly, with time, inner peace arises in me every time I apply these 16 exercises in sitting meditation.

My second memory of Thay is when he gave me another name, Pháp Tăng. Thay said, Chúng - like Tăng - means "Sangha." So I could be called Pháp Chúng or Pháp Tăng - either is just fine.

There were times when Thay and I enjoyed meals together. When Thay shared his food with me, I didn't expect this kind gesture from him and felt that he was like a father to me, a wonderful and intimate feeling. I was in a dream and so happy. There was no distance between an accomplished, respected Zen Master and his disciple. Whenever that moment comes to mind, it continues to nourish every fiber of my being.





# One Step At A Time

## Brother Chân Pháp Lý



*Brother Pháp Lý was ordained in the Pink Lotus ordination family in 2009 and received the Dharma lamp in 2020. This excerpt of his heartfelt sharing during the monastic retreat in September 2024 in Upper Hamlet offers insights into his 15-year journey of practice and the invaluable experiences that he has encountered along the way.*

### **Taking refuge in the collective energy**

I was sharing two days ago during the Dharma sharing for Young Dharma teachers how I am still amazed by Thay's insight telling us that the sangha energy can carry us and help us. When we gathered for the first morning sitting (in this retreat), I could feel how amazing was the collective energy. I've been sitting mostly by myself during the last two lazy weeks, so the contrast between sitting alone and sitting with the sangha was strong. I could feel the presence of the whole sangha. I felt I could just rely on it and let go.

I found it so interesting, because I was revisiting sitting meditation, but from the Theravadin point of view, which seems more focused on how to practice by ourselves. But sitting with the sangha suddenly helped me realize that we are so lucky to have a sangha. So many people at home don't have the good fortune to have so many friends every morning who can sit with them.

If I'm still here after 15 years it is, first of all, thanks to the sangha. When I first arrived in Plum Village for a one-week retreat, seeing the sangha touched me deeply. It was very clear that something was going on here which really supported me, and

I knew I wanted more. So I joined the next Rains retreat and I haven't left since.

### **Lightening up in order to soften up**

Another aspect of the Plum Village practice that touches me is joy. In other traditions, I had the impression that it was not emphasized as much, or more as a kind of blissful state to attain. But Plum Village provides practices that allow us to generate joy at any moment, not only during sitting meditation. I realized that practicing does not need to be as serious as I had thought. Even now, I am very serious about not needing to be too serious (laughter).

I'm trying to be as light as possible. This is possible because I practice investing whatever time and energy it takes to digest and care for all of my emotions. This is a concrete practice I do every morning. I take time to go deeply into anything that remains from the day or night before as emotions or knots in my body and let them settle, just as Thay explained in the story about letting the pulp in the apple juice settle. Usually, it works very well if I'm patient and concentrated enough to not let myself be distracted by other thoughts. Afterwards, I feel much more open, relaxed, and light. This lightness

then allows me to invite some more vulnerable parts in me to open up.

They often spoke of the inner child. Concretely, I physically contact those more vulnerable parts in me and let them open up by themselves. I cannot ask my inner child to open itself up if it doesn't want to. That's why I create all the good conditions for that to happen, which are usually present at the end of sitting in the morning. I was doing it this morning again, and I could feel that sensation of relaxation and softness coming into the body. I could even feel some joy and a smile coming up, because I was reconnecting with that inner child, that vulnerable part in me.

I see how deeply nourishing this practice is. It took time to get to know that part of me, which now feels safe enough to open up to my older self. It isn't too scared anymore; it is more confident in coming up and seeing that the surroundings are safe. There is so much energy and life in that part of me. It would be such a pity to not let it open up and be here for it. That's one concrete practice that is really helping me. Whenever I am successful, the inner child really carries me through the day. I start with a very clean slate; but also with a lot of energy, joy, and happiness. That makes the start of my day much easier. However, if I do not start my day like that - wow - the day is much, much harder. I kind of lag behind the day. I can feel that I'm not totally united, always one step behind, trying to catch up on the day.

Thanks to this practice, in the 15 years that I have been living in the sangha, I have taken one step at a time on a journey of becoming more and more relaxed and able to open myself up to the sangha. It has helped me to receive the energy of the sangha more. Sometimes, it is not a straight path. For example, if I am hurt by somebody's speech, I can fall back a bit. But every time it happens, I also take care of what has been touched.

## **Finding what is challenging enough for growth**

I love the sangha for acting as a mirror. Whatever I have been able to transform, the sangha has been able to show me my transformation through my interactions with my brothers and sisters. Sometimes, my buttons are pushed and I can see that I'm overreacting. Then, I know there is something to look at. I try to stop and not let any emotion take over. It's not always easy, but I try to be careful. Usually it works; but if it doesn't, I just go and apologize later for having overreacted.

A few days ago, I happened to overreact with my roommate. First, we agreed to say nothing further, but come back to speak about it again

later. After a few days had passed, I apologized for my overreaction, saying that the energy with which I was speaking was not right. I shared that I had all these other unresolved things on my mind bothering me. Now we are the best roommates in the world again.

I realize that I need challenges to grow up as a practitioner and the sangha is a good place to create those challenges. For example, the organizing team asked me to be on this panel sharing. Yesterday, I could see that I was very relaxed and really enjoying the retreat. My only plan for that lazy day was to go for a little ride with my bicycle and pack for the upcoming hiking retreat. So I felt that it was the right moment for me to accept. Without challenges, I tend to retreat back into myself, into my habit energies. But I know from experience that it is not what makes me grow. That's not what helps me transform. So I need these challenges. I need to get out of my comfort zone in order to be able to grow and be even more alive.

However, too many challenges are not good either. How do I find that balance between what is enough of a challenge and what is too much comfort? I often end up too far on either side. For example, after our Francophone tour of almost seven weeks, with back to back retreats of four to five days each, I was not comfortable. That was too challenging; I hadn't found the time and energy to digest all of it. Luckily, I had two relatively easy weeks afterwards.

During that tour, I borrowed a bicycle from some lay friends. Unfortunately, I badly broke my wrist during a cycling accident and I had to go to the hospital for two days. They had to put a plate inside. It was a chance for me to practice with my anxiety, which was painting many scenarios about what would happen. Luckily, I was able to identify and take care of my anxiety, which allowed me to enjoy my stay in the hospital and speak with all the staff members over there. Even during the surgery, I was speaking with a nurse about Plum Village as they had a computer right there. We looked at our website, right when the surgeon was actually doing whatever he had to do.

So, anxiety is not what is currently pushing my buttons. But recently, I called my mother and I realized, oh, this is much more difficult. Right away, my buttons were pushed. The inner child was screaming out saying, "Will you ever listen to me one day?" It was very strong. That's when I know there is still a lot of work for me to do, but I'm slowly making progress. One step at a time.



# love, transformation and Dharma

## Interview with Sister Chân Bội Nghiêm

Sister Bội Nghiêm, True Pearl, ordained in 2005 and currently resides at Deer Park Monastery in California, USA. This excerpt is from an interview with Sister Bội Nghiêm during her visit to Plum Village, France, in the fall of 2024.

**Newsletter Team:** Dear Sister Bội Nghiêm, in 2025, you will have been part of the sangha for 20 years. What has nourished you and helped you stay on the path so far?

**Sr. Bội Nghiêm:** I think my personality plays a significant role. Once I commit to something, I stay with it. I am someone who values loyalty and perseverance. I find inspiration in the monastics with deep faith, like Sister Chan Khong, Sister Chan Duc, Sister Jina, and Sister Dinh Nghiêm. Their example nourishes me. I also don't spend much time daydreaming about what I could do as a layperson. Instead, I find joy in my commitment to this life. This is part of why my love for the sangha remains strong.

I often remind myself that I live in a place where there's no smoking, no drinking, and no fighting. This is heaven! What is even more beautiful is that we live surrounded by people who share the same aspirations and love in their hearts - even though we each express it uniquely. As a Buddhist nun, I am fortunate to travel to different countries and meet people from so many different backgrounds - whether in terms of ethnicity, gender, identities, life experiences, professions, abilities, or ages. I truly feel blessed to live such a meaningful life.

As long as I continue to practice, I see the changes within myself - whether it's letting go of irritation, releasing my attachment to the past, or staying present in meditation. For example, as a novice, I sometimes wondered, "Why does this person, who has been a monastic for ten years, act like that?" But after almost 20 years of practice, I no longer ask that question. I've come to trust that transformation is always possible and naturally unfolds through our practice. This understanding also helps me to have greater faith in others, knowing that we all have the potential for growth and change.

Another source of nourishment for me is witnessing the joy and peace in our lay friends. For example, seeing young children sitting and breathing together is such a simple yet powerful image, so it is nourishing to the heart, watching teenagers who attend a retreat and return home to support their



parents by washing the dishes or seeing young people who no longer objectify others but instead see each person as a fully human being, deserving of respect.

I live in a safe, protected environment; taking that for granted is easy. There aren't many places like this where people, especially women, can experience greater freedom from fear or harm. In Plum Village practice centers, we do our best to ensure everyone - regardless of gender, background, or identity - can feel safe and welcome. We work together to maintain this beautiful and rewarding environment.

And perhaps most importantly, I can do what I love. The sangha gives me so much space to explore and express my practice. Yes, we all share the same core practices, but we each bring our unique creativity to how we share them. None of the Dharma teachers are telling me what to say or how to share my experience. They always had faith in us, trusting that we would share mindfulness, the art of mindful living, based on our personal experiences. We can offer this practice to children, teenagers, and adults from all walks of life - whether from Africa, Asia, the Americas, Australia, Antarctica, Europe, or any other background. For me, Plum Village, while not perfect, is more than enough.

**Newsletter Team:** What is one of the greatest transformations you've experienced in yourself?

**Sr. Bội Nghiêm:** One transformation I've experienced is my ability to dwell happily in the present moment. In the past, my mind would wander. It took me ten years to let go of my former boyfriend. Even though I had already been a nun for six years, it wasn't until I turned 27 that I truly felt free from him. But now, I am very free, and that freedom is the fruit of the practice. And it wasn't because I started loving a monk (laughs). What helped me most were the daily reminders from Thay and the sangha

about dwelling happily in the present moment, coming back to the breath, and practicing self-love.

Many people find it hard to believe I don't think about the future. But honestly, I don't. I never ask myself what I would like to do in ten years because, when I look back, none of my past visions for the future came true. For example, I never imagined I would become a monastic. So, dwelling happily in the present moment now feels natural.

Oftentimes, I ask myself if I can hear the birds singing, and I quiet my mind to listen. It's one of the very basic practices, nothing advanced. In the past, I would do things without much awareness. But now, as I slow down, I find so much joy in becoming aware of every movement. I'm able to express gratitude and be more mindful of my actions. For instance, if I close a door that makes too much noise, I will open it again and close it more gently. When I put down a cup loudly, I'll pick it up and place it down quietly. This is to train myself to pay attention to the present moment and each action I take.

This practice also helps me become more aware of my thoughts. Before, I would hurt others with my speech, and I would hurt myself with my thoughts, too. By practicing to dwell happily in the present moment, I am more aware of what I am about to say, and that helps me speak with more mindfulness and care.

**Newsletter Team:** *We all have different ideas about what it means to build brotherhood, sisterhood, siblinghood. What does it mean to you? Could you share any challenges that you face?*

**Sr. Boi Nghiem:** When I spend time with my monastic siblings - whether sharing a cup of tea or helping each other - whenever I feel my heart is happy and full, I know I'm secreting happy hormones. To me, that is siblinghood. But if I'm in a setting where we're drinking tea and negative thoughts or emotions arise in me - like when too many conversations happen simultaneously, without a clear focus - I don't feel my heart is at peace. At that moment, we're not genuinely fostering siblinghood, even though we're physically together. So, I pay close attention to my body during these times.

Before I became a nun, I often felt an unbearable emptiness inside. That's why I emphasize the importance of quality time. Meaningful conversations help us learn something new about our siblings, something we may not have known. This requires a space where we feel safe enough to share what lies deep in our hearts.

How attentive are we to each other's needs when we work or travel together? Simple acts of kindness - like carrying someone's luggage or offering a cup of juice - build siblinghood. It's someone pouring tea for us to enjoy. It's words

of encouragement after we facilitate an activity, give a Dharma talk, lead a sharing on walking meditation for the first time, or read the Five Contemplations in English for the first time. Just that compassionate gaze, that great support - that is siblinghood. It's about encouraging each other and being there to help when needed. True siblinghood is the absence of competition and jealousy.

I've experienced a sister noticing my sadness and asking sincerely, "How are you doing?" That question made me feel that she had time for me. I can share my thoughts and feelings openly when someone has time for me. That, to me, is how we build siblinghood.

Living with 40 sisters, I've had to accept that I won't be able to form deep connections with all of them. I don't need to force it. The word "relationship" means connection, and connection is emotional. If, during the day, I didn't say "Hi" to a sister or ask her a few questions, I used to feel bad and judge myself - thinking I wasn't contributing to the harmony of the sangha, that I was a bad practitioner. But that was me forcing myself, and it wasn't genuine. Building siblinghood must come naturally. Organic food is very healthy, but if pesticides are used, it may look beautiful on the outside, but it's not healthy for our bodies when we eat it. It's the same with building siblinghood. My presence won't be appreciated if I'm forcing myself or feeling guilty.

Sometimes, I also have to accept that I can't look someone in the eyes or talk to them. In those moments, at least in my mind, I practice cultivating gratitude for the fact that they are monastics, part of the sangha, and not doing anything to hurt me. This is another way of returning to the practice of dwelling happily in the present moment.

One time, I had real difficulty with a sister. Every time I thought about her, my heart would beat very fast because I had this big internal knot, and I would only remember her harsh words to me. And I didn't want to continue having those feelings. So, I needed to practice changing my thoughts, saying, "Okay, if you cannot say anything nice, please think of something nice." I asked myself, "Is she doing anything right now that hurts me?" The answer was "No." "Then why am I angry at her right now?"





When I saw her practicing walking meditation peacefully, I ensured the image entered my consciousness as profoundly as possible. To me, this practice is also about building siblinghood. It doesn't have to be just coming together, drinking tea, sitting for hours, talking... No! It can be how we think about our siblings from a distance if we can't come closer. I do this because I want my mind to be beautiful.

**Newsletter Team:** *Do you remember your first meeting with Thay? How did that impression affect your life in the monastery?*

**Sr. Boi Nghiem:** If I remember correctly, I first met Thay in 2002 at Memphis Airport. But honestly, I don't recall much about that moment. However, when I became an aspirant in Plum Village, I remember when the sangha gathered for walking meditation. Thay approached me and reached out his hand, and I reached mine in return. I will never forget that walk. Of course, I felt anxious because I was walking with Thay! I put pressure on myself to be mindful in his presence (laughs). Very often, he would gently squeeze my hand during the walk. I didn't understand why he kept doing that, and I never asked him because we practiced silently. But he squeezed my hand very gently, so I thought, "Maybe this is to remind me to come back to the present moment." That seemed reasonable to me.

Thay's energy was light and warm. He was always 100% present with his monastic disciples, guests, and children. I never felt abandoned or neglected by him, and I sincerely wish to continue this.

I want to be fully present when I'm with someone, setting aside all distractions. It reminds me of a scene in *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*. Someone called Mr. Rogers and asked, "Mr. Rogers, who is the most important person in your life?" And Mr. Rogers replied, "You. At this moment, you are the most important person in my life." I could see that Thay practiced like this, and I wish to continue his way of being.

**Newsletter Team:** *When going through the "teenage years" of your monastic life, did you have any rebellious or difficult moments? How did you overcome them?*

**Sr. Boi Nghiem:** There were moments when I felt very unhappy with my elders. I would think, "Why didn't they bring this topic to the Bhikkhuni council? Why did they decide this by themselves?" It felt like we didn't have a voice. Listening to Thay's Dharma talks on the role of the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni councils made me feel even more conflicted. It stirred up that rebellious teenager inside me and, at times, made me upset to the point where I started to feel some disrespect. This was alarming for me because I never wanted to have that kind of attitude.

Many teenagers experience that rebellious phase with their parents. When parents say "no," they may find a way to do it anyway. Looking back, I'm very grateful for my elders. They listened to all my complaints and criticisms, but their love for the sangha remained unchanged. I think I put a lot of pressure on them.

However, because Thay had instilled so much trust and faith in them, the criticism did not affect them. They had a much broader vision than I did at the time. My vision was limited. It wasn't until I started helping with various projects for the sangha that I began to see the pressures they were facing.

As monastics, whether young or old, experienced or not, I think we must always show respect and gratitude, especially toward our elders. They have been in the sangha for many years and have given so much. As they age, they face health problems, as we all will. They carry heavy responsibilities and also the expectations of younger ones. All of this takes a toll on their health. I don't want to add to that. I want my elders to be healthy and to feel appreciated. I want them to feel we love and care for them and not feel pushed aside.

When we're young, we may think we know better. But with that attitude, we risk losing our elders. And we can't afford to lose any more of them.

I'm sure there were times when I said things that hurt them. As a young "teenager" in the Dharma, I would sometimes talk negatively about our elders with my peers, and we'd reinforce those feelings together. And they could feel it. They know when we're upset, and I'm sure it makes them sad. Instead, we should ask ourselves, "How can I make my elders feel happier?"

**Newsletter Team:** *Thank you for courageously supporting the 2SLGBTQIA+<sup>1</sup> & BIPOC<sup>2</sup> communities. What feedback have you received, and what insights have you gained in the process?*

**Sr. Boi Nghiem:** Over the years, I've learned that mental health issues, depression, and suicide rates among 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals are much higher than average. Understanding this, my compassion grows deeper. What can I do to help? They've been crying out for help, waiting for someone to understand, hoping their families will accept and support them. But often, they face rejection. "It's contagious - stay away from them." Those words wound. They feed the darkness that can push someone to the brink of ending their own life. I refuse to be part of the harm that perpetuates their suffering. That's why I'm vocal in my support for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. When I speak up, I save lives, if only for a moment. People who identify this way will always need other

[1] 2SLGBTQ+ is an acronym that stands for Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning and additional sexual orientations and gender

[2] BIPOC is an acronym that stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

factors for happiness and health, but at least I contribute to the fight against despair.

There's so much homophobia rooted in ignorance, fear, and a lack of openness.

When I first wanted to become a nun, I kept it a secret from my family for a long time. It was painful. Living a lie, hiding my true self, was a silent agony. It took everything I had to find the courage to finally tell them. Now, imagine the courage it takes to come out to your family, knowing the consequences could be devastating.

Many in Generation Z identify as 2SLGBTQIA+ and feel more comfortable expressing themselves to people they trust. So, when a monastic or lay friend comes to me and shares that they are part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, I first express my deep gratitude. In the past, I might have distanced myself mentally. But now, I recognize the courage it takes to share such an intimate part of yourself. I honor this openness and respond with acceptance and support.

I've also received a lot of encouragement from monastics and friends who see the importance of making our practices and practice centers more accessible and welcoming to the BIPOC community. During the COVID pandemic, six monastic Dharma Teachers from three U.S. centers met monthly on Zoom to engage in heartfelt and open conversations, sharing their insights and reflecting on their struggles and shortcomings in understanding the complex topic of race. They reminded me why this work is so important - not just for others but for myself as a female Vietnamese-American. By creating space for BIPOC friends, I am also honoring my ancestors, life experiences, and healing.

So far, I've helped organize two BIPOC retreats - one at Magnolia Grove Monastery and one at Deer Park Monastery. Who knows? Maybe one day we'll host one at Plum Village. We have already planted these seeds in the community. Some monastics and lay friends have expressed concerns, thinking that having a BIPOC retreat might exclude others. Hearing this feedback can be discouraging. Sometimes, I

question whether it's worth continuing. But then I remember the faces of those who've told me they finally felt seen, understood, and healed at a BIPOC retreat, and I know this work is necessary - even if some misunderstand its purpose.

When we organize a Vietnamese retreat, a Wake-Up retreat, or a teenagers' retreat, are we excluding anyone? If so, why? We recognize the need to create conditions for people with shared joys and struggles to come together, heal, support, and transform. I believe in the collective wisdom of the sangha to transform negative mental formations; we've done it before and can do it again. We also don't have much experience organizing these kinds of retreats yet, so we need more BIPOC retreats - to make them as regular and seamless as the teenagers' or Wake-Up retreats.


One of the most beautiful aspects of a BIPOC retreat is the space it creates for remembering our ancestors, reclaiming our roots, and honoring our many beautiful cultures and identities. In honoring our ancestors, we also reclaim the strength to face today's struggles. At a BIPOC retreat, participants know they are safe, supported, and free from the worry of microaggressions - whether it's how people look at them, judge their words, or even critique their appearance or clothing.

I witnessed something profoundly moving during the BIPOC retreat in May 2024 at Deer Park Monastery. During the "Be-In" session, when friends shared poems, songs, or skits, every offering was dedicated to those suffering from wars. It wasn't just about performance or entertainment - it was a profound act of love and solidarity. Chills ran through my body as I listened. Each word carried meaning. Every act carried love. It reminded me of our deep interconnectedness in suffering and joy - a true expression of interbeing. The friends at the retreat weren't just remembering their pain; they were sending love and solidarity worldwide.

This is why I dream of more BIPOC retreats - not as an extra but as an essential part of our practice. We need these spaces to heal, grow, and remember that together, we are strong.







# Return Home To Wholeness

Kathryn Talano

*Kathryn Talano, a lay practitioner from the United States, arrived in Lower Hamlet in Autumn 2023 and joined the Happy Farm team in 2024. She offered not only boundless energy, joy, and creativity to everyone at the Farm and beyond, but also helped organize Lower Hamlet's Happy Farm Week retreat in May 2024. She shares about her connection to farms and gardens as places for refuge and healing as well as her experience on the Happy Farm.*

Gardens have long been places of refuge and connection in my life. The first garden with which I formed a deep relationship was my grandfather's, a garden nestled on a small island off the coast of Maine in the unceded territory of the Abenaki and Wabanaki peoples. Complete with ponds, berry bushes, and secret hiding spots waiting to be discovered, this vibrant and colorful garden was a haven for children and pollinators alike. Crafted brass statues of people birdwatching, catching fish, and playing the saxophone decorated the garden beds alongside hydrangeas and peonies. A hand-built bench, one perfectly placed to witness sunsets over the tides, had a small box beside it filled with photos that captured the brilliant red hues that often lit up the sky just moments before the stars awakened. This place was where I first learned how to plant sunflowers, create homes for amphibians, and give thanks to the white pines for shading the wild blueberry bushes. Here, the wonders of the Earth and our deep interconnectedness sank into my being and filled me with a wordless reverence.

As with all living things, this garden has passed through many cycles. Summers brought new creations, such as waterfalls, sandboxes. One autumn gifted us the birth of a cousin among the fallen, yellow birch leaves. Years later, winter arrived with cardinals perched on bare branches and news of my grandfather's dementia diagnosis, beginning a new phase for him, for me, and for the land. It was now my turn to be the caretaker for us all. I spent much time unearthing unfinished projects and forgotten paths he once paved. The garden became wilder; untended rose bushes mingled with the native wildflower seeds I generously scattered across the beds. It became a new kind of wonder-filled space, where I explored parts of him, myself, and the land that had long been unmet. Then in spring 2023, looking out onto the blooming irises, my grandfather and I shared his final breath. There, in the loudness of stillness, I sat with the full spectrum of life - peace, love, sadness, and grief. The Life-Death-Life cycle continued to weave itself through my grandfather, through the irises, through me.



I knew that this darkness I sank into held spaciousness for new life, for rebirth; yet the emptiness was much too full of memory to sit with alone. I tried to be with the roses and the tides, but we both needed time and space to process. I sought a place where I could rest, where I could hold and be held in the deep questions I was grappling with, such as: What does it mean to be alive? To be human? How do I make peace with time? How do I tend to the fear of death? Of awakening?

When I arrived at Lower Hamlet's Happy Farm last year, I could feel my grandfather in my steps. His presence lingered as I built homes for solitary bees and planted blackberry bushes for the children to enjoy in the summer months. I knelt down, sank my hands into the present moment, and offered my grief, questions, and restlessness to the soil. I listened to the many teachers around me - the tomatoes, sugar snap peas, and ladybugs. I found refuge seeding alongside fellow Happy Farmers; the sisterhood cultivated there grew, blossomed, and bore fruits beyond time.

I've been fortunate to witness the farm through all its seasons. It was always bustling with life, even when the surface appeared gray and bare. Perhaps more striking is how the farm has nurtured and witnessed my transformation. It has heard my voice grow deeper, more grounded with confidence. It has felt my once hurried footsteps ease into a slow meander between outstretched zucchini plants. It has sensed the return of strength in my hands. Though they are not the same berry bushes and benches he planted and crafted all those years ago, I've watched as my grandfather continued - through my hands - in the Happy Farm's sweet berries and spaces for sitting and watching the turns of time. The farm offered a space for creativity, stability, and clarity amidst uncertainty and deep questioning.

Happy Farm brought me home, not to Dipper Cove, Maine, but to my own body. To our nested

communal, Earth, and cosmic bodies. It softened the boundaries I had once built between the outside and inside worlds, thus allowing me to experience the boundlessness of a non-separate self. The farm taught me that everything belongs - rainstorms, droughts, weeds, pests. Everything has a role in creating a garden of wholeness. It helped me remember my divinity.

I've witnessed this remembrance bloom within others who also made their way to this piece of land. One could see this land as a playground for humanity or a meeting space for humility. As birds and bees danced among the vibrant flower beds and tended to their nectared duties, we humans did the same during 2024's Happy Farm Retreat. With over 70 participants, the land teemed with helping hands. Each of us living beings, tended to our niche duties in solidarity that in turn amassed into one harmonious act of care. We embodied the inner and outer work as we planted seeds of joy amongst pumpkin seedlings, when we sank knee-deep in compost to create the conditions for transformation. Here, nestled between the fields of sunflowers and the thick, luminous clouds of the French countryside, we sought refuge in togetherness.

We faced mud. Lots of it. Rain clouds gradually soaked every inch of the farm and us, but generosity and perspective kept us going. Long-term residents and newcomers lent extra layers of clothing, baked warm bread, and brewed tea. The mud became something to embrace, perhaps even something to revel in. Our inner tending extended beyond the farm. Together, we took a walk through Deep Time, wrote love letters to the Earth, and sat silently with potatoes in hand to contemplate interbeing. By the end of the retreat, the farm felt equally drenched in rain and remembrance. Laughter mingled in the air with the earthy scent of petrichor, the freshness that remains after a heavy storm.

*(Photo credit: Helena Brunnerova)*





# Footsteps of Mindfulness and the Song of Autumn

## Journey through the Northeastern United States

### Sister Chân Duyệt Nghiêm

*September, as the maple leaves began their vibrant transformation into shades of red and gold, signaling the arrival of a new season, we - four brothers and four sisters - packed our belongings for a special journey: a three-week teaching tour across five states in the Northeastern United States. This trip was both an opportunity to savor the autumn season as well as a chance to sow seeds of mindfulness, connect with local Sanghas, and listen to the pulse of life. These are the journal entries of reflections I recorded about beautiful moments of scenery, people, and events during the trip.*

#### **New Haven, Connecticut – Yale University** (September 15-16)

A quiet Sunday greeted us with serene streets and an equally peaceful campus. Sumi, the university chaplain, invites the brothers and sisters from Blue Cliff Monastery to Yale every one or two years to share and practice mindfulness with students. The university, with its red-brick Gothic architecture, sits beside a chapel whose bells ring periodically. Amid the vibrant energy and the ever-present tension and busyness of student life, especially at such a prestigious institution, we began our first session.

Our first activity was a walking meditation in the shaded campus grounds beneath tall, expansive trees. Each deliberate step offered participants a chance to experience stillness amidst the bustle of daily life. Following the meditation, we divided into smaller groups for sharing and Q&A sessions, helping students better understand how mindfulness could be integrated into their lives.

That evening, we held another session in the campus church, which included a Dharma talk and Q&A. The attendees included students, professors, staff, and long-time practitioners in the local sangha. Brother Pháp Khôi delivered a brief Dharma talk, while the rest of us contributed to the Q&A portion. We were deeply aware of the honor of sitting in the “house of God” to share about mindfulness. I believe the message

we conveyed was felt by everyone present. The evening ended with a sense of peace and gratitude, marking a meaningful beginning to our journey.

The next morning, we returned to Yale to join a Vietnamese language class for students of Vietnamese heritage. I felt a strange sense of connection and curiosity toward these young individuals and their roots. Their journey to reconnect with their identity - language included - must be neither simple nor easy. We introduced basic practices like sitting meditation and walking meditation, guiding them through the experience. To our delight, they quickly grasped the practices and shared their reflections. It was heartwarming to see how these seeds of mindfulness were received. My hope is that in challenging moments of their lives, they will remember these practices, nurture them, and find greater peace and happiness.

#### **Berkshires, Massachusetts** (September 16-18)

From Yale, we headed to Hartford International University for Religion and Peace in the afternoon to lead a mindfulness session for about 50 people. That evening, we rested at the home of Eileen, a Sangha friend.

Leaving behind the city’s bustle, we found ourselves in the serene countryside of the Berkshires, in a small house nestled among hills and farms. I pitched a small tent on a patch of high









ground, breathing in the fresh air and soaking in the tranquility of the trees, earth, and the radiant moon above. Waking up to birdsong and the gentle mist, enjoying a fragrant cup of tea while watching the forest change colors - these moments were truly peaceful.

In Sheffield, we conducted a mindfulness session at Christ Trinity Church. Every session includes walking meditation, mindfulness songs, Dharma talks, Q&A, and mindful eating. Yet, this session, like any session, felt like its own story, shaped by the unique organization, atmosphere, and heartfelt sharing from the brothers and sisters.

We also enjoyed a lunch gathering with the local sangha at Eileen's home. Our presence created an opportunity for sangha members to reconnect, sharing joy and warmth like old friends meeting after a long time.

Later, we took a leisurely walk around an organic farm nearby. The vast, fertile land had clearly been lovingly nurtured. The farm's Native American owner was as earthy and genuine as the land and plants she tended. Their efforts to reconnect with the Earth, cultivating and humbly receiving its gifts, were deeply admirable.

## **Boston, Massachusetts**

*(September 19-20)*

After lunch, we continued our journey to Boston, arriving at Cambridge Zen Center - a practice center of the Kwan Um Zen lineage. It was a modest house in the middle of the city, where practitioners did not





wear monastic robes or shave their heads but still maintained a strong, serene energy. This was where we would rest after our events outside.

That evening, we dined and practiced with the Wake Up Boston youth group. Though the evening was brief, we managed to introduce them to basic mindfulness practices like mindful breathing, sitting meditation, and walking meditation. We also offered a Q&A session. Once again, our presence served as a mindfulness bell, bringing everyone together to practice in the vibrant, youthful energy of their age group.

The following morning, we explored the city as tourists. Our lay friends were happy to have the opportunity to connect and enthusiastically guided us around, ensuring we were well cared for. A duck boat took us through Boston's busy streets before plunging into the river, an amphibious twist that excited everyone aboard.

We also visited the Thich Nhat Hanh Center for Mindfulness in Public Health at the Harvard T.H.Chan School of Public Health. We were warmly welcomed by professors and leaders who courageously established and managed the center. They shared about research and teaching programs that integrated mindfulness into nutrition, environmental sustainability, and other fields, fostering healthier habits for individuals and communities.

That evening, we had another session at a church, sharing a potluck dinner with sangha members who traveled from far and wide to join us. Some drove nearly two hours, bringing home-cooked dishes to contribute. It was so heartwarming! The beautiful, ancient church resonated with hymns from the chapel next door as we practiced together. The evening ended with gratitude and joy. Sometimes, simply being present - breathing and smiling - is enough.

### **Northampton, Massachusetts – Smith College** (September 20-22)

Our journey from Boston to Northampton was a day of rest from formal events. It was a chance to relax together, sharing lighthearted moments and reflecting on the past few days.

Northampton is a tranquil town of trees, rivers, and charming homes. Smith College, majestic and





quiet, had the solemn air of a historic chapel. Despite its size, the campus of 2,500 students felt calm and serene compared to Yale. This women's and non-binary college, established in the 19th century, has upheld its tradition of inclusivity to this day.

We stayed at a lovely house in the woods hosted by Linda and Tom, a retired academic couple. Linda, a meditation practitioner, enjoys gardening, painting, and reading, while Tom is equally gracious and intellectual.

The next day, we hosted a Day of Mindfulness at Smith College, organized by Denys, a long-time



practitioner and the Director of the Jandon Center for Community Engagement. The venue, set by the river, was meticulously prepared. Surrounded by towering sequoias, cypresses, and a botanical garden, the campus exuded a timeless beauty. I will always remember the walking meditation we did that day - profoundly peaceful and moving. In those moments, I felt as though I was walking with Thay, sensing his presence deeply. A day of mindfulness is so simple, yet filled with joy, connection, and a profound sense of tranquility.

## Hanover, New Hampshire – Dartmouth College (September 23-25)

At noon, we left Northampton and headed toward Hanover, New Hampshire. Upon arrival, the group split up and were hosted in various practitioners' homes. My younger sister and I stayed with Léa's family, a cheerful and hospitable family from Colombia.

The next day, the schedule began with a Day of Mindfulness for the local sangha held in a church.

On another day, we conducted sitting meditation, walking meditation, and a Dharma talk







in the historic Rollins Chapel on Dartmouth College's campus. Following this, we joined a class for engineering students, organized by Solomon and Diane, a married couple who were both faculty members at Dartmouth and dedicated practitioners.

During breaks, Solomon and Diane shared their journey of incorporating mindfulness into their teaching. They spoke about the challenges of gaining institutional approval, introducing mindfulness into the curriculum, gauging student receptiveness, finding suitable spaces for practice, and designing innovative programs to engage students. Despite the difficulties, what shone through was their dedication to mindfulness practice, their profession, and the future generation. Everyone in our group deeply admired their determination and compassion.

### **Alstead, New Hampshire - Morning Sun Center** (September 26-28)

After Dartmouth, we traveled to Morning Sun, a mindfulness practice center led by Michael and Fern (formerly Brother Phap Hien and Sister Ha Nghiem).

By now, the autumn leaves had matured in their colors, and the natural beauty of the hills, forests, and mountains was breathtaking. My younger sister and I stayed in a large, simple Mongolian yurt. The residents of this community were down-to-earth, kind-hearted, and deeply connected to nature. The 13 families living here had chosen to build a healthy, harmonious community together. Their lifestyle was far from easy, but they persisted with simplicity, love and respect for Mother Nature. It was profoundly inspiring.







Michael invited us to lead a Day of Mindfulness. The sessions took place in a modest meditation hall, which seemed fragile against the region's harsh climate. Yet, the attendees radiated happiness, especially during a walking meditation by a small lake under the gentle midday sun. We hoped the peace they experienced that day would continue to nourish their lives.

### **Maple Forest Monastery, Vermont** (September 29 – October 3)

Despite Michael and Fern's reluctance to see us go, we departed in the morning for Maple Forest (a former Plum Village monastery in Woodstock, Vermont) where we would rest for three days after offering one more session. This was a much-anticipated stop as we were all weary from the intensive schedule and constant travel.

We arrived at Maple Forest around noon. The nuns were fortunate to stay in a beautiful house offered by Pritam Singh - a lay Dharma teacher of Plum Village, overlooking vast, rolling hills. However, we still had a two-hour drive to meet the Burlington sangha later that afternoon. After settling in and resting briefly, we hit the road again.







The drive to Burlington was scenic, though the autumn colors had not fully come in. The Burlington sangha, active for 13 years, welcomed us with delight. Though I felt tired and sleepy, a cup of tea revived me; and I managed to stay present for the session. As always, we offered a Dharma talk, singing meditation, walking meditation, a shared meal, and Q&A. The joy and enthusiasm of the participants were infectious, lifting our spirits. We left Burlington at 9 p.m. and arrived back at our lodging near 11 p.m. The dark, winding mountain roads seemed endless, but they eventually led us back to the warmth of our cozy home. Exhausted yet content, I looked forward to a restful three days of peace and quiet.

The next afternoon, I sat outside on a chair in the backyard, gazing at the expansive hills. Nature was serene and gentle. The trees, the wind, the rustling leaves, the late afternoon sunlight, the clouds, and the sky - all were simply present together. For itself, for me and for life.

After breakfast, I hiked from Pritam's house to Maple Forest, following the beautiful trails to Thanh Son Meditation Hall, now a storage space in a remote corner of the property. The paths wound through sunlit pine forests, leading to a teahouse, a lake, and rolling hills. Everything remained as a testament to a time when this was a vibrant monastery. Mr. Pritam preserved the site as it was, in memory of Thay and the monastics who once lived there. Sitting in the teahouse, I imagined the laughter and warmth of those simpler times. The youthful faces of the past now belonged to different moments in time and space, each continuing their journey.

## **Augusta and Portland, Maine** (October 3-6)

After a few days of rest, recharging energy, and playing with the sisters from Blue Cliff Monastery, we packed our bags and set off for the final leg of our journey - Maine, a vast state with many untouched natural spaces located in the far eastern part of the United States.

After nearly five hours of driving, we finally arrived at the home of Marty and Harry, a beautiful house by the lakeside. Now, after each journey, arriving at a home that welcomes us brings a sense of relief and gratitude: gratitude for the warm and thoughtful reception, and for the host's sharing of their private space with us. Meanwhile, the hosts constantly thanked us for making the long journey to share the practice with them. Gratitude makes life happier and more meaningful!

We would spend two days guiding mindfulness practice here - one day in Augusta and one day in Portland. The brothers and sisters wholeheartedly supported and uplifted each other, from the beginning to these final days. After the mindfulness day in Augusta, we gathered for a meal with our hosts. Everyone was happy. Although the weather was cold, each heart was filled with warmth from the love and care that was shared.

The last day of mindfulness practice was in Portland - a prosperous port town opening up to the vast Atlantic Ocean. After the session, we said goodbye to the "last" practitioners. We departed, and-as is often the case on any journey - the parting moments were filled with pain, and everyone promised to meet again... at Blue Cliff. In





my heart, I thought to myself that surely next year, Blue Cliff will be “overloaded” with practitioners returning as Sangha members!

At this time, I also had the opportunity to visit the Portland Head Light - the splendid lighthouse of this area. To me, it was a return to the memories of eight years ago, the first time I came here. Walking along the rocky shore, I remembered a quiet afternoon years ago, and the faces of those dear ones, innocent and familiar...

The journey through the Northeast has come to an end, but its echoes remain. It was truly a valuable experience and learning on the path of practice

and service in the Engaged Buddhist tradition. I am deeply grateful for all the conditions that allowed me to walk this path - for our Teacher, for the original vision of this trip by Brother Phap Khoi, for the brothers and sisters, for the organizing teams, for the Earth and the sky, and of course, deeply grateful... to myself!

In the end, I only wish that everyone can light the flame of mindfulness in their lives, so that each day will bring more peace, love, and happiness. When we live with mindfulness, life becomes more meaningful, and we can spread love, help each other, and make this world more beautiful.





# Gathas for Daily Practice

Chân Thường Lưu

## Waking up

*Crossing over the dark fog  
Arriving at the shore of sunrise,  
May all that I see  
Be coloured by peace and freedom.*



## Morning tea

*Reaching out to catch the first light  
Filling up a teacup once empty  
With each drop a stone is softened  
With each day a flower is blooming.*

## Walking

*What a wonderful moment!  
With each step, as light as a cloud,  
Even amid a thundering storm,  
The Buddha Land is available.*

## Entering the Budha Hall

*Stepping into Freedom  
Stepping into Ease  
May I see clearly  
My pain and my peace*

## Listening to the bell

*Come home my dear  
Peace is here  
When you breath in like a flower  
And breathe out with freshness.*

## Washing up

*Bathing in the Compassionate nectar,  
Cleaning what has never been tainted,  
I see the purity of a true mind.*

## Knocking on the door

*Knock knock! Who is there?  
Returning from a deep quest  
Now I have arrived.*

## Looking at the moon

*The moon and I are no strangers.  
In a true moment of concentration  
I am one with the galaxy.*





# let go to fly high

Sister Chân Hội Nghiê

*The following article is adapted from Sister Hoi Nghiem's sharing during the monastic retreat in September 2024 at Upper Hamlet, Plum Village France.*

*Siblingshood is immense,  
yet my heart is so restricted.  
Nature is so beautiful, why is the mind indifferent?  
The Buddha's love is boundless,  
why do I stay on the shore and refuse to set off to sea?  
Stepping into freedom, why do I refuse to take a step forward?  
Refusing, then sitting there to complain!  
Sky and Earth are vast, yet I get entangled in the petty things.  
The path is so straight, yet I just wander around.  
Thầy said don't worry, yet I am tiresomely concerned.  
The path is laid with stones and pebbles, yet I just want it to be smooth.  
Stagnation causing endless ups and downs.  
Stop! No matter how busy I am, remember to breathe and smile.  
In the practice, don't be lazy;  
if I want to accomplish it thoroughly.  
In critical moments, let the Buddha take care.  
Be still, calm and free to truly be the Buddha's child.*



Thay's calligraphy "Siblinghood is immense" was displayed in the Still Water meditation hall during the monastic retreat in 2012. Looking at the calligraphy, I was deeply moved, even though at the time I hadn't truly experienced what "immense siblinghood" meant. Probably because I'm usually drawn to anything vast and spacious, "immense siblinghood" immediately resonated with me. Every time I entered the meditation hall, I would admire it and think about asking to bring that calligraphy home to display after the retreat.

As soon as the retreat ended, I went to Brother Phap Nguyen, who was Thay's attendant at the time, to make my request. Fortunately, he joyfully agreed. The calligraphy has since been hung in the common room of the Purple Cloud building in Lower Hamlet, where I can see it and softly hum the phrase "Siblinghood is immense" every day.

Thay once said, "There is no liberation without experiencing siblinghood." Therefore, this calligraphy was not only a wake-up call but also a koan for my practice.

Siblinghood is immense; yet in retrospect, I see that my heart was so restricted. I was constantly blaming this person or resenting that person, or finding fault with this or that situation.

*"Siblinghood is immense,  
yet my heart is so restricted."*

And because my heart was restricted, caught in comparing, calculating, blame, and resentment, I kept going through ups and downs, drowning in my own suffering. I was indifferent to nature, not able to recognize the wonders of life around me.

*"Nature is so beautiful, why is the mind indifferent?"*

I often went against nature, and against Thay's teachings.

*"The Buddha's love is boundless,  
why do I stay on the shore and refuse to set off to sea?"*

I did not want to step out to be present or help others. Like a clam retreating into its own suffering, all I did was lament, blame, and criticize.

*"Stepping into freedom, why do I refuse to take  
a step forward?  
Refusing, then sitting there to complain!  
Sky and Earth are vast, yet I get entangled in the  
petty things."*

When I was a child, my brother and I used to fly kites in an open field. There, the kite could soar so high, filling me with joy. Imagine if I didn't go to the open field, the kite might get caught in the branches of a tree.

Having reflected on my practice, I see that it is much the same. If I can let go, I will be like a kite

in the vast open sky, soaring high with freedom and ease. But if I cannot let go, I will be like a kite caught in a tree. The very image of the kite has helped me practice letting go. I realize that only by letting go can true liberation be found.

The career of a practitioner is the career of liberation and awakening. And where can liberation be found if not in letting go? Afflictions are obstacles, but even our knowledge can be a hindrance that we need to let go of.

We may live a life with ideals, full of meaning, service, and loving-kindness, yet in the end, we will also need to let go in order to fly high. Once we are able to fly high, we can uplift the sangha to soar as well.

Studying the precepts, I was deeply touched by the image of the original sangha. Whenever a monastic broke a precept, it was always brought before the Buddha, who would summon the offender and ask, "Did you do this?" If that person had indeed broken the precept, they would answer honestly, "Yes, Honorable One."

There was no lamenting or making excuses. Yet I, on the other hand, tend to go around in circles. We lack the courage to face ourselves and the ability to truly see our own mind. Avoiding getting straight to the point will never lead to liberation.

*The path is so straight, yet I just wander around.*

Meanwhile, the path to liberation is a straight path. Recognizing this, I train myself to just share what is in my heart, then go along with conditions. Whatever comes my way, I welcome it; whatever has not yet come, I acknowledge that it has not. There is no need to go around in circles. Our true value lies in the sincerity of our hearts.

I often reflect on an orange. If it is a sweet and delicious orange, no matter what people say, it remains sweet and delicious; but if it is a sour orange, even if people praise it for being sweet, it remains sour. In the same way, we are who we are. We do not become better because others praise us, nor do we become worse because others criticize us.

I practice reflecting to see whether the orange within me is sweet or sour. If it's sour, I look deeply to discover all possible causes. Could it be lacking water or nourishment? Then I make an effort to replenish and take appropriate care so that next season, my orange will be sweeter and more delicious.

Of course, when I receive praise from someone, I feel happy. I join my palms in gratitude. This is something I learned from a sister of mine. Whenever I praised her, she always kindly said, "Thank you, Sister!" In the past, whenever





someone praised me, my reaction was to say “It’s nothing good, I didn’t do anything special.” Yet, sometimes, I felt a pride deep down inside. Nowadays, when I say “thank you”, I hold a deep sense of gratitude in my heart. Because whatever I have accomplished is not solely my own effort but a manifestation of countless conditions and the support of everyone.

*“Thầy said don’t worry, yet I am tiresomely concerned.”*

Thay said, “Don’t worry,” but I kept worrying, moving from one concern to another, from one person to another, and this led to exhaustion because I didn’t recognize my own limits. I cared, but then expected others to care for me in return. I didn’t realize that sometimes my concern could make the other person feel tired, taking away their freedom and their time.

*“The path is laid with stones and pebbles, yet I just want it to be smooth.”*

The path is rough, full of stones and pebbles. Looking back at the journey I’ve walked, even when Thay was present, there were various challenges and issues within the sangha. However, that was a blessing for us because we learned how Thay handled such situations.

This is similar in the case of the elder brothers and sisters in the sangha. It’s not that everything is going well when the elder brothers and sisters are around. However, thanks to various issues happening, we learn how they resolve problems. And later, in Thay’s or the elder brothers’ and sisters’ absence, we can handle issues on our

own, instead of always relying on them to keep everything in order.

The important thing is that when our mind is at peace, we will know how to handle situations. If our mind is not at peace, not only are we unable to handle them well, but we might even make things more chaotic. Therefore, we need to know how to return to ourselves and calm our mind. Otherwise, we will experience endless ups and downs.

*“Stagnation causing endless ups and downs.”*

That’s why we need to keep practising.

*“Stop! No matter how busy I am, remember to breathe and smile.”*

In Plum Village, the sangha has at least two lazy periods per year. Thay said that we should spend our lazy days in such a way that it nourishes our body and mind and the sangha. We should not take our breathing, steps, and smiles lightly. When I first started practicing, I returned to my steps, my breath, and my smile. After five, ten, or even twenty years of practice, I still return to my steps, my breath, and my smile.

When our practice is not yet deep, our perception is that the practice is not profound and sometimes we get bored and take it for granted. We long to find another place with a much deeper practice.

There were moments when I also thought “Good Heavens, is this all there is? Nothing more superb? Nothing deeper?” But the more I practice, the more I realize that this teaching is very deep. In order to truly understand the profound



teachings and sutras, I must practice mindfulness in daily life, being a master of my body and mind and being solid in my steps, my breath and smiles.

Therefore, we must thoroughly understand and diligently practice the Discourse on the Full Awareness of Breathing and the Discourse on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. They are our compass.

How vast and boundless is the Dharma! When I only study a little, it feels insufficient; but when I study a lot, at times I feel confused, not knowing what to rely on. Once, in a letter to Thay, I wrote: "Dear Thay, sometimes I see my path as bright and beautiful, but at other times I feel so unclear and lost. Like walking in a foggy morning, I don't know where to go or how to find my way." In the lamp transmission gatha that Thay wrote for me, there are two lines:

*"The night sky holds a festival of stars,  
The moon has a path to enter with solemn grace."*

These words awakened me. The vast sky, as boundless as it is, yet we still can navigate - how much more so the Dharma! The breath and mindful steps will help us see our path clearer and brighter each day.

I feel so fortunate to have been taught by Thay how to enjoy life. Thanks to Thay, when I returned to Vietnam after a few years of practice, I could appreciate the beauty of my country and loved nature more. But sometimes, I enjoy things a little too much - I just want to sit still to savor the moment, forgetting other practices. So, I often remind myself to be diligent.

*"In the practice, don't be lazy;  
if I want to accomplish thoroughly."*

In teachings like the Five Powers, the Noble Eightfold Path, or the Seven Factors of Awakening, the Buddha emphasizes diligence. And the Buddha's final teaching before passing into nirvana was, "All dharmas are impermanent. If there is birth, there is death. Be diligent in your efforts to attain liberation!"

In order to achieve anything, we need effort and perseverance. As practitioners, we cannot succeed without diligence and determination. It means diligently training our mind and overcoming internal difficulties.

We are very fortunate to have elder siblings who walked the path before us to guide and support us. However, sometimes there are challenges that we need to face and train ourselves to overcome. A caterpillar, before becoming a butterfly, remains inside a cocoon, diligently preparing day and night to emerge. Once it breaks out of the cocoon,

its wings gradually strengthen so it can fly high. If we don't understand this and, upon seeing the caterpillar struggle in the cocoon, cut it to help the caterpillar come out more easily, its wings will not be healthy and strong enough. As a result, that young butterfly won't be able to fly. Its wings won't be strong enough to lift it into the sky. Similarly, we must also train ourselves diligently, day and night, so that our wings become strong, enabling us to soar high in the sky of freedom.

*"In critical moments, let the Buddha take care."*

Once, I climbed a high mountain, but halfway up, there was nothing for me to hold on to continue climbing. I couldn't go up, and going back down was even harder - very dangerous. I didn't know what to do. A moment of anxiety and fear arose.

At that moment, I thought of the Buddha: "Dear Buddha, please help." I let the Buddha breathe and take care of me. I felt more at peace. Maintaining calmness, I held onto the plants and grass, lifting myself up bit by bit. Finally, I managed to climb to the top of the mountain.

I was surprised at myself, not understanding how those plants could support my weight like that, as they weren't deeply-rooted plants - just a light pull, and they could easily come out. I felt an immense sense of wonder and gratitude.

What happened during that mountain hike gave me great faith. Whenever something arises, whether internally or externally, I just "let the Buddha breathe, let the Buddha take care," and everything will settle peacefully.

As children of the Buddha, we must have "tĩnh tại" and freedom. The word "tĩnh tại" is a great word: "Tĩnh" means still and "tại" means free and at ease. As practitioners, we need to cultivate the element of tranquility. It provides more inner space for nourishment and healing. We may enjoy ourselves and have fun, but we must also know how to return to care for and nurture our inner stillness.

*"Be still, calm, and free to truly be the Buddha's child."*





# a journey home

Sister Chân Tạng Hạnh



Recently, my uncle asked me on the phone, "How would you explain your drastic lifestyle change over the past year and a half?" My initial urge was to protest, It's not - that - different! But I stopped myself and looked a little deeper. I could see that, indeed, from an external glance, my current situation could not be more different from the life I led before entering the monastic community. My former restless lifestyle appears to be the far opposite of the seemingly routine-driven life within the monastery: a life with a set schedule, the same breakfast year-round, daily silent periods, and so on. Yet, besides my impulse to resist my uncle's remark, I found that, in my heart, the transition felt rather natural. I'm only reminded of the transition by some stark contrasts drawn by my former entourage.

Before settling in Plum Village, I had the opportunity to move around the globe often. Born in South Africa, I lived in France until I turned 18 and then lived in another four or five countries before I arrived in Lower Hamlet in my 24th year. The nomadic seeds were planted very early on by my parents. My family rarely stopped moving. At every opportunity, we would explore a new corner of the world, skip school for weeks at a time, and seldom stay more than two nights in one place. In those times, my parents hardly followed any set plan; they welcomed unforeseen adventures. Each new place or experience was a chance for discovery, and I quickly learned to thrive on the unknown.

Thus, when I turned 18, it was not truly a surprise to anyone when I announced that I would go traveling on my own for a year before settling down to study. I felt like I had to explore more and let myself live before conforming to what I felt was silently expected of me. It was a plan I mostly followed. It turned out to be two years on the road followed by studying, yes, but not really settling down. Somehow, I found "settling down" a rather difficult challenge, something at odds with what brought me so much joy and happiness.

Travelling, moving around, and experiencing regular changes in environment had at this point become a strongly ingrained habit. My comfort zone was made of change, of cultural differences, and of unforeseen incidents. The idea of routine terrified me, and staying in one place sounded impossible. I could not imagine being happy and satisfied without frequent novelty. The fear of dealing with the boredom and all the unknown, hidden parts of me that settling down would bring up was too big.

Yet, the truth was, I was tired of moving around and feeling like I didn't have a home. I had become a victim of my habits rather than someone who truly enjoyed new experiences. Deep down, parts of me knew this rate of consuming experiences was not sustainable.

Then, one sunny August afternoon in 2023, due to an interesting crossroads of causes and



conditions, I arrived in Plum Village for my first one-week retreat. I didn't expect to make it to the retreat that summer, nor did I have expectations for the experience I would have. Fortunately, I happened to be transiting through France to visit my friends and family after working in Thailand. My plan was to move to Denmark three weeks later. However, I never made it to Denmark. I came to Plum Village that August, stopped, and stayed ever since.

A little over 15 months later, wearing a brown novice robe, I look back on this interesting and beautiful journey with enquiring eyes. I can understand my uncle's surprise as I try to understand some of the complex reasons that led me to this path - taking on a monastic form that seems at odds with the free-spirited, independent, and restless lifestyle I had led. I now understand that, in essence, these two ways of life are similar. The search for growth and truth simply continues in another form. It has been a journey of letting go of ideas of what I think I need to be happy and the strong habit energies that come with them. It's also been a journey of accepting what my heart has to say.

At the start of my first Rains Retreat, I did not see the boundaries of the monastery as my friends. My rebellious side came up strongly and I would spend much free time walking outside - to be in the boundaries or not to be in the boundaries was not the question. I thought I would go mad staying in one place for three months and having to ask for permission every time I wanted to step outside. My concept of freedom, a value so dear to me, was shaken to the core. Thoughts like, "Why would I do that to myself?" kept coming up in my mind. Yet, a deeply rooted stubbornness made me trust what my heart had to say: "Give it a try. You'll see."

I was comfortable with outer silence, but inner silence was far from familiar to my restless mind. As the weeks passed, little by little, I found more stillness inside. As my being quieted down, it slowly revealed what actually matters most. My resistance took a backseat as I gradually gave in and tried out this way of life. Trusting. No more running, no more escaping. With stillness there, the beauty of life revealed itself to me again. A little voice murmured, "What's the point of running? You know everything is here already." My focus turned inwards instead of outwards. My attention went deep rather than wide. My greatest joy came from observing life as it unfolded itself, outside and inside myself. I took in the intricate details found in a leaf, the dew drops as the sun shone through the spiderwebs, and the coming and going of sensations passing through me. I saw clearly for the first time hidden parts of my heart

and mind. I started to see the infinite possibilities and beauties found in the same landscape, constantly changing as time passes. I started to grasp the infinite discoveries that lie within myself and that, actually, a steady environment might help highlight those discoveries. Why would I go anywhere when I'm surrounded by change, by novelty? The urge to escape slowly shifted into welcoming a newfound connection to life itself. There's no need to go anymore; all is here.

Of course, it isn't always that easy to see. Only on the days when I have space inside can I feel deeply satisfied being here and going nowhere physically. As soon as turbulent waves pass through me, those habit energies come running back. My mind is flooded with sweet memories of distant times and places; It does everything in its power to help me run away from the present moment and its challenges.

But now I see and now I trust that I cannot as innocently give in to these habit energies anymore. In my heart, I know there is nothing that will offer what I seek more than being present right here and now.

I am deeply grateful for everything that led me to be here at the perfect time. I recognize that being here and learning to be still are, in essence, the same as those years on the road. I keep searching and my curiosity keeps being satisfied. I keep moving, simply in a different form. Every day, I learn, I grow, and I face all sides of my being in a way that was hardly possible before. Most of my energy is now focused on this path; my energy is less dispersed, less distracted. It's the most beautiful journey I could set on. A journey home.







# Back to the Ancient Forests

Sister Chân Tuyết Nghiêm

*Our solitary bus crawled through the hot, barren, treeless desert that stretched endlessly for miles on all sides. Life seemed impossible in this place. My eyes suddenly spotted a mountain goat standing sure-footed on a rugged cliff. How magnificent! Life thrived, no matter the conditions.*

*On the 2-day bus drive back to Deer Park Monastery from Colorado, my siblings' singing made it all bearable. Everyone would have agreed that the sangha bus was a happy bus. Besides the silent moments, there were also moments when we burst out singing and laughing. Such fun! Everyone had something to offer. It didn't matter whether it was good or bad - a song, a poem, or a tiny cup of tea would always do - as long as we were truly present.*

## Thay is the sangha

Happiness still brims over in me whenever I think about the recent trip to the YMCA of the Rockies, Colorado with the sangha. I was moved knowing that we were returning to where Thay had been. Although I was never there with Thay, the accounts given by my elders who were there with Thay touched within me many deep, sacred feelings.

The Father and Son statue touched me the most. An elder brother shared that Thay would always stop by this statue whenever he passed by. Perhaps inspired by this story, I also developed a

special affection for it. From then on, I chose to stop and feast my eyes on the statue every time I passed by.

The image of the father putting one hand on his son's shoulder and pointing into the distance with the other hand left an indelible impression on me. It was deeply moving to see the son holding up a compass and looking eagerly in the direction where his father was pointing. I learned that this statue symbolizes a father's love and trust for his child. The father points the way, yet trusts his child to chart their own path and explore new horizons.



One morning, I brought tea and sat quietly by the statue. In the stillness of dawn, I could see a reflection of Thay and myself in that statue. Thay has illuminated a path for me and has given me the compass - the concrete practices that keep me grounded on this path. With his trust and love, Thay has encouraged me to move forward and discover the teachings for myself. At that moment, I felt Thay's trusting hand on my shoulder.

I have long dreamed of building a strong sangha, as it is the legacy from Thay that I cherish the most. Though the path of sangha building is challenging, my practice has deepened my trust in Thay's insights. I see the sangha playing a crucial role in today's world, where people are overwhelmed by advanced technology and constantly driven to consume more, growing more selfish and distant from each other.

In a retreat for business people in Vietnam, I remember that a leader of a large company cried at the Be-in. What nourished and healed him the most, after just a few days, was the peace and authenticity of the human connections there. It is difficult to find authentic human connection when increasing competition and confrontation gradually erode trust. That's why the loving kindness, clarity, peace, and sacredness of a sangha are such precious gifts in today's world. Sometimes, it's as simple as sitting in peace, eating in noble silence, or listening deeply during Dharma sharing circles. Yet, each time this trust is awakened, it has the power to reopen many hearts, again and again.

Through retreats, I have grown to trust more deeply in Thay's insight that "One Buddha is not enough." During the YMCA retreat, it dawned on me that my siblings worked like a harmonious, happy beehive. Everywhere I looked, there were smiles being offered to one another. Most beautifully, as we worked together in different groups - organizing the retreat, taking care of the children's program, Dharma sharing families, and so on - there was a sense of joy and support. Younger siblings had the chance to learn from and support the elders.

The collective energy of the sangha during this retreat deeply nourished me. It showed that the sangha is a wholesome and precious source of energy that heals and transforms many people. The sight of nearly 50 monastics chanting the "Namo Avalokiteshvara" (the Chant of Compassion) brought many people to tears. In that sacred moment, I could see Thay was present and smiling.

### **Everything is possible with the sangha**

Bringing the sangha to the YMCA for a retreat for more than 400 people was no easy feat. I was very moved by the tears of an elder sister in the

organizing team. She had been with Thay for many years, and in my eyes, she was always strong; I had never seen her cry before. But on the first day of the retreat, she shared in a teary voice, "I have finally fulfilled my promise to Thay!"

I knew Thay's love and trust were always with my sister - it was what helped her succeed in handling the transportation of such a challenging retreat. Thay once told us we should come back to the YMCA, but it took us 10 years to fulfill this wish.

Perhaps the return of the brown-robed figures on this land was the living proof of love and trust. The YMCA retreat not only sowed good seeds in more than 400 retreatants, but was also an opportunity for the monastic sangha to enjoy countless benefits along the way. We siblings had many opportunities to be side by side, supporting each other in the work of organizing and offering.

This was where we saw sangha power! Everyone had a role to play, but the greatest contribution of all was still our presence and our practice of mindfulness imprinted in each step, each breath, each smile.

*Like an old friend returning here,  
Mountains and forests greet the sky and the clouds.  
A festival filled with radiant smiles.*

*Figures in brown walk serenely in freedom,  
The past generation is seen in today's.  
Green coniferous trees cup memories in their hands,  
Do you remember, Thay, the ancient dream of reunion?*

*Finding my way back to the past,  
Tears fall silently as I catch glimpses of Thay's smiles.  
Prayers nurse the hearts back to life,  
All rivers join as they head far out to sea.*

*Many pause amidst the daily hustle,  
Finding stillness in old-growth forests.  
Whispering stream opens the hearts wide,  
Peace deepens, as breaths become one with the winds.*

### **True presence is the heart of the practice**

The YMCA is truly a land of happiness, blessed with a paradise-like natural setting. The breathtaking landscape with its majestic cliffs, towering coniferous trees, emerald lakes, and winding streams was a feast for our senses. These wonders filled our hearts with a sense of peace and spaciousness.

As the retreat drew to a close, we were fortunate to be able to remain for a few extra days, allowing us to fully embrace the peace and beauty of the Rocky Mountains. At one point, it struck me that with the sangha's support, there was no summit we couldn't conquer.





The image of our brown-robed community hiking together remains one of my favorites. We wandered through the forests, laughing and chatting like pure-hearted children, finding joy in the simplest of things. Monastic life is rich and fulfilling. We reached new summits and gazed upon a tranquil jade-green lake. In the midst of such breathtaking nature, we bowed our heads, our hearts full of contentment. I carry the sangha, nature, and my own peaceful heart with me. Life is vast, and so am I. The happiness I feel is even more vivid when the present moment is filled with smiles, true contentment with whatever life offers.

I firmly believe in the three roots that make a person happy: connection with oneself, connection with others, and connection with nature. I want to shape my life around these three elements, moving away from a lifestyle that makes it difficult to break free from material comforts, technological conveniences, and the constant pull of the internet.

Recognizing that these are challenges to my practice, I've chosen to spend less time on the computer, whether for study or service to the sangha, and more time with my siblings, nature, and myself. This shift helps me connect with a deep and balanced sense of inner happiness.

I find joy in wholeheartedly re-establishing communication with those I've had difficulties with. It opens me to deeper understanding and

greater love, leaving my heart light, fresh, and at peace. It feels wonderful to be free from the ups and downs of an internal knot. When a relationship isn't working out, I pause and ask myself if I hold any aversions. Sometimes, I only need to stop, see things more clearly, and put down my aversions for joy to arise again.

Living in the peace and quiet of nature allows me to see clearly and gain insights into the problems that weigh on me. Is it the light of non-self that I touch whenever I immerse myself in the flow of the sangha and nature? These connections dissolve the small 'self' that is constantly tossed by joys, sorrows, and life's fluctuations. This flow of peaceful energy creates both solidity and spaciousness in my heart and mind.

I enjoy this feeling and wish I could touch this light more often. My deepest wish is to continue flowing in the river of the sangha, so that the light of non-self can permeate my heart and touch the deep freedom and peace within. As the candlelight flickers in my quiet corner and the sweet sage gently perfumes my heart, I write down these pure and wonderful feelings as they pass by me so beautifully, joyfully, and deliciously. I send them into the Great Hidden Mountains, where my love may continue to flow within the sangha.

*Great Hidden Mountains, September 2024*





# There Are Wounds

Sister Chân Trắng Bảo Tích

When I was little, I often had an extraordinary fear. I was afraid of looking at a wound. I could bear the painful feeling if I got wounded; I didn't fear the feeling of pain. But what I feared was looking at the wound from whence it shouted out that painful feeling.

When I was little, I often thought that a beautiful life was a life without any worries or afflictions, a life with only happiness and joy. A beautiful life was a life in which I could achieve what I dreamed of, and a life where everything was perfect and kept well intact.

However, gradually, time has taught me that this idea was an illusion and helped me to realize beautiful lessons drawn from the imperfectness of life. Then, what I understood was the salty taste of tears, which are the glittering crystallizations of movements within this cosmos. The people passing by in my life also taught me the lesson about God's love. Sometimes, love doesn't mean something that tastes as sweet as honey. In fact, medicine often tastes bitter. Life is a party where people come and offer each other joy, and at the same time, teach each other how to live with difficulty. And there is a truth (though it seems harsh) that only when we do not prioritize joy over sadness do we reach the shore of true happiness and peace.

However, there is one prayer I want to say: May you and I be able to keep a blue clear sky after storms of darkness. The sincerity and wholesomeness of the heart is the most precious gift that we can maintain in our life so that we can still recognize who we are.

Wounds cannot embarrass you about what you have experienced if you are determined to regard it as beautiful patterns designed according to your own style and especially bestowed for your own life. Holding a thorn in the heart is not the attitude of the wise as it only makes your heart bleed more and unintentionally pierces the hearts around.

Each of us, coming to this world, how many years do we have for our existence?

Each has their own business to care of, their own life to lead. If there is nothing beautiful we can do for each other, we just pray that we do not give any scratches in each other's lives.

When we can hear the shout from the bleeding cells of a tiny scratch, we are able to understand the painful feeling of an ant who has just got his limb broken.

Let the door of our heart open. Absorption is the precedent of empathy. A miraculous flower would bloom through the depths of darkness. There, discreetly blooming, a contented smile.

Once, in the sutra "Discourse on the Lotus of the Wonderful Dharma: Universal Door Chapter", I was shaken by these verses:

*"... in moments of extreme suffering  
our faith in the purity of Avalokita  
is where we go for refuge."*

Who is Avalokita?

There is a kind of nectar in our heart. Are we brave enough to have faith that this nectar is able to be a source of salvation for us in difficult moments?





## There Are Wounds

*There are wounds that never heal completely  
with which we often play hide-and-peek  
but to bury a wound,  
is it possible?*

*There are wounds that never heal completely  
to flush someone out of our heart  
is something not so difficult.  
But being harsh,  
should it be something worth learning  
or,  
would it just make our heart shrunken?  
Bright, innocent eyes, and open heart of youth  
wishing to embrace this whole world  
where have you gone?*

*There are wounds that never heal completely  
a hand on scars  
still hear the sound of a sobbing heart  
time and space, what is it? (or is it nothing?)  
when the meeting point is just one, one drop...  
between heaven and earth, eternal, vast.*

*There are wounds  
people don't know that  
just a sincere apology  
would shatter the hard-stoned fortress of the ego.  
Life is too short  
to imprison ourselves and the other  
in a cell  
of vanity.  
(Freedom - It is not for those who lack courage)*

*With wounds, a lesson to be learnt  
to love ourselves  
to embrace our own heart  
long forgotten in neglect and indifference.*

*Only when  
wounds become part of companionship  
do we understand that  
Happiness blooms  
with the cessation of longing for perfection.  
From the depths - erupting the fresh spring,  
glistening;  
this morning  
blooming a rosy pink after darkness.  
Love, there are too many ways to define it  
but ask!  
this love, how deeply did I bow  
when uttering that word?*

*Wounds  
are tests of sincerity and courage.  
Sincerity  
does not mean  
adequate sincerity is a pay-off;  
it only means  
we do not betray ourselves  
do not deceive ourselves.  
If even with ourselves,  
we could not be truthful  
how could there be hope for empathy  
with the truth of life around?*

*Waiting for someone to initiate first  
life would be left in ruins  
if there is still a glowing ember in the heart  
why not let it have a chance to flame up again?  
If what's determined  
is for The Renaissance to take forth  
Wounds  
Promise  
Illumination.*



# Every day is a Gift

## Sister Chân Trắng Tâm Đức

When I used to hear about Thay's Hermitage, I imagined a small hut perched on the top of a mountain. Then, when I visited the Hermitage for the first time, I was surprised to find it nestled amidst trees on completely flat land alongside the small Fragrant Stream and bordered by a bamboo grove planted by Thay himself.

Last summer, I had the opportunity to attend Sister Chan Duc with my Dharma sisters at the Hermitage. Before leaving New Hamlet, when we bade other sisters goodbye, everyone told us that to live in the Hermitage was a blessing: it was steeped in Thay's presence, and it was a rare chance to share the same living space with our beloved elder, Sister Chan Duc. To me, there was another thing that made it all the more a blessing: the chance to be close to and understand my sisters better.

### The beauty of the Hermitage

The Hermitage is home to many marvelous trees and plants: cedars, lindens, oaks, magnolias, dogwoods, cherries, orchids, multiflora roses, lavender, ginkgo, birches, walnuts, apples, pears, plums, persimmons, peaches, figs, lemons, pomelos, lotuses, roses bushes, and many others I had yet to recognize. I wondered to myself, "Are all the ordination families named after the plants and trees in this garden?"

As I watched a donut peach tree from when she sent out her first buds until all her fruits ripened, I came to develop a special fondness for this buddy. Every morning, I jogged past her and said "Hi" with a great big smile. I was fascinated to see tiny peaches taking shape for the first time and I watched them grow bit by bit as the days went by.

When the pink shade deepened, I was happy to pick the first five ripe peaches as an offering on Thay's altar.

We could also harvest some lavender from the garden in summer. When I was still in Vietnam, lavender only appeared in commercial photographs or movies. So, when I harvested the lavender, it felt like I was on a movie set in the European countryside. At the end of the day, each of us gathered a bouquet to put under our pillows. I said jokingly to my elder sister, "If tonight you dream of dashing through a lavender field, don't forget to invite me along, ok?"



The small lotus pond in the front garden of the Hermitage made the whole place look like a dream. I loved the moments when I could listen to the raindrops pitter-pattering on the lotus petals and watch them delightfully rolling to and fro as if doing somersaults. As soon as the lotus buds surfaced above water, they shot up so fast that it felt like they could grow four inches overnight. When it collected enough energy from the sun, the first lotus bud - to everyone's amazement - would burst open.

One beautiful morning, together with Sister Chan Duc, we savored lotus flavored tea! We had prepared this tea ourselves by folding tea leaves in the heart of a blooming lotus to infuse overnight. We sat in peace, enjoying the crisp morning air and the first warm sun rays, when suddenly Sister Chan Duc started singing in Vietnamese, "Who says monastic life is tough?" (Ai bảo đi tu là khổ?) Seizing that moment, we all sang along:

*"It's not. It's not.  
Sitting here,  
drinking tea,  
gazing at the lotus,  
oh, life is so peaceful."*

I relished that happy and peaceful moment to my heart's content.

What's more, I loved the cedars' fragrance in the garden when the sun was up. In summer in France, the sun sets so much later than it does in Vietnam - it was still bright even at 9pm. So after



the daily evening sitting and chanting, it became my habit to fetch water from the stream for the garden.

Every time I passed the three aged cedar trees, I always stopped for a moment to feel the cool breeze and to bathe in their fragrance. I smiled at the glow of the sunset, the cool breeze, the warbling birds, the burbling stream, and the cedars' pleasant fragrance. I saw Thay in me smile and enjoy all these things with me.

Every time I strolled with peaceful steps around the garden, I felt Thay's calm presence everywhere. And every time I walked in a hurry, I felt as if Thay was smiling and asking me, "What are you doing, my dear?" With that, my steps became light and free again. Living in this tranquil environment and being able to listen to my inner silence, I realized I had more than enough conditions to be happy.



## Learning from Sister Chan Duc

Sister Chan Duc became our mentor when we moved to the Hermitage. I will never forget the first mentor-mentee gathering. Early that day, we listened to the *Discourse on the Four Kinds of Nutriments*. To begin the mentor-mentee session, Sister Chan Duc asked, "How have you practiced with the four kinds of nutriments?" That question made me become more aware of how I nourished my body and mind on a daily basis.

Eating in noble silence allowed me to come to appreciate the presence of my sisters and the great fortune of having something to eat every day. My "non-stop thinking" (NST) radio paused from time to time, allowing me to come home to myself.

I was deeply thankful every time Sister Chan Duc gave me feedback on my practice, which helped me to non-judgmentally recognize whatever seeds were manifesting in me and to remember the teachings on the mindful manners in *Stepping into Freedom*. Sister Chan Duc addressed all of our concerns in the practice. Many knots in me were untied and I felt more energetic in the practice.

Sharing the same space with Sister Chan Duc allowed me to feel the love and care that she had for us, even in her smallest gestures. Being close to her was a rare chance for me to learn from her living Dharma body. We are very lucky to still have her with us.

I felt joy seeing Sister Chan Duc gardening and her love for trees and plants. I could see very vividly the pure-hearted inner child in her. It was thanks to her that I learned to follow my breathing while gardening, in order to prevent many insects from being harmed.

I observed Sister Chan Duc sowing the first string bean seeds and watched them sprout, mature, flower, and grow into pods. Before moving a plant into a pot, she knelt by its side and spoke to it tenderly, asking for its understanding. I will never forget this image.

Sister Chan Duc brought the plant along to illustrate a Dharma talk for children during the summer. She shared with the children that the string bean might think it is big and tall and that all the flowering and fruiting were its own work, but the truth was it used to be a tiny seed. The string bean might have forgotten that, but Sister Chan Duc was the one who planted them two months ago and she remembered. Similarly, she taught the children to get in touch with the presence of their parents in them.

Although the talk was for the children, every word sank deeply into my heart. When I first came to the practice and I was asked if I could see my parents' hands in mine, it was a question that hardly ever dawned on me. "My hands are mine. How could that be possible?" As my practice deepened, I began to see that not only the hands of my parents are in me, but their entire beings are in me.

Every time I practice patience in order to maintain harmony in the sangha, I see my father in me. This is what I really appreciate about my father. As the eldest brother to many siblings, he always practices patience to hold the family together. I am grateful to my mother who never hesitates to help others even when she hasn't a penny in her pocket. She has nurtured my compassion.

I am also aware of the many habit energies and weaknesses that my parents and ancestors have transmitted to me. Now, every time I see the origins of those weaknesses, I can smile to them instead of blaming and judging myself harshly, and - thanks to that - come to understand and love my parents all the more. My trust in the path of practice grows with the deepening awareness that I practice not only for myself but also for my parents and ancestors.





## Living in harmony

One thing I wanted to succeed in my practice while attending Sister Chan Duc was living in harmony with my sisters. The three of us had never shared the same living space before, and each of us had our own living and working habits. I reminded myself that no matter what happened, the priority would be to live together in harmony.

All of us bring into our monastic life prior experiences from our different blood families, schooling, social, and cultural environments. I practiced looking at my siblings through all these factors. Despite frequently reminding myself to practice in this way, I forgot from time to time because my practice is still young.

On one occasion, two weeks into our time together, out of unskillfulness, I made a young sister sad. Her deeply saddened and teary eyes made me realize the seriousness of my fault. After lunch, I spent some time sitting still to reflect and decided to meet my sister to practice “beginning anew.” I knew if I didn’t do so, I wouldn’t be able to sleep that night.

After dinner, I invited my young sister out to the garden for a walk and asked if she would kindly accept my wish to “begin anew.” After sharing my heartfelt gratitude for the many things she had done, I apologized to her for not treating her very nicely. I saw my sister’s face relax; it gave her a chance to share what was in her heart, too. As we held each other’s hand, I felt our sincere determination to live with one another in harmony. I felt completely light and at peace, and happy that I could succeed in this practice.

My sister later told me that not everyone could proactively initiate the practice of “beginning anew,” and this incident inspired greater confidence in her. She felt more trust in me and in the concrete practices and teachings handed down by Thay. I was deeply moved to listen to her.

[1] From Sister Uyen Nghiem’s song “The Dream of Great Togetherness”

Thanks to living together, I had many opportunities to better understand the lives my sisters had before monastic life. It’s true that “*each person is a poem that I can read over and over, only to find myself being surprised all over again.*” Thanks to the moments when we could truly be there and open our hearts to one another, we understood each other more deeply. From there, I learned to accept and love them with all my heart. I also learned to empty myself of preconceived notions of others so there could be more joy in being of service together. Given all my unskillfulness and weaknesses, I really appreciated my elder and younger sisters for their love, acceptance, and support for me. We shared so many moments of hearty laughter at the Hermitage.

## Everyday is a gift

On my continuation day last year, an elder sister made a small drawing and wrote on it, “*I’m not dreaming at all. Today is truly beautiful. Truly!*” My elder sister said she had no idea why that line came to her as she drew. I brought it with me to the Hermitage and hung it in front of my desk.

Even until now, many times upon finding myself in the Hermitage, I still think I’m in a dream. I’m always grateful to my ancestors for transmitting to me many wholesome seeds so that I can be here, where every corner is steeped with Thay’s presence.

Every time I sweep and tidy up the Crystal Veranda, or water the plants that Thay planted himself, I feel Thay is still there, smiling at each plant. I’m not at all dreaming, I am fully aware that every day is a precious gift that life has given me.

Every time I gaze - with all my heart - at the luminous moon, the crimson sunset, the vast fields of sunflowers, the purity of a blooming lotus, the playful squirrels in the garden, I’m grateful that Thay has shown us how to look with eyes that can savor the beauties of the universe.

And when I listen to the birds warble, the stream whisper, the leaves rustle in the breeze, or the rain pitter-patter down on the Crystal Veranda, there’s a profound gratitude to Thay for teaching me how to listen to the magical sounds of life.

I’m deeply indebted to Thay for transmitting to us the practice of peaceful breathing so that I can come back to myself to take care of and nourish my body, heart, and mind.

Thay always said, “*Wherever there is gratitude, there is always happiness and contentment.*” I am a happy Dharma child because so much gratitude is brimming over in me. This last summer in particular, I’m grateful to the Hermitage for allowing the inner child in me to manifest fully, creating many pure memories and contented moments.



# Daring to Stay

## Sister Chân Lạc Hạnh

*In the fall of 2024, Sister Lac Hanh received news of her mother's severe cancer diagnosis, as well as a request to come home. Just a week after her mother's passing, Sister Lac Hanh shares about the journey home, and what it means to choose to stay, even in the face of family conflict and adversity.*

*"If you think you're enlightened, go spend a week with your family." - Ram Dass*



I'm not quite sure when I first came across this quote, but it has somehow always accompanied me on my spiritual journey.

I started practicing yoga when I was 16. The same year that I moved out of my mother's house. The same year that I started university. The same year that I had my first major identity crisis and so many things changed for me. My life as I knew it before would never be the same. It was an embarking into the unknown... a going forth...

Yoga became the center point of my life. Not all at once. But slowly, slowly, over the years. It was the lens through which I looked at the world. It shaped my consciousness and transformed my lifestyle. My days and nights revolved around the discipline of it. It became the compass that guided me to travel throughout six of the seven continents, not to mention the countless inner landscapes that were traversed. My practices became my best friend, and sometimes my only friend, accompanying me everywhere. Through the pains and joys. Through the upheavals of relationship separations. Through the bittersweetness of long-lost family reunions. And always marked by movement. Movement of the body. Movement of the breath. Inhaling... and exhaling...

Movement has always conditioned my life and my being. I was born in one country. Adopted into a family in another. Emigrated to another. Three different continents in the same number of years. And within these relocations, a constant moving of houses. By the time I left my mother's house at 16, I had moved homes 19 times. And it didn't stop there. That habit continued on.

When I left my mother's house, it was an escape. From the overbearing absence of my father. From my parents' complex separation that still had enough attachment to keep them connected and plunged my mother into a long-term depression. From my father's excessive pressure and expectations that burdened me despite the dearth of his physical presence. From the cycles of my father's anger when he was present. From the events that traumatized my childhood and adolescence, and had scarred me.

Somehow I deceived myself by thinking that if I put enough geographical distance between us, I could escape the pain and suffering that had accumulated inside me. That suffering which I could not always name. Let alone recognize. Nor wanted to be reminded of. Moving became synonymous with reinvention. Before the world of technology that we have now, moving had the deceptive hope of a fresh start. Cutting ties and beginning anew.

But one can never really escape from what one inherently is. There are moments in life that stop us in our tracks. That force us to be still. That make us turn around and face what we most fear. Externally and internally.

In my experience with family, there is always a circling back. After 15 years of separation in which they lived geographically far from each other, yet still saw each other occasionally, and never divorced, my parents decided to get back together. It was a reunion that at the time was unfathomable to me. And on many levels difficult for me to accept. It coincided with the time when my spiritual journey was about to deepen in unimaginable ways with my first trip to India, where I would spend the next 18 years on and off learning and practicing with my teachers.

Somehow the measure of my spiritual progress was always tested and evaluated by my relationship with my family (and later families, after I reunited with my birth parents). More often than not, I was dismayed to find that whatever peace, equanimity, compassion, and acceptance I had thought I cultivated, dissolved when I visited my parents. Sometimes instantaneously. Sometimes more delayed. It was difficult not to be reactive. To not slip back into old patterns of dysfunction. I found my faith in myself and the practices constantly challenged in the presence of my parents.

Amidst the complex, harrowing journey of reuniting with my biological parents, which almost ruptured the relationship with my adoptive parents, my spiritual path widened when I went to Plum Village. Even though I had been in touch with Thay's teachings and practices through his prolific writings, it was through my various long-term stays in New Hamlet that I began to really immerse myself in the practices and start to feel the benefits. It compelled me to move back to Korea, seeking internal and external reconciliations, which provided profound healing that I was not even aware that I needed. Later, at the age of 49, in the year that Thay passed away, I deepened my commitment by ordaining as a monastic in the Plum Village tradition. To completely align myself with my inner aspirations. To fully dedicate myself to a life of spiritual practice. To wholeheartedly devote myself to a path of service.

This past September, my brother, also adopted from Korea but not biologically related, came to visit me for 24 hours in New Hamlet during a weeklong visit to France. I had not seen him since 2010. We had a marathon session of catching up. We spoke about our shared childhood, our parents, our present-day lives, our future aspirations. I wonder now, was his visit a premonition?





A week after he returned to California, he messaged me that our mother had been diagnosed with inoperable liver cancer. This was unprecedented. Our family was one that usually endured our major life events - including accidents, illnesses, etc - alone. We only shared about them after the fact. When we had come through safely to the other side.

The progression of my mother's illness was rapid. At the end of October, during a call with my mother, she asked me to come home. It was the first time she had ever asked me to do so. Over all the years of my travels and relocations that took me around the world, as well as hers, we only met when it was convenient. Wisconsin, Connecticut, Belgium, Rome, Barcelona, Cape Cod... The last time I saw her was in February 2020 in London, right before the Covid pandemic went global. Perhaps it was an intuition of foreboding, but since my parents said that her prognosis was unclear and it was not an emergency, I booked a flight in two weeks time. I didn't want to rush. I felt a need to put my external responsibilities and things in order, as well as to attend to my internal spaces.

The Ram Dass quote resurfaced in my consciousness. This was the first time I would be seeing my parents in my monastic form. I wanted to go with enough calm, peace, solidity, equanimity, and fearlessness to face this journey into the unknown. My aspiration was to bring all of those energies to my mother and family, so that as we accompanied her on what could be her final journey, we could collectively have our presence be a gift to her. The gift that she had always wanted: a harmonious, united, loving family. Something that in the past we were most often not.

When I first arrived on a Wednesday evening, my mother seemed much better than I had anticipated. However, on Friday morning, my father and I had to take her to the emergency room. She was not responding well to her

chemotherapy treatments. Since my arrival, I could sense how overwhelmed my father was. From the accumulation of caretaking for my mother, combined with all the emotions that were being stirred up in the face of what seemed only one plausible outcome. That weekend, he began to unravel and something inside him snapped. He no longer could be in my physical presence. He raged against me. There was no one else against whom he could assail. My mother was lying helpless in her hospital bed. As I sat next to her while she spoke with him on the phone, there was no need for speaker phone, I could hear him screaming so clearly. That my presence was not wanted. That he could not be around me. That I should go back to France. That I needed to leave... NOW!

Suddenly, I was 12 years old again. Barefoot, on the other side of the locked door that my father had violently shoved me out of and slammed, telling me to "never come back again!" Panicked, fearful... I started running. To the house where I was a nanny to their three young daughters. For refuge and safety. Even though afterwards, with much intervention, I returned to live at home, something had irrevocably broken between my father and me. Internally, I felt defeated and resigned that because of my young age, I had to continue to live at home. But I vowed to myself that I would escape as soon as possible. And so began my life of escaping, of running.

They often teaches about stillness. Of stopping the running. Of staying with strong emotions and tending to them, taking care of them as a mother does with a baby.

There was none of that, as I haphazardly packed my bags in a panic in the empty house, hoping not to cross paths with my father and be engulfed by his fury. A friend of my parents took me to a hotel for the night, around the corner from the bus station that could take me to Boston airport. I called my mentor. And with great forbearance, as well as drawing from her own personal, similar experience with a dying parent, she advised me to try to stay. She told me that my father would probably have a turnaround. She encouraged me to try to cultivate compassion for my father, as he was facing his whole world being turned upside down with the impending death of my mother.

It goes against all reasoning to stay in a situation that evokes such visceral fear for one's own safety. But I did. I chose to put my faith in the teachings and practices. Already, I had refrained from reacting to my father, from adding fuel to the fire, by remembering the mindfulness training that "when anger is manifesting in me, I am determined not to speak". In the hotel room



that night, I reflected on Thay's teachings and the Discourse on the Five Ways of Putting an End to Anger, specifically on how one can cultivate love and compassion and keep one's heart open towards "someone whose words and bodily actions are not kind" by remembering that this is "someone who is undergoing great suffering". It was so clear to me that my father was undergoing immense suffering, and with that understanding I could cultivate compassion.

The next day, my father came to pick me up from the hotel. He seemed deflated and defeated. I wasn't sure if it was from the medication which he had just been prescribed, or if he had indeed had a turnaround. It didn't really matter. Again, I went home. And once more the incident was never mentioned again between us.

My mother was devastated by the whole ordeal. It too had completely traumatized and drained her. Her health declined rapidly. My brother changed his scheduled visit for Thanksgiving to arrive earlier, hoping that his presence would diffuse the situation. My mother's swiftly deteriorating condition became our primary focus. My father led the way. And we acquiesced to his choices and decisions in the care and caretaking, letting go of any personal views. In order to be peaceful and harmonious, I dropped my own personal concerns and interests.

Later, when my father railed against me again, the fourth novice precept on mindful speech and deep listening saved me and the situation from escalating: "Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech, I vow to cultivate right speech and deep listening... I am determined to say only things that inspire self-confidence, peace, joy, and hope. I am determined to speak the truth in a way that brings about understanding and harmony..." After I let him rant, in a quiet moment, I reminded him calmly that if we wanted my mother to pass peacefully, which is what we all wanted, then we had to lay aside our personal differences and conflicts and really embody and practice peace. My father agreed and we tried our best to go forth accordingly.

Dying and being with the dying becomes its own unique bubble. Outside of normal time and space. Once my mother started hospice care, stopped eating, and later stopped ingesting any kind of fluids, there was literally nowhere to go and nothing to do. We took turns sitting by her side, keeping

vigil, accompanying her breath, as well as our own, trying to assess her pain and discomfort levels, and attempting to relieve them. Stillness took over. Silence prevailed.

I cannot lie: at times, the process was excruciating, unbearable. There were many moments when we thought "this is it". When we believed she was drawing her last breath. When we wondered if when we went to sleep, whether she would still be alive when we awoke. The precepts and trainings about reverence for life and on protecting life often arose in my consciousness. My mother had specifically outlined that she wanted to die at home, not at the hospital, without intervention of machines to extend her life, and had a clear DNR (do not resuscitate) statement. There is a certain incongruous helplessness in bearing witness to the final dying process. It is a practice in restraint that goes against one's instinct. To not want to intervene. To not help in some way. To not want it to be some other way. To completely trust the daily nurses and health aides who came and assured us that there was nothing more to be done.

My mother drew her last breath at home on the 11th of December, 2024 at 5:08am. She was able to pass peacefully with her whole family present and harmonious. As she wished. What I naively thought would be our gift to her was ultimately her gift to us. The giver, the receiver, and the gift are one. There is no separation. We are not separate selves.

As I write this, my brother prepares to leave and I grapple with how long to stay. I decide to stay at least through Christmas and perhaps the 30th of December, which would have been my mother's 83rd birthday. I don't want my father to face these days alone. Yet this decision doesn't come easily. There is trepidation and dread of what could happen when my father and I are alone with my mother gone and my brother away. I come back to my breath. I come back to the present moment, not projecting possible future scenarios. Not replaying the past. I know that our newfound reconciliation, peace, and harmony may be challenged. It is still new, fragile, and vulnerable. It is also not our first reconciliation attempt, but somehow I feel that this time is different. Somehow deeper. I also know that this is the practice. Thay says, "There is no way to peace, peace is the way." Through each thought. Through every action. One breath at a time.

*In loving dedication and with infinite gratitude to Thay,  
R.Sharath Jois, my esteemed Ashtanga Yoga teacher (29 September, 1971 - 11 November, 2024),  
and my beloved mother (30 December, 1941 - 11 December, 2024).  
Cape Cod, Massachusetts, 18 December, 2024*

# every moment, a wonder

## Wonderous moments with Sister Chân Diệu Nghiêm



*Sister Dieu Nghiem (“True Wonder”, also known as Sister Jina) arrived in Plum Village in 1990. She ordained as a monastic in Japan in the Soto Zen tradition. Since Thay invited her to stay in Plum Village “indefinitely” over thirty years ago, Sister Dieu Nghiem has touched the lives of countless young monastics as a beloved elder sister. Here, eight monastics seize the challenge to share - briefly! - some wondrous moments with their dear elder sister.*

### The wise wizard

*Sharing by Sister Chân Mẫn Nghiêm*

Our dearest Sister Dieu Nghiem, who we baby nuns used to lovingly refer to as Reverend Mother, is a true teacher. She always has a skillful and playful way of poking at her mentees so that we realize nuggets of wisdom on our own, in our due time and space. She always nudged us towards thinking outside the box, towards considering all perspectives of the situation. True teachers help their students grow into becoming teachers themselves without even really realizing it until much later on. Sister Dieu Nghiem is a magical wizard who sees the good in people and helps them in discreet ways, so they gain self confidence and

blossom as happy humans. She has this skill of not getting caught in only two options: East or West, Elders or Young Ones, right or wrong, good or bad, conflicts or harmony. She doesn't impose on others arbitrary standards that can make us all feel like we're stuck in a moral quicksand.

One time, we had a sangha meeting after dinner and it was so intense. We simply could not arrive at any conclusion. The atmosphere was so tense that I found it hard to even breathe. As a baby nun at the time, I remember being filled with dread, wondering how it was ever going to end well. It was getting quite late, and after more than two hours, it seemed hopeless. Then, I heard this calm, angelic voice acknowledge that we were all exhausted after a long day and perhaps we could resume our meeting



the following day when we were more refreshed. Wait, that was an option?! We didn't have to choose between only two options? My baby nun brain simply could not compute. I mean, we don't have to do or die and make the decision now?! It felt like a complete war zone and yet she's saying it's all right to pause? We had never stopped a long meeting before; we always had to plow through until we had a result, no matter what! My eyes widened at this possibility. I couldn't stop staring at this wise wizard with blue eyes who was called Sister Abbess at the time.

This was one of the long lasting impressions I had of Sister True Wonder and it has shaped my experience of meetings and sangha life as a whole all these years. Nope! I don't have to fall into any traps of dualistic views. East or West? Lay or Monastic? Elders or Young ones? Someone might say, "Where's your loyalty?" Ha! Inner freedom and not being bound to views of right and wrong is the way! Our dearest Sister Dieu Nghiem has this natural super power to bring about harmony of views simply with her openness and her being game to acknowledging all perspectives and experiences. I'm forever grateful to her way of shaping the sangha, and for her inclusivity of all sangha members. Whether we were shy or outspoken, she always made sure all voices were heard.

Speaking of meetings, whenever we went around and a sister piped up, "I don't have anything to share," Sister Dieu Nghiem didn't let her or any of us off the hook. She'd simply reply, "Ah, so you're not ready yet. That's ok, we'll continue and at the end we'll come back to you." Back then, we thought it was a tad annoying how we couldn't just hide in our elder sisters' shadows; but now, looking back, many of us recall that time with a grateful chuckle. And of course, we continue this tradition in nudging our shy younger sisters to share. The wise wizard's wisdom lives on!

## Check and be clear about your intention

*Sharing by Sister Chân Lễ Nghiê*

Dear Sư mẹ (Dharma mother) Jina,

I remember the day I first arrived in Lower Hamlet, an autumn day in 2004. That morning, an elder sister accompanied me to meet and pay respect to you. You were sitting by the old bell tower. With a warm and gentle smile, and a loving wink from your blue Irish eyes, you said, "Welcome!" After my novice ordination and through all the years I was in Lower Hamlet, I was your mentee.

How many wonderful and deep teachings have I received from you? How can I share all the memories and lessons that I have and learned from you? But one teaching that I have always carried with me and embodied in my daily practice is to always check and be clear about my intention.

You always gave me the freedom to make choices and decisions, and you always encouraged me to do so. You allowed and encouraged me to stand on my feet, to grow, and to be responsible and independent. These are treasures that I carry in my heart on my journey of Returning Home. I feel so fortunate and grateful to have been your mentee all those years.

With this deep bow in gratitude, I send my deepest gratitude and love to you and wish you well.

## I am here to support

*Sharing by Sister Chân Bội Nghiê*

Sister Dieu Nghiem is one of those rare individuals whose words I wish I could recall in their entirety. Her wisdom carries a profound ability to make me pause and reflect on my thoughts, speech, and actions. During my visit to Lower Hamlet in September 2024, I had the privilege of spending time with her, walking through the serene and picturesque landscapes of Loubes-Bernac. The rolling hills, vibrant greenery, and tranquil atmosphere created an ideal setting for meaningful conversations.

As we walked, I asked her about many facets of her life - her childhood, her early days as a novice, her experiences at Plum Village, her perspective on the current state of the world, and her thoughts on life in the community today. Her candid and thoughtful answers made me feel at ease, creating an atmosphere of trust where I could explore any topic. She not only welcomed my questions with an open heart but also asked me some of her own, inviting me to share my aspirations and reflections with honesty.

At one point, I shared something close to my heart: "I'm at a place in my monastic journey where my deepest aspiration and joy is to help make Plum Village centers in the West more welcoming, inclusive and friendly to our BIPOC (*Black, Indigenous, and People of Color*) friends." We paused mid-step. Sister Dieu Nghiem turned to face me, her compassionate gaze steady and filled with warmth. "We should,"



she said. "Please continue to do what you are doing. I am here to support." Her words felt like a gentle yet resolute affirmation, giving me a sense of strength and validation. As we resumed walking, I carried her encouragement with me, feeling uplifted and more confident in my aspiration.

Sister Dieu Nghiem has always encouraged her younger siblings to step beyond their comfort zones, to discover the infinite possibilities born of our capacity to love, serve, care, and heal. That day, walking beside her, I felt the power of her encouragement more than ever. I know, without a doubt, that Sister Dieu Nghiem is there to support. I left with a renewed determination to dedicate myself to this aspiration - not only for my own growth but for the countless others who will one day find a sense of refuge and belonging within the Plum Village community. And I know sister Dieu Nghiem is there to support.

### **The Dharma rain brings ease**

*Sharing by Brother Chân Trời Đạo Bi*

When I first came to Plum Village, while listening to a Dharma talk by Sister Jina, I burst into tears. I didn't know why. It was as if her words entered the depths of my consciousness. Her Dharma rain penetrated the dry soil of my mind deeply. I met Sister Jina at a retreat with Thay in Indonesia. At that time she, Br Phap Ho (Jem), and a few other monastics came to the Day of Mindfulness in Bogor, my home city. I was in the organising team for the event, and it was my first time being in touch with Western monastics. I was deeply impressed by the depth of her practice.

Sister Jina shared with me that whenever she went to Indonesia, she felt at home. I shared with her that whenever I went to the Netherlands, I felt at home right away, and I don't know why. She discovered that many foods that she used to eat in the Netherlands are actually from Indonesia. Her favorite Indonesian dish is gado-gado (vegetables, salad with tempeh, tofu, and peanut sauce). Since then, I like to offer her this dish. Sometimes, I invite some brothers to come and visit Sister Jina in Lower Hamlet, and we enjoy eating gado-gado together.

Everytime I see Sister Jina, her sense of lightness and ease always helps me feel at ease. It helps me to learn to be more at ease with the presence of elder sisters and brothers in the community.

### **To just enjoy, to just be**

*Sharing by Sister Chân Trắng Hiếu Khai*

Two years ago, I attended Sister Jina, the experience of which still affects my practice today very deeply. I learned not to wait anymore, which can bring unpleasant feelings, but just enjoy the present moment. I have nothing to do, nowhere to go. As an attendant, this helped me just to be, and to create restful moments for myself. Even now, every time I am queuing for a meal, I have that reminder in me.

Also after eating, Sister Jina taught me to stop and wait until the food arrives in the stomach. In Dutch, we say, "Let the food sink into the stomach." This is what I still do today, and it helps me to be in touch with the reaction of my body to the food, as well to enjoy another moment of nothing to do, nowhere to go.

Every day we walked together, I learned to appreciate nature even more deeply. Something I was not aware of so much was the shade of the colors, like the blue sky together with the green trees. It is so beautiful and it is something that can bring me a lot of joy. We also stopped often to listen to the bird songs. One time, we saw a beautiful mist bow, which I had never seen before. Every time that I walk around Lower Hamlet, those reminders from two years ago pop up in my mind and I feel so grateful for those experiences I had with Sister Jina.

### **Life is a journey**

*Sharing by Sister Chân Xuân Hạnh*

Being with Sister Jina for three months has been an exploration of wonders from nature to an Irish cup of tea. Sister Jina is like a bird, travelling from place to place: Lower Hamlet is her universe to explore everyday. From early morning sunrises, shining through the poplar trees to birds chirping in the pines in the afternoon, never missing a wonder





that anything or anyone would offer. A rainy day is a tea day, cozy and warm. A sunny day is an exploring day. Moving from field to field, between trees, flowers and wildlife, the local land becomes the most exotic place to be. Life is a journey, dancing with the sun, wild, open and free. Weather does not affect her state of mind. "It's Irish", she would say, "both wind and sun have something to offer." And if the meditation door is closed at 6 am, there is time for walking meditation - the moon, the stars, the frost on the trees, the night enveloping us in its warm blanket. And the two of us, walking in the moonlight. Silence.

There is never a moment which is not a wonder of life.

## Always an adventure

*Sharing by Sister Chân Đôn Hạnh*

Last winter was very, very rainy, but every day, with Su me Jina, we enjoyed a long walk in the lands surrounding Lower Hamlet. "Hmmm..., road shoes or trail shoes, em (younger sister)?" We both already know the answer: trail shoes! Because going for a walk with Su me Jina was always an adventure. Everything was possible. Trying out new trails was much more fun than walking on the road; and if there weren't any trails, we made them with our steps.

We used to return to Lower Hamlet with muddy robes, rosy cheeks and a big smile on our faces. "Em, we don't need any more mud. Our own mud is enough, isn't it?", she used to say with a mischievous look.

During our walks, from time to time, Su me Jina would stop, gazing attentively with her deep blue eyes at the landscape. Then, she would take out her mobile phone and play with the camera, putting the light here or there, zooming in on this or that detail... Her photographic talent, inherited from her ancestors, gives Su me the ability to bring out the beauty of everything in front of the lens, adding a touch of humour, freshness, and poetry.

During the months that I attended Su me Jina, I could experience this very process in myself and



in the people who were close to her. Through her wise gaze, love, and care, we were able to get in touch with and enhance our inner wonder.

Thank you Su me for being there for all of us, reminding us that we are true wonders.

## Everyday acts of loving kindness

*Sharing by Sister Chân Đăng Hạnh*

As Sister Jina's attendant, I had the wondrous privilege of spending many moments in close proximity to her outside of formal practice and sangha activities. Every moment was a moment of teaching with her; but in these natural moments, her transmissions on living in mindfulness had a more direct entry to my heart.

In the colder months in Lower Hamlet, one can find stink bugs crawling around in every indoor space. They're everywhere. Many of them perish indoors, unable to hibernate through the winter. On any given day, one can find an unmoving stink bug on its back, its legs scrunched up. Sister Jina's room and surrounding spaces are not immune to this phenomenon. When Sister Jina found a live one, she'd gently pick it up and release it outside, no matter how many she found. When she found a dead one, she'd gently pick it up and lay it on the soil by a plant, no matter how many she found. She wanted them to be able to rest in nature, on Mother Earth. This small, everyday act touched me deeply. Sister Jina, simply extending loving kindness to all beings that come her way.







# Stepping Into an Adventure

Géraldine M.

*When a dear sister asked me to volunteer in the Teens program, I thought to myself that it would be quite an adventure - stepping into a garden of amazing encounters and transformations, a garden of beautifully blooming flowers.*

## Let it go

“Welcome to Plum Village, would you like to leave your phone in the freedom box?” First things first. Teens were invited to practice letting go by giving away their smartphone for a week. It’s not an easy step for a teenager to take, but they were all brave enough to step into a mobile phone free zone, giving themselves space and time to experience human connection with new friends from all over the world and, more importantly, to reconnect with themselves.

## The blooming of a flower

Spending your holiday in a Buddhist monastery that teaches mindfulness might not seem like the ideal destination for a teenager. I remember one girl on the first day looking down, not making much eye contact and not smiling much. That’s where the magic of connection comes in. A teenage friend who’d been in Plum Village since she was a child, showed her around. There was deep sharing and listening on hay bales, and lots of laughter. The power of friendship.

The teenager became more and more open to the practices proposed by the sisters and volunteers.





I remember that she was reluctant to do the morning sitting, which is quite early. But she came for the special outdoor one, the sunrise meditation on the hill. A bunch of sleepy heads sitting on yoga mats, witnessing a true miracle of life. The light of the morning sun touching every part of nature, magnifying everything with unity. This was mindfulness, the mindfulness of the sun that could touch beauty here and now. And the teenagers touched it. It was one of their favorite moments of the week. There was togetherness, simplicity, presence, silence, beauty, light, safety, love, and true peace.

This teenager, her head down on the first day, blossomed like a flower throughout the week, with a wonderful blooming smile. She shared with teary eyes and open heart in the final sharing circle, "I initially didn't want to be here, but now I don't want to leave. I feel safe to be myself here. I am so grateful for this week."

### **Intergenerational healing**

The practice of Beginning Anew was one of the highlights of the retreat for me. A circle embracing and reconciling two generations, the guidance of the sisters, and the power of the bell. I witnessed parents and young people expressing gratitude through the practice of watering flowers and expressing regret with so much love for each other. Along with the vibration of the bell, you could feel the vibration of love in everyone's body. The powerful collective energy of everyone listening deeply, even though at times we couldn't

understand their language, brought tears rolling down everyone's faces. Tears of hope, of love, of joy.

To have the space to express with words frees the heart. To receive words from the heart frees one from doubts and opens wide beautiful flowers of the heart. I remember the father who read his letter to his daughter, unable to look her in the eye, trembling as he held the paper in his hand. I remember the depth of the teenager's look at her father, the tears. And the shield that fell for both of them. I remember vividly their embrace of reconciliation, breathing together, heart to heart.

*The parents quietly and deeply listening to their child's heart.*

*Healing tears watering the roots of understanding and love.*

A collective healing practice for parents and teenagers and all the witnesses in the circle.

Thank you, dear teens, for your trust. I still wear your friendship bracelet and remember to practice self love and acceptance for my inner teen and all my descendants.

### **Bloom, Teen Flowers**

(A poem for teens and inner teens)

*Breathe in and out, dear teenager,  
Daily water your inner beauty,  
For you are a wonderful flower  
Blooming in the garden of humanity.*





# Sisterhood

## Sister Chân Đức



*Phương Khê, 27 December 2024*

Dearest Sư Cô (Sister) Chân Không,

There are so many things for which I am grateful to you that I do not know where to begin, but I shall begin at the chronological beginning. I first met you face to face in 1986. Two years earlier, a friend and I had written to you asking to come to Plum Village. We were thinking of bicycling down from Dieppe, having crossed the Channel by ferry. You told us, however, that Plum Village was regrettably fully-booked for that summer opening.

In 1986, I was lucky enough to be asked to help organize a retreat and public talks for Thay to lead in England. Thay and you agreed to come. I had no idea of the needs of Thay and yourself and booked a retreat venue in a draughty castle in the north of England. It even snowed during the course of the retreat and the castle was impossible to heat. When I first saw you, it was at the airport and I felt somehow close to you before I had spent any time with you. Thay and you were very kind to me, not complaining in spite of my many ineptitudes as a retreat organizer.

As we drove north from London to the retreat, you sang songs. I remember it was the first time I heard you sing “My Awareness the Bright Sun” and you taught me to sing along. You also explained some of the Vietnamese language to me. I learnt from you that Vietnamese has no words for ‘I’ and ‘you’. You were ‘chị, elder sister’ and I was ‘em, younger sister’. It is one of the most difficult things for a brain that has been accustomed to ‘you’ and ‘I’ to grasp the fact that ‘I’ and ‘You’ have to change according to the person I am talking to.

Thanks to this encounter with Thay and you, I was able to go to Plum Village for the Summer Opening in 1986 and spent the last two weeks of that retreat in Lower Hamlet where you were in charge. You led the practice for the Vietnamese retreatants in the Lower Hamlet. The atmosphere was like that of one big family. Towards what should have been the end of my stay, you told me that Thay might ask if I wanted to stay on as a resident of Plum Village. I believe that the fact I could stay on as a resident had something to do with you. That was quite an amazing surprise for me. When I told Thay that I was more than happy to stay on, you told me that I would be an elder sister (chị) for a number of male refugees currently staying in



Lower Hamlet. You entrusted me to a task which I did not perform well and you were absent for two or three months in the refugee camps of southeast Asia where the Vietnamese boat people were held. It was an opportunity for me to learn Vietnamese, since no one spoke English or French. After you came back, you would often bring me things to eat: French cheese, muesli, yoghurt. You taught me how to make yoghurt.

In 1987, I spent my first Summer Opening as a resident, rather than as a retreatant, under your direction. You did everything from organizing the programme to cooking. I followed along and learnt how to make a number of soups including canh bầu, canh rau muống (Vietnamese vegetable soups), and potato soup for one hundred or more people. I also managed to make lemon cake for tea meditation which earned your praise.

1988 was a special year, the year of our ordination as bhikshunis. I owe it to you in large part that Thay agreed to ordain me by your side. I think Thay was not so sure I would make it as a nun for my whole life, and the fact that you supported my ordination was very important. You are of an inclusive and generous nature. You even let me have a share of the robes that had been made for you, since before we arrived in India I did not know anything about the proposed ordination and I had nothing prepared.

From then on, you were my monastic elder sister and I certainly was not an easy younger sister. Although I had a deep-seated wish to be a nun, I had many habit energies that did not go along with being a nun - jealousy being one of them. I needed many reminders and, thanks to you, there was someone to remind me. When I was a young nun, you encouraged me to work in the kitchen and the garden. I had the privilege of being allowed to come and stay in the Hermitage where I was always made to feel so welcome and where I could learn so much from the way that Thay lived.

In 1989, Thay allowed me to be his attendant on the North American tour when you had to return to Europe. You taught me how to make a few basic dishes that Thay could eat; but, fortunately, there were many Vietnamese friends who wanted to help cook for Thay.

As the years passed, you saw my weaknesses in administrative and organizational work, and you did your best to relieve me of these duties when I was in Green Mountain Dharma Center. You supported me wholeheartedly when I was in the EIAB and always allowed me to come back to Plum Village and spend time with you where you would listen to my problems with a kind and wise ear. You never blamed me for the difficulties I went through and accepted my weaknesses.

“Keep healthy for me,” you said recently. Yes, I will do my best. Since your fall in Czech, I have never ceased to admire your patience, your acceptance of your physical condition, and the perseverance and humour which go along with these qualities. I learn so much from you about how to let go and to rest in the present moment. Because you have spent so many years in the presence of Thay, your practice of mindfulness is your second nature. You must miss Thay sometimes after being at his side for so long, but you always remind yourself and others that Thay is there alongside us however difficult the situation may be. You are your own bodhisattva and your lamp transmission gatha says it all:

*The **true** person transcends form and appearance  
The nature of **emptiness** has always been bright and clear  
Manifesting appropriately on hundreds of thousands  
of paths in the world  
Using love and compassion to rescue beings.*

Thank you for making it possible for me to be and remain a nun, as your “sư em”.

Chân Đức





# New Beginnings at Nhập Lưu

Sister Chân Sinh Nghiêm



Dear respected Thay,

When I had a chance to return to Dieu Tram nunnery to recharge spiritually, to be close to the Root Temple and our spiritual ancestors I also took time to reflect on our Nhap Luu community (Stream Entering Monastery).

## **You're still a baby, where are you going?**

In 2010, Thay accepted the donation of the land in Beaufort and the request from the Green Bamboo (Trúc Xanh) lay community to establish the first monastic Plum Village mindfulness practice centre in Australia. Thay sent three sisters - Sister Thuận Tiên, Sister Chân Sinh Nghiêm, and Sister Lương Nghiêm - back to Australia to set up the pioneering group. At that time, I had been a novice for just over a year (barely out of the monastic "crib"), but I had to return to Australia to re-apply for my long-term visa in France. One day during a day of mindfulness, Thay called us up to do a formal request before the whole community. I obediently knelt behind the senior sisters, not saying a word, when suddenly Thay looked at me and said, "You're still a baby, where are you going?" Everyone laughed, but I just felt so happy and warm, being adored by Thay like a little child. Honestly, at that time, I didn't fully understand what Thay meant.

When I got to Australia, I understood and felt a lot of compassion for my elder sisters. We lived in a remote place surrounded by the Australian dry bushland, with no electricity or water. Every morning, Sister Lương Nghiêm and I would wake up early to study and practice writing Chinese characters with candlelight and headlamps (the kind worn by miners). We were very happy sitting and chanting in the flickering candlelight. At night, we had to use a generator for a bit of light in the small kitchen and dining room, which could accommodate about five people. The four of us slept in a simple wooden hut full of gaps. The winter winds were so cold, they cut through the cracks, making it bone-chillingly cold. We had to light a wood fire heater to survive. Despite the difficulties, my bodhicitta was flying and I felt joyful and wanted to stay and help build the sangha with my three elder sisters. Even though they loved me and wanted me to stay, they encouraged me to return to the Plum Village to be nurtured and taught by the mahasangha. So, I went back to Plum Village. Exactly eleven years later, in 2021, I returned to my second homeland in Australia once more.



## Coming back

This time, returning to Australia felt like starting anew. The Stream Entering Monastery had moved to a new location near the small town of Daylesford, which was voted one of the top 10 towns to visit in the world, known for the friendliness of its locals. Everything was new, and the environment was vastly different from Beaufort. The buildings are so beautiful, like chalets in the European alps! It used to be a mineral spa resort! The tall pine trees provided shade in the summer, the claret ash leaves turned ruby red in the fall, and the cherry blossoms bloomed in spring. The infrastructure of the place is all set, and the location is closer to the city, which makes it much more accessible for the lay community to come and practice with us. Now we face the challenge of not having enough sisters and brothers to take care of this new place. Most of the lay community in Melbourne. Many Vietnamese young people come to Australia for studies or tourism and are allowed to work temporarily. In the first year after COVID, the retreats were fully booked within hours. Now, every year the number of retreats and daily schedule are stable, and we are able to practice, study, and develop our skills in areas we love.

## Loving Hands

After nearly four years of practicing and serving at Nhap Luu, I've come to deeply appreciate the special qualities of this place, especially the deep spiritual family bond between the monastic and lay community. Due to the shortage of monastics and the many things needed to do, the lay families have really supported and bonded with the nuns as a larger spiritual family. From the beginning, families like: Uncle Thanh and Aunt Mìn, the senior figures like Aunt Chi and Aunt Lài, Uncle Vinh and Aunt Loan, Uncle Đạt and Aunt Bích Ngọc, Uncle Thắng and Aunt Loan, Uncle Phước, Thái and Hà, etc., have been dedicated, working together to build the community for over 10 years, often coming to the monastery to help on weekends. These people have been through the thick and thin times of Nhap Luu, and now they are enjoying the better living conditions at our new location. Later, when Nhap Luu moved to Daylesford, younger families - a new generation - have continued to build Nhap Luu, creating a beautiful and peaceful refuge for the future.

Anyone who has been to Nhap Luu would know the Handyman family, "Hands of Love and Hope for the Land." Many of those in the Handymen family are ordinary members in the community, working hard all week, and they really have to arrange their schedules to come to the monastery on Sundays to practice with us, often helping with cooking or going to Asian markets for us. At first, the men

didn't enjoy attending the days of mindfulness, but because they had to drive their wives and children to the monastery, they reluctantly went along without joining the meditation sessions. However, when the sisters' Mud House was flooded and the roof leaked, the men rolled up their sleeves, gathered their friends to come on the weekends to repair and replace the roof. I truly value their wholeheartedness because none of them are the right tradies by profession, but they were willing to learn new skills and offered their precious time and energy to support us. Whoever had some experience, they would share it with others, and harmoniously they worked together to fix things at the monastery. There is one young man in IT who, whenever he dug a trench, would accidentally break a water pipe! It happened so many times that he ended up mastering the art of fixing broken pipes!

What's special about Nhap Luu is that whenever there's a big project, the sky seems to sense the brotherhood and construction spirit of the men and be moved to tears, literally! Whether it's heavy or light rain, was it to test their resolve for volunteer work? They didn't seem to mind and continued to smile and work with joy. Once, while the roof was being installed for the dining hall deck, it rained so heavily that some of the sisters had to put on our sanghati robes to chant and pray to the land ancestors for protection. Miraculously, the rain lightened, and the men continued working safely. It was a chance for them to put on a fashion show of colorful plastic raincoats. Those were such wonderful and joyful memories!

Some men from the Handyman family initially came to the monastery because they were drivers for their wife and children, but while at the monastery, they spent all their time on the computer and had to wait for their wives in order to go home. But the sangha has magical ways of working, and just by being in a joyful and wholesome environment of the monastery, the men eventually came around





and joined a retreat, received the Five Mindfulness Trainings, and even joined the class for the 14 Mindfulness Trainings! Now, when they come to work at the monastery, their wives have to wait around until the work is finished before heading home together.

Recently, when the sisters needed to lay a cement foundation for a large shed, it rained again. None of the handymen had enough experience and the right tools, so they had to improvise and borrow equipment. Everyone was a little worried that we wouldn't be able to finish the job, but when the cement truck arrived, the driver asked me, "Are you Vietnamese?" I was surprised and happily answered, "Yes. What's your name?" Khanh was delighted to know there was a Vietnamese monastery here in the countryside of Australia. Seeing that the Handyman team lacked experience, he immediately rolled up his sleeves and worked alongside them, helping to pour the cement professionally. The Handymen who had no prior experience had a chance to learn the trade of cementing a floor.

When the shed foundation was nearly finished the cement ran out! So the Handymen discussed among each other to buy some more from the local hardware store - we needed more than 20 bags, each bag weighing 20kg, but we didn't have the right car to be able to transport such a load. Listening to the discussion, Khanh promptly offered to go back to his company to mix some more despite the rain and that his working hours had finished. He worked tirelessly, not stopping to drink some water and eat lunch, just to get the job done. Before leaving, he offered to help with any other jobs needed in the future at the monastery. The Handyman family and the sisters were deeply touched by Khanh's kindness and wholeheartedness. Growing up in Australia from a young age, perhaps he felt the bond of fellow Vietnamese solidarity and the brotherhood of working in harmony and joy, which made him eager to lend a hand.

These are just a few of the loving moments I've experienced over the past few years, and there are many more beautiful memories to manifest. Many people, whose names I haven't mentioned in here, have worked wholeheartedly to help build Nhap Luu, and for this, I am deeply grateful for their kindness and generosity.

Dear Thay, I see Nhap Luu is like "the baby of the MahaSangha." Our Brown Robe family has 11 Plum Village centers around the world. Nhap Luu is still small in terms of the number of monastics, but the kindheartedness and the solidarity within this spiritual family are vast, warm, and inclusive. I'm no longer "a baby" as I was back then when I first ordained and I am now doing my best alongside my brothers and sisters to be a wonderful continuation of Thay.

Anyone who comes to Nhap Luu can never forget the deep love this spiritual family has to offer. Just like the song written by Sister Ân Nghiêm, I would like to quote here:

### **Returning to Nhap Luu**

*(Completed on October 25, 2024)*

*Nhap Luu blossoms within the heart of the people,  
The peaceful, meditative steps shine everywhere.  
The small path, the trail of footsteps left behind,  
A peaceful heart welcomes the smile of serenity.  
Here, we cultivate and build human connections,  
Rain or shine, nurturing the seeds that grow.  
The fruits of life are offered, peace in every way,  
Boundless hearts, imbued with love for home.*

### **Chorus:**

*At Nhap Luu, the kookaburras laugh day and night,  
Spring blooms with colors across the sky.  
We come here to walk, to sit,  
Breathing, smiling, with love overflowing.  
Together we walk, returning to the source,  
Preserving the warmth of our home, rich and tender.  
Etching in our hearts, Nhap Luu, beloved,  
Anyone far away will forever remember this deep love.*





# We Need Each Other

Sister Chân Chuẩn Nghiêm

*Still Water Meditation Hall, Upper Hamlet*

*February 18, 2022*

Dear respected and beloved Thay,

I can never forget the evening I had dinner with you in your hermitage. Sister Chan Khong and a few other sisters also joined us. Together, we, teacher and disciples, shared our dinner time in such a cozy and homely atmosphere. After dinner, Sister Chan Khong, with a kind smile, shared with me that since you'd learned that I was from Northern Vietnam, you saved me some green sticky rice cakes - a Hanoi specialty. I was deeply moved, not knowing how to respond other than to join my palms and say, "Thank you, dearest Thay. Thank you, dearest Elder Sister!"

Then, my sisters and I had the chance to savor the cakes and tea with you and Sister Chan Khong. You then told us many stories. You even shared about the history of Buddhism in Northern Vietnam. "There are many ancestral teachers who were from Northern Vietnam," you said. Then, Sister Chan Khong turned to me and added, "It's our wish that you can go all the way till the end of the path, my dear."

Back then, I was only four years into my monastic life. Hearing Sister Chan Khong's words, I didn't yet know what to make of them, so I only bowed in acknowledgment, "Yes, Sister." At that moment, I saw you looking at me.

Dear Thay, if I could draw, I would have already drawn that look: It was the kind look of a teacher with a boundless heart of understanding, compassion, and reverence for life. It showed me the trust you had in me.



## The Mind of Love is so valuable

Before bed last night, I read a few pages of *In Love and Trust: Letters from a Zen Master*. You gave each of us, your children, a copy of this book on your visit to Plum Village Thailand. At that time, sisters from the Dieu Tram center and I flew over to see you. I've always held your gift near and dear, and kept it with much care; so that every once in a while, I can open the book and read a few pages of these letters.

Last night, when I ran my finger over the pages, I randomly stopped at the letter *Now We See Each Other Clearly* (which you wrote on March 7, 2010). Like chancing upon a treasure trove, I took it all in with all my joy and gratitude for you. It was as if you had read my soul and led me to these pages.

In your letter, you give all your love and trust to your Dharma children. I was deeply moved to find this line, "The Mind of Love is so valuable; so long as we still have it, we still have everything." I've looked back at my Mind of Love and can tell you, "My Mind of Love is still fully intact, dear Thay."





I was also reminded of my father's words every time I visited my family. He told me, "As long as you're diligent in your practice, that's already the greatest gift you've given us. You have nothing to worry about us. We have pensions to rely on, and we have the pond, the garden, and the paddies. We can get by just fine. And that's good enough!" Besides my parents, I also have my blood siblings' full support. I'm in immense gratitude to you, my parents, and my blood siblings. I have only one thing to do, which is to train well in the Dharma.

Every time I am reminded of you, I am also reminded of my parents. Their whole lives, my parents worked hard and endured many hardships to make sure their children could finish school and grow up to be good and kind. They always reminded us, their children, to live with integrity. When I was still young, my Dad used to let me work the garden and the paddies. He said that by getting me started on handling the hoe or the sickle, he was showing me what my life might look like if I do not finish school.

I always keep a memory of one of my early days which Vietnamese people humorously call "mischievously innocent." That day, I was watching my Dad work in the garden. In spring, showers drizzled down, and the cassava my Dad had planted earlier began to sprout their very first leaves. In all my innocence, I pinched a bud off and raised it to my Dad, asking, "Daddy, what kind of plant is this?" I had no idea once a bud was pinched off, there was no hope for me to see the answer for myself - whatever that answer happened to be!

When I came of age, my father still reminded me and my siblings of this funny story. It was thanks to these mischievously innocent moments like this that I slowly got the hang of working in the garden. The community garden has made living in the sangha a great joy for me. I can play with the trees, the plants, and the soil to my heart's content. I'm deeply grateful to my parents for getting me started on working in the garden at a young age.

I also remember that every time I undercooked or burned the rice, Dad never blamed me. He only told me to take it as a learning experience, and taught me how to get it right next time: "When the rice bubbles over, lower the heat. That'll never scorch the pot, dear." He also taught us never to think that "the grass is always greener on the other side," because whatever I endeavored to do would only bear fruits when there was self-discipline and perseverance.

### **Living fully each day**

It has been 16 years since I began my monastic life. They have been 16 years of many ups and downs, and many joys and sorrows. But everything is impermanent after all. Reminding myself of impermanence, I always live each day fully and deeply. And I've told myself to live as if it was the

last day of my life. With that thought in mind, I have participated in all sangha activities, been of service to the sangha, and been fully present for my siblings with every fiber of my being. Sometimes, although I still find myself angry or sad, I am now capable of letting go.

It's been my commitment to share from the heart with the sangha, no matter what problems I'm faced with. There was a time when I was deeply saddened, but I made it a point to never miss any sangha activity. When it was time for Dharma sharing or a Dharma talk, I allowed my tears to fall. Being able to cry in the heart of the sangha allowed me to feel light and at peace.

And while doing so, it dawned on me that sadness was only a feeling. And because it was only a feeling, it would - in due time - pass. It was thanks to the sangha's embrace that I could quickly get through my sadness.

### **In gratitude, you have watered seeds of love in me**

In this Rains Retreat, we got a full monastic day every week on Wednesdays. Every Wednesday morning, we alternated between listening to Dharma talks by Thay or Brother Phap An, and sometimes we listened to my siblings' sharing. We divided ourselves up into small teams of four or five to take care of the monastic day. With this arrangement, I could enjoy the best and most beautiful my siblings had to offer. I only had one thing to do, which was to join in all sangha activities and be fully present for each one.

Last week, when I was invited to a tea meditation, I had a chance to enjoy good tea, eat the cakes Sister Bang Nghiem made herself, and listen to my other siblings sharing. The accounts and memories about you that my siblings shared have been great nutriments for me and the whole sangha. As the tea meditation came to a close, everyone's face brightened up with a radiant smile.

Dear respected and beloved Thay, you have gone through so many difficulties to create the happiness that I'm now inheriting. You have opened up an illuminating path, which I only need to take. I know difficulties are still there. But you have transmitted to me your wealth of Dharma treasures. I only have to pull them out and put them to good use. I want to be diligent in the practice and to be wholehearted in my service before it's too late.

I would like to offer you a poem which I have set to music. I wrote it in the Still Water Meditation Hall, Upper Hamlet, during the Monastic Retreat (January 2022) *You Have Seen the Path, Do Not Fear Anymore*. That night after all the sangha activities, while sitting in peace and looking at your photo, these lines came to me.



## **We need each other**

*The rhythm of my breath becomes one with the sangha's.  
Every time my breath deepens and steadies, I always see you, Thay.  
You have given all your love  
To the students you care very much for,  
And your teachings have penetrated deeply into each of us.  
Dear Thay, we are aware that  
countless difficulties are still there,  
But we vow to be together.  
Holding each other's hand,  
We'll bring you into a bright future.  
On this journey,  
We vow to help and support each other.  
A spiritual home  
that is built with love and forgiveness.  
Your teachings are the substance that nourishes us to maturity.  
Today and tomorrow, we don't need anything but each other.*





# Remembering Terry Barber

## Monastic Community of Deer Park

*It is with deep respect and gratitude that we remember Terry Barber, a beloved member of our community, an editor of Thay's books for more than 20 years, and a transcriber of thousands of his talks. Terry was also the composer of the Namo Avalokiteshvara chant. She passed away on 9 November 2024.*

*Deer Park Monastery,*

*November 10, 2024*

Dearest Terry,

We remember as young monastics working with you at the Parallax table, selling Thay's books on the early U.S. Tours. We remember your quiet presence, like a gentle stream nourishing the roots of the community. You were so humble and respectful toward Thay and us. Little did we know how much you had been contributing in the background for more than a decade: spending hundreds of hours transcribing Thay's talks into English and turning these transcripts into books that would transform countless lives.



*Br. Pháp Dung, Br. Pháp Lưu, Sr. An Nghiêam and Terry Barber*



You remained devoted to Thay and his mission through the generations of ups and downs at Parallax Press. Though at times unsure of yourself and the quality of your contributions, you were always more than 100% committed to the path of practice and the community. Each time Thay came to the U.S., he sat with you and others at Parallax to discuss the direction of publications in the next two years. You were part of that intimate group. Your personal transformation helped chart a spiritual path for the world decades before the mindfulness revolution of the early 2010s. Thay always had complete trust in you, and all who encountered your presence and work also trusted you. Thay's love and respect for you deepened your own journey, making your work even more of a gift to the world.

Thanks to your vision, the "How to..." book series was launched. You curated and edited those small gift books, which became one of the most effective ways of sharing Plum Village teachings with new audiences - people curious about mindfulness but too busy to read larger books on the subject. Your ability to craft accessible books invited people to take their first steps on the path.

You enjoyed so much respect from the monastic community; your humility, gentleness, and deep wisdom shone through in everything you said

and did. Intensely private, you never wished to be a burden on anyone, even when the illness that would mark the last years of your life made it challenging for you just to breathe. Your spirit lives on in each one of us who has encountered Thay's books. Quietly shunning recognition, your deep conviction that everyone deserves a chance to cultivate their best qualities was your engaged way of transforming violence in the collective consciousness.

May you continue to manifest in each of us, so we may learn from your quiet Bodhisattva way of nurturing and healing through skillful words and kind deeds. Your presence continues in us, inspiring us to embody and share the Dharma. You passed away peacefully, and we know that the Sangha was there with you in your thoughts, your speech, and your actions. Your legacy continues in each book and in the hearts of all of us who carry on Thay's work.

Thank you, dear elder Dharma sister, for your courage, compassion, and deep transformative insight.

*With love,  
The Monastic Community of Deer Park*



*Terry and Sr. Diệu Nghiễm*



*Terry, Sr. Trì Nghiễm and Hisae*



# A Poem for Terry Barber

Sister Chân Từ Nghiêm

*Please go peacefully into the dark night  
Full of stars and their light  
Holding you gently now.*

*True Bodhisattva with a heart  
as generous as the ocean  
And humble as a little spring flower.*

*Dear great friend,  
Always riding the chariot of goodness,  
The sangha boat has arrived  
And holding hands we chant your  
“Namo’valo’ bringing love and peace  
To the world*

*You will be sailing into  
The mysterious freedom  
We have not tasted yet,*

*And we bow to you,  
Remembering with gratitude  
your love  
And powerful wisdom.*

*This poem was being written the evening of 9th November here in Plum Village without knowing that Terry would be transitioning soon in California. Hearing that she was in the Intensive Care Unit, I wanted to write a poem for her. I remember the early days of Plum Village when Terry lived and practiced with us in Lower Hamlet. These were precious and happy times for all of us. Terry had a lot of talent in music and a lovely voice, as well as a deep understanding of the Buddha’s and Thay’s teachings. We did not keep in touch over the years, yet she is alive for me now as I remember her.*





# Yes, You too are Welcome!

## Sister Chân Trắng Sáng Tổ

*New Hamlet, November 18, 2024*

Dear beloved Thay,

It's already the end of November in the Village, but each fine morning, I can still hear the birds chirping high up on the branches. The sun's rays are still golden and crisp. And along the mindful walking path, and here and there - everywhere in the hamlet - I can still see flowers bursting open in glorious bouquets of yellow, purple, and other brilliant colors. The forest is still putting on its new, autumnal clothes - brighter and fresher with each passing day. My siblings say autumn this year seems to be warmer than the previous ones.

Sometimes, when an elder sister catches me standing with eyes fixated on all the bright flowers and leaves, I tell her I am storing away all these brilliant colors for winter. I know that, soon, these colors will play a long game of hide and seek.

Dear Thay, on pristine and crisp mornings like this, I have the opportunity to return to the home within myself, light a lamp inside to make it cozy, and sit contentedly as I gaze at each of the familiar

faces of those living there. I don't remember when I stopped running away, but now, I am able to come back and sit unperturbed next to these old friends who have been with me through the years.

I remember, one day, one of my elder sisters enthusiastically shared, "You know, my dear? I can see myself a little bit better every day. Sometimes, when I wash my robe, do my dishes, or sweep the floor, it suddenly clicks - I understand myself a little bit better - and I can offer myself a gentle smile!" We both burst into hearty laughter, feeling exultant over our latest "triumph."

Isn't it so true, dear Thay? For as long as anyone can remember, you have imparted this lesson to us: It is no other than in the moments of washing our robes, cooking our food, or sweeping the floor that we see ourselves most clearly.

*What a miracle to chop wood!*

*What a miracle to carry water!*

It is thanks to these moments of chopping wood and carrying water that I can go back and dwell in my home.



When I think about the sangha, I often visualize my house resting on the surface of a calm and still lake. The sangha is the pure and bright lake surface reflecting what is in my home.

When I return home, the house slowly becomes warmer and more accommodating. With time, I have become a more hospitable host. I no longer discriminate, choose, or avoid whoever is visiting my home. I no longer say things like, “*Why are you here? I only wanted to hang out with that guest, not you.*” No matter who it happens to be, they have a place in my home.

Every day I practice to have enough respect, compassion, and patience for these friends. Maybe that’s why it seems that my house has more and more space. Now there’s enough space for many friends to come all at once and live together in harmony, dear Thay.

I often think about a particular teaching of yours: If we can stop and look a bit more deeply, we will recognize that everything we do, say, or think about others will come right back to impact ourselves - in this very moment and in the future.

There is nothing more important than what we offer to one another and how we think of one another at any moment, on any day of our lives; because each thought that manifests in us - no matter how small - has an indefinite value. Living in the sangha, I begin to understand this teaching of yours. If I cannot return and care for my home so that it can accommodate the visits of many precious friends - such as forgiveness, equanimity, acceptance, or compassion - then it seems to me that I don’t really have anything to offer.

And dear Thay, when I look at my siblings, I see that they, too, are coming back to take good care of their homes. They, too, are lighting lamps to make their homes cozy. There are probably some whose lamps are dimly lit, but there are also those with dazzling lights. When the houses are placed side by side, the collective light eventually penetrates all the homes, making one house just as cozy and joyful as the next. So, whenever I look at the sangha as a whole, it is like looking at a small, cozy village with many glowing houses clustered together. It is such an idyllic scene.

Dear Thay, on your continuation day at Plum Village this year, we listened again to a teaching you gave many years ago. You said, “*To me, now, the present moment is far more beautiful than any of my wildest dreams.*” We are the lucky ones. All of us are living the beautiful present moment that Thay built from scratch with all his forbearance and compassion.

After weathering so many ups and downs, over so many months and years, you realized that no dream could possibly be more beautiful than the present moment you were in. We, your children, have been “teleported” straight from your dreams to this beautiful and marvelous present moment. And together, we continue Thay’s most beautiful present moment.

You know, Thay, autumn is showing up every day wordlessly with such style. Every time I can feast upon autumn’s picturesque scenes with new, fresh, and unbiased eyes, a profound sense of gratitude to you overflows in me. I know you are still here, with the brightest eyes and the freest smile, gazing with all of us at all the beauties and miracles the earth and the sky have to offer.

Writing to you has never been difficult, dear Thay. If I ever find myself stuck when writing about something, all I have to do is imagine that I am writing to Thay. Then, I am able to say whatever is in my heart.

I hope my letter is putting a big smile on your face, dear Thay!



Drawing by Sister Tr ng S ng T 



# Touching Healing, Together

## Long-term friends in New Hamlet

*Five friends who joined the New Hamlet sangha for the 90-day Rains Retreat share the aspirations they began with and the fruits they harvested from practicing in community.*



Dear respected Thay,

Dear Sangha,

My aspiration for the Rains retreat was to develop love and compassion toward myself. Whilst I felt the need for change within myself and a strong intuition to come, I didn't really know what to expect from my stay. Ever since arriving, I have found myself on a journey of getting back in touch with myself and my body and learning to listen to what is happening inside of me. I realized that my body and mind are almost constantly in a state of stress.

Further, I feel that all the emotions I have suppressed for the past years have accumulated in my body, leading to a lot of tension. Whenever difficult emotions arise, I disconnect from my body and the feelings get stuck in it. Through the practice, I am now confident for the first time that change in the way I handle my emotions is possible and that there is a way out. I have started to accept my suffering and feel that I am no longer drowning in them. In the teachings, I have found a deep sense of trust and liberation.

Right now, I feel the happiest I have ever felt. I feel that I have arrived at a path that guides me in the way of living according to my values whilst being free and happy.

I have found trust that I can build the strength necessary within myself to follow my aspiration to contribute to the releasing of suffering in the world.

Thank you for offering a nourishing and healing place.

*In gratitude,*

*Fine.*

One of my aspirations in joining the Plum Village sangha for these 3 months was to discover how I can manage to practice with others, as I have practiced within the last year mostly alone. My aspiration was - and is - to experience relating to community and work through the practices when I am not necessarily alone. What I discovered is that it is still - and maybe even more - important to count on myself and the "island" within in order to live, work, and create together. At times, it is challenging and I still find it easier to relax and connect with myself and others during meditation, sitting, walking or chanting. It is still hard to figure out how "stopping" works in a dynamic, pulsating sangha-rhythm, where you need to follow a certain pace and schedule to contribute. What I gratefully experience, though, is a love for being in motion: cooking, cutting, washing and sanitizing. I really enjoy the movements themselves. The more I find ease in the schedule, the more I feel held by the community and the more I sense the organic side of community life which can flow and generate much joy! The Noble Silence, especially, helps me to connect with myself and others, another way of "communication" that feels quite natural. Also, more and more, I can let go of "trying to make it good" which is very liberating.

I would love to encourage myself more to feel joy and happiness, as I love to laugh, sing and play. I would love to encourage myself to feel loved and welcomed as I am to generate more peace and happiness for myself and others.

Thank you for listening, I am very grateful to be with all of you and all the conditions.

*A warm hug,*

*Kathe*



This morning, I woke up finding myself deeply grateful to be in this Rain Retreat. This is a revelation for me as, previously, I wondered if joining the Rain Retreat was an appropriate decision for me.

There was a period when the practice became a struggle and did not offer me spaciousness. Not so long ago, I hit the lowest point of trust in myself, in the practice, and in life. Fortunately, there was an incredible amount of support offered in many ways that got me through the stormy time. The energy of self-destruction in me has gradually been shifting and blossoming into a new form of life. This new energy is yearning to truly live and rediscover the practice with a fresh and pure approach. I aspire to stop my grasping for transformation, to look with the eyes of non-discrimination, and to see true love in the nature of all dharmas as they are.

To look and truly see.

Today, I can see that the space within me is gradually expanding. Although still shy, my seeds of love and trust have become stronger and more certain about the choice to be sown in the field of practice at New Hamlet this Rains Retreat. In the middle of the storm, the warmth of love radiates everywhere: songs of practice, a cup of tea, a bowl of rice or noodles. Smiles are like the sun brightening the winter days. They are all there reminding me to see the clear blue sky even through the gloomy dark clouds.

Today I'm in profound gratitude as true peace is, once again, permeating into my being.

*With love,*

*Khanh (Chân Thường Lưu - True Stream of Steadiness)*

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When I arrived in Plum Village, my main aspiration was to nourish peace within myself, especially because of the devastating war in my region that caused immense suffering to me, my loved ones and millions of others. People of my community have been brutally murdered; hundreds, of all ages and gender, are still held hostage. Recently, I also had to let go of a significant relationship, adding even more to the deep grief I already carry.

Since my arrival at New Hamlet, the retreat environment has been very supportive for my practice. The collective teachings and learnings about our inner nature and suffering have been invaluable. I feel the sangha's energy helps me stay mindful and present, allowing me to face my suffering with care.

I've been practicing the Five Touchings of the Earth guided by Thay to deepen my gratitude and connection to those who supported me in this life and to those suffering from the conflict. Through sitting meditation, I have become more aware of my anger; and I am working to understand it and

transform the pain it causes into compassion and understanding.

Thanks to the collective practice, I can observe my feelings and communicate my needs for sensitivity and safety. The practice allows me to understand my own inner nature and build an inner home, where peace can exist without being threatened by external circumstances. Step by step, I am learning to calm my mind and strong emotions. I feel I'm starting to create a more stable and peaceful space within myself, which I hope to nurture further.

*With much gratitude and appreciation,*

R.

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A large step for me on the path is that I had moments in which I felt an ability to stay with my painful emotions and accepted that they were part of my experience in that moment. Usually I have a strong habit to run away from them and use rumination to solve what made them arise. That I am running less also reflects itself in feeling generally more connected to reality. This shows for example in not being sleepy at all, or trying to escape from my suffering by sleeping, which is often a strategy I use at home.

Additionally I feel more of my creative energy coming up again. I haven't drawn or painted for the last two years but started a new sketchbook. I enjoy seeing it slowly filling up with visual memories.

Another important area of progress for me is in the social realm. I have gotten to experience longer moments of being in a mindset of love during Dharma sharing, instead of one of judgment. That felt like the beginning of a shift in perspective.

I am also learning to be on my own, and I care less about what the other retreatants think of me. I am therefore more self-reliant, which is a great progress for me, since I usually think too much about the opinions of others. Here, I can be part of the group or sit in a room with someone, having little or no anxiety.

I came here with the aspirations to go deeper on the path of the Dharma and to develop more clarity regarding my wish to possibly become a nun. Although I haven't experienced a deep transformation, which I think is too much to ask for after five weeks, I have taken steps ahead on my path. My aspiration to dedicate all my time to this path, though it got challenged at times, just grew stronger here. I am still searching for the right place and time but I want to become a sister eventually.

*With love,*

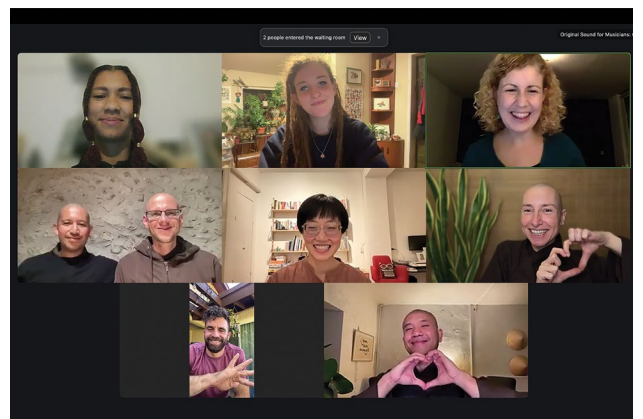
*Nele*



# A Year in Review

*Highlights of the year of the Plum Village sangha in France*

At the end of February, following Thay's Two-Year Memorial Ceremonies and the Lunar New Year celebration, Plum Village opened its doors to practitioners for the spring retreats. From the Earth, daffodils awakened and stretched themselves. The Earth and sky rejoiced to welcome the new season.









# Well-being: Mind and Body Retreat

*New Hamlet, May 3 - May 10*

The retreat was an opportunity for nearly two hundred practitioners to learn how to slow down and listen to their body and mind. Through Dharma talks by Sister Dinh Nghiem and Sister Chan Duc, the practitioners learned how to take care of the stresses in their bodies, embrace strong emotions in their minds, and look deeply to see what kinds of food they have been feeding their body and mind in daily life.

They were also offered sessions of guided deep relaxation, and one session specially offered by Sister Chan Khong. After a week of practice, their steps became slower, and radiant, vibrant smiles appeared on the faces of many. Over 50 practitioners took the Five Mindfulness trainings, committing to continue to integrate the practice into their daily lives.



## Retreat for Young Asians in the West: Nourishing Our Roots

*Lower Hamlet, May 3 - May 10*

For the second year, Plum Village welcomed over 70 young Asians who spent their formative years in the West. Echoing the days when Thay offered Plum Village as a place where Vietnamese children could learn about and connect with their cultural roots, retreatants enjoyed eating meditation with familiar heritage dishes, chanting in ancestral tongues, touching ancestors through Touching of the Earth, and more.

Read one retreatant's personal account of healing and reconnecting with ancestors through Plum Village practices in the article "Roots Nourished, Spirits Glow."





(Photo credit: Helena Brunerova)

## Coming Home to Mother Earth

*Happy Farms, May 3 - 24 and September 27 - October 4*

In spring (May 3–24) and autumn (September 27–October 4), the Happy Farm teams of Upper Hamlet and Lower Hamlet hosted transformative retreats where participants immersed themselves in nature, explored regenerative practices, and enjoyed the beauty of Plum Village’s 20 hectares of rewilded land. They also had hands-on experience of the profound interconnection between earth, rain, sun, and seed with the hands and feet of a “farmer”.

(In the article “Return Home to Wholeness,” featured in this issue, Kathryn Talano - one of the organizers of this retreat - shares about her connection to farms as places of refuge and healing as well as her experience on the Happy Farm).





# Monastics on Tour

Continuing Thay's aspiration, groups of brothers and sisters organised teaching tours, sharing the art of mindful living worldwide: United Kingdom, Netherlands & Flanders, France, Andorra, India, Indonesia, Japan, Taiwan and Wake Up tour in Europe...





# Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet

Online Course, March 24 - May 12 and October 20 - December 8

The challenge of effectively responding to the climate crisis - let alone incorporating a spiritual dimension to that response - is immense. How can Plum Village share Thay's teachings - on deep ecology, non-fear, and well-being here and now - globally, accessibly, and in a timely fashion? One way has been through two cohorts of the online course "Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet".

In the spring and autumn of 2024, a four-fold team guided a total of 2,671 participants from 96 countries through a seven-week long course composed of a combination of self-paced audio-visual content, Dharma sharings, and live events. Participants learned key Plum Village practices and concepts (such as embracing strong emotions, mindful communication, cutting through illusions) that profoundly informed the way they now relate to Mother Earth, to strong emotions, and to the immense task of responding to climate change together.

One participant shared, "I have cried a lot as a result of the Plum Village choir music and because of the pain I feel about the war and destruction of nature. But when I accept that pain and bounce back, I suffer better (less) and I smile more and touch nature and experience gratitude about little things like birds and brief smiles with strangers."



# Ancient Path for Modern Times: Applied Ethics

June Retreat: June 1 - June 15

Nearly 600 experienced practitioners and Order of Interbeing members from around the world gathered for Plum Village France's biennial June Retreat with the theme "Ancient Path for Modern Times: Applied Ethics." For two weeks, the community engaged in a rich lineup of Dharma talks, panel sharings, Dharma sharings, and practice sessions. Together, we explored an essential question: What is Buddhism's contribution to the global ethical response to today's suffering? This included discussions on armed conflicts around the world, responses to climate change, and the growing polarization in society.



At the end of the retreat, the community bore witness as more than 60 friends received the Five Mindfulness Trainings and over 30 friends received the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, each stepping forward on the path of love and understanding.





# Summer Opening

July 9 – August 1

The summer retreat began as the sunflower fields around Plum Village burst into full bloom, warmly welcoming friends and families from around the world. Over these festive three weeks, more than 2,000 friends - including 170 teenagers and 480 children - came together to live simply, cultivating awareness, understanding, and compassion.

One teenage girl, after returning home from a week-long summer retreat, wrote to us: “Plum Village has given me a lot of peace and joy, which allowed me to start the new school year in a happy and relaxed way. Unfortunately, I didn’t continue the practice of sitting and walking meditation as in Plum Village, but now I know that I can meditate at any moment, maybe when I walk from the bus stop to my home, or when I take a shower feeling the body regenerated by water, or while I wash dishes, at any time of my day I can be present with joy. I always sing the songs I learned in Plum Village, when I feel insecure, sad, angry, but also when I just want to feel the spirit of Plum Village deep in myself. Thank you for giving me this wonderful experience!”







## Wake Up Retreat: Peace Begins Here

August 10 - 17

In the peak heat of summer, 700 young people (age 18 to 35) brought to Plum Village the full force of their vitality and determination to discover and nourish a way of living that establishes peace in themselves, their families, and society. In a time defined by man-made polycrises, how do we begin to address the roots of the suffering present today and begin walking the path towards a better future? For young people, this question is perhaps especially pressing and real.

Through the practice of mindful breathing and walking, retreatants touched and watered the seeds of present-centered joy themselves. Just as steam rises from a fresh cup of tea, the fragrance

of peace they generated perfumed the forests and walking paths of each hamlet.

“The Wake Up retreat gives me hope in humanity. It is so powerful and transformative to be with young people that deeply care about social issues and - like me - are also searching for a way to live a meaningful and ethical life while working on self-love and compassion” - Richi, Brasil.

And, in classic Wake Up style, the retreat closed with the exhilarating sounds of faith and togetherness resounding up and down Upper Hamlet’s Buddha Hill.





# International Peace Day

On International Peace Day (*September 21*), the Plum Village sangha in Jerusalem offered a Peace Walk to send the energy of peace and healing to Palestine and Israel. The sanghas in Plum Village France, Blue Cliff Monastery, and Deer Park Monastery amplified the energy of peace by also organizing sessions of walking meditation, sitting meditation, and chanting.

Collectively, a deep wish for peace was sent not only to Palestine and Israel, but also to Sudan, Ukraine and all other war-torn lands.



## Climate retreat

*Upper Hamlet, September 15 - 19*

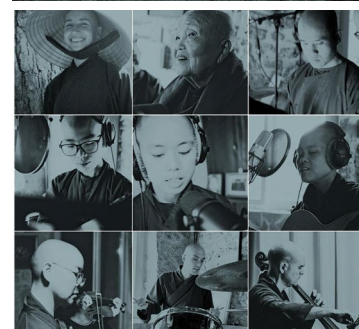
In Upper Hamlet, France, 160 climate activists gathered for a five-day retreat to integrate mindfulness into their activism. On the final evening, monastic brothers and sisters offered the chant of Namo Avalokiteshvara, as a prayer to all the suffering present everywhere, and strengthen the aspirations of all the activists present.

## “A Cloud Never Dies” New album from the Plum Village Band

*Released October 11*

On October 11, the Plum Village band released its debut album “A Cloud Never Dies,” a musical meditation and heartfelt tribute from Plum Village monastics and friends to our teacher, Thay. A product of mindful jam sessions and creativity, the nine-track album is a mix of spoken word, full songs, and instrumentals, including a precious recording of Sister Chan Khong reading the poem “Recommendation.”

The album invites listeners on a journey of insight that allows for not only healing one’s suffering and grief, but also touching the seeds of love and inspiration that lie alongside those painful feelings.







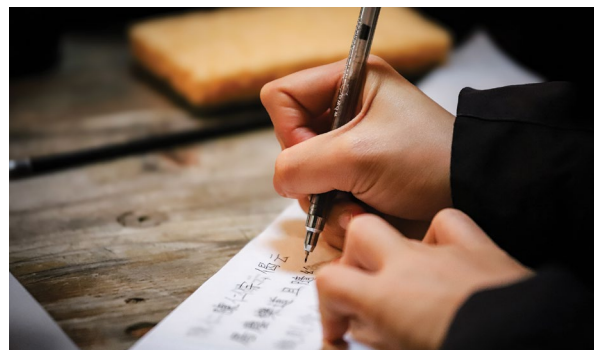
## Rains Retreat 2024-2025

October 10, 2024 - January 7, 2025

As the leaves turned color and the geese began their long flights south, the multi-fold sangha of Plum Village France settled in for the Rains Retreat, a treasured tradition from the Buddha's time for deep study and collective practice. 142 monastics and 106 lay friends committed to dwell within the monastery boundaries for 90 continuous days.

Supported by the strong collective energy, the sangha revisited teachings Thay gave during his penultimate Rains Retreat before his stroke in 2014. In his talks, Thay asks whether we are soulmates, true students of the Buddha. Breaking down the ways the Buddha's teachings have been misconstrued and misunderstood over the years, Thay boldly sets the record straight, radically updating traditional teachings for future generations. Originally delivered in Vietnamese, a team of dedicated monastics worked tirelessly every week to faithfully translate and subtitle the talks.

On Sunday Days of Mindfulness, Dharma teachers provided follow-up talks. On Thursday Monastics Days, elder siblings lovingly nourished the community with an impressive line-up of classes, including some on monastic culture, handling strong emotions, Pali, a collection of Thay's letters, Buddhist psychology, designing online courses, and more.





# Christmas and New Year Week



During the Christmas and New Year's weeks, our community gathered to cultivate mindfulness, joy, and togetherness. On Christmas Eve, a heartfelt Dharma talk and a Be-In session of songs, poems, and aspirations nurtured our collective presence, reaching nearly 500 online participants.

As the New Year approached, over 500 friends and monastics reflected on the past year, released what no longer serves us, and started fresh with clear intentions. On New Year's Eve, we celebrated our togetherness during the Be-In session and welcomed the New Year with sitting meditation at midnight. It was a powerful reminder that peace within ourselves is the foundation for peace in our families and in the world. Also, the New Year's Eve Dharma talk and the Welcoming New Year Ceremony were live-streamed on YouTube, with over 700 people joining online for each event.





# Lamp Transmission Ceremony

On October 6, 2024, at Magnolia Grove Monastery in the U.S., Sister Hỷ Nghiễm represented Thay and the sangha to transmit the Dharma Lamp to Sister Đĩnh Nghiễm. Here is the transmission gatha in Vietnamese:

*Đĩnh ước lời xưa vẫn còn nguyên  
Nghiễm thân mở lối ngát hương thiền  
Sen hồng tịnh độ trong tay nắm  
Thoáng hiện tình xưa ngộ chân truyền.*

## English translation:

*The ancient **vow** remains ever true,  
**Adorned** with mindfulness trainings, the path of fragrant  
Zen opens.  
Holding the pink lotus of the Pure Land,  
A glimpse of the past reveals the wisdom of the true transmission.*



# Ordination ceremonies in 2024 and early 2025

*In 2024, the monastic Sangha welcomed 48 new members*

## The Jambu Tree ordination (March 6 at Thai Plum Village)

*Comprised of six brothers:*

Chân Nhất Nghĩa, Chân Nhất Dung, Chân Nhất Tín, Chân Nhất Xứ, Chân Nhất Hạo, Chân Nhất Lộ.



## The White Apricot Blossom ordination (July 14 at Thai Plum Village)

*Comprised of eight brothers:*

Chân Nhất Hội, Chân Nhất Hậu, Chân Nhất Hòa, Chân Nhất Ngôn, Chân Nhất Minh, Chân Nhất Ngộ, Chân Nhất Phương, and Chân Nhất Bảo

*And three sisters:*

Chân Sắc Hạnh, Chân Sinh Hạnh, and Chân Sách Hạnh.



## The Lilac ordination (October 6 at Deer Park Monastery and Magnolia Grove Monastery, USA)

*Comprised of two brothers:*

Chân Nhất Quang and Chân Nhất Trì.

*And two sisters:*

Chân Dũng Hạnh and Chân Minh Hạnh.





### **The Tulip Tree ordination**

(October 27 at Dharma Cloud Temple, France)

*Comprised of three brothers:*

Chân Nhất Ngân, Chân Nhất Quán,  
and Chân Nhất Từ

*And four sisters:*

Chân Thắng Hạnh, Chân Quy Hạnh,  
Chân Tri Hạnh, and Chân Tạng Hạnh.



### **The Yew Tree ordination**

(November 3 at Blue Cliff Monastery, USA)

*Comprised of one brother:*

Chân Nhất Địa.



### **The Indian Cork Tree ordination**

(December 19 at Thai Plum Village)

*Comprised of two brothers:*

Chân Nhất Hiếu and Chân Nhất Pháp.

*And six sisters:*

Chân Nhẫn Hạnh, Chân Kiên Hạnh,  
Chân Định Hạnh, Chân Tĩnh Hạnh,  
Chân Lý Hạnh, and Chân Trí Hạnh.



### **Thanh Trà Grapefruit ordination**

(On January 12, 2025 at Dieu Tram Nunnery in Vietnam and at Blue Cliff Monastery in the USA)

22 new members of the Thanh Trà Grapefruit ordination family were joyfully welcomed into the Brown family.

*Comprised of eight brothers:*

Chân Nhất Tính, Chân Nhất Tạng,  
Chân Nhất Chí, Chân Nhất Bản,  
Chân Nhất Đăng, Chân Nhất Đế,  
Chân Nhất Hoa, and Chân Nhất An.

*And fourteen sisters:*

Chân Hương Hạnh,  
Chân Thiền Hạnh,  
Chân Nguyên Hạnh,  
Chân Nghiêm Hạnh,  
Chân Nhã Hạnh,  
Chân Đan Hạnh,  
Chân Lưu Hạnh,  
Chân Khai Hạnh,  
Chân Văn Hạnh,  
Chân Thư Hạnh,  
Chân Bồn Hạnh,  
Chân Giác Hạnh,  
Chân Mẫn Hạnh,  
Chân Khiết Hạnh.





# Rebuilding After a Fire

## Lower Hamlet Sisters

In the early hours of Thursday 23rd January, the oldest building of Lower Hamlet went up in flames. Thanks to the buddhas and bodhisattvas, one sister woke up and the nine sisters asleep on the upper floor were able to get out just in time.

The Purple Cloud building is more than just a building: it is the heart and hearth of our hamlet. It's one of the first structures to be renovated after Plum Village was founded. It's where Thay's room was located, and where ten sisters lived. When Thay was still with us, it was here that he rested after Dharma Talks, welcomed guests for tea, guided his students, listened to chanting, signed books, and relaxed in his hammock.

The sisters of Lower Hamlet are hugely grateful for all the support and help that has come to our aid in the last 36 hours. Three large volunteer firefighting teams mobilized from the surrounding countryside, thirty men and women all woken from their sleep. They arrived by 3am, along with our beloved local mayor, the police and ambulance, and stayed throughout the night.

### Community spirit

It took almost 3 hours to contain the flames that took hold and ravaged the building. The fire crews did their best to save as much as they could of the structure, including the front, north, and south facades. The rest was gutted. At different moments of the night with the help of the firefighter teams, we were able to evacuate some precious items, including original calligraphies by Thay, Dharma and vinaya books, and whatever we could of a few cherished items in Thay's room that survived the first gust of flames. We are awaiting the results of an expert investigation into the cause of the fire, which seems to have begun in the walls.



The Lower Hamlet sisters are heartbroken by this loss, and still in shock and recovery. At the same time, we are resolved to rebuild this sanctuary and preserve all we can of the energy of our dear teacher that remains in this space and in everything we could save. Rebuilding and restoring Purple Cloud for all of Thay's students to enjoy has now become an urgent part of our plans, already underway, to construct a new ecological building that can accommodate all 60 sisters together.

Your generosity can help us as we rebuild. Any donation will help:

<https://plumvillage.org/?form=PVLHFireRelief>

### Solidarity

In this moment, we feel a deep sense of inter-being with everyone around the world who is also enduring loss at this moment - the loss of homes, safety and sanctuary. We are keenly aware of everyone who is struggling to rebuild, and of the strength and resilience we have in our communities, to hold our hearts and values together in the face of destruction. We send out wishes for all of us around the world in our various communities, that the power of our collective energy may enable us to build (and rebuild) spaces of peace and sanctuary that we can pass on as a sacred refuge to future generations.





# Retreats Calendar 2025

## Plum Village – France

07.02 – 13.06	Spring general practice weeks
21.02 – 28.02	Silence Theme Week: The way out is in (Lower Hamlet)
07.03 – 14.03	Theme Week: Healing grief and loss (Lower Hamlet)
14.03 – 21.03	Theme week: Community work (Lower Hamlet)
21.03 – 28.03	Great Precept and Lamp Transmission Ceremonies
04.04 – 11.04	Theme Week: Happy teachers change the world (New Hamlet)
04.04 – 11.04	Theme Week: The art of calligraphy (Lower Hamlet)
11.04 – 18.04	Retreat in Spanish (Upper Hamlet)
19.04 – 26.04	Francophone retreat
02.05 – 16.05	Coming home to Mother Earth retreat (Upper Hamlet)
09.05 – 16.05	Mindful Recovery Retreat (Upper Hamlet)
09.05 – 16.05	Vietnamese OI retreat (New Hamlet)
16.05 – 23.05	Happy Farm retreat (Lower Hamlet)
23.05 – 30.05	Hiking Theme Week (Lower Hamlet)
06.06 – 13.06	Young Asian retreat (Lower Hamlet)
13.06 – 20.06	Vietnamese retreat (Lower Hamlet)
13.06 – 20.06	Happy Farm retreat (Upper Hamlet)
13.06 – 20.06	Wellness Retreat: Well-being of Body and Mind (New Hamlet)
10.07 – 02.08	Vietnamese Summer Retreat (Son Ha Temple)
10.07 – 02.08	Summer Opening Retreat
09.08 – 16.08	Wake Up Retreat
05.09 – 17.10	Autumn General Practice Weeks
26.09 – 03.10	Cooking retreat in New Hamlet
03.10 – 10.10	Happy Farm Theme Week (New Hamlet)
23.10 – 20.01.26	90-day Rains Retreat
19.12 – 26.12	Christmas Holiday Week
26.12 – 02.01.26	New Year's Week

For more information, please visit:  
[www.plumvillage.org](http://www.plumvillage.org)

## Healing Spring Monastery – Paris, France

07.03 – 09.03	Weekend Retreat in English
14.03 – 16.03	Weekend Retreat in French
04.04 – 06.04	Weekend Retreat for International Wake Up in English
11.04 – 13.04	Weekend Retreat for Wake Up in French
18.04 – 20.04	Weekend Retreat for Educators
25.04 – 27.04	Weekend Retreat for Educators
04.05	Day of Mindfulness to celebrate Vesak in Vietnamese and French
09.05 – 11.05	Weekend Retreat in English
16.05 – 18.05	Weekend Retreat in French
18.05	Day of Mindfulness in French
06.06 – 08.06	Weekend Retreat in English
20.06 – 24.06	Wake Up Retreat in French
27.06 – 01.07	Wake Up Retreat in English
21.08 – 24.08	Rose Ceremony Retreat in Vietnamese

For more information, please visit:  
[www.healingspringmonastery.org](http://www.healingspringmonastery.org)

## Maison de L'Inspir – Paris, France

07.03 – 09.03	Weekend Retreat
14.03 – 16.03	Weekend Retreat
18.04 – 20.04	Weekend Retreat

For more information, please visit:  
<https://maisondelinspir.org/>

## European Institute of Applied Buddhism – Germany

06.03 – 09.03	Healing the Inner Child retreat
13.03 – 16.03	Nurturing our relationships retreat
17.04 – 21.04	Easter retreat
24.04 – 27.04	Course on Buddhist Psychology
30.04 – 04.05	Course on Flower Garland Sutra
15.05 – 18.05	Course on Wake up to true freedom (age 18 - 35)
28.05 – 01.06	Hiking retreat
03.06 – 10.06	Exploring monastic life: A 7-day retreat for temporary ordination
22.07 – 27.07	International retreat: Teachings on love
03.09 – 07.09	Vietnamese retreat
24.10 – 26.10	Educator's Weekend Retreat: Happy Teacher's Change the World
06.11 – 09.11	Course on Calligraphy
27.12 – 02.01.26	New year's retreat: Celebrating life

For more information, please visit: [www.eiab.eu](http://www.eiab.eu)



**Asian Institute of Applied Buddhism – Hong Kong  
(Lotus Pond Temple)**

For more information, please visit: [www.pvfhk.org](http://www.pvfhk.org)

**Blue Cliff Monastery – New York, USA**

23.04 – 27.04 OI Retreat  
09.05 – 11.05 Vesak Weekend  
25.06 – 29.06 Wake-up  
16.07 – 20.07 Summer Family Retreat  
06.08 – 10.08 Vietnamese Retreat  
19.09 – 21.09 BIPOC Weekend

For more information, please visit:  
[www.bluecliffmonastery.org](http://www.bluecliffmonastery.org)

**Deer Park Monastery – California, USA**

27.04 – 03.05 Wake Up Retreat  
17.06 – 21.06 Family Retreat  
08.07 – 12.07 Teen Camp  
06.08 – 10.08 Vietnamese Retreat  
26.10 – 25.01.26 90-day Rains Retreat

For more information, please visit:  
[www.deerparkmonastery.org](http://www.deerparkmonastery.org)

**Magnolia Grove Monastery – Mississippi, USA**

16.04 – 20.04 OI retreat  
07.05 – 11.05 Wake-Up Retreat  
02.07 – 06.07 Family Retreat  
25.07 – 28.07 Vietnamese Retreat  
01.10 – 05.10 Silent Retreat  
19.10 – 18.01.26 90-day Rains Retreat  
28.12 – 01.01.26 Holiday Retreat

For more information, please visit:  
[www.magnoliagrovemonastery.org](http://www.magnoliagrovemonastery.org)

**Thai Plum Village – Thailand**

17.03 – 29.03 Great Precepts Transmission Ceremony, Retreat for Monastics in Asia, Meeting of Plum Village Dharma Teachers in Asia  
29.04 – 05.05 Vietnamese-speaking Retreat for Young Friends  
20.06 – 26.06 Vietnamese-speaking Family Retreat  
11.07 – 07.10 90-days Summer Retreat  
23.10 – 27.10 Thai-speaking Retreat for Teens  
05.12 – 10.12 Thai-speaking Retreat for Healthcare Professionals  
25.12 – 01.01.26 International Holiday Retreat

For more information, please visit:  
[www.thaiplumvillage.org](http://www.thaiplumvillage.org)

**Mountain Spring Monastery – Australia**

18.04 – 21.04 Easter Retreat  
09.05 – 11.05 Vietnamese Language Weekend Retreat  
06.06 – 09.06 English Weekend Retreat: Just sit  
11.07 – 13.07 English Weekend Retreat: Healing Sounds  
15.08 – 17.08 Vietnamese OI Weekend Retreat  
25.05 – 24.08 90-days Rains Retreat  
19.09 – 21.09 English OI weekend Retreat

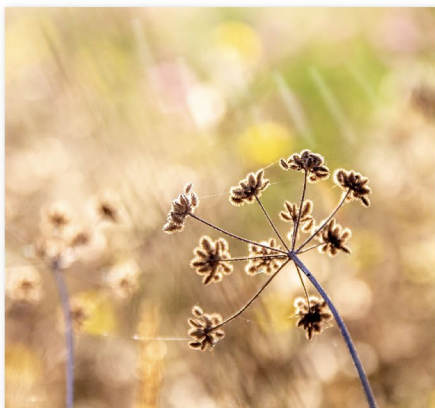
For more information, please visit:  
[www.mountainspringmonastery.org](http://www.mountainspringmonastery.org)

**Stream Entering Monastery – Australia**

10.04 – 13.04 English Speaking Retreat  
17.05 – 17.08 90-days Rains Retreat  
25.09 – 28.09 Wake Up Retreat  
08.10 – 12.10 English Speaking Retreat  
31.12 New Year's Eve program

For more information, please visit:  
[www.nhapluu.org](http://www.nhapluu.org)









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