

# Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh: A Biography

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*Editor's note on names:*

Thích Nhất Hạnh (pronounced Tik - N'yat - Haan), is a religious name (or “Dharma title”) that our teacher has gone by since his early twenties, and the name by which he is known worldwide to millions as a writer, teacher, poet, and peace activist. It is not his only name. As a boy, he received a formal family name (Nguyễn Đình Lang) to register for school, but was known by his nickname (Bé Em). When he first entered the temple he received a spiritual name as an aspirant for the monkhood (Sung); when he received the Five Precepts and formally became a lay Buddhist he received a Lineage name (Trùng Quang); and when he ordained as a monk he received a Dharma name (Phùng Xuân). When he later needed to register himself legally, he did so with the name Nguyễn Xuân Bảo. He took a new Dharma title (Nhất Hạnh) when he moved to Saigon from Hue in 1949. In the great political turbulence and upheaval of Vietnam in the 1950s and '60s, he used Nhất Hạnh and over a dozen other pen names for his articles and books. For simplicity and ease of reading, this biography refers to Thích Nhất Hạnh simply as *Thầy*. It is the informal Vietnamese word for “teacher” and the name by which he is known to his students.

# Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh: A Biography

## Early Life

Thầy was born on October 11, 1926, into a large family in the ancient imperial capital of Huế in central Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> His father Nguyễn Đình Phúc was from Thành Trung village in the province of Thừa Thiên, Huế, and was an official for land reform in the Imperial Administration under the French.<sup>2</sup> His mother, Trần Thị Dĩ, was from Gio Linh District in the neighboring province of Quảng Trị.<sup>3</sup> He was the second-youngest of their six children, with three older brothers, an elder sister, and a younger brother born soon after him. He lived until aged five with his extended family, including uncles, aunts, and cousins, at the home of his paternal grandmother—a large house with a traditional courtyard and garden, with a lotus pond and bamboo grove, within the old imperial city walls.

When Thầy was four, his father was assigned to work in Thanh Hóa, about 500 kilometers north in the mountains, to oversee work to clear forest and prepare agricultural land for poor villagers to cultivate. A year later, the family moved up to join him in the Nông Cống district, about 100km from the town of Thanh Hóa. Thầy went to elementary school there, and in the summer holidays attended an informal homeschool. He was registered for school with the family name “Nguyễn Đình Lang”. Thầy was a curious student and keen to learn, yet also very shy. At school and in his free time at home he studied Vietnamese and French, and began to teach himself classical Chinese. He also eagerly read the Buddhist books and magazines brought home by his elder brother Nho, whom Thầy loved and admired. Nho also taught Thầy how to draw portraits, and even how to take photographs and develop them from a do-it-yourself machine.

In his later talks and lectures, Thầy often recalled a pivotal moment when, perhaps as early as age nine, he was captivated by a peaceful image of the Buddha on the cover of one of Nho’s Buddhist magazines. The illustration of the Buddha sitting on the grass, naturally at ease and smiling, captured his imagination and left a lasting impression of peace and tranquility. It was a stark contrast to the injustice and suffering he saw around him. Vietnam at the time was still under French colonial rule. The image of the Buddha awakened a clear and strong desire in Thầy to become just like that Buddha: someone who embodied calm, peace, and ease, and who could help others around him also be calm, peaceful and at ease.<sup>4</sup> Two years later, Thầy and his brothers and friends were talking about what they wanted to be when they grew up. One said doctor, another said lawyer. His elder brother Nho was the first to say he wanted to become a monk. At first it sounded very new and original. But after talking more, finally all the boys agreed they wanted to become monks. Thay later said, “During that discussion, it was clear that some decision or some aspiration was there very strong in me already. Inside, I knew that I wanted to be a monk.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thầy is the 15th generation in the “Nguyễn Đình” line. The most distinguished poet in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Vietnam, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, author of the epic poem *Lục Vân Tiên* was Thầy’s ancestor, belonging to the 9<sup>th</sup> generation of the Nguyễn Đình” line. *Note:* It is customary in Vietnam (as in France) to write the family names first (Nguyễn Đình) before the given name.

<sup>2</sup> Land reform: *đi dân lập ấp*.

<sup>3</sup> Thầy’s mother’s Dharma name (her spiritual name as a Buddhist) was Trùng Thịnh. She received this name and the Five Precepts from Thầy’s teacher (together with Thầy’s father) at Từ Hiếu Temple when they came to visit their son right after Tết (Lunar New Year) 1947.

<sup>4</sup> The magazine was called *Đuốc Tuệ* (“Torch of Wisdom”). This story is told in Thich Nhat Hanh, *A Pebble for Your Pocket* (2001).

<sup>5</sup> See Thich Nhat Hanh Dharma Talk, June 8, 1992: “When I was eleven, one day we discussed among ourselves—three brothers and two friends, five boys—after dinner we talked about this and that, and finally we asked ourselves the question, “What do we want to be in the future?” Someone said, “I want to be a doctor.” “I want to become a lawyer.” We talked a lot about that. Finally my big brother said, “I want to become a monk.” This was original and new. I don’t know why but we

About six months later, on a school trip to a nearby sacred mountain, Thầy had what he would later describe as his first spiritual experience.<sup>6</sup> As his fellow schoolmates sat down to eat, he slipped away to explore alone, eager to find the old hermit rumored to live there.<sup>7</sup> He didn't find the hermit but, hot and thirsty, came upon a natural well of fresh, pure water. He drank his fill before falling into a deep sleep on the nearby rocks. The experience created a profound feeling of satisfaction in the young boy. Having found the water, he felt completely fulfilled. He felt that he had somehow met the hermit in the form of the well, and found the best possible water to quench his thirst.<sup>8</sup> A sentence came to his mind in French: *J'ai goûté l'eau la plus délicieuse du monde* (I have tasted the most delicious water in the world).<sup>9</sup> The wish to become a monk continued to grow in Thầy's heart, and a few years later that dream would be realized.

Thầy's beloved elder brother Nho ordained when Thầy was twelve, and entered the Great Compassion Temple in Thanh Hóa, 15km from their home.<sup>10</sup> At the time, it was difficult for their parents to accept Nho's choice, as they knew the life of a monk could be very hard. Even so, Thầy wanted to ordain with his elder brother, but waited until he was a few years older to obtain his parents' permission. Although Thầy was still young, the Buddhist articles and stories he had been reading inspired Thầy with ideas of how Buddhism could help nurture a more just, free and prosperous society in Vietnam.<sup>11</sup> Soon, Nho was sent to Huế by the Abbot of the Great Compassion Temple, Zen Master Trùng Pháp Chân Không, to continue his training at Từ Hiếu Temple. Thầy was eager to go with him. When his parents finally agreed to let him follow his dream, Thầy accompanied Nho on the long journey 500km south. In 1942, at the age of 16, Thầy began his novice training at Từ Hiếu Temple in Huế, under Zen Master Thích Chân Thật (1884-1968), entering the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist tradition in the lineage of the renowned Master Linji (Rinzai) and Master Liễu Quán.<sup>12</sup> Thầy was initially given the aspirant name "Sung."<sup>13</sup> After three years of instruction, he formally received the novice precepts in the early morning of the full

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came to the conclusion that five of us would become monks. For me it was easy, because I had that kind of something like "falling in love with the Buddha." Just by seeing the image of a person sitting quietly and calmly like that. So that seed had been growing. During that discussion, it was clear that some decision or some aspiration was there very strong in me already. Inside, I knew that I wanted to be a monk. How? We did not know at all. Being a monk was a vague idea. It meant to follow the path of the Buddha—that's all. But to follow in what way? We did not know."

<sup>6</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Q&A at Brock University, Toronto, 15 August 2013. See also Thich Nhat Hanh, Q&A in Plum Village, July 19, 2009. It was "a kind of deep, deep spiritual experience."

<sup>7</sup> The mountain in Thanh Hóa is known as Núi Na ("Na Mountain"). The story of the Núi Na hermit appears in the writings of Nguyễn Du renowned 16<sup>th</sup> Century Vietnamese poet, and may have been based on the true story of a royal official in the Tran Dynasty, who retreated up into the mountain in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. More information [here](#).

<sup>8</sup> This story is told in Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Hermit and the Well* (2001).

<sup>9</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love* (1996), pp.11-13.

<sup>10</sup> Nho ordained with Zen Master Trùng Pháp Chơn Không at the Great Compassion Temple (Chùa Đại Bi) in Thanh Hóa. Nho received the monastic name Thích Giải Thích. Many decades later, in 2010, Thầy named the nuns' residence at his European Institute of Applied Buddhism Great Compassion Temple (Chùa Đại Bi).

<sup>11</sup> The magazines Thầy read from as early as age nine included *Đuốc Tuệ* ("Torch of Wisdom"). There were many articles about Buddhism in service of society and engaged in social issues (*Nhân gian Phật giáo*). Thich Nhat Hanh, "Cultivating our Deepest Desire", *Mindfulness Bell* #08, Spring 1993: "I remember a series of articles in that magazine on "Buddhism in the World," about practicing in society and in the family, not just in temples. Reading articles like that sparked in me the desire for awakening."

<sup>12</sup> Thầy's teacher, Thích Chân Thật, belonged to the 41st generation of the Linji School (臨濟宗, Vietnamese: Tông Lâm Tế, Japanese: Rinzai) and seventh generation of the Liễu Quán Dharma line. Zen Master Thích Chân Thật had the Lineage name Thanh Quý 清季; Dharma name Cứu Cảnh 究竟; and Dharma title Chân Thật 真寔. According to Vietnamese Buddhist tradition every practitioner receives a lineage name when first committing to practice the Five Precepts; on becoming a monk they receive a monastic Dharma name. Later, monks may take or be given by their teacher or community one or many Dharma titles, marking the development of their career. Every monastic member in the Vietnamese Buddhist tradition has a name which begins with Thích, which represents the Buddha's family name "Shakya" (釋迦). It can be considered a family name or surname for Buddhist monastics in Vietnam.

<sup>13</sup> *Điền* means "aspirant" and *Sung* comes from the words *sung túc*, meaning "prosperity" or "to prosper."

moon of the ninth lunar month of 1945.<sup>14</sup> When he received the Five Precepts he was given the Lineage name Trùng Quang (澄光, “Calm Light”), marking his generation in this particular Buddhist school; and when he received the Ten Novice Precepts, he was given the monastic Dharma name Phùng Xuân (逢春, “Meeting Spring”), the name by which was known in the temple.

## Monastic training: traditional roots

Despite the tension beyond the temple walls, with the Japanese occupation of Vietnam (1940-45), and the scarcity of food during the catastrophic 1945 famine, a warm atmosphere of brotherhood and peace prevailed, and Thầy recalled his novicehood as a happy time.<sup>15</sup> He had a close relationship with his teacher, who loved him very much.<sup>16</sup> His years at Từ Hiếu Temple were a time of rustic simplicity.<sup>17</sup> There was no electricity or running water, and no toilets. As a young novice in training, his daily tasks included chopping wood, carrying water from the well, sweeping the courtyard, working in the garden, tending the cows, and, when the season came, helping to harvest, thresh, and mill the rice. The temple followed the Zen principle of “no work, no food,” which applied to everyone from the highest monk to the newest member.<sup>18</sup> Whenever he had a chance to be his teacher’s attendant, he would wake before dawn to light a fire and boil water to prepare his tea.<sup>19</sup> Thầy was taught to be concentrated in every task, whether washing the dishes, closing the door, sounding the temple bell, or offering incense at the altar. He was given a little book, *Essential Vinaya for Daily Use*—forty-five short verses in Sino-Vietnamese which he had to memorize and recite silently during every act of daily life to maintain concentration.<sup>20</sup> His training was practical and down-to-earth. He learned how a monk should sit, walk, eat, and chant with peace and compassion. He participated in the morning and evening liturgy in Sino-Vietnamese, and the ceremony to offer rice to the Buddha every day at noon.<sup>21</sup> He found the chanting powerful, uplifting, inspiring, and comforting. Thầy recalled one time as a novice when he accompanied his Teacher to visit Hải Đức Temple in Huế, and he saw a Zen master sitting on his wooden platform. “He was not doing sitting meditation. He was not in the meditation hall. He was simply sitting in front of a low table, very beautifully, very straight. And I was very impressed. He looked so peaceful, natural, relaxed. And in my heart as a novice, there came a vow, a longing, to sit like that. How could I sit like that? I would not need to do anything. I would not need to say anything. I would just need to sit.”<sup>22</sup>

In the temple, Thầy received traditional Buddhist training in the monastic code and developed his knowledge of classical Chinese. He found time while tending the cows to continue his reading and

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<sup>14</sup> The full moon of 21 October 1945. See Thich Nhat Hanh, *My Master’s Robe* (2002): “In our first year we studied the daily liturgy and precepts of novices. In our second year we studied the commentaries on the precepts and well-known sutras. By the third year, of the four of us, Brother Man and I had excelled in our studies and we had great hopes of being the first to have novice ordination. Novice ordination meant to officially take the vows of a monk. We awaited this moment as though we were waiting for some great success. For me, I yearned for this moment even more than a scholar might yearn for the announcement of the results of an exam taken after many years of study.”

<sup>15</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Q&A session, Plum Village, 24 July 2012 (Question no.4), and “The Little Buffalo in Pursuit of the Sun,” a chapter on his novicehood memories in Thich Nhat Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* (1999) pp.103-115.

<sup>16</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Q&A session, Plum Village, 18 July 2012 (Question no.2).

<sup>17</sup> Nhat Hanh, *My Master’s Robe* (2002).

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>19</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names* (1999) p.111.

<sup>20</sup> *Essential Vinaya for Daily Use* (毗尼日用切要) compiled by Vinaya Master Duti (讀體, 1601-1679), also known as Jianyue Lüshi (見月律師). Thầy also studied the Ten Novice Precepts and the *Twenty-Four Chapters of Mindful Manners* by Master Zhuhong, and the *Encouraging Words* of Master Guishan. The meditation he learned as a novice in Từ Hiếu Temple was from the Tiantai school.

<sup>21</sup> Chanting was of sutras in Sino-Vietnamese, including the *Śūraṅgama Sutra*, the *Sukhāvāṭī Sutra*, and *dhāraṇī* incantations.

<sup>22</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh Dharma Talk, December 4, 2011.

studying, and was the only one in the temple who could speak French. He was inspired by the writings of Zen Master Thích Mật Thể (1912-1961) and the author Nguyễn Trọng Thuật (1883–1940).<sup>23</sup> Both figures saw the deep riches in Vietnamese Zen history and the capacity of Buddhism to bring about “a new spring” for Vietnam, the kind of Buddhist renewal also being proposed by other reformers and modernists elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> Yet in the first half of the twentieth century, there were those in Vietnam who still saw Buddhism as outdated and archaic, not fit to respond to the challenges of modernity and the dominating forces of colonialism. Catholicism was advanced and promoted, while Buddhist “shrine monks” (or “bonzes”) were considered old-fashioned, superstitious, heathen, and uneducated.

Thầy witnessed at close hand the Japanese occupation and Great Famine of 1945. Stepping out of the temple he saw bodies out in the streets of those who had died of hunger, and witnessed trucks carrying away dozens of corpses.<sup>25</sup> He and his fellow monks were desperate to help. “The situation of suffering impels young men and women to go out and join the revolution. As a young person in such a situation, you *have* to do something for your country.”<sup>26</sup> Although many young monks were tempted by the Marxist pamphlets’ call to arms, Thầy was convinced that Buddhism, if updated and restored to its core teachings and practices, *could* truly help relieve suffering in society, and offer a nonviolent path to peace, prosperity, and independence from colonising powers, just as it had during the renowned Ly and Tran dynasties in medieval Vietnam.<sup>27</sup>

In 1947, soon after receiving the novice precepts, Thầy’s teacher sent him to study and live at the nearby Báo Quốc Institute of Buddhist Studies in Huế.<sup>28</sup> There, he followed a foundational Buddhist curriculum including new Buddhist textbooks being published by monastic and lay teachers seeking to renew Buddhism in China. Thầy studied key Mahayana sutras, including the *Sutra on the Eight Realizations of Great Beings* (八大人覺經), the *Sutra on Impermanence* (無常經), the *Sutra of Forty-Two Chapters* (四十二章經), the *Sutra of the Buddha’s Last Teachings* (the *Bequeathed Teachings Sutra*, 遺教經), and Buddhist psychology (including the 51 Mental Formations). In the second year, he studied the novice monastic code (*vinaya*), the *Amitabha Sutra*, and the key texts of the Yogācāra School, including the *Thirty Verses* and the *One Hundred Dharmas*—many of which he memorised by heart in Sino-Vietnamese.<sup>29</sup> The curriculum also included Confucian literature, for example *The Four Books and Five Classics* (四書五經). His studies continued with Buddhist logic (*hetu-vidya*, 因明), the *Sūraṅgama Sutra*, and teachings of the Tiantai School, including the *Greater and Lesser Treatises on Concentration and Insight* by Master Zhiyi (智顛). There was a culture of poetry at Báo Quốc, and teachers and students often exchanged insights and reflections in poems. Thầy had begun to write poetry when he was twelve and he continued at Từ Hiếu Temple. He later said that, experiencing so many beautiful moments at Từ Hiếu, “it was impossible for me not to become a poet.” At Báo Quốc his talents in poetry were nurtured and encouraged.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Inside the Now: Meditations on Time* (2015).

<sup>24</sup> For example, the Chinese Master Taixu (1890-1947). Thích Mật Thể studied with Master Tinh Nghiêm (Qing Yan) in China, and brought back his ideas to Huế.

<sup>25</sup> Thầy described what he saw in an interview with Don Lattin for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, October 12, 1997: “There was a time when every morning when I got up I saw many dead bodies on the street, because people did not have anything to eat. [We] Young students had to go and beg for rice. And at lunch, we went into each house and asked for a rice bowl. We collected this rice and then we divided it into a smaller rice bowl and distributed it to the dying people. They were dying of hunger...I never can forget such an experience.”

<sup>26</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, Dharma Talk at Plum Village in Vietnamese, February 11, 2002 (Lunar New Year Eve)

<sup>27</sup> Nhất Hạnh, *My Master’s Robe* (2002)

<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately the Báo Quốc Institute’s records are no longer extant. They were deliberately burned in 1975 and what remained was lost in a later accidental fire.

<sup>29</sup> Thầy’s private papers; and Thích Nhất Hạnh, Dharma Talk of February 15, 2009. Thầy did so well in his first year that the Director of the Institute, Venerable Trí Thủ, let Thầy attend his intermediate classes on the novice *vinaya* and contemporary Vietnamese literature.

<sup>30</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, Dharma Talk of June 9, 2013 and his private memoirs.

Thầy's studies took place against the backdrop of the First Indochina War (1946-54). Following the withdrawal of the Japanese, a violent struggle emerged between the French forces and the nationalist Việt Minh engaging in guerrilla warfare to end colonial rule.<sup>31</sup> Over 50,000 people would die in the fighting, as the Vietnamese fought for the kind of independence India would win from the British. The skirmishes and violence did not spare the monks or temples. They became a place of sanctuary and refuge for revolutionaries fleeing the French.<sup>32</sup> Although unarmed and nonviolent, many monks, including some of Thầy's close friends, were shot and killed.<sup>33</sup> French soldiers frequently raided the temples, searching for resistance fighters or food. Thầy vividly recalled one raid where soldiers demanded the last of their rice. It was during this unsettled time that Thầy had an unexpected chance to befriend a young French soldier stationed at the water plant near Từ Hiếu.<sup>34</sup> Thầy later said that, like many young men and monks his age at the time, he was very tempted by Marxism, and the promise of taking action to improve the situation.<sup>35</sup> But he was confident that the Buddhist path could also offer a non-violent way forward.

At Báo Quốc, Thầy and his fellow seminarians started their own little magazine, called *Lotus*. After a few issues, Thầy felt the content was too theoretical, so they tried again, with another magazine they called *Tiếng Sóng* ("Sound of the Waves"). But it was seen as too provocative by the elders in the institute, and they had to stop.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, Thầy continued to read progressive Buddhist magazines such as *Tiến Hóa*, which explored ideas for a "socially conscious" Buddhism that was concerned not only with transforming the mind, but also the wider environment and conditions in society, including the economic and political roots of poverty, oppression, and war.<sup>37</sup> *Tiến Hóa* published articles on the importance of studying science and economics, in order to understand the actual roots of suffering, and not rely only on chanting and prayer. Thầy and his fellow young monks, keen to expand their horizons, still had a thirst for books on science, philosophy, and foreign literature beginning to be published in Vietnam. Yet the kind of Buddhism taught at Báo Quốc was still very traditional, with a strong emphasis on rituals and chanting, and it did not yet directly address the problems going on around them. In their second year, Thầy and his friends petitioned their teachers for changes to the curriculum, so they could study Buddhism in a way that was more relevant to the contemporary situation. They felt the old way of teaching and learning did not respond to their own needs or the needs of the country struggling for independence from colonial oppression. Although the director listened deeply and understood their concerns, the conservative teachers were not ready to make changes, and the students' requests were declined.<sup>38</sup>

## Monastic training: seeking a new path

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<sup>31</sup> The First Indochina War lasted eight years, from 1946-54, as the French fought to reclaim their colony after the Japanese withdrew in 1945, against a growing Vietnamese resistance.

<sup>32</sup> Thầy recalls sheltering revolutionaries in his letter, Nhat Hanh, "The Magical Sound of the Sitar," October 13, 2009.

<sup>33</sup> Thích Tâm Thường, a very close friend was among those killed. See Nhat Hanh, *Inside the Now* (2015), p.15.

<sup>34</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Inside the Now* (2015); see also "The Last Sack of Rice" and "A French Soldier" in Thich Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World: Stories and Essential Teachings from a Monk's Life* (2016); and "Humanity" in Nhat Hanh, *My Master's Robe* (2002)

<sup>35</sup> *Mindfulness Bell*, issue #34, Autumn 2003

<sup>36</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Dharma Talk in Plum Village, April 17, 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Nhat Hanh, unpublished private papers.

<sup>38</sup> Nhat Hanh, unpublished private papers. The Director of the institute at the time was Thích Trí Thủ



In late spring 1949, after two years at the Báo Quốc Institute, 23-year-old Thầy left Huế with his friends who had been creating *Tiếng Sóng* magazine, to further their studies in Saigon.<sup>39</sup> As battles were still raging, they took a long route, and in parts travelled by boat to avoid the military roadblocks.<sup>40</sup> Along the way, the young monks decided to affirm their deep aspiration to become *bodhisattvas* of action by taking new names. They all took the name Hạnh, meaning “action.” In this way, Thầy (Phùng Xuân) became Nhất Hạnh (“One Action”), and the two other monks became Đường Hạnh (“Great Action”) and Chánh Hạnh (“Right Action”).<sup>41</sup> As the name of every Vietnamese Buddhist begins with Thích, so it was that, from this time, Thầy became known as Thích Nhất Hạnh.<sup>42</sup>

When they arrived in Saigon, the war with the French was still going on. Thầy and his friends stayed and studied at a number of other different temples, for weeks or months at a time, while they pursued their self-directed studies. Thầy soon published his first books of poetry. *Reed Flute in the Autumn Twilight*, a collection of about fifty poems, including a play in verse, was printed in autumn 1949. His poetry collection in a radical new “free” form, *The Golden Light of Spring*, followed in 1951.<sup>43</sup> Capturing his experiences of war and loss, his poetry was well received, and quickly sold out.

Thầy and his friends became some of the first Buddhist monks in Vietnam to find ways to study a more western-style curriculum, making use of the Saigon National Library. Traditional Buddhism in Vietnam did not allow monks to study “worldly” subjects but, as well as studying the *Tripitaka*—the Buddhist canon—Thầy and his friends also eagerly studied science, world literature, foreign languages (in particular French), philosophy, and psychology. As he reflected later, “we were convinced that these subjects could help us infuse life into the practice of Buddhism in our country. You have to speak the language of your time to express the Buddha’s teachings in ways people can understand.”<sup>44</sup> In autumn 1950, Thầy helped Thích Trí Hữu co-found Ấn Quang Pagoda, a new temple built of bamboo and thatch. It would later host a reformist Buddhist institute where he would become one of the youngest teachers, and is today one of the most prominent temples in the city.<sup>45</sup> Thầy continued his research in the library, publishing in spring 1951 his first book on Buddhism, *Oriental Logic*, a discussion of Eastern logic in the light of Aristotle, Hegel, Marx and Engels.<sup>46</sup>

It was during this time that Thầy and his friends delighted in breaking with monastic convention, and were among the first to dare to ride bicycles out in the streets.<sup>47</sup> Thầy also took the bold step of

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<sup>39</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Conflict in Yourself, Your Community and the World* (2001) p.22, “I left the Buddhist Institute because I did not find an appropriate teaching and practice there for responding to the reality of life in Vietnam, but I did not leave monastic life.” Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love* (1996) p.21, “We left the Buddhist Institute in Hue because we felt we weren’t getting the teachings we needed.”

<sup>40</sup> From Đà Nẵng they took the boat to Saigon.

<sup>41</sup> Thầy’s private papers. With the name “Hạnh,” they may have been evoking the name of Zen Master Vạn Hạnh, an eminent Vietnamese monk from the 10-11thC., who was a master of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, and who served as adviser to the King. The name Vạn Hạnh means “ten thousand actions,” whereas Nhất Hạnh means “one action.” Speaking later about his name, Thầy said that he, unlike his eminent predecessor, needed to concentrate on one thing. Source: Sallie B. King, “Thích Nhất Hạnh and the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam: Nondualism in Action,” in Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (Eds.) *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (1996), Ch.9.

<sup>42</sup> See footnote 11, above.

<sup>43</sup> *Tiếng Dịch Chiều Thu* (“Reed Flute in the Autumn Twilight”) published under the name Nhất Hạnh by Dragon River Press in 1949. This was followed by *Thơ Ngụ Ngôn* (“Fables”), published under the pen name “Hoàng Hoa” by Đuốc Tuệ publishing house in 1950. *Ánh Xuân Vàng* (“The Golden Light of Spring”), was published soon after, in 1950.

<sup>44</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love* (1996), p.22.

<sup>45</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, Dharma Talk in Hanoi, May 6, 2008. They founded the temple in 1949 together with the Brother Trí Hữu. At first they called it Ứng Quang. It became known as the South Vietnam Buddhist Institute (Phật học đường Nam Việt) in 1950. Today Ấn Quang temple is one of the most well-known temples in the city.

<sup>46</sup> *Đông Phương Luận Lý Học* (“Oriental Logic”) was published by Hương Quê publishing house in 1950.

<sup>47</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, Dharma Talk in Plum Village, May 10, 2014. While visiting the coastal town of Nha Trang several hundred kilometers northeast of Saigon.

enrolling, in September 1951, for the *baccalauréat* exams in Saigon to get the certificate he needed to enter secular higher education.<sup>48</sup>

In October 1951, at the age of 25, Thầy formally received full ordination as a bhikshu at Ân Quang Temple, with Venerable Thích Đôn Hậu as his Ordination Master.<sup>49</sup> In many respects, this step to receive bhikshu ordination was long overdue. Thầy had already been a monk for nine years, had made his name as a poet and Buddhist scholar and commentator.

Following the publication of *Oriental Logic*, Thầy was invited to Đà Lạt, up in the Central Highlands, 200 kilometers northeast of Saigon, to edit *Hương Thiện* Buddhist magazine and train the young aspirants at one of the temples. They established a community of monastics studying at the Spiritual Light Pagoda (Chùa Linh Quang).<sup>50</sup> Eager to explore new horizons, Thầy wrote articles on Buddhist philosophy and the renewal of Buddhism, wrote a Vietnamese play adaptation of Molière's *Le Tartuffe*.<sup>51</sup> For the Lunar New Year in February 1952, Thầy directed his students to perform the play.<sup>52</sup> Reflecting later on this time, Thầy wrote, "I was full of creative energy, an artist, and a poet. More than anything else, I wanted to help renew Buddhism in my country, to make it relevant to the needs of the young people."<sup>53</sup>

Despite the tension and instability of the French Indochina War, in which Catholic colonial forces engaged in a bitter struggle to reassert dominance, the French intellectuals living in Đà Lạt were unusually curious about and respectful towards Buddhism, and Thầy met them at weekly lectures at Chùa Linh Sơn. At that time, French journals such as *La Pensée Bouddhique*, edited by Mme. Marguerite La Fuente in Paris, could be bought in Saigon, and provided a rich resource for Thầy's academic research. Soon, he updated *Hương Thiện* magazine to a smaller format, and changed its name to *Liên Hoa*, inspired by the French Buddhist magazine, *Le Lotus Bleu*.

During the early 1950s, Thầy divided his time between Đà Lạt and Saigon where he was teaching, publishing articles, and completing his *baccalauréat*. Thầy gave a series of talks on the meditation practices of *śamatha* and *vipāśyanā* at Phước Hải Temple, that would later be published.<sup>54</sup> From time to time he was invited to lead courses in Đồng Nai Thượng. It was not easy to have enough money to live on, as, to preserve their independence, Thầy and his young monastic brothers did not cultivate individual sponsors (as was typical for monks at the time). The honorariums Thầy received for articles and books helped cover their basic needs, but they did not always have enough. Thầy sometimes lacked medicine and rest, and his health at this time was fragile and weak.<sup>55</sup>

In late 1952 in Đà Lạt, Thầy and his elder brother An (known as "Bé Anh") set up the first Buddhist private school in Vietnam, offering for Buddhist families the kind of structured education being given by

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<sup>48</sup> At Vương Gia Cần High School in Saigon. It was considered inappropriate at the time for monks to seek "worldly" education.

<sup>49</sup> This information is published in *Tiểu sử danh tăng Việt Nam thế kỷ XX* (1995) ("Biographies of Renowned Vietnamese Monks of the Twentieth Century"), Ch. 1, p. 322, compiled by Venerable Thích Đồng Bổn, published by the Buddhist Association of Hồ Chí Minh city.

<sup>50</sup> The name of the temple (Chùa Linh Quang) can also be translated as "Miraculous Brightness Pagoda." For more on his time in Đà Lạt in 1950, see Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love* (1996).

<sup>51</sup> His articles and writing were published in book form in 1953, by Đuốc Tuệ publishing house, with the title *Gia Đình Tin Phật* ("Buddhist Families"). He developed new, concrete practices for Buddhists to incorporate the teachings into their family relationships and lifestyle, and also presented ways they could offer meaningful chants and prayers at home.

<sup>52</sup> A translation that was later published with the title *Câu Đồng*

<sup>53</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love* (1996), p.11.

<sup>54</sup> Thích Nhat Hanh, *Chỉ Quán Yêu Lược* (1955)

<sup>55</sup> In 1953 he published an article entitled, "Sickness Helps Us Practice."

the growing number of French Catholic missionary schools in the country.<sup>56</sup> They offered a secular elementary study program including science and French, and young monastics who couldn't afford the fees could study for free. Thầy's popular articles and teachings on Buddhism for lay practitioners, which he had been publishing in *Hương Thiện* magazine since 1951, began to be published as books. *Buddhist Families* and *Being Buddhist* came out in 1953, and were broadcast on the weekly Buddhist radio station. This new kind of very practical Buddhism for people who weren't monks and nuns foreshadowed Thầy's later efforts to develop practices that could be effective for young people, families, relationships, and home and working life.<sup>57</sup> At this time, he hoped that in the future he would "see monks and nuns operating high schools, taking care of kindergartens, and running healthcare centers, practicing meditation while doing the work of helping people—not just talking about compassion, but expressing compassion through action."<sup>58</sup>

## Creating a Renewed, Engaged Buddhism

In July 1954, following the Geneva Accords which officially ended hostilities between the French and the Viet Minh, Vietnam was divided into two. The North became communist and the South soon became anti-communist, supported by the U.S. The separation of the country ushered in a turbulent time, with huge numbers migrating from North to South in an atmosphere of confusion and uncertainty. To strengthen their voice and collect their energy, Buddhist leaders formed a National Buddhist Association (TỔNG HỘI PHẬT GIÁO VIỆT NAM) of all the schools and lineages.<sup>59</sup> The board of the Ân Quang Institute invited Thầy back to Saigon to help stabilize and renew the program of studies and practice for the young generation of monks and nuns. Many students were being drawn to Marxist ideals and the struggle for freedom from foreign control, and left monastic life to join the guerrilla struggle. Thầy later said that there was a time when even he was tempted by these ideals.<sup>60</sup> Others, feeling that Buddhist courses were neither rigorous nor relevant, were turning to secular education and training in other professions, such as medicine or engineering. Thầy created a program that could address the young monastics' need for a more relevant kind of Buddhist study and, for the first time, offer them a diploma comparable to secular courses.

And so, from summer 1954, Thầy was appointed Director of Education at the Ân Quang Buddhist Institute.<sup>61</sup> "I convened a series of meetings involving hundreds of young monks and nuns," he recalled, "and we created an atmosphere of hope, trust, and love. The patriarch of the National Buddhist Association joined one of our meetings, and he listened as we young monks and nuns expressed our deepest hopes for Buddhism in our country."<sup>62</sup> Thầy proposed a new curriculum at Ân Quang, for the first time combining traditional Buddhist studies with science, mathematics, Western philosophy, foreign languages, history, literature and creative writing. The new Ân Quang diploma would now be equivalent to the diplomas of secular institutes. He helped start a Student Society for Culture and

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<sup>56</sup> Hanh, *Inside the Now* (2015) p.18. The school was called Tuệ Quang. By 1970 there were 72 Buddhist elementary schools and 65 high schools based on this "Bồ đề" model, teaching over 58,000 students. In 1975, all those schools became public schools under the Ministry of Education.

<sup>57</sup> Nhất Hạnh, *Là Phật Tử* ("Being Buddhist," 1953), published by Đức Tuệ; and Nhất Hạnh, *Gia Đình Tin Phật* ("Buddhist Families," 1953), published by Đức Tuệ (this was a collection of articles first printed in the magazine *Hương Thiện* in Đà Lạt in 1951).

<sup>58</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love* (1996), p.22.

<sup>59</sup> On May 6, 1951, fifty-one representatives from 6 Buddhist congregations of the South, the Central and the North had a meeting at Từ Đàm temple and agreed to establish the National Buddhist Association. Source: Nguyễn Lang, *Việt Nam Phật giáo Sử luận* ("History of Vietnamese Buddhism")

<sup>60</sup> *Mindfulness Bell*, issue #34, Autumn 2003

<sup>61</sup> He had begun teaching the intermediate class at Ân Quang in 1953, as he was dividing time between Đà Lạt and Saigon.

<sup>62</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love* (1996), p.30. Note: this quote corrects a mistranslation printed in the book (it should read "National Buddhist Association" not "Unified Buddhist Church.")

Communication, which began publishing a newsletter, *New Lotus Season* (Sen Hái Đầu Mùa). Thầy knew that “The task of reforming Buddhism demands a revolution in the teachings and the regulations of the Buddhist institutes. When the training can form a sufficient number of good students, then there can be a real reform of Buddhism.”<sup>63</sup> Experimenting with a new style of *séminaire*, Thầy began to reorganise every aspect of the monks’ studies, practice, and way of living. To enliven the lessons, he taught them folk songs and new Buddhist songs, and he even took them on a camping trip to the beach.<sup>64</sup> He directed them to take down the walls of the young monks’ rooms, so all forty students were living in one big, airy dorm.<sup>65</sup> As Thầy later wrote, “It was exhilarating to be involved in what I had dreamed about for such a long time.”<sup>66</sup>

Thầy taught his students foundational Buddhism, the history of Buddhism, and Vietnamese literature, as well as creative writing and poetry. Thầy invited guest teachers to give talks, including Venerable Yan Pou (Diễn Bồi) from China and Brother Ananda Mangala from India. He taught the young monastics the poetry of Victor Hugo and encouraged them to learn French; every day at 8pm they studied the French class being broadcast on the *Pháp Á* (“France Asia”) radio station.<sup>67</sup> However, he soon discovered that their French was not quite up to it, and he realised there would need to be changes to the core curriculum. Thầy also began experimenting with translating Chinese texts into poetic contemporary Vietnamese. His most popular course was on “Buddhist literature,” then a new subject he was pioneering. He gave commentary on Buddhist poetry and *gathas* in Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese, and presented Mahayana sutras in the light of their literary qualities.<sup>68</sup> Thầy encouraged the students to have informal discussions on Buddhism, French literature, and the situation in Vietnam.<sup>69</sup> He also began teaching the advanced students at Ân Quang a few classes on western philosophy, including Hegel, Nietzsche, Sartres, and Camus, so when the monks gave teachings, they could respond to questions from contemporary intellectuals.<sup>70</sup>

For his students, this represented a new way of teaching—very different from the traditional Buddhist institutes—based on inspiration rather than authority. As one student recalls, “Thầy was youthful and bright-eyed, gentle, sensitive, calm, mature and refined. He never yelled or criticized us.”<sup>71</sup> He still insisted, nonetheless, that they memorise by heart every sutra, poem, or text they studied, so it would enter their consciousness, and help them develop their vocabulary and writing skills. At the time, traditional Buddhism was focussed primarily on the mastery of classical Chinese and Sino-Vietnamese. But Thầy felt it was important to train the young generation of monastics in the beauties and strengths of the Vietnamese language, and to help them learn to write eloquently in contemporary Vietnamese. Many of his students from Ân Quang later become scholars and teachers in their own right.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Nhat Hanh, *My Master’s Robe* (2002)

<sup>64</sup> Under the French, lay Buddhists had created a *Commission d’Études Bouddhique et de Perfectionnement Moral* (Thanh Niên Phật Học Đức Dục), a “Commission for Buddhist Studies and Moral Advancement.” The group sought to reinvigorate and modernise Buddhism, and respond to the advancement of Catholicism. They introduced singing to Buddhist devotees, and in 1940 created an anthem for their association. Thầy taught this anthem and other songs to his students at Ân Quang.

<sup>65</sup> They painted a slogan on the walls to inspire the students: “Students are the Life-force of Flourishing Buddhism” (*Học tăng là sức sống của đạo pháp đang lên*). See Thích Trí Không, *Những Năm Tháng Theo Thầy* (unpublished memoirs): “*Hòa hợp chúng*” và “*Học tăng là sức sống của đạo pháp đang lên*.”

<sup>66</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love* (1996), p.30.

<sup>67</sup> Trí Không, unpublished memoirs. Thầy wrote to the producers to get free course books for the young monks. Although at first it was a new and exciting way for them to learn French, the grammar was too difficult and many of them gave up.

<sup>68</sup> Trí Không, unpublished memoirs. They studied the insight poems of Zen Masters of the Ly and Tran dynasties, including Zen Master Vạn Hạnh. They also studied the *gathas* of Master Guishan.

<sup>69</sup> Trí Không, unpublished memoirs

<sup>70</sup> This class included Thích Huyền Vi and Thích Thanh Từ.

<sup>71</sup> Trí Không, unpublished memoirs

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*

At the same time Thầy became Director of Education at Ân Quang (1954), he also enrolled himself as a student at the newly-opened university Faculté des Lettres de l'Université de Saigon. In order to enroll, Thầy was required to register legally. Like many others in such irregular and uncertain times, he modified his chosen name, registering as “Nguyễn Xuân Bảo.”<sup>73</sup> The university’s first intake was a prestigious cohort, and included Doãn Quốc Sỹ and Lý Quốc Sinh, who went on to become leading public intellectuals. Thầy often cycled in to university from Ân Quang, and after his classes, would cycle back to Ân Quang to teach. He stayed silent when one day, to his surprise, his book on Buddhist logic was used as course material in one of his classes.<sup>74</sup> Thầy completed his university studies and graduated with a BA in French and Vietnamese Literature, while also continuing to write and publish his own poems, articles and books.<sup>75</sup> One of Thầy’s students at the time, Thích Trí Không, has written his vivid recollections of studying with Thầy at Ân Quang in the 1950s.<sup>76</sup> He recalls Thầy teaching them not to believe everything they heard on the radio, and never to impose their views on others. He encouraged his students to reflect on what they hear, to think critically, and contemplate with discernment.

In 1955 the regime of Vietnamese Catholic leader Ngô Đình Diệm began to consolidate power, using every means possible. Catholics were explicitly favoured and Buddhists increasingly suppressed and marginalized. Hopes for democratic elections soon faded as guerrilla fighters continued to gain ground, and the government—under foreign influence—did everything they could to stymie a free ballot.

Thầy was asked to write a series of ten high-profile articles for the politically-neutral daily newspaper, *Democracy* (Dân Chủ).<sup>77</sup> They asked him to show the strength of Vietnam’s own Buddhist heritage, and prove that Buddhism was not irrelevant or obsolete, as many were claiming. And so, in the turmoil and pressure of the division of the country, Thầy’s vision for engaged Buddhism crystallised. Published on the front page, under the pen name Thạc Đức, and entitled “A Fresh Look at Buddhism” (*Đạo Phật Qua Nhận Thức Mới*), Thầy’s daring articles proposed a new way forward in terms of democracy, freedom, human rights, religion, and education. They sent shock-waves across the country.<sup>78</sup> The tenth and final article was a bold Buddhist critique of President Diệm’s doctrine of “personalism.”<sup>79</sup> The official South Vietnam Buddhist Studies Association published them as a book in February 1957, and the articles became a touchstone for a truly Vietnamese and Buddhist way forward in the turmoil.<sup>80</sup>

In 1955 Thầy made his first trip back to Huế, to his home temple and family, seven years after leaving. He received a warm welcome at his Root Temple and at the Báo Quốc Institute they organized a talk for him with the students. Thầy also enjoyed a happy visit with his parents. It would be the last time he saw his mother in good health.<sup>81</sup>

Meanwhile, as Thầy’s recognition and standing grew, at the second assembly of the National Buddhist Association in 1956, Thầy was appointed Editor in Chief of *Vietnamese Buddhism* (Phật Giáo Việt Nam), the official magazine of the new National Buddhist Association. He used a dozen pseudonyms, and authored articles on Vietnamese history, international literature (including Tolstoy, Albert Camus, Victor Hugo), philosophy, Buddhist texts, current affairs and interviews, short stories, plays, and even folk poetry—doing everything he could to promote reconciliation and a spirit of togetherness between

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<sup>73</sup> Xuân Bảo can be translated as “Spring Treasure.”

<sup>74</sup> *Đông Phương Luận Lý Học* (“Oriental Logic”), was published in 1950 (see Appendix).

<sup>75</sup> Trí Không, unpublished memoirs.

<sup>76</sup> Thích Trí Không, *Những Năm Tháng Theo Thầy* (unpublished memoirs)

<sup>77</sup> According to Thích Nhất Hạnh’s private papers, they were published in 1955.

<sup>78</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, Dharma Talk in Hanoi, May 6, 2008; Trí Không, unpublished memoirs.

<sup>79</sup> His alternative to liberalism and communism which every government employee was required to follow

<sup>80</sup> Thạc Đức, *Đạo Phật Qua Nhận Thức Mới* (1957), published by Hội Phật Học Nam Việt. It sold 5,000 copies in the first print run. Source: Trí Không, unpublished memoirs.

<sup>81</sup> Nhất Hạnh, unpublished private papers.

the different Buddhists groups of North and South.<sup>82</sup> He dug deep into Vietnam's own history to propose a truly Vietnamese way out of the situation, drawing on the very "engaged" role Buddhism had played during the Trần and Lý Dynasties between the 11th and 13th Centuries, that had so inspired him as a young monk. As the leading Buddhist journal, at a time when both Catholicism and foreign influences were staking new ground, the magazine became an important voice of Vietnamese culture and spiritual tradition, and (unusually for the time) was sold in secular bookshops and at street newsstands.<sup>83</sup> Editing this national Buddhist magazine was an opportunity for Thầy to help consolidate efforts to unify the various Buddhist branches into one congregation that could protect itself and respond with strength to the threats and challenges they were facing from political forces. With the success of the journal, Thầy became a prominent, far-sighted figure. Yet his ideas for how Vietnamese Buddhism could contribute to help the worsening situation were, in many ways, ahead of his time, and it eventually became clear that his efforts to unite the Buddhist groups could not succeed. There was resistance from the conservative Buddhist hierarchy and from laypeople who were not ready to embrace his vision of a new kind of Buddhism.<sup>84</sup>

While the situation in the country was changing rapidly, Thầy's own mother's health was deteriorating. Thầy and his brother An brought their mother to stay with them for treatment in Đà Lạt. Thầy's elder brother Thích Giải Thích (Nho) came to join them, and so did their older sister. All four children were present when his mother finally passed away on the full moon day of the ninth lunar month, 1956. Thầy wrote in his journal, "The greatest misfortune of my life has come!" As he explained later, "Even an old person doesn't feel ready when he loses his mother. He too has the impression that he is not yet ripe, that he is suddenly alone. He feels abandoned and unhappy as a young orphan."<sup>85</sup>

## Experimental community

Towards the end of 1956, Thầy began to spend more time in B'lao, a remote tea-growing region in the central highlands, about two hundred kilometers north-east of Saigon en route to Đà Lạt. The division of the country, the death of his mother, and staunch resistance in the Buddhist hierarchy to his endeavors—to unify the Buddhist branches and successfully renew the Án Quang study program—were all taking their toll.

In Công Hinh (another name for B'lao), surrounded by tea plantations, was Phước Huệ Temple, the headquarters of the local Buddhist congregation.<sup>86</sup> There, Thầy retreated to a small thatched hut built out among the tea trees. It was a simple hut, at the end of a little path through the tea plantation, with just a bed and a table—and stacks of books. The climate in B'lao was slightly warmer and milder than in Đà Lạt and offered favourable conditions for Thầy to do his writing and research, away from the turbulence

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<sup>82</sup> His pseudonyms included Hoàng Hoa (poetry), Thạc Đức (philosophy, Engaged Buddhism, current affairs and reconciliation), Nguyễn Lang, (history of Buddhism), Dã Thảo (renewing Buddhism, role of Buddhism in society, influence of Buddhism on Western philosophy; critique of Buddhist institutions), Tâm Kiên (modern folk poetry), Minh Hạnh (literary commentary, French literature, cultural critiques), Phương Bối (deep Buddhism, message to youth), B'su Danglu (renewed Buddhism), Tuệ Uyển (Buddhist ethics), Tâm Quán (short stories about novice monastic life), Minh Thu and Thiệu Chi (Buddhism, short stories, interviews with leading monks). He edited as Nhất Hạnh, and also wrote Buddhist commentary and some poems as Nhất Hạnh.

<sup>83</sup> Trí Không, unpublished memoirs

<sup>84</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love* (1996), p.30.

<sup>85</sup> Thích Nhat Hanh, *A Rose for Your Pocket* (1987), p.28; first published in Vietnamese in the Buddhist magazine *Lotus* in 1962, under his own name Nhất Hạnh, with the title *Look Deeply at Your Mother (Nhìn kỹ Mẹ)*. Published later the same year by Lá Bối publishing house, with the title *Bông Hồng Cài Áo*.

<sup>86</sup> Today the village has become the large town of Bảo Lộc, and Phước Huệ Temple is a large, developed, and prestigious temple downtown.

of Saigon, and the power struggles in the Buddhist hierarchy which were obstructing the younger generation. It was very quiet in B'loao, with just the occasional sound of a car in the distance on the main road. The temple had no mains electricity, but a small generator that could provide enough power for a dozen electric bulbs for a couple of hours in the evening.<sup>87</sup>

Thầy dreamed of creating a monastic community there in the mountains and was soon joined by a number of monastic brothers from the Báo Quốc Institute and students from Ân Quang. Thầy created a program of practice and study, and they were often joined by lay practitioners who lived nearby. They woke early for sitting and chanting at 4am, and would have classes and study time in the morning. It was from here that Thầy wrote and edited articles for the national *Vietnamese Buddhism* magazine over the next two years, while teaching the young monks. Early every evening, Thầy would join everyone in playing ping-pong or even soccer on the large field out back—quite radical, since at the time monks in Vietnam did not play sports.<sup>88</sup> They finished their day with meditation and chanting in the temple.

Thầy wanted to give the monks a chance to train in the spirit of self-directed study and research, in a nourishing and inspiring place close to nature. He wanted to inspire the young monks to develop their curiosity to study and research for themselves, and not just study for the sake of exams and diplomas. “We wanted to offer a new kind of Buddhism,” he said. “A Buddhism that could act as a raft, to save the whole country from the desperate situation of conflict, division, and war.”<sup>89</sup> Thầy wanted each monastic to cultivate their own discernment, insight, and awakening, and not simply have “blind faith” in Buddhist doctrine.<sup>90</sup> He taught the young monks how to make use of non-Buddhist subjects, such as science, history, and literature, as “tools” for further Buddhist research.<sup>91</sup> He taught them the history of Buddhist thought; the evolution of different Buddhist schools; and key texts from the early Theravada and Sarvastivada schools.<sup>92</sup> Professors and scholars from Saigon came up and stayed with them for a few weeks at a time, joining their discussions and walks, and savoring the peace and charm of simple living.

From time to time Thầy took them to visit the elder nun Sister Diệu Âm in Djiring for lunch, or they would go for hikes into the nearby Đại Lão forest, where there were rivers and waterfalls to explore, and beautiful places to enjoy listening to the streams and birds.<sup>93</sup> The monks would take a picnic, and after eating would lie down on the rocks by the creek to rest. Thầy encouraged them to sing songs and to enjoy the sky and clouds, to truly refresh their spirits. Sometimes they sat in the heart of the forest to listen to Thầy tell stories, recite poems, or share about his vision for the future of Vietnam. There were times he even asked them to sit in a circle and take notes.

It was while staying in his little hut among the tea trees, that Thầy had a dream in which he saw his mother, and for the first time had a deep realization that “being” and “non-being” are—above all—just

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<sup>87</sup> Trí Không, unpublished memoirs. Thầy had a bulb in his hut; there were others in the study room, meditation hall, kitchen, shrine hall and at the entrance gate.

<sup>88</sup> See Nhat Hanh, “[The Magical Sound of the Sitar](#),” a letter to his students, October 13, 2009, and Trí Không, unpublished memoirs.

<sup>89</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Inside the Now* (2015)

<sup>90</sup> It may have been in B'loao that Thầy wrote his poem, “I Want It All”—printed in Nhat Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names* (1993), p.177.

<sup>91</sup> While at Ân Quang, Thầy had read the book “Looking at Buddhism Through Science” (*Bản báo cáo của một nhà khoa học đã từng nghiên cứu Kinh điển Phật giáo*) by Wang Zhi Biao (Uông Trí Biểu), which offered a new perspective on how the scientific method and Buddhist contemplation and practice could be complimentary.

<sup>92</sup> For example: the “Treatise on the Wheel of Propositions of Different Schools” (*samaya bhedoparacanacakra*) by Vasumitra; the “Points of Controversy” (*kathāvatthu*) from the Theravada Abhidhamma Piṭaka; *Treatise on the Twelve Doors* by Nagarjuna; *Abhidharmakosabhasyam* by Vasubhandu; and the *Nagasena Bhikṣu Sutra* (Nagasena’s answers to questions from the Indo-Greek King Menander I of Bactria, c. 150 BCE). Source: Trí Không, unpublished memoirs.

<sup>93</sup> The Bobla waterfall, Liên Khàng Waterfall, Nugar Waterfall, and Pongour Waterfall.

ideas. In the dream, Thầy's mother was "young, vivid, joyful, and beautiful, with long black hair."<sup>94</sup> "She looked the same as always, and I spoke to her quite naturally, without a tinge of grief... [A]t about one a.m. I awoke, and my grief was gone. I saw that the idea that I had lost my mother was only an idea. Being able to see my mother in my dream, I realized that I could see my mother everywhere. When I stepped out into the garden flooded with soft moonlight, I experienced the light as my mother's presence. It was not just a thought. I could really see my mother everywhere, all the time." That night, he explained, "I realized that my mother's birth and death were concepts, not truth. The reality of my mother was beyond birth or death. She did not exist because of birth, nor cease to exist because of death...This is not philosophy. I am only speaking truth."<sup>95</sup>

In 1957, Thầy and his friends found sixty acres of land available to buy in the heart of the Đại Lão Forest, in a quiet spot near the Montagnard village of B'su Danlu, about 10km from B'lao and Phước Huệ Temple.<sup>96</sup> In January 1958 they began clearing the land, and that summer started erecting some simple wooden structures. Zen Master Thích Thanh Từ joined them, and built his own hut up on the hill, staying there until 1961.<sup>97</sup> Thầy went to Saigon to seek funds, and was able to sell the manuscript for a new book on Buddhist psychology, which sold 2,000 copies and raised about twelve thousand dong.<sup>98</sup> It was enough to build a small hut, and a long building with a corrugated iron roof, that had three rooms: a library, a meditation hall with altar, and a dining room.

The new land was covered in lush vegetation and clear streams, and had beautiful paths for walking meditation. They called this new community "Phương Bối" (Fragrant Palm Leaves), after the name of Thầy's hut in the tea field of Phước Huệ. Thầy recalled that Phương Bối "offered us her untamed hills as an enormous soft cradle, blanketed with wildflowers, grasses, and forest. Here, for the first time, we were sheltered from the harshness of worldly affairs."<sup>99</sup> It was a perfect refuge for the small community—a place for reading, writing, meditation and contemplation, surrounded by the peace and tranquility of the majestic forest. Phương Bối was also wild and invigorating. Thầy wrote in his journal that he could feel "the ancient tribesman in myself awakening."<sup>100</sup> Sometimes they would see tigers, or be battered by storms, or kept awake at night with eerie sounds from the forest depths. Sometimes Thầy would run and yell to prove to himself that he was free—to live deeply, in an authentic way, close to nature, with a powerful energy of brotherhood, togetherness, and aspiration.<sup>101</sup> With this new dream of a "rural practice center" Thầy definitively broke free of the mould of the traditional Buddhist temple, with its ceremonies and rituals, and created an environment exclusively dedicated to spiritual practice, study, healing, music, poetry, and community-building. They enjoyed sitting meditation in the early morning, tea meditation in the afternoons, and sitting meditation in the evenings. Phương Bối was an experimental model for the renewal and reinvigoration of Buddhism. Though few may have foreseen it, Phương Bối became a prototype for Thầy's many "mindfulness practice centers" that would flourish around the world by the end of the century.

At Phương Bối, Thầy and his friends continued their activism. As well as time spent exploring the forest or sharing poetry, Thầy "devoted hours and hours to studying, discussing, and writing about a new,

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<sup>94</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names*, p.122, notes to a later poem about the day his mother died, "That Distant Autumn Morning."

<sup>95</sup> Thích Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves: Journals 1962-66* (1999), p.99-100.

<sup>96</sup> The land was bought from K'Briu and K'Brôi on August 7, 1957.

<sup>97</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* (1999), pp.37-42. He too was forced to leave in 1961, and went on to revive the Bamboo Forest Meditation School of King Trần Nhân Tông of the 13th C. Tran Dynasty.

<sup>98</sup> *Duy Thức Học* ("Vijnanavada Studies," 1958). Published by Phật Học Đường Nam Việt, under the pen name "Professor Thạc Đức."

<sup>99</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* (1999), p.19.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, p.23

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*, p.29



“engaged” Buddhism.” As he wrote later, “I worked as hard as I could.”<sup>102</sup> He traveled to teach and continued to edit *Vietnamese Buddhism* magazine. But in 1958, after just two years of publication, its funding was discontinued. Thầy felt that it wasn’t just about a lack of funds, but also resistance in the Buddhist hierarchy to his bold articles. He felt he had failed in his effort to renew and unify Vietnamese Buddhism.<sup>103</sup> With this setback, and still grieving his mother’s death, and enduring the painful division of the country, Thầy struggled to keep his hope alive. Thầy fell sick—so sick he almost died.<sup>104</sup> He spent almost a month in Grall Hospital in Saigon, where French doctors treated his insomnia.<sup>105</sup> His student Thích Trí Không accompanied him as an attendant. Thầy’s took a long time to recuperate, and a lay friend in Saigon let Thầy rest there, so he wouldn’t be troubled by too many temple visitors.<sup>106</sup>

It was an extremely difficult time for Thầy. His body was weak and he suffered from acute insomnia. Even the doctors were at a loss as to how to help. His spirits were lower than ever. He later described this period as a time of deep depression.<sup>107</sup> But Thầy had the intuition that, if only he could master his full awareness of breathing and walking, he would be able to truly heal. It was the very challenges of the 1950s that forged the deepening of Thầy’s personal practice, and spurred his efforts to find a way forward. As a young monk, Thầy had studied the principle of counting and following the breath, and had trained in slow walking meditation (*kinh hành*). But Buddhist Institutes in Vietnam did not teach an applied meditation practice for personal healing; only meditation theory. And so, faced with deep suffering, Thầy had to discover for himself a healing way to meditate. He experimented with a new method to combine his breath and steps more naturally while walking and, instead of counting only the breath, he counted the steps in harmony with the breath. With this concentration, he was able to tenderly embrace his pain and acute despair without being swept away by strong feelings. “With the practice of mindful breathing,” he said, “I got out of the situation.”<sup>108</sup> He began this practice at Ân Quang and continued to experiment with it in B’lao and at Phương Bối, and later at Princeton Theological Seminary in the US; and over the coming decades as his understanding of the sutras on meditation and breathing deepened.<sup>109</sup> As Thầy wrote in his journal, “Now I understand that truth and virtue must be joined by strength... Truth without strength cannot stand firm.”<sup>110</sup>

In spring 1959, Thầy, known for his work as Editor of the *Vietnamese Buddhism* magazine, was invited to Japan to attend the international Vesak conference celebrating 2,500 years since the Buddha’s birth. He was asked to give one of the speeches—his first public talk in English.<sup>111</sup> During the trip, Thầy’s

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<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*, p.51

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*, p.50. “The hierarchy did not know how to deal with us, so they silenced our voices. For eight years, we tried to speak about the need for a humanistic Buddhism and a unified Buddhist church in Vietnam that could respond to the needs of the people. We sowed those seeds against steep odds, and while waiting for them to take root, we endured false accusations, hatred, deception, and intolerance. Still we refused to give up hope.”

<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*, p.7

<sup>105</sup> October 1958. Thầy’s health had also been weak the year before, in 1957, when he spent a month in Grall Hospital in Saigon to treat problems with his heart, lungs, and digestive system. At that time they were still short of money and didn’t have enough for Thầy’s medicine. What little money Thầy’s brother had, he needed to save for their mother’s tomb.

<sup>106</sup> Trí Không, unpublished memoirs.

<sup>107</sup> Nhat Hanh, Dharma Talk in Plum Village, June 20, 2014: “...after my mother died, and the country [had been] divided, and the war continued, I had depression... The doctors could not help. It was by the practice of mindful walking and mindful breathing that I could heal myself. [...] When you practice sitting or walking, you can *know* whether your breathing is healing or not. You can *see* the effect of healing right away when you breathe in. And when you walk, if every step brings you happiness and joy, ...that is very nourishing and healing, and you *know* it. And with your depression, if you breathe and walk like that for one week, I know that you can transform. That is the practice of *stopping* and healing— *stopping* the running, stopping the fact that you are being carried away. You resist, you do not want to be carried away; you want to *live* your life, and you have your [own] insight as to how to do it.”

<sup>108</sup> Nhat Hanh, Q&A in Plum Village, July 25, 2013.

<sup>109</sup> Nhat Hanh, unpublished private papers.

<sup>110</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* (1999), p.50

<sup>111</sup> The “Buddha Jayanti” celebrations took place in Tokyo from March 27-31, and Thầy ended up staying from March to May.

health weakened again, and he was hospitalised in Tokyo. He continued to practice full awareness of every step and breath along the corridors of the hospital, training himself to completely focus on his breathing and release his anxieties. When he finally returned to Vietnam in mid-May, he had a new resolve to travel more outside Vietnam, and set himself over the following year to become fluent in English. In Japan, he heard of the great Buddhist collections in libraries overseas and, with the help of another Vietnamese monk who had recently returned from the US, he made enquiries for scholarships at the U.S. Embassy.<sup>112</sup>

In November 1959, at a weekly lecture series for Saigon university students, at Xá Lợi Temple, Thầy met many young people eager to help him in his work. Among them was Cao Ngọc Phương, a young biology student, who became one of his “Thirteen Cedars,” a group of passionate young activists who studied with him and supported his vision for a modernized Buddhism. Phương was already actively leading social work programs in the Saigon slums and urged Thầy to develop spiritual practices that could support such engaged action. He accepted the challenge, and it was in the process of guiding Phương and “the thirteen cedars,” in social work, education, and relief projects, that Thầy’s teaching found its practical application and field of action. As Thầy reflected later, “It was not easy because the tradition does not directly offer Engaged Buddhism. So we had to do it by ourselves.”<sup>113</sup> Phương went on to become his principal collaborator over the next six decades, later becoming known as Sister Chân Không, today a renowned and much-loved teacher in her own right.

Thầy’s friend from Báo Quốc, Venerable Đức Tâm, invited him to write another series of ten articles, entitled “Buddhism Today” (*Đạo Phật Ngày Nay*), further developing the ideas of “Engaged Buddhism” of his series in *Dân Chủ* in 1955. Thầy went to stay with Venerable Đức Tâm on Cồn Hến Island in Huế, to write the articles there. Thầy later recalled that while he worked, Venerable Đức Tâm would prepare him tea made of the bark of a plum tree and offer him fresh corn, a speciality from the island. The first article was published in *Dân Chủ* in March 1961. Within a few years the series was translated and published in French, becoming Thầy’s first book to be published in the West, with the title *Aujourd’hui le Bouddhisme*.<sup>114</sup>

From 1959 onwards, U.S. intervention in Vietnam had begun to increase, and their backing for the Catholic Diệm regime became more marked. In late 1961, fighting between guerrilla fighters and the authorities reached Phương Bối, and government agents forced them to leave. A government-guarded ‘strategic hamlet’ was set up by the main road.<sup>115</sup> The loss touched Thầy deeply. Two years later, when he was already far away studying in the U.S., Thầy reminisced: “I mourn for Joy of Meditation Hut. I mourn for Montagnard House. I mourn for every leaf and blade of grass at Phương Bối.” And yet, he wrote, “We can never really lose Phương Bối. It is a sacred reality in our hearts. No matter where we are, just hearing the name “Phương Bối” moves us to tears.”<sup>116</sup>

## Princeton Theological Seminary & Columbia

In 1961, Thầy was offered a Fulbright Fellowship to broaden his experience and scholarship, and travelled to the U.S. to study Comparative Religion at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1961-62.

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<sup>112</sup> “He had heard that there were more than one hundred libraries in the United States with great collections of religious books, including Buddhist texts in Chinese, Sanskrit, and Pali.” See Sister Chan Khong, *Learning True Love: Practicing Buddhism in a time of War* (2007, Rev. Ed).

<sup>113</sup> [Shambhala Sun interview](#), July 1, 2003.

<sup>114</sup> *Aujourd’hui le Bouddhisme*: The series of articles was first printed by Vietnamese students in Paris in 1964, and subsequently published in French by La Boi Press in 1965 (trans. Lê Văn Hào).

<sup>115</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* (1999), p.53

<sup>116</sup> *ibid.*, p.59

Before leaving, Thầy paid one last visit to Phương Bối to say goodbye to Brother Thanh Từ, the last monastic remaining.

At PTS, Thầy took courses on Christianity, Islam, and Chinese Buddhism. It was an inspiring, contemplative, and healing time: the atmosphere on the peaceful campus was not unlike a monastery.<sup>117</sup> Thầy had a lot of time to practice walking meditation along the college paths. It was at Princeton that he experienced his first autumn, his first snows, and the fresh beauties of spring following winter. In the peace and calm, Thầy's insights had a chance to ripen: "It was there that I truly tasted, for the first time, the peace of dwelling happily in the present moment" (the ancient Buddhist teaching of *dr̥ṣṭadharmasukhavihāra*).<sup>118</sup> Thầy was able to truly arrive in the present moment and touch the spirit of aimlessness.

In summer 1962, at Camp Ockanickon in Medford, New Jersey, Thầy captured these "first blossoms of awakening" in *A Rose for Your Pocket*. It was a simple, lyrical little book in celebration of mothers, and inspiring the reader to cherish what they have right now in the present moment (*dr̥ṣṭadharmasukhavihāra*).<sup>119</sup> It captured the distinctively new path of practice and teaching which Thầy would develop over the coming years. Thầy sent it to one of his student "cedars" in Vietnam, who arranged for its publication right away.<sup>120</sup> It was the first Vietnamese book to apply the insights of mindfulness into a spiritual perspective of daily life, and rapidly became a bestseller.

Written in natural, poetic language that even children could understand, *A Rose for Your Pocket* didn't have the form of a Buddhist teaching, but was in essence a guided meditation to help the reader to touch the wonder of their mother's presence in the here and now. For the first time, a Buddhist monk was showing how meditative awareness could be a bright and gentle energy—a companion shedding light on daily life. The reader could touch the fruit of meditation without having to turn their heart and mind into a battlefield, in which the mind is like a warrior fighting the afflictions of anger, grief, or desire. With its publication Thầy, who hitherto had been known primarily as a poet, editor, and Buddhist scholar, became increasingly known for his deep and accessible Buddhism. Already on Mother's Day that year (Vu Lan; on the full moon of the seventh month), Thầy's students organised a "Rose Festival" to celebrate motherhood, centered around the text of *A Rose for Your Pocket*.<sup>121</sup> From that time on, this annual celebration has become an integral part of Buddhist culture in Vietnam. The book has sold over a million copies, and can be found in every Buddhist home.<sup>122</sup> The spirit and approach of *A Rose Your Pocket* broke new ground in Buddhist writing, and crystallised Thầy's signature writing style. His intimate, authentic, lyrical, and profound voice and tone established a new approach to Buddhist writing and teaching that would become widely adopted in both East and West.

Thầy later reflected on these formative years in the U.S.: "I grew up in Vietnam. I became a monk in Vietnam. I learned and practiced Buddhism in Vietnam. And before coming to the West, I taught several

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<sup>117</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* (1999), p.61 Thầy was housed in Brown Hall, on the Theological Seminary campus.

<sup>118</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* (1999)

<sup>119</sup> Nhất Hạnh, *Bông Hồng Cài Áo* (1962)

<sup>120</sup> He sent it to Cô Nhiên. First published in Vietnamese in the Buddhist magazine *Lotus* in 1962, under his own name Nhất Hạnh, with the title *Seeing Your Mother Deeply (Nhìn kỹ Mẹ)*. It was subsequently one of the first books to be printed by Lá Bối publishing house. Venerable Thích Trí Thủ, the Director of Báo Quốc Institute, told Thầy he was moved to tears the first time he read it. Kim Cương, a well-known actor and playwright, created a play from it. And in 1965, the professional singer Phạm Thế Mỹ performed it as a modern Vietnamese song.

<sup>121</sup> The cedars organized for 200 handwritten copies to be prepared for the first Rose Ceremony. A red rose or a white rose was attached to each copy depending to the person who received it, whose mother was still alive or deceased.

<sup>122</sup> The "cedars" organized for the text to be published in the Buddhist magazine *Lotus*, and in 1964 it was published in book form by Lá Bối Press. The tradition of the Rose Ceremony for Vu Lan in Vietnam began.

generations of Buddhist students in Vietnam. But I can say now that it was in the West that I realized my path.”<sup>123</sup>

After completing his year at Princeton Theological Seminary, Thầy stayed on in the U.S. and continued his research at Columbia (1962-3).<sup>124</sup> There, he made the most of the extensive Buddhist collection in the Butler Library, and benefited from the mentorship and support of the Professor of Religion, Anton Zigmund-Cerbu. Professor Cerbu was an eminent scholar and expert in Eastern religions, and had mastered several dozen languages, including Vietnamese and French.<sup>125</sup> Professor Cerbu had a youthful, easy-going nature, and was a true friend and “pillar of support” for Thầy, seeing and nurturing his potential.

In November and December 1962, Thầy experienced a series of deepening spiritual breakthroughs. He had been profoundly moved by the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer—a German pastor and theologian, and a bold, outspoken critic of the Nazi regime, who was imprisoned and later executed in 1945.<sup>126</sup> Reading Bonhoeffer’s account of his decision to return home to Germany from the U.S., even though it put his life at risk, Thầy was struck by his description of his final days in prison:

...I was awakened to the starry sky that dwells in each of us. I felt a surge of joy, accompanied by the faith that *I could endure even greater suffering than I had thought possible*. Bonhoeffer was the drop that made my cup overflow, the last link in a long chain, the breeze that nudged the ripened fruit to fall. After experiencing such a night, I will never complain about life again. [...] All feelings, passions, and sufferings revealed themselves as wonders, yet I remained grounded in my body. Some people might call such an experience ‘religious,’ but *what I felt was totally and utterly human. I knew in that moment that there was no enlightenment outside of my own mind and the cells of my body. Life is miraculous, even in its suffering. Without suffering, life would not be possible.*<sup>127</sup>

Seeing Bonhoeffer’s extraordinary bravery and virtue, Thầy realised that bodhisattvas *do* exist, “right here on earth.” Thầy broke free of the idea that bodhisattvas were ‘remote deities’ on pedestals, and spent the following weeks contemplating all the bodhisattvas of the Lotus Sutra. He realised he could “recognize their presence every day among those we see,” including among the young generation back in Vietnam. His friends and students had been writing to him regularly on everything that was going on, recounting their efforts and actions to relieve the suffering they saw around them. Thầy gave rise to a deep and determined aspiration to nurture them, and began to envision the kind of teachings and programs he could set up to support them on his return to Vietnam.<sup>128</sup>

It was in 1963, during the annual spring Vesak festival, that the Diệm regime’s suppression of Buddhists dramatically escalated.<sup>129</sup> Thầy’s own teacher, Master Thích Chân Thật, whose gentleness and

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<sup>123</sup> Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World* (2016), p. 87.

<sup>124</sup> Thầy’s commentary on St Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Contra Gentiles* made a strong impression on his professors. It was at Columbia that Thầy encountered the work of the theologians Karl Bath, Paul Tillich, Martin Buber, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, read Allan Watts, and heard talks from leading theologians, including Jacques Maritain.

<sup>125</sup> Professor Anton Zigmund-Cerbu was [a specialist in Buddhism](#), and was [said to have mastered 40 languages](#). Ten years older than Thầy, Prof. Cerbu passed away after undergoing heart surgery just a few months after Thầy returned to Vietnam.

<sup>126</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* (1999), pp.109-111. Bonhoeffer considered taking refuge in the U.S., but soon realised: “I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.” He was also critical of the Church’s response to the situation: “the Church was silent when it should have cried out, because the blood of the innocent was crying aloud to heaven.” Quoted in Franklin Sherman, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2019).

<sup>127</sup> Thầy’s account of his insights on the night of November 2, 1962 (italics added). Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* (1999), p.85.

<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*, pp.109-112.

<sup>129</sup> He submitted his documents on 8 October, 1963, the day of the U.N. debate on President Ngô Đình Diệm’s suppression of the Buddhists.

fearlessness Thầy admired deeply, joined the monks' peaceful protests in the streets.<sup>130</sup> In America, Thầy found himself becoming an active spokesman for the Buddhist peace movement back home. He gave talks and media interviews, and submitted a report to the United Nations on the human rights violations. In June, Thầy learned of the self-immolation of the senior monk, Venerable Thích Quảng Đức in the *The New York Times*.<sup>131</sup> Thầy knew him well and had stayed with him in Nha Trang and Saigon. Thầy later explained: "When you commit suicide, [it's because] you are in despair, you can no longer bear to live. But Venerable Quảng Đức was not like that. He wanted to live. He wanted his friends and other living beings to live, he loved being alive. But he was free enough to offer his body in order to get the message across that we are suffering, we need your help."<sup>132</sup> Before long, Thầy got news of the self-immolation of more monks and nuns.<sup>133</sup> His poem, "The Fire That Consumes My Brother," captured his agony and his firm resolve to continue to work for peace.<sup>134</sup> In August, over a thousand Buddhist monks were arrested, and hundreds more "disappeared." Thầy submitted documents concerning the persecutions to the United Nations, called a press conference, and began fasting to pray that the U.N. would send a fact-finding delegation to Vietnam.<sup>135</sup>

In summer 1963, Thầy earned a joint Master of Arts in Religion from Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University; his thesis was on Buddhist psychology. Professor Horace L. Friess, an ethicist, invited him to stay on as a teaching and research assistant in the graduate school of the Department of Philosophy and Religion.<sup>136</sup> But after the Diệm regime fell in November 1963, Thầy received an invitation from the Vietnamese Embassy to return home, and then another from the National Buddhist Association<sup>137</sup>. Professor Cerbu tried to persuade Thầy to stay on in the U.S. so they could set up a Department of Vietnamese Studies at Columbia together.<sup>138</sup> Soon Thầy received another request, this time a cable from one of the leading monks in Vietnam Thích Trí Quang, imploring him to come back to Saigon to help once more in efforts to organize and renew Vietnamese Buddhism.<sup>139</sup> In Vietnam, it was a time of possibility, but also great political instability and discord. Thầy still hadn't yet accepted the invitation to return when he received a cable telling him that his ticket had been booked and was waiting for him at the airport. Thầy accepted to return, albeit with some trepidation, expressed in his poem, "Here Are My Hands."<sup>140</sup> Half a century later, in 2017, Union Theological Seminary would create a "Thich Nhat Hanh Master's Program for Engaged Buddhism" in his honor.

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<sup>130</sup> See [photo](#) of Master Thích Chân Thật participating.

<sup>131</sup> "Man Sets Himself Afire", *The New York Times*, July 1, 1969, p. 14. The Most Venerable Thích Quảng Đức was 66 years old.

<sup>132</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh Dharma Talk in Plum Village, June 7, 2002.

<sup>133</sup> In August 1963: Br. Nguyễn Hương; Br. Thanh Tuệ; Sr. Diêu Quang; and Br. Tiêu Diêu.

<sup>134</sup> "...The fire that burns you burns my flesh with such pain, that all my tears are not enough to cool your sacred soul. Deeply wounded, I remain here keeping your hopes and promises for the young. I will not betray you-- are you listening? I remain here because your very heart is now my own." Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names* (1993).

<sup>135</sup> Chan Khong, *Learning True Love* (2007), Ch.5.

<sup>136</sup> See Union Theological Seminary [website](#), and Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* (1999), p.72: He received a small stipend to "teach five hours a week and have office hours as well to meet with students and assist them in their research."

<sup>137</sup> He also received a third invitation from the the Interdenominational Committee for Protecting Buddhism (*Ủy Ban Liên Phái Bảo Vệ Phật Giáo*)

<sup>138</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* (1999), pp.153-4.

<sup>139</sup> The monk was Thích Trí Quang, a leading figure in the Buddhist hierarchy. He wrote Thầy a telegram, and then a letter saying, "I am exhausted and at my wit's end. Please come back and help."

<sup>140</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names* (1999), pp. 46-7: "...Here are my hands / reborn once again / but still carrying old wounds. / And here is my smile / because I never hated. / And here is my heart, / my pure heart / from days gone by..." He also wrote the poem, "Butterflies Over Golden Mustard Fields," *ibid.*, pp.76-79: "...I hear the excited buzzing of the diligent bees / preparing to rebuild the universe./ Dear ones, the work of rebuilding / may take thousands of lifetimes, / but it has also already been completed / just that long ago.../ ...Don't dip your hands into cement and sand. / The stars never build prisons for themselves..."

## Leader in the Buddhist peace & social work movements

Thầy left the U.S. in December 1963, travelling via France where he gave lectures in Paris. Returning to Vietnam in January 1964, Thầy entered into a leadership role in the Buddhist movement for peace and social action.<sup>141</sup> He met with Buddhist leaders and students to hear their reports. He offered two concrete proposals for the young social workers and activists: first, to dedicate one full day every week to spend time together at the Bamboo Forest Temple, to calm body and mind, and nourish their aspiration; second, to invest in establishing pilot villages for rural reconstruction and development.

In addition, Thầy made three proposals for the Unified Buddhist Congregation of Vietnam to address the violence and discord:

1. The Buddhist Congregation should publicly call for cessation of hostilities in Vietnam, and organise peace talks between North and South to this end.
2. The Buddhist Congregation should urgently establish an Institute of Higher Buddhist Studies to train a new generation in the study and practice of Buddhism, who could help guide the country in the direction of understanding, compassion, tolerance and deep listening.
3. The Buddhist Congregation should immediately develop a center for training social workers to go out to rural villages to help the poor—who are starving, who have no education, and who have no knowledge of organising village affairs—in order to help bring about nonviolent social change based on the Buddha’s teachings.

The elders in the Buddhist hierarchy agreed only to point two. However, they had no finances or location to found the new institute, and so they allowed Thầy to take the lead. Within a week, Thầy met with the board of the Unified Buddhist Church, and took the first steps to establish a Institute of High Buddhist Studies of Saigon.<sup>142</sup>

The following years were a period of intense activity and engagement in teaching, publishing, public speaking, community-building, and social service, which galvanized the younger generation. Thầy finally had a free rein to put his dreams into action. The Bamboo Forest Temple became the community’s base, where young monks and lay friends spent time together as a community, the students joining them on the weekends.<sup>143</sup> Thầy instructed his first monastic disciple, Brother Nhất Trí, a talented social worker, to be in charge of the pilot program in the village of Cầu Kinh.<sup>144</sup> The community set up two pilot villages: Cầu Kinh and, later that summer, Thảo Điền.<sup>145</sup> The young community of social workers, lay and monastic, helped the villagers build school huts and began teaching the children. Soon, they started to offer training in agriculture, irrigation, and sanitation. “We have no money,” Thầy wrote at the time, “but we have a plan, goodwill, and lots of energy.”<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> This nonviolent resistance movement has been called the “Third Force” in Vietnamese politics at the time.

<sup>142</sup> Some leaders of the Unified Buddhist Congregation met on January 30, and included the venerable monks Trí Thủ, Thiện Hoa, and Thiên Ân.

<sup>143</sup> The sangha included monastic brothers Đồng Bồn, Thanh Văn, Thanh Tuệ, Thanh Hương, Thanh Hiện, Từ Mẫn, Châu Toàn, Nhất Trí and lay students Tâm Quang, Tâm Thái, Thu Hà, Trà Mi, Phùng Thăng.

<sup>144</sup> Brother Nhất Trí began studying with Thầy in B’lao, where he received the Five Precepts, and Thầy ordained him as a novice in 1964.

<sup>145</sup> The Thảo Điền village development project was started by Phụng, and it was in this village that Brother Nhất Trí lived and worked.

<sup>146</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* (1999), p.135 and pp.155-6: “From time to time, Ly asks if I need money. I tell him that even without money, I am not poor. I paraphrase a *haiku* by Basho and tell him that even though the electricity has been shut off, the moon still shines in my window. Ly laughs and pulls a few bills from his pocket, which he insists is money he

In March 1964, with the wholehearted support of his students and friends, Thầy founded both the publishing house Lá Bối and the Institute of High Buddhist Studies of Saigon at Pháp Hội Temple. Thầy moved his library of almost 20,000 books from Phương Bối to the Institute. Thầy began one of the first courses on Buddhist psychology, and taught the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom texts) and sutras from Early Buddhism.<sup>147</sup>

When Thích Minh Châu came back from India in April, Thầy invited him to become the institute's director. The first full school year began in fall 1964, at which point the institute was renamed Vạn Hạnh University.<sup>148</sup> The vision for Lá Bối Publishing House was to provide a platform for the new Buddhist voices proposing a way out of the violence.<sup>149</sup> “We used literature and the arts as ‘weapons’ to challenge the oppression,” Thầy explained. “Works by anti-war writers, composers, poets, and artists, although illegal, were widely circulated. Anti-war songs were sung in the streets and classrooms, and anti-war literature became the largest category of books sold in Vietnam, even infiltrating army units.”<sup>150</sup>

Soon Thầy started and became Editor-in-Chief of the principal Buddhist weekly paper, *Voice of the Rising Tide* (Hải Triều Âm).<sup>151</sup> As its readership grew, fifty thousand copies were printed every week and delivered by plane to Huế and Đà Nẵng. It was the first magazine to openly publish peace poems and songs, as well as profound Buddhist discussions and reports on the monks' hunger strikes and protests against ongoing government oppression. Thầy's own peace poems, written in a free form, without the classical rules, were especially popular. Although Thầy never called his poetry “free verse,” his poems were considered some of the best examples of Vietnam's new “free verse” poetry movement.<sup>152</sup> For centuries, poets had been highly esteemed figures in Vietnamese culture and society, and during these fraught times the voice of poetry was as powerful as ever, touching the hearts of millions.

The great flood of November 1964 in central Vietnam swept away homes and took thousands of lives. Victims in the conflict zones were the most vulnerable because no one dared to bring them aid. Thầy, Brother Nhất Trí and Phụng organized boats, hung up Buddhist flags and banners to show they were on a humanitarian aid mission, and headed up the Thu Bồn River between the lines of fire to distribute aid in the Đức Dục area of Quảng Nam Province. They encountered children bleeding from gunfire wounds, malnourished young men, and fathers whose entire families had been swept away. In a gesture of compassion and solidarity, Thầy cut his finger and let the blood fall into the river to pray for all those who had perished.<sup>153</sup>

It was extremely difficult to conduct their social work in the context of suspicion, hatred, fear and violence. Danger could come from any side, at any moment. Thầy's friends were arrested, social

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owes me for printing a recent article I'd written in his paper. I never know which article he is referring to, but I don't refuse his gesture.”

<sup>147</sup> In Vietnamese: Pháp Tướng Duy Thức Học.

<sup>148</sup> The official permit for Vạn Hạnh Buddhist University from the Ministry for Education was dated October 17, 1964. Note for researchers: since Thầy's exile there are those who have sought to write his name out of the history of Vạn Hạnh University, despite him being its principle founder.

<sup>149</sup> For example, *Đạo Phật Hiện Đại Hóa* (“Actualized Buddhism” or “Buddhism Updated”), and *Nói Với Tuổi Hai Mươi* (“Message to a Twenty-year-old”), both published in 1965. Thích Nhất Hạnh spoke to the fears, hopes, and confusions of the young generation and offered a way out.

<sup>150</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (1993), Ch.1.

<sup>151</sup> The first issue was published on April 22, 1964.

<sup>152</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Inside the Now: Meditations on Time* (2015), pp.23-24. The poetry editor of *Voice of the Rising Tide*, Vũ Hoàng Chương told Thầy Châu Toàn how strange it was that Thầy's peace poems “were by far the best poems of the free poetry movement, even though I never said they were ‘free poetry’.”

<sup>153</sup> Nhất Hạnh, *Call Me By My True Names* (1999).

workers were threatened, and armed soldiers would challenge them unexpectedly.<sup>154</sup> “If you don’t have a spiritual practice, you can’t survive,” Thầy explained.<sup>155</sup> And so “Engaged Buddhism is born in such a difficult situation, in which you want to maintain your practice while responding to the suffering. You seek the way to do walking meditation right there, in the place where people are still running under the bombs. And you learn how to practice mindful breathing while helping care for a child who has been wounded by bullets or bombs.”<sup>156</sup> Only mindful breathing could help them not be carried away by their strong emotions, and give them enough peace of mind to see what to do, and what not to do, to help the situation.

Their own suffering and difficulties acted as their greatest teacher. “The hardest thing is not to lose hope, not to give in to despair,” said Thầy. “In a situation of utmost suffering like that, we [have to] practice in such a way that we preserve our hope and our compassion.”<sup>157</sup> It was during this time that one of the villages they had been helping near the Demilitarized Zone, was bombed. They rebuilt it. When it was bombed a second time, the social workers asked Thầy if they should rebuild it, and he said, “Yes.” When it was bombed a third time, he reflected for some time and then replied, “Yes.” As he later explained, “It did not seem that there was any hope of an end, because the war had been dragging on for so long. I had to practice a lot of mindful breathing and coming back to myself. I have to confess I did not have a lot of hope at this time, but if I’d had *no* hope, it would have been devastating for these young people. I had to practice deeply and nourish the little hope I had inside so I could be a refuge for them.”<sup>158</sup>

By June 1965 the military had seized control of government; violence and oppression escalated. “Civil liberties were restricted, political opponents—denounced as neutralists or pro-communists—were imprisoned, and political parties were allowed to operate only if they did not openly criticize government policy.”<sup>159</sup> Guerrilla fighters continued their struggle. Thầy continued to write bold and stark peace poetry, capturing the agony of the people. His collection, *Palms Joined in Prayer for the White Dove to Appear*, was published in 1965.<sup>160</sup> Over 3,000 copies were sold in the first two weeks. Before long, the poems were denounced on radio as “anti-war poetry” by both sides, endangering his safety.<sup>161</sup> Nonetheless, they circulated widely underground and became popular peace songs, sung in the streets and at student meetings. Phạm Duy, one of the country’s most popular composers, wrote “Ten Songs of The Heart,” inspired by Thầy’s poetry and his message that “Our Enemy Is Not Man.”<sup>162</sup>

In 1965, afraid that the communists were gaining ground, U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson sent the first combat troops to Vietnam. By summer, there were over 125,000 U.S. soldiers on the ground. Thầy and other leading intellectuals in Vietnam, decided they needed the help of high-profile spiritual and humanitarian leaders in the West to help shift public opinion in the U.S. “Through two wars, we saw French soldiers come to kill and be killed, and young Americans come to kill and be killed,” said Thầy.<sup>163</sup> “I could see that the cause of our suffering in Vietnam is not American soldiers. It is a kind of policy

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<sup>154</sup> Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World* (2016), p.57 “The Airfield.”

<sup>155</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Q&A at Blue Cliff Monastery, August 29, 2013.

<sup>156</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Dharma Talk in Plum Village, June 21, 2009.

<sup>157</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Q&A at Blue Cliff Monastery, August 29, 2013.

<sup>158</sup> “Not Giving Up,” in Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World* (2016).

<sup>159</sup> “The two Vietnams (1954–65)” in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2020): <https://www.britannica.com/place/Vietnam>

<sup>160</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Chấp Tay Nguyên Câu Cho Bò Câu Trắng Hiện* (1965).

<sup>161</sup> Thầy himself never considered the poems “anti-war” poetry, as he said they were not ‘anti’ anything; they were simply “peace poems.”

<sup>162</sup> The lyrics (rough translation from the Vietnamese): *Our enemies are not men / If we kill men, with whom shall we live? / Our enemy wears the colors of ideology. / Our enemy wears the label of liberty. / Our enemy has a fancy appearance. / Our enemy carries a basket full of words.* For a contemporary account, see: Quan Nhu, *Vietnamese Engaged Buddhism: The Struggle Movement of 1963-66* (2002).

<sup>163</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Q&A at Blue Cliff Monastery, August 29, 2013.



that is not wise. It is the misunderstanding, the fear that lies at the foundation of the policy.”<sup>164</sup> And so Thầy and his friends agreed that Thầy would write to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in June 1965, while others wrote to Jean-Paul Sartres, Henry Miller, and so on.<sup>165</sup> Thầy’s letter to Dr. King explained the compassion behind the Buddhist immolations, and explained that “Nobody here wants the war. What is the war for, then? And whose is the war? [...] I am sure that since you have been engaged in one of the hardest struggles for equality and human rights, you are among those who understand fully, and who share with all their hearts, the indescribable suffering of the Vietnamese people. The world’s greatest humanists would not remain silent. You yourself can not remain silent.”<sup>166</sup> By the time they met a year later, in Chicago, Dr. King had joined the International Committee of Conscience on Vietnam.

In September 1965, Thầy formally founded the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS). Rallying thousands of student volunteers, the SYSS provided a formal structure for the engaged social action that Thầy, his colleagues, and the “thirteen cedars” were pioneering. They created a fully-fledged *politically-neutral* grassroots relief organization to train young people in practical skills and spiritual resilience, and send them out to bombed villages and undeveloped communities to set up schools and medical centers, resettle homeless families, and organize agricultural cooperatives.<sup>167</sup> They were a kind of neutral “peace corps,” which focussed on volunteer service in four areas: education; health, hygiene and sanitation; economics; and organisation. The SYSS students helped villagers build school-houses out of bamboo and palm fronds, and then began teaching classes. They taught them how to irrigate their fields and grow mushrooms. They dug toilets and drains, and set up health clinics to treat diarrhea and infections.<sup>168</sup> As Thầy wrote at the time, “My friends and I are convinced that a movement to rebuild our country must be based on an entirely different foundation. We want to initiate a war on poverty, ignorance, disease, and misunderstanding.”<sup>169</sup>

The SYSS attracted young people who were eager to take action to help the situation, and who wanted a non-violent alternative to joining either the communists or anti-communist struggle. As with the revolutionaries, joining the SYSS required commitment and sacrifice. Like the U.S. Peace Corps, the social workers had no income; their service work came from the heart. But soon it became clear that its political neutrality was both the SYSS’s greatest strength, and greatest vulnerability. With a country so fractured, even being neutral was seen as a threat by both sides.

Thầy wrote the poem “Recommendation” to remind his students to keep their compassion and not fall into despair when facing violence and injustice in the path of service:

*Promise me, promise me this day  
promise me now, while the sun is overhead,  
promise me:*

*Even as they strike you down*

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<sup>164</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh Public Talk at the Riverside Church, NYC, September 25, 2001 (shortly after 9/11)

<sup>165</sup> These letters were published in the book *Dialogue* (1965), published in English by Lá Bối Press. Hồ Hữu Tường wrote to Jean Paul Sartres; Tam Ích wrote to André Malraux; Bùi Giáng wrote to René Char; and Phạm Công Thiện wrote to Henry Miller.

<sup>166</sup> Thầy’s letter to Dr. King: <https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/letters/in-search-of-the-enemy-of-man/>

<sup>167</sup> SYSS in Vietnamese: Thanh Niên Phụng Sự Xã Hội (TNHSXH). A brochure of their activities can be seen [here](#). Thầy was inspired by the U.S. Peace Corps, the kibbutz movement in Israel, and the ashrams and social work of Vinoba Bhave in India (source: Nhat Hanh, private papers) In Nov. 1966 Thầy would also visit Philippines to observe and learn from their Rural Reconstruction Movement.

<sup>168</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Dharma Talk in Plum Village, December 4, 2011.

<sup>169</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* (1999). This poem is inspired by the Kakacupama Sutta (Example of the Saw), Majjhima Nikaya 21. For further explanation, see Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy, and Liberation* (1997), p.204.

*with a mountain of hatred and violence;  
even as they step on you and crush you like a worm,  
even as they dismember and disembowel you,  
remember, brother, remember: man is not our enemy.*

*The only thing worthy of you is compassion—  
invincible, limitless, unconditional.  
Hatred will never let you face the beast in man.<sup>170</sup>*

Thầy was supported in his endeavors by a strong community of friends and colleagues. Brother Thanh Văn (the disciple of one of Thầy's monastic students from Đà Lạt and Ân Quang) became the dedicated and first director of the SYSS. Brother Châu Toàn, the only disciple of Thích Mật Thể, whose engaged Buddhism had inspired Thầy as a young monk, became Thầy's editorial assistant for the hugely successful *Voice of the Rising Tide* magazine. Brother Nhất Trí, Thầy's first monastic disciple, was an inspirational social worker, a leading example of humility and compassion. Phụng was president of the Vạn Hạnh Buddhist University Student Union and became a resourceful and passionate head of the SYSS outreach department, implementing their shared vision for the Buddhist social work movement.<sup>171</sup> Despite all the challenges and dangers they frequently faced in their daily work, the mid-1960s was also a time of solidarity, brotherhood and sisterhood, and joyful community-building. Theirs was a young, dynamic community envisaging a future of hope and reconciliation. Thầy ensured that once a week, no matter what was going on, they would gather together at the Bamboo Forest Temple in Gò Vấp to practice sitting meditation and walking meditation, enjoy a meal together, and afterwards recite poetry and sing songs to restore their spirits.<sup>172</sup>

In February 1966 Thầy took a step further in building community and established the Order of Interbeing (Đòng Tu Tiếp Hiện), a new order based on the traditional Buddhist *bodhisattva* precepts, expressed with an innovative vision of a modern, engaged Buddhism. It embodied Thầy's teaching of "not taking sides in a conflict," and emphasised non-attachment to views, and freedom from all ideologies. For Thầy these precepts were "a direct answer to war, a direct answer to dogmatism, where everyone is ready to kill and die for their beliefs."<sup>173</sup> He later said, "As a Buddhist who practices peace and reconciliation, you cannot accept a war where brothers are killing brothers with foreign ideologies and foreign weapons. The Order of Interbeing was born as a spiritual resistance movement."<sup>174</sup> The first six members (including Phụng) were active social workers dedicated to putting Buddhist ideals into practice, and they supported each other's efforts to combine spirituality and action, coming together every week to recite the precepts at Chùa Lá, the simple bamboo-thatched temple they built in the heart of the SYSS campus.<sup>175</sup> Over the coming decades, Thầy continued to update the Fourteen Precepts, and they continue to be a powerful ethical compass for engaged action. Today there are over 3,000 members around the world.

As Thầy wrote, "The Vietnam War was, first and foremost, an ideological struggle. To ensure our people's survival, we had to overcome both communist and anticommunist fanaticism, and maintain the

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<sup>170</sup> English translation of the Vietnamese original, as published in Nhat Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names* (1999).

<sup>171</sup> See Chan Khong, *Learning True Love* (2007).

<sup>172</sup> For more detail on this period and the people involved, see Chan Khong, *Learning True Love* (2007).

<sup>173</sup> Thích Nhat Hanh, Dharma Talk on April 7, 2008, Hanoi.

<sup>174</sup> Thích Nhat Hanh, "A History of Engaged Buddhism," Public Talk in Hanoi, Vietnam, May 5, 2008 (speaking in English)

<sup>175</sup> 'Chùa Lá' was a fond nickname given by the students, and literally means 'thatched temple.' It was designed by Thầy and became the heart of the SYSS, the very cradle of the Order of Interbeing; it was where the first six members were ordained. In 1967, after the five social workers were shot at the river bank, they were buried in the garden of Chùa Lá. Today the temple is known as Chùa Pháp Vân, and is one of the largest and most active temples in Ho Chi Minh City. The memorial garden for the SYSS workers can still be visited there.

strictest neutrality. Buddhists tried their best to speak for all the people and not take sides, but we were condemned as “pro-communist neutralists.”<sup>176</sup> Both warring parties claimed to speak for what the people really wanted, but the North Vietnamese spoke for the communist bloc and the South Vietnamese spoke for the capitalist bloc. The Buddhists only wanted to create a vehicle for the people to be heard—and the people only wanted peace, not a “victory” by either side.<sup>177</sup> But, he said, “the sound of the planes and bombs was too loud. The people of the world could not hear us. So I decided to go to America and call for a cessation of the violence.”<sup>178</sup>

## Leaving Vietnam to call for peace

In spring 1966, Thầy was invited by Dr. George Kahin of Cornell University to travel to the U.S. to give a lecture series on the situation in Vietnam at the university’s Department of Politics, South-East Asia. Alfred Hassler, Executive Secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (the prominent international interfaith organization for peace and justice) then invited Thầy to tour universities and churches across the U.S., Europe, Asia, and Australia, to speak out for peace.<sup>179</sup> It was a risky trip, due to last only three months, after which Thầy planned to return to Vietnam to continue his work in the peace and social work movement.

On May 1st 1966, ten days before leaving for the US, Thầy received the Lamp Transmission from his teacher, Zen Master Thích Chân Thật at Từ Hiếu Temple in Huế, formally becoming a Dharma Teacher of the Liễu Quán Dharma Line in the 42nd generation of the Linji School. On this occasion, Thầy’s teacher also expressed his wish to transmit his abbotship to Thầy in the future. In accord with tradition, he offered Thầy a poem, to mark the transmission of the lamp:

*Nhất hướng phùng xuân đắc kiện hành  
Hành đương vô niệm diệt vô tranh  
Tâm đăng nhược chiếu kỳ nguyên thể  
Diệu pháp đồng tây khả tự thành*

*Heading in one direction, embracing the vitality of spring,  
is to walk the path of heroes.  
In action: not caught in notions, nor competing sides  
The light of mindfulness illuminates our true nature  
And in East and West the wonderful Dharma is realized.*

Thầy left Vietnam on May 11th, 1966, and it would be 39 years before he could return home. Thầy would never see his teacher again.

When he left, Thầy was a leading figure in the Buddhist peace and social work movement, he had published over twenty books, and was one of the country’s most popular poets.<sup>180</sup> Thầy’s speaking tour saw him visit 19 countries, calling for peace and describing the aspirations and the agony of the voiceless masses of the Vietnamese people. A journalist for the *New York Post* described the impression Thầy made on him, just a few days after arriving in the U.S.:

He is a tiny, slender, robed figure; his eyes are alternately sad and animated; his tones are modest and moving. In the American vernacular, there is probably a price on his head in Gen. Ky’s Saigon. [... H]e spoke in the international language of the scholar who finds himself thrust into the drama of history,

<sup>176</sup> William S. Turley, Neil L. Jamieson and Others, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “The two Vietnams (1954–65),” see: [Britannica.com](http://Britannica.com)

<sup>177</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, p.39.

<sup>178</sup> Thích Nhat Hanh, Public Talk at the Riverside Church, NYC, September 25, 2001.

<sup>179</sup> Dr Kahin was from Cornell’s Department of Politics, South-East Asia, and the trip was sponsored by Cornell’s Inter-University Team. Alfred Hassler had visited Vietnam the previous year and met Thầy at Vạn Hạnh University that summer.

<sup>180</sup> See his short biography at the time in *The New York Review of Books*, June 9, 1966, when they featured his peace poems

crying not for peace at any price, but for an end to madness. [...] When asked about ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy,’ he will ask, “What is the use of freedom and democracy if you are not alive?” [...] Listening to this frail, earnest figure, one wondered whether the State Dept. would permit President Johnson direct exposure to him.<sup>181</sup>

In the US, Thầy met the high-profile peace activists and Christian mystics Father Daniel Berrigan and Father Thomas Merton, as well as leading politicians including Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and Senator Edward Kennedy.<sup>182</sup> He also met Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., with whom he had begun corresponding a year earlier. “We talked about human rights, peace, nonviolence,” recalled Thầy. “What we were doing was very similar—building community, blending the seeds of wisdom, compassion, and nonviolence.” On May 31st, 1966, they held a press conference in Chicago at the Sheraton Hotel, one of the first occasions Dr. King spoke out publicly against the war in Vietnam. In a joint statement, they compared the civil rights protestors and the self-immolations in Vietnam: “We believe that the Buddhists who have sacrificed themselves, like the martyrs of the civil rights movement, do not aim at the injury of the oppressors, but only at changing their policies. The enemies of those struggling for freedom and democracy are not men. They are discrimination, dictatorship, greed, hatred and violence, which lie within the hearts of man. These are the real enemies of man—not man himself.”<sup>183</sup>

The 1966 trip was an intense time. The day after his conference with Dr. King in Chicago, Thầy flew to Washington, D.C., where, in a June 1<sup>st</sup> press conference, he presented a five-point peace proposal for ending the war in Vietnam, including an immediate ceasefire and a schedule for U.S. troop withdrawal.<sup>184</sup> That same day, he was denounced on Saigon radio, in newspapers, and by Gen. Thiệu and Prime Minister Kỳ’s government of South Vietnam as a national traitor. Denied the right to return to Vietnam, he began an exile that would last almost four decades. “Because,” Thầy later said, “I had dared to call for peace.”

A week later his powerful peace poetry was featured on the front page of the *New York Review of Books*. The same night, a special event on “Vietnam and the American Conscience” was organized for him at the New York Town Hall, featuring the playwright Arthur Miller, the poet Robert Lowell, and Father Daniel Berrigan, all outspoken critics of the war. Thầy appeared in the “Talk of the Town” pages of *The New Yorker*.<sup>185</sup> The desperation of war had effectively catapulted him from the refuge of traditional monastic training in Vietnam to the forefront of the American political and intellectual scene of the '60s.

Father Thomas Merton wrote the foreword for the English edition of Thầy’s book *Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, which was published in the U.S. that same year. The book made an eloquent, hard-hitting, insightful,

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<sup>181</sup> James A. Wechsler, “A Plea For Life,” *New York Post*, May 18, 1966.

<sup>182</sup> As Thomas Merton recorded in his journal after meeting Thầy for the first time, “he is first of all a true monk; very quiet, gentle, modest, humble, and you can see his Zen has worked.” See: *Learning to Love: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 6 (1997), p.76.

<sup>183</sup> From FBI reports. Earlier in the day, Thầy had participated in an ecumenical peace service at Rockefeller Chapel on the Chicago University campus, attended by many senior clergy.

<sup>184</sup> See Chan Khong, *Learning True Love* (2007):

1. The United States should issue a clear statement of its desire to help the Vietnamese people have a government genuinely responsive to Vietnamese aspirations.
2. The United States should end all bombing.
3. The United States military should limit its actions to a purely defensive role.
4. The United States should convincingly demonstrate its intention to remove its troops over a specified period of months.
5. The United States should offer reconstruction aid free of ideological and political strings.

“That same day, he was denounced on Saigon radio, in newspapers, and by the Thieu/Ky government as a traitor. From this point on, it was not safe for him to return to Vietnam. He decided to come home after his speaking tour anyway, at his own risk, but we in the SYSS begged him to wait.”

<sup>185</sup> [New Yorker, June 25, 1966.](#)

and rational plea to end the violence. It was printed underground in Vietnam, and ran to multiple editions and sold tens of thousands of copies.<sup>186</sup> “Nhat Hanh speaks for the vast majority who know little of politics but who seek to preserve something of Vietnam’s traditional identity as an Asian and largely Buddhist culture,” wrote Father Merton. “Above all, they want to live and see an end to a brutal and useless war.” As Thầy himself recalled, “The war in Vietnam was raging. We were killing each other with weapons from Russia and China and America. Bombs were destroying our forests and our people. Buddhism was like a lotus flower trying to survive in that ocean of fire. Buddhism is a kind of spiritual strength from the heritage of Vietnam. We wanted to make use of this spiritual heritage in order to defend ourselves from destruction.”<sup>187</sup>

The Fellowship of Reconciliation organized for Thầy to continue speaking out for peace in Europe. He had two audiences with Pope Paul VI whom he invited to visit Vietnam.<sup>188</sup> He held press conferences in Copenhagen, Paris, Rome, Geneva, Amsterdam, and Brussels. He spoke about the situation in Vietnam at universities and churches, often to audiences of over a thousand people. He spoke at the parliaments of the UK, Canada, and Sweden, and met the philosopher Bertrand Russell in the UK.<sup>189</sup> In Holland he befriended the World War II resistance fighter Hebe Kohlbrugge and the theologian Hannes de Graaf, and in Germany the Lutheran Pastor Reverend Heinz Kloppenburg, and Martin Niemöller, theologian and opponent of the Nazis—all of whom became loyal friends and associates in Europe. In the autumn, Thầy’s tour calling for peace continued on to Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Japan.<sup>190</sup>

Meanwhile, the war and suffering continued unabated in Vietnam. The number of U.S. troops on the ground increased and would soon exceed 500,000. In June 1966, shortly after Thầy left, the SYSS campus was attacked with grenades; and again in April 1967, killing a student social worker and visiting professor, and injuring sixteen others.<sup>191</sup> Thầy was in Paris in May that year when he received the devastating news that his student Nhất Chi Mai, one of his first six disciples to ordain in the new Order of Interbeing, had immolated herself. She left behind a letter for Thầy, saying “Thầy, don’t worry, peace will surely come.” Speaking to his students many years later, Thầy reflected, “She was about to die and she didn’t want me to worry. She contributed her life for the cause of peace. The act was motivated by true love, not by despair.”<sup>192</sup> But the shock and pain went deep, not only for Thầy, but for the wider SYSS community. He captured his grief and loss in poetry, and invited his friends to write something to honor her memory.<sup>193</sup> The “Coconut Monk” wrote to Nhất Chi Mai, “My dear niece, I am burning myself like you. The only difference is that I am burning myself more slowly.” As Thầy explained to his students later, “There are many ways to devote ourselves to peace.”<sup>194</sup>

As he was traveling from city to city to call for peace, Thầy received word of tragedies in his community in Vietnam. In the night of June 14<sup>th</sup> 1967, eight of Thầy’s students from the SYSS were

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<sup>186</sup> Published by Hill & Wang in America in 1967. Vietnamese edition: Nhất Hạnh, *Hoa Sen Trong Biển Lửa* (1967).

<sup>187</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, “A History of Engaged Buddhism,” Public Talk in Hanoi, Vietnam, May 5, 2008 (speaking in English)

<sup>188</sup> “The subsequent trips to North and South Vietnam by Archbishop Pignedoli and Msgr. Huessler have been linked by Vatican journalists to Nhat Hanh’s suggestion.”—source: Fellowship of Reconciliation archives, “Thich Nhat Hanh: A Brief Biography,” (1970), held in the F.O.R. archives at Swarthmore.

<sup>189</sup> In Canada, Thầy was the first non-Canadian to be invited to speak before the Canadian Parliament’s Committee of External Affairs.—source: *ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> Thầy’s private papers.

<sup>191</sup> 24<sup>th</sup> April 1967. Nhat Hanh, unpublished private papers.

<sup>192</sup> See Thầy’s Dharma Talks: March 25, 2004; and June 7, 2002. Nhất Chi Mai recorded Thầy’s poem “Recommendation” into a cassette tape two times before immolating herself.

<sup>193</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names*, p.24. Thầy recounts this conversation in the notes to the poem “Let Me Give Back to Our Motherland,” written after hearing of the attack. He wrote the poem “Flames of Prayer” (p.28) after hearing of Nhất Chi Mai’s self-immolation. He also wrote the moving play, “The Path of Return Continues the Journey,” featuring Chi Mai and the five students.

<sup>194</sup> Thầy’s Dharma Talk, June 7, 2002.

kidnapped and never returned, among them Brother Nhất Trí, Thầy's first monastic disciple.<sup>195</sup> Later that summer, five of Thầy's young SYSS social workers were led to bank of the Bình Phước River by armed men and shot. One fell into the water and survived; the other four died immediately.<sup>196</sup> The one who survived reported that, before firing, one of the attackers placed a loving hand on the head of one of the social workers, saying, "I am sorry, but we have to kill you."<sup>197</sup> At the funeral for the four who died, Phụng wrote a eulogy expressing the SYSS's sorrow, but also their gratitude to the attackers for saying sorry, for still having some compassion in their heart. Although they grieved their dear friends, it was a victory for the spiritual practice of the SYSS that they could recognise that *the attackers, too, were victims of the situation*, and would have been killed if they didn't follow orders. After these skilful words at the funeral, overheard by informants, there were no further attacks.

Upon hearing the news in Paris, Thầy cried. A friend comforted him, saying, "Thầy, there's no need to cry. You are a general leading an army of nonviolent soldiers. It is natural that you suffer casualties." Thầy replied, "No, I am not a general. I am just a human being. It is I who summoned them for service, and now they have lost their lives. I need to cry." The tragedy marked Thầy and led him to dig ever deeper to discover the roots of hatred and violence, which he found to be above all grounded in wrong perceptions. The political neutrality of the SYSS, refusing to side either with the communists or anti-communists, made all sides suspicious of them. Reflecting on the shooting of his students, Thầy said, "We must use the sword of understanding to put an end to all views we have about each other; all notions and labels. All these labels must be cut off. Views can lead us to fanaticism. They can destroy human beings. They can destroy love." At the funeral for those who died (which may have been attended by the attackers or their informants), Phụng wrote a eulogy that did not blame or hate anyone, even the killers. They focussed on their message that "*man is not the enemy.*" After the riverside deaths, although their social work faced many challenges and obstacles, they were never attacked again.

## Brotherhood: friendship with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In January 1967, six months after they first met, Dr. King nominated Thầy for the Nobel Peace Prize, saying, "his ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity."<sup>198</sup> A few months later, on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1967, Dr. King quoted Thầy's book *Lotus in a Sea of Fire* in his landmark "Beyond Vietnam" speech at the Riverside Church in New York. It was the first time he unequivocally denounced the war and finally united the peace and civil rights movements. Dr. King shared Thầy's powerful message that "*Men are not our enemy. Our enemy is hatred, discrimination, fanaticism and violence.*" And when Dr. King marched against the war, he marched under banners with these words in Vietnamese as well as English.<sup>199</sup>

Thầy and Dr. King met for the second (and last) time in May 1967 in Geneva, at the Pacem in Terris (II) Conference organized by the World Council of Churches. Their discussions centered in particular on their shared global vision of a "beloved community," a fellowship among peoples and nations built on principles of nonviolence, reconciliation, justice, tolerance and inclusiveness, in which even enemies can become friends. Theirs was not a utopian vision, but a realistic, achievable goal attained when a critical mass of people can be trained in the principles and practices of peace and nonviolence. In this vision, the spirit of all activism and engagement is profoundly nonviolent, going always in the direction of reconciliation, fellowship, and nurturing the kind of love that can transform opponents into friends

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<sup>195</sup> See Sister Chan Khong's biography in Vietnamese: *Sư cô Chân Không, 52 Năm Theo Thầy Học Đạo và Phụng Sự*

<sup>196</sup> The attack is recounted in Chan Khong, *Learning True Love* (2007), Ch.11.

<sup>197</sup> Chan Khong, *Learning True Love* (2007), Ch.11

<sup>198</sup> See full text of the nomination letter [here](#).

<sup>199</sup> For example, on March 25, 1967 leading a march against the Vietnam war in Chicago ([Los Angeles Sentinel](#))

and help to build the beloved community.<sup>200</sup> In Geneva, Thầy had an opportunity to tell Dr. King, “In Vietnam they call you a *bodhisattva*: an enlightened being trying to awaken other living beings and help them go in the direction of compassion and understanding.”<sup>201</sup>

Less than a year later Dr. King was assassinated. Thầy was in the U.S. when he heard the tragic news. Their friendship, shared courage and vision, and then the loss, had a profound impact on him. “I was devastated,” he later said. “I could not eat; I could not sleep. I made a deep vow to continue building what he called “the beloved community,” not only for myself but for him also. I have done what I promised to Martin Luther King Jr. And I think that I have always felt his support.”<sup>202</sup>

Thầy was in New York City at the end of January 1968 when news broke of the Tet Offensive in Vietnam. The fighting and destruction was particularly heavy in Huế, where the battle continued for over a month. Thousands of civilians were massacred. Phụng and other SYSS colleagues wrote to Thầy of the atrocities. The streets were full of corpses. Phụng and her friends mobilised volunteers to collect the bodies and dig mass graves to bury them.<sup>203</sup> Meanwhile, the SYSS campus become a refugee camp where thousands took refuge. In the aftermath of the violence, many senior monks were imprisoned. Thich Đôn Hậu, who had transmitted the bhikkhu precepts to Thầy, was abducted to North Vietnam. Temples were bombed, and shooting reached Thầy’s root temple, Từ Hiếu. Early one morning soon after, Thầy’s beloved teacher, Master Thich Chân Thật, peacefully passed away. In his final moments he lay in the lion pose, his two hands joined in a lotus. As Thầy wrote later, “we all aspire to practice like our grandfather teacher, our *bodhicitta* unbroken our whole life.”<sup>204</sup> In his will, Master Thich Chân Thật nominated Thầy as his successor as Abbot of Từ Hiếu Temple.<sup>205</sup> But Thầy could not return to attend his funeral—his friends feared for his life if he did so. They urged him to stay abroad, to continue to call for peace, and to rally international support for the SYSS’s humanitarian work.

## Paris Peace Talks

By early 1969, Thầy’s relentless itinerary brought him—via Hong Kong and India—back to Paris, where he continued his peace work at the Paris Peace Talks (1968-73). In September 1970 was officially assigned by Vietnam’s Unified Buddhist Congregation to be head of the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation. He was joined by Phụng, who flew over from Vietnam, and by many other young

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<sup>200</sup> For more about Dr. King’s vision of the Beloved Community, see: <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy#sub4>

<sup>201</sup> Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World* (2016), “[Martin Luther King Jr., Bodhisattva](#)”

<sup>202</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> Chan Khong, *Learning True Love* (2007), Ch.11

<sup>204</sup> See Nhat Hanh, “[The Magical Sound of the Sitar](#),” October 13, 2009. “Bodhicitta” can be translated as “the mind of awakening,” the “mind of love” or “aspiration”—the vow to love and serve.

<sup>205</sup> Thầy was the only disciple to receive the Lamp Transmission from Master Thich Chân Thật, making him his Dharma successor. In the history of Từ Hiếu Temple, the appointed successor also serves as official Abbot of Từ Hiếu Pagoda until his death. There have been only four appointed successors since the temple’s founding:

*Founding Patriarch: Tánh Thiên Nhất Định*  
*1st Patriarch: Hải Thiệu Cương Kỳ (1810-1899)*  
*2nd: Thanh Thái Huệ Minh (1861-1939)*  
*3rd: Thanh Quý Chân Thật (1884-1968)*  
*4th: Trùng Quang Nhất Hạnh (1926 - )*

Others have also served as “Acting Abbot” (Giám Tự): Venerable Huệ Đăng (1930-1892; Venerable Tâm Tịnh (1868-1927); Venerable Chí Niệm (1918-1979), Thầy’s elder Dharma Brother; Venerable Chí Mậu (1948-2009), Thầy’s younger Dharma Brother; Venerable Từ Đạo (1955-), Ven. Chí Mậu’s disciple.

international volunteers from the peace movement who were inspired to help.<sup>206</sup> They rented a small apartment in a poor neighborhood in an Arab district in Paris's 18th arrondissement, and opened an office at 11, Rue de la Goutte d'Or.<sup>207</sup> There they worked to represent Vietnamese Buddhists and the many Vietnamese people not represented by the governments of either the North or the South. They also continued their work to support relief operations in Vietnam, co-ordinated by their own SYSS social workers, as well as Oxfam, Amnesty International and many other humanitarian organizations.<sup>208</sup> Through these networks, they organized international sponsorship for thousands of young children orphaned by the violence. By 1975, 20,000 donors in Europe and the U.S. were supporting more than 10,000 orphans back in Vietnam.<sup>209</sup>

The years in Paris were a time of poverty and simplicity, but also joy and community. The volunteers worked with Thầy in the small one-room apartment, where they kept a mimeograph in the bathroom.<sup>210</sup> To earn enough for them all to live on, Thầy taught a course, "The History of Buddhism in Vietnam," at the prestigious Sorbonne École Pratique des Hautes Études. They only ever bought the cheap broken rice meant for birds, being sold at the local pet store.

Thầy and his associates edited and printed a newsletter, *Le Lotus*, to inspire, inform, and engage their growing grassroots movement of support across Europe and the US. Working long days on peace activism and social work, the small community would share a mindful dinner in the evenings followed by dish-washing meditation, singing, and silent sitting meditation. Thầy led them on walking meditation outside, and presided over recitations of the new, engaged, "ethical code" of the Order of Interbeing, which came to be their guiding light. Each week they organized public sessions of meditation and mindfulness at a nearby Quaker meeting house, attracting young seekers from the West.<sup>211</sup> Once they found a larger place for their offices in Sceaux, they could use the offices there for sitting meditation.<sup>212</sup>

## Engaging new elements

Separated from his students and the Buddhist peace movement in Vietnam, Thầy developed friendships and collaborations with academics, poets, students, and Christian leaders actively working for peace. As the Peace Talks became more and more drawn out (they could continue almost five years), Thầy's friends began to organise speaking tours for Thầy, translations of his books, and they also organised events to raise funds for their social work programs in Vietnam. Catholic friends in Rome organized a highly-publicised protest with 300 priests, each wearing around their neck a placard with the name of one Buddhist monk imprisoned in Vietnam.<sup>213</sup> Hebe Kohlbrugge was so committed to helping the orphan sponsorship program that if her government refused to support Thầy's work, she told them she

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<sup>206</sup> The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam was formally created on December 31st 1963, uniting all the different Buddhist groups in Vietnam into one single congregation (building on the efforts of the National Buddhist Association that began a decade earlier).

<sup>207</sup> At No. 11, Rue Gouttes d'Or in Paris; later they moved further out to Sceaux.

<sup>208</sup> F.O.R., The Third Way in Vietnam, Friends Quaker House (Quakers in Great Britain), Christian Aid, Save the Children, Help the Aged, Huddersfield Famine Committee, Comité pour les Enfants du Vietnam, Swedish International Development Aid (SIDA), War Resistance International (WRI), Mouvement Chrétien pour la Paix (MCP), Hilft für Vietnam (Help for Vietnam in Germany), and others.

<sup>209</sup> Chan Khong, *Learning True Love* (2007), pp. 306-7.

<sup>210</sup> "Only the Rice Loves You: a month with Thich Nhat Hanh in Paris," Jim Forest, 1972 ([source](#)).

<sup>211</sup> The Quaker meeting house was located on Vaugirard Boulevard.

<sup>212</sup> At 69, Rue Desgranges, Sceaux.

<sup>213</sup> On October 11, 1971. The protest was organised to coincide with a press conference organised by Thầy and his associates at the Hôtel Lutèce in Paris, as part of their "Stop the Killing Now!" campaign in cooperation with the International Committee of Conscience on Vietnam. The campaign mobilised parliamentarians and faith leaders and gathered over 9,000 signatures.



would return her World War II medals. Thanks to her determination, the Dutch Foreign Minister agreed to meet with Thầy and was persuaded to help his efforts to call for peace.<sup>214</sup>

### **Inter-faith dialogue**

Thầy's friendships and dialogue with the Jesuit priest Father Daniel Berrigan, the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, Reverend Heinz Kloppenburg (the Lutheran pastor leading the German Fellowship of Reconciliation), and Hannes de Graff (a Dutch theologian), and his discussions at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago several years later, culminated in his seminal book on Buddhism and Christianity, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*.<sup>215</sup> Thầy benefited from the opportunity to broaden his horizons, and to understand Christianity at a deeper level than his earlier experiences in Vietnam allowed.<sup>216</sup> Father Berrigan stayed several months with Thầy and his colleagues in Sceaux to learn meditation and mindfulness. Their remarkable late-night conversations in the offices in Sceaux were recorded and published with the title *The Raft Is Not the Shore*.<sup>217</sup> As Thầy's dialogue with Christians evolved, these were followed with later books, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* and *The Energy of Prayer*.<sup>218</sup>

Exiled in Paris, Thầy began to take a leading role in offering spiritual support and guidance to the growing number of Vietnamese Buddhists living in France and elsewhere in Europe. When he hosted a large "prayer for peace" event in Paris in June 1969, at a hotel just next to the foreign ministry (the French government would authorise neither a peace conference nor a press conference in the capital) the crowd of 600 attendees reflected this unique mix of the Vietnamese diaspora with Western intellectuals and activists.<sup>219</sup>

### **The Early Ecology Movement**

Even at this time, Thầy's public activism was not restricted only to Buddhism and peace. Together with Alfred Hassler, Dr. Pierre Lépine of the Institut Pasteur de Paris, and other leading intellectuals and scientists he had encountered, Thầy helped convene Europe's first conference on the environment, in Menton, France. Their actions began with the Menton Statement, "A Message to our 3.5 billion neighbours on Planet Earth," which addressed environmental destruction, pollution, and population growth. Drafted in May 1970, the statement was signed by over 2,000 scientists and published in the UNESCO periodical *Courier*.<sup>220</sup> Thầy and his associates met with U.N. Secretary-General U Thant the following year to engage his support, and in 1972 hosted the Đại Đồng "Great Togetherness" Environmental Conference alongside the U.N. Summit on the Human Environment in Stockholm.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Chan Khong, *Learning True Love* (2007), Ch.14.

<sup>215</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (1995). The World Parliament of Religions was held in Chicago in 1993.

<sup>216</sup> As Thomas Merton wrote of their connection: "I have said Nhat Hanh is my brother, and it is true. We are both monks, and we have lived the monastic life about the same number of years. We are poets, both existentialists. I have far more in common with Nhat Hanh than I have with many Americans, and I do not hesitate to say it." See: *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, William H. Shannon, ed. (1997), pp.260-1.

<sup>217</sup> Father Daniel Berrigan arrived in September 1974. Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Raft Is Not the Shore: Conversations Toward a Buddhist-Christian Awareness* was published by Beacon Press in 1975, and was later reprinted by Orbis.

<sup>218</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (1999); Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Energy of Prayer: How to Deepen Your Spiritual Practice* (2006)

<sup>219</sup> The Prayer for Peace gathering was held at the Hôtel du Palais du Quai d'Orsay on June 8, 1969.

<sup>220</sup> *The UNESCO Courier* edition was July 1971.

<sup>221</sup> Archives of the encounter on 11 May 1971 and the Secretary-General's support are held in the [UN archives](#). [Swarthmore Library](#) holds the Dai Dong archives. While in Stockholm, Cao Ngoc Phuong had an energetic series of side meetings with government agencies and ministers, and succeeded in persuading them to sponsor the SYSS/Unified Buddhist Church social work programs to rebuild bombed villages in Vietnam. The first grant, made through the Swedish Lutheran Church, was for US\$300,000. See Chan Khong, *Learning True Love* (2007), p.164.

Deep ecology, interbeing, and the importance of protecting the Earth continued to evolve as a powerful theme in Thầy's teachings, ethics, and writings.<sup>222</sup>

Thầy continued to travel and lecture widely. In May 1971, he was in Washington, DC, on a speaking tour calling for peace and a ceasefire in Vietnam, when a reporter from *The Baltimore Sun* informed him that an international diplomatic dispatch from South Vietnam had cancelled his passport, cementing his exile.<sup>223</sup> It was a heavy blow. Thầy flew to Europe and requested asylum on arrival in Paris. After the Paris Peace Accords were finally signed two years later, in January 1973, Thầy made a new bid to return home, but was still refused. It would be decades before Thầy could return.

## Miracle of mindfulness: cultivating peace & healing

Thầy's course at the Sorbonne in the early 1970s evolved into a three-volume book, *Treatise on the History of Vietnamese Buddhism*, elucidating the origins of the art of mindful living and the distinctive role of Vietnamese Zen in Asia.<sup>224</sup> As a Sorbonne professor, he had access to the extensive Buddhist manuscript collections at the National Library in Paris. There, he discovered rare documents detailing the life of Master Tăng Hội, the distinguished Vietnamese Buddhist monk of Central Asian and Vietnamese parentage.<sup>225</sup> In 247 C.E., Tăng Hội travelled north from what was then known as Jiaozhou (or Giao Châu) in today's Vietnam, into the Kingdom of Wu (in what is now southern China), becoming the first Zen master to teach in China, three centuries before Bodhidharma.<sup>226</sup> Tăng Hội established the "First Temple" in Jianye, and organised the first Buddhist monastic ordination ceremonies on Chinese soil, giving foundation and structure to the Buddhist meditation tradition (Ch'an, i.e. Zen) that would flourish in China for over a millennia. Tăng Hội practiced and taught Zen, and was a pioneer in the Mahāyāna tradition, drawing on the meditation sutras of early Buddhism, including teachings on conscious breathing and mindfulness of body, feelings, mind, and phenomena. In this way, Tăng Hội's teaching combined the spirit of Mahayana with the practical teachings of early Buddhism. As far as Thầy was concerned, "We cannot underestimate the importance of Tăng Hội in the lineage of ancestral teachers of Buddhism."<sup>227</sup> Thầy's research was captured for Western readers in his book *Zen Keys*, first published in 1972 in French as *Les Clés Pour le Zen*, and later in his book, *Master Tăng Hội: First Zen Teacher in Vietnam and China* (2001).

In his own writings, Thầy emphasized the importance of cultivating awareness and concentration in every act. "Even if you have the perseverance to sit for nine years facing a wall, sitting is only one part of Zen. While cooking, washing dishes, sweeping, carrying water, or chopping wood, you dwell deeply in the present moment."<sup>228</sup> It was during this time that Thầy went deeper into his research and study of the early sutras of Source Buddhism, including the *Satipaṭṭhāna* and *Ānāpānasati* sutras; his insights and discoveries would become the foundation of the practices he would later offer on retreats.<sup>229</sup> Thầy

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<sup>222</sup> Christiana Figueres was the Executive Secretary of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change from July 2010-16. In this role she convened the historic 2015 Paris Agreement.

<sup>223</sup> That night Thầy wrote the poem "I am Back to Open the Old Pages," in Nhat Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names* (1999), p.80.

<sup>224</sup> The first volume was published in Vietnam in 1974 with the title *Viet Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận* under the pseudonym Nguyễn Lang, his original birth name.

<sup>225</sup> Master Tăng Hội's father was a merchant from Sogdia in Central Asia, in what is today Uzbekistan, who traded and then settled in Vietnam where he married a Vietnamese lady (Tăng Hội's mother).

<sup>226</sup> Giao Châu (Vietnamese name for the city); 交州 in Chinese.

<sup>227</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Master Tăng Hội: First Zen Teacher in Vietnam and China* (2001), p.22.

<sup>228</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* (1999), p.131.

<sup>229</sup> Thầy published his first new translation of the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* in 1975, in Vietnamese, with the title *Kinh Quán Niệm Hơi Thở*

and Phụng found the delegation a small, dilapidated farmstead in Fontvannes, in the countryside about two hours outside Paris, not far from the Forêt d’Othe. They began retreating there on weekends to rest and renew themselves, practice walking meditation in the forest, and to work in the vegetable garden and begin renovating the buildings.<sup>230</sup>

It was at Sceaux in 1973 that Thầy began writing *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, developing further the practice of mindfulness described in *Zen Keys*, and capturing Thầy’s own experience of practicing mindfulness over the preceding decade. It began as words of guidance in Vietnamese for his young SYSS social workers continuing their work in Vietnam in the dangerous circumstances of war. His intention was to give them a very concrete framework for spiritual practice while engaging in action. “Because if you don’t practice during the time you serve,” he explained later, “you will lose yourself, you will burn out, and that is not engaged Buddhism.”<sup>231</sup> Thầy completed the Vietnamese edition of the manuscript in the loft of Professor Thomas Roep’s house in Alkmaar, in the Netherlands, and they later helped Thầy print the first copies on a Gestetner offset machine at Fontvannes.<sup>232</sup> Mobi Warren translated it into English.

*The Miracle of Mindfulness* rapidly became a leading meditation manual in the West. It was, as Jon Kabat-Zinn has said, “The first book to awaken a mainstream readership to the subject of mindfulness.” It broke new ground in the meditation scene of the late 1970s and early 1980s, taking meditation out of the meditation hall, and revealing how mindfulness could be integrated in everyday life. As an Oxford University academic has said, “It quietly sowed the seeds of a revolution.”<sup>233</sup> Today it has become a bestselling meditation classic published in over 30 languages.<sup>234</sup>

### Sweet Potatoes

After Saigon fell to communist forces on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1975, Thầy’s communication with friends and associates in the Vietnamese Buddhist community was abruptly cut, and the new government appropriated the resources of their social work programs. From 1975, Thầy and the delegation withdrew to Fontvannes to establish a nascent mindfulness community. They named it *Les Patates Douces* (Sweet Potatoes), after the food eaten by the poorest in Vietnam when there is no rice. They lived simply, did what they could to continue the orphan sponsorship program, and raised funds to send to Vietnam packages of medicine that could be exchanged for dozens of kilos of rice. They focussed in particular on offering moral and financial support to intellectuals, artists, writers, poets, composers and musicians—the “rare flowers” of Vietnam’s cultural heritage—who were facing great adversity. They sent relief packages and letters under pseudonyms; recipients did not know the true identity of those

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<sup>230</sup> At this time the delegation included Thanh Hương, Chơn Hòa, Chơn Ngữ, Laura Hassler, Mobi Warren, Lợi, Thoa, Raphael Ruiz, Pierre Marchand, Neige Achiary, Jim Forest, Marie Emmeny and others. There was usually about ten people, practicing sitting meditation, walking meditation, precepts recitation and Dharma discussion together.

<sup>231</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Dharma Talk in Plum Village, June 21, 2009

<sup>232</sup> First distributed in Vietnam in 1975 under the pen name Thạc Đức, with the title *Ý Thức Em Mặt Trời Tỏ Rạng* (“Awareness is the Bright Sun”). Then published underground in Vietnam the following year with the title, *Hàm Tiếu Thiên: Phép Lạ Của Sự Tỉnh Thức* (“Zen with a Smile: the miracle of mindfulness”). The first English edition was published in 1975 by the Fellowship of Reconciliation in the U.S. and Europe, under the title, *The Miracle of Being Awake*. The German Buddhist monk, the Elder Nyanaponika, who had been staying with Thầy in Sceaux, organized for it to be published by Theravada Buddhists in Sri Lanka.

<sup>233</sup> Prof. Mark Williams, University of Oxford, in a new foreword to Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (2015)

<sup>234</sup> First published by the Fellowship of Reconciliation in the U.S. in 1975 with the title *The Miracle of Being Awake*. Only after it was accepted for publication by Beacon Press in 1975 did it receive its present title *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. It was also published by Pax Christi in London with the title *Be Still and Know: Meditation for Peacemakers*. It was first published in French with the title, *Le Miracle est de Marcher sur Terre* (“The Miracle Is to Walk on Earth”). It was published in 1976 in Sri Lanka and Thailand as “a manual on meditation for the use of young activists.”

who were helping them.<sup>235</sup> During this time, Thầy did a lot of gardening and physical work outdoors. Once someone even said, “Why don’t you spend your time writing more poems instead of growing lettuce?”

Thầy replied, “I know very well that if I don’t grow lettuce, I won’t be able to write poems.”

### **Time of healing**

Embracing the disappointment of not being able to return to Vietnam, Thầy spent time practicing walking meditation and sitting meditation, gardening, and writing. It was a challenge not to be overwhelmed by despair. Together, the little community at Fontvannes learned how to cherish life and balance their suffering by getting in touch with the beauties still around them in the present moment. Practicing full awareness of breathing helped Thầy handle the shock of the cancellation of his passport, the loss of their programs in Vietnam, and also helped him embrace the news of the death of many beloved ones. As well as the passing of his teacher, three of his closest students had died since his exile began: Brother Nhất Trí, his first monastic disciple, had been abducted with seven other SYSS social workers in 1967 and never seen again. Brother Thanh Văn, the director of the SYSS was killed in 1971 by a drunk American soldier driving a truck. Brother Châu Toàn, the young editorial assistant of their radical magazines, died of a heart attack in June 1974. “Perhaps I loved him even more than a blood brother,” Thầy wrote. “Because we shared the same dream and aspiration.”<sup>236</sup>

Over the following years, Thầy wrote *The Moon Bamboo*, *The Sun My Heart*, and the second and third volumes of his *Treatise on the History of Vietnamese Buddhism*.<sup>237</sup> In Paris Thầy taught himself how to print books, and at Sweet Potatoes he printed and bound his Vietnamese publications himself, preparing the layout, cover design, and plates, and then printing, cutting, and binding by hand.<sup>238</sup> The books were distributed to Vietnamese refugees in Europe. In Vietnam, the only way to avoid censorship was to print the books under pen names and send them back anonymously to friends in thin envelopes, a few pages at a time, in order to stop them from being intercepted. The books were then reproduced underground.<sup>239</sup>

### **Boat people crisis**

In December 1976, Thầy attended the World Conference on Religion and Peace in Singapore. There, he learned of the plight of people beginning to flee former South Vietnam by boat. Already thousands were adrift on the open seas, at the mercy of storms and pirates. When boats did make it to shore, they were often pushed back out. Unable to continue to lead his community’s social work programs back in Vietnam, Thầy could still help the boat people. “It’s not enough just to talk about compassion; we have to do the work of compassion,” he later said.<sup>240</sup> From Singapore, Thầy, Phụng, and their associates rented three boats, the *Roland*, a cargo ship, the *Leap Dal*, an oil tanker, the *Saigon 200*, a small faster

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<sup>235</sup> Chan Khong, *Learning True Love* (2007), Ch.18 “Rare Flowers of the Country.”

<sup>236</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Inside the Now* (2016) p. 19.

<sup>237</sup> *The Moon Bamboo* was first published in Vietnamese with the title *Tổ* in 1979; *The Sun My Heart* was published with the Vietnamese title *Trái Tim Mặt Trời* in 1982—both by Lá Bối press in France. Vol. 1 of the *Treatise on the History of Vietnamese Buddhism* was published in 1974 by Lá Bối in Saigon; Vol.2 in 1978 by Lá Bối in Paris; Vol.3 was completed in 1979 but was not published until 1985.

<sup>238</sup> “I always printed and bound books in mindfulness, breathing and smiling as I printed. I never let the machine run at full speed, always slowly and always a smile every time I changed pages. I have printed several dozen books and I have bound thousands of books.” Thich Nhat Hanh, *I Have Arrived, I Am Home: Celebrating Twenty Years of Plum Village Life* (2003)

<sup>239</sup> Since by this time his books were banned in Vietnam, Thầy’s three volumes of *History of Vietnamese Buddhism* had to be printed under the pen name Nguyễn Lang (his original birth name), and circulated underground in Vietnamese. To this day they are used as textbooks at Vạn Hạnh Buddhist University and other Buddhist institutes in Vietnam. The English translation is forthcoming from Parallax Press.

<sup>240</sup> Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World* (2016), “At Sea on Solid Ground,” p. 61

boat that could bring people onto the larger boats, and also a small airplane to search the water. Within a few weeks, they had rescued over eight hundred people from the high seas.<sup>241</sup>

But the rescue efforts angered the U.N.'s High Commissioner for Refugees, and after three months the program was shut down. The rescue boats carrying hundreds of people were not allowed to enter Malaysian waters to find shelter from a threatening storm, nor were they allowed to be resupplied with food or fuel. Thầy was given 24 hours to leave Singapore. It was a moment of immense pressure and despair, with hundreds of lives depending on his actions. Thầy turned to meditation to find a way out, and practiced meditation through the night. He later said that it was only through concentrating on his breath and steps, that he was able to re-establish peace and clarity, and get the insight he needed to find a solution: to overturn his deportation, so he could stay longer in Singapore, and have time to arrange matters to guarantee the safety of everyone on their boats.<sup>242</sup> His experience in Singapore proved to him that in even the most difficult situations, with mindful breathing, peace, clarity, and insight are always possible.

Back in Europe, through his books and teachings, Thầy continued to attract a broad following among Vietnamese refugees. Families gathered at *Les Patates Douces* (Sweet Potato) community in the summer months to enjoy the countryside and restore their spirits. There they learned mindfulness practices from Thầy to help them embrace and heal their suffering from the war, and help them get in touch with their cultural and spiritual roots as a source of strength and stability. Some of Thầy's most memorable and heart-wrenching poems were written during this time of the "boat people" crisis, including "A Lotus Just Bloomed on the Ocean," and "Please Call Me By My True Names" in which he sees himself as both refugee and pirate, a prisoner and politburo chief, an arms dealer and impoverished child.<sup>243</sup>

## Pioneering communities of mindfulness and peace

From his active involvement in Vietnam in the '50s and '60s, to his time in Paris in the '70s, Thầy had come to see the creation of physical environments of peace and communities of mindful living as the surest way to heal the wounds of war and suffering and to cultivate the seeds of peace, healing, reconciliation and awakening in the world.

### Peace is a practice

In June 1982, Thầy was in New York and participated in a peace demonstration while teaching a retreat for a number of students of the late Japanese Zen Buddhist monk Shunryu Suzuki.<sup>244</sup> Thầy led the delegation to walk slowly, in peace, but their pace was too slow for the crowd behind them, many of

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<sup>241</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart* (1982)

<sup>242</sup> Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World* (2016), "At Sea on Solid Ground," p. 61 Thầy realised that if he could persuade the French Ambassador to intervene on his behalf, and persuade the Singaporean authorities to let him stay another week, he would have enough time to make arrangements to secure the safety of the hundreds of refugees out at sea on their boats without fuel or food.

<sup>243</sup> "Interbeing" (*trong tức* in Vietnamese) is a term coined by Thầy to describe the mutual interdependent co-arising of all phenomena across space and time. As he says, "The real meaning of "to be" is "to inter-be". You cannot be, by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with everyone else, with everything else." This is a core teaching underlying all aspects of his 'applied Buddhism.' Thầy encouraged all his students to embrace every aspect of reality—suffering as well as happiness—in such a way that can bring positive change to the world.

<sup>244</sup> The nuclear disarmament rally on nuclear disarmament rally in New York City on June 13, 1982 was one of the largest peace rallies in U.S. history ([The New York Times](#)). Thầy was in New York for a "Reverence for Life Conference", an interfaith conference on nuclear disarmament being held alongside a summit of world leaders, "The United Nations Second Special Session on Disarmament."

whom became angry as they overtook the group. “There’s a lot of anger in the peace movement,” he observed.<sup>245</sup> “Every time you have a thought that is full of anger and misunderstanding, that is war. War can be manifested through our way of thinking, our way of speaking, and our way of acting. We may be living in war without knowing it, in the way we are fighting with ourselves and the people around us... Maybe in your daily life there are a few moments of ceasefire. But most are moments of war.” For Thầy, the practice of mindfulness became crucial to cultivating peace: “By the way we live our daily life we contribute to peace or to war. It is mindfulness that can tell me that I am going in the direction of war and it is the energy of mindfulness that can help me make a turn and go in the direction of peace.”<sup>246</sup> With mindfulness we can transform our way of thinking:

Just to remove bombs is not really the work of peace. Even if we were able to transport all the bombs to the moon, we would still be unsafe, because the roots of the war and the bombs are still there in our collective consciousness. We cannot work to abolish war with angry demonstrations. Transforming our collective consciousness is the only way to uproot war.<sup>247</sup>

And so Thầy’s focus shifted from demonstrations and press conferences to the deeper work of transforming consciousness through mindfulness retreats and community living. The retreats he began to offer became a field of action and transformation.

### **Creation of Plum Village**

Thầy’s growing community soon outgrew *Les Patates Douces*, in 1982 Thầy and his followers found an old farm and land in the Dordogne Valley of southwest France. There, amid rolling hills and vineyards, they established a mindfulness practice center, which became known as “Plum Village” after the 1,250 plum trees they soon planted in the rich soil.<sup>248</sup> The existing buildings were dilapidated, and the set-up was rustic. Barns became meditation halls and sheep-sheds became dorms, with beds made of wooden boards balanced on bricks.<sup>249</sup>

### **New mindfulness practices**

In the first summer, 117 practitioners came to learn sitting meditation, walking meditation, mindful eating, and tea meditation, within a relaxed atmosphere of songs, music, and poetry.<sup>250</sup> As well as Vietnamese refugees seeking guidance and healing in an unfamiliar land, there were also young seekers,

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<sup>245</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Q&A at Blue Cliff Monastery, August 29, 2013: “There was a peace movement in America opposing the war in Vietnam. And as people demanded peace and did not get it, they got very angry. So there was a lot of anger in the peace movement. And when Thầy toured America and talked to these groups, Thầy said, “If you have a lot of anger in you, you cannot achieve peace. You have to *be* peace before you can *do* peace.” See also his interview with John Malkin, *Shambhala Sun* magazine, July 1, 2003: “People were very compassionate and willing to support us in ending the war in Vietnam during the sixties. But the peace movement in America did not have enough patience. People became angry very quickly because what they were doing wasn’t bringing about what they wanted. So there was a lot of anger and violence in the peace movement. Nonviolence and compassion are the foundations of a peace movement. If you don’t have enough peace and understanding and loving-kindness within yourself, your actions will not truly be for peace. Everyone knows that peace has to begin with oneself, but not many people know how to do it.”

<sup>246</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Public Talk for religious leaders in South Korea, March 19, 2003, published in *The Mindfulness Bell*, [issue No.34, Autumn 2003](#).

<sup>247</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Dharma Talk, February 21, 1991

<sup>248</sup> At first the community was named “Làng Hồng” (Persimmon Village), in memory of Phương Bối. Later (c.1992), as the plum trees flourished, it was renamed in “Làng Mai” (Plum Village). From 2001 onwards it went by the official title “Đạo Tràng Mai Thôn” (Plum Village Practice Center).

<sup>249</sup> For more details on the history of Plum Village, see Nhat Hanh, *I have Arrived, I Am Home* (2003) and Thich Nhat Hanh, Dharma Talk, December 13, 2001

<sup>250</sup> Walking meditation: Thầy’s new techniques were presented in *Thiền Hành Yếu Chỉ* (“A Guide to Walking Meditation”), published in 1983

artists, and peace activists, eager to hear the Zen master's wisdom. Thầy offered private consultations and gave lectures, teaching children and adults mindfulness practices they could apply in daily life. Thầy introduced the practice of mindfulness poems or *gathas* for daily actions like brushing your teeth, sweeping the floor, and lighting a candle—just like he had practiced in the temple as a young novice.<sup>251</sup> Over time, he incorporated more and more practices to help members of his community touch the peace, ease and joy of dwelling in the present moment, and helping them heal and transform.<sup>252</sup> It was in these years that Thầy developed the new practices of Touching the Earth (prostrations with guided texts for contemplation), guided sitting meditation, tea meditation, Dharma sharing (using loving speech and deep listening), and guided relaxation.<sup>253</sup> He drew on his strong foundation in Buddhist psychology to develop “Beginning Anew”—a concrete practice for deep cultivating deep listening, loving speech, and reconciliation, that could help couples, parents and children, and old friends heal their difficulties and re-establish communication.<sup>254</sup> These deceptively simple practices were an effective way to concretely apply Buddhist insights of no-self, impermanence, and interbeing, to respond to the roots of suffering and bring healing and transformation to everyone who came to learn.

With the practical talents and resourcefulness of Thầy's longtime collaborator Phụng and other early residents, Plum Village was able to blossom on a shoestring budget. They welcomed over 300 people to Plum Village in the third summer and almost 1,000 by 1990. Over the next two decades, Plum Village would grow into the largest Buddhist retreat center in the west, attracting people from around the world, with over 4,000 retreatants every summer and more than 10,000 visitors every year.

### Teacher of teachers

In the 1980s and 1990s, Thầy visited the U.S. frequently and had a growing influence on the burgeoning Western meditation scene, leading retreats at new Buddhist meditation centers springing up on both East and West Coasts.<sup>255</sup> In spring 1983, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and San Francisco Zen Center organized Thầy's first retreat for Western Buddhists at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center.<sup>256</sup> The model of an immersive mindfulness retreat he designed and offered was radically distinct from the formal *sesshin* (sitting meditation) retreats being offered by other Zen traditions. He was one of the first Buddhist teachers in the West to emphasize the importance of incorporating meditation and mindfulness into everyday activities *outside* the meditation hall.<sup>257</sup> Drawing on his own experience and breakthroughs he emphasised the importance of applying mindful breathing for healing body and mind. He created and introduced practices for his students such as stopping and breathing mindfully with the sound of the bell. And he introduced the new style of walking meditation he had been developing in his own practice. It is a more gentle, relaxed form for walking meditation outdoors in nature, very different from the formal style of slow walking meditation (*kinh hành* or *kinhin*), and harmonizes the steps with the breath and key words. Thầy developed a new practice of “deep relaxation” based on the Buddhist practice of using mindfulness to scan the body from head to toe. Thầy also pioneered a new way to guide sitting meditation, combining phrases and key words with the breath, to help the practitioner to cultivate joy,

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<sup>251</sup> Gathas: This modernised practice for meditation in daily actions was presented in *Từng Bước Nở Hoa Sen* (“Present Moment, Wonderful Moment”), published by Lá Bối publishing house, Paris, 1983.

<sup>252</sup> For his new teachings on dwelling in the present moment, see: *An Trú Trong Hiện Tại* (“Dwelling in the Present Moment”) published by Tu viện Kim Sơn (Kim Sơn Monastery), 1986.

<sup>253</sup> Guided sitting meditation, combining the in-breath and out-breath with phrases and key words was developed in 1989, and presented in *Blooming of A Lotus: Guided Meditations for Achieving the Miracle of Mindfulness* (1994). The practice of guided prostrations for “touching the earth” were developed in 1994-5.

<sup>254</sup> The practice of “Beginning Anew” was developed around 1989-90

<sup>255</sup> Including the Insight Meditation Society, Omega Institute, Ojai Foundation, and the San Francisco Zen Center

<sup>256</sup> See the Buddhist Peace Fellowship [website](#).

<sup>257</sup> His early books *Zen Keys: A Guide to Zen Practice* (1974) and *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (1975) outlined a clear vision of daily practice for doing so.

healing, and insight. Today, these powerfully effective and creative new ways of practicing meditation Thầy developed have now been adopted by thousands of meditation teachers, and shared with millions of people around the world.

Thầy emphasised the importance of the Buddhist ethical code and Five Precepts in meditation practice, which many people were leaving aside, asserting that they were inappropriate for a modern Buddhism in the West.<sup>258</sup> Thầy insisted that ethics and mindfulness could not be separated; and that meditation or mindfulness without ethics is not true mindfulness. In so doing he became an important beacon of ethics as the popularity of Buddhism and meditation began to grow. Thầy's retreats during the 1980s were attended by many practitioners who have since become leading mindfulness teachers in the West, including Joan Halifax, Jack Kornfield, Joanna Macy, Sharon Salzberg, and Jon Kabat-Zinn, who attended a retreat with Thầy at the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts in 1987. Thầy's teachings on 'everyday mindfulness' and his style of walking meditation have now been taken on and popularised by the secular 'mindfulness movement' and brought healing to millions of people around the world.

### **To be is to inter-be**

It was during one of Thầy's retreats at Tassajara Zen Center in California that Thầy coined the word "interbeing" to describe the way in which everything "inter-is" with everything else. Using the root verb "to be" like this was a powerful new way to translate the Buddhist term *sahabhūta* (Skt.). Thầy taught his students to look with "the eyes of interbeing" to see that there cannot be a sheet of paper without clouds, forest and rain; there cannot be a mother or father without daughter or son. "Everything coexists," he explained. "To be is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone; you have to inter-be with every other thing."<sup>259</sup> The contemplation on interbeing can help the practitioner to remove discriminative and dualistic thinking. With the one simple word "interbeing," Thầy captured the insight behind his commitment to "not take sides" during the conflicts in Vietnam; and his realisation during the Boat People crisis that you cannot separate good from evil, pirates from refugees. He saw that everything arises as a manifestation of infinite causes and conditions, one of those conditions being *you*. "Everything includes everything else," as Thầy put it.<sup>260</sup> In his early retreats, Thầy went on to teach that you cannot have happiness without suffering, the mud without the lotus. The insight of interbeing became central to his teachings on communication, ecology, conflict-resolution, political division and even personal family relationships. The word 'interbeing,' although it still uses the idea of 'being', is a skilful way to go beyond dualistic ideas of separation to touch the true nature of reality. Interbeing became one of Thầy's most distinctive contributions to Buddhist teaching.

In 1984 Thầy's father passed away in Nha Trang, Vietnam. A great number of monks attended his funeral, to represent Thầy, knowing he could not return. Thầy practiced deeply to see his father's continuation in him: "My father is there in every cell of my body," he said in one of his talks. "My mother also. My grandfathers, my grandmothers, my ancestors, they have not died; they are fully

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<sup>258</sup> *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* by James William Coleman (2002)

<sup>259</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Other Shore* (2016), p.28. See also, Thich Nhat Hanh, Dharma Talk in Plum Village, October 1, 2013: "We have to inter-be. We use the word interbeing in order to free ourselves from the idea of being. We say we inter-are to free ourselves from the idea that we can be by ourselves alone. As soon as we are free of the idea of being we are free from the idea of non-being. Thanks to the idea of interbeing we are free from both being and non-being. That is thanks to the skill of the "wisdom of adaptation." We may still use words and concepts but we use them very skilfully to gradually free ourselves from words and concepts. We make use of new notions like co-arising and interbeing in order to free ourselves from old notions like birth and death, being and non-being. Once we are free from these ideas we can then also let go of the notions interbeing and co-arising; just like when we use a spade to dig a well, once we have dug the well we put the spade down. We do not need to carry it around with us everywhere. While co-arising and interbeing help us transcend birth, death, being and non-being, they are not an ultimate truth to be held on to forever." (translated from Vietnamese)

<sup>260</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Dharma Talk, March 25, 2004



present in every cell of my body. When I hear the bell, I invite all of them to join me in listening. As we hear the bell, we can say silently: *We listen, we listen. This wonderful sound brings us back to our true home.*<sup>261</sup>

## Renewing Buddhism: deepening roots, extending branches

Over the years of practicing mindful breathing, mindful walking, and dwelling in the present moment, Thầy embraced and healed the pain of not being able to return to Vietnam. It was “thanks to the practice I was able to find my true home in the here and the now,” he explained. “Your true home is not an abstract idea, it is a solid reality you can touch with your feet, with your hands, with your mind. It is available in the here and the now, and nobody can take it away. They can occupy your country, yes. They can put you in prison, yes. But they cannot take away your true home and your freedom.” He described the phrase, ‘I have arrived, I am home’ as the ‘cream’ of his practice and “the shortest teaching I can give.” He guided the hundreds (and later thousands) of people who began attending his retreats in Plum Village, to truly arrive and feel at home in themselves in the here and now, would make it the first of his Four Dharma Seals.<sup>262</sup> He said:

It embodies and expresses my understanding of the teaching of the Buddha... And since the time I found my true home, I do not suffer anymore. The past is no longer a prison for me. The future is no longer a prison for me. I am able to live in the here and the now. I am able to touch my true home.

The future is available through the present. This is what I have found. And when you touch the present moment deeply, you touch the past. If you know how to handle the present moment properly, you can heal the past. Many think that the past is already gone, you cannot do anything, you cannot go back to the past, and fix and repair things. But according to this teaching of the Buddha, the past is still there with all the pain and suffering. And if you know how to come home to the present moment and touch the present moment deeply, you touch the past, and you can heal the past. And when you heal yourself, you heal your ancestors. And this is possible. My ancestors have suffered in me, I have also suffered. And since I am able to touch the present moment deeply, I heal myself, and I heal my ancestors including my parents, my father, my mother, my brother, my sister, my grandfather, my grandmother.<sup>263</sup>

### **Buddhist scholar**

In Plum Village, France, Thầy continued his research, publishing new books and translations, realizing his dream of modernizing core Buddhist teachings and bringing new life to classic Buddhist texts. His seminal biography of the Buddha (*Old Path White Clouds*), now translated into over 20 languages, portrayed the Buddha as a human being, not a god, and guided seekers to go beyond the Buddha of myth and legend, and to touch the simplicity of the Buddha as a teacher.<sup>264</sup> Thầy was very happy to bring *Old Path White Clouds* back to India on his pilgrimage there in 1997, restoring—in Hindi translation—the humanity of one of the country’s most distinguished figures.<sup>265</sup> It has since become a bestseller.<sup>266</sup> Thầy

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<sup>261</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Dharma Talk, June 20, 2014

<sup>262</sup> Four Dharma Seals of Plum Village (ie. every Plum Village teaching must include these elements; if it does not include them, it is not a true Plum Village teaching): 1. I have arrived, I am home; 2. Going as a river; 3. The interbeing nature of the three truths and the three times; 4. Continuous ripening

<sup>263</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Dharma Talk, March 25, 2004

<sup>264</sup> Vietnamese edition: *Đường Xưa Mây Trắng* was published in 1988. The first English translation (*Old Path White Clouds*) was published in 1991.

<sup>265</sup> The Hindi translation is by Dr. Ramchandra Tiwari, and was published by Hind Pocket Books in 1997 with the title *Jehan Jehan Charan Pare Gautam Ke*. Thầy offered it at the foot of the Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya on his trip to India in 1997.

<sup>266</sup> It is considered the most popular biography of the Buddha in Hindi, and has now been translated into a number of other Indian languages.

made modern translations of foundational Buddhist texts such as the Heart Sutra (published in *The Heart of Understanding*, 1988), the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (published in *Transformation and Healing*, 1990), and the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (published in *Breathe, You Are Alive*, 1988), drawing on his classical training and the inspiration of the 3rd Century Vietnamese Zen teacher, Master Tãng Hội.

Thầy's deep research into the the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* unearthed three more versions in the Chinese canon (little-known to contemporary scholars in the West). These alternate readings enabled him to correct an error in the Pali, and help the meditator apply the sutra in practice. Thầy emphasised that “it is time for us to restore the *Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing* [*Ānāpānasati Sutta*] to its proper place in the tradition of meditation practice.”<sup>267</sup> Thầy discovered that Zen Master Tãng Hội had made use of the sutras of Source Buddhism, with the very open view of Mahayana Buddhism. In Plum Village, Thầy combined both Mahayana and Theravada traditions, and the foundational sutras used in Plum Village are present in all the different schools—in Pali, Chinese, Sanskrit, Korean, and the Tibetan canon.<sup>268</sup> During two decades of lectures in Plum Village, Thầy gave lectures and commentaries on both the Chinese canon and Pali canon, combining his traditional scholastic training with his “applied” approach of putting teachings directly into practice. He taught courses on Buddhist psychology and philosophy (including Vasubandhu's *Thirty Verses on Manifestation Only*, Asanga's *Mahāyānasamgraha*, Nāgārjuna's *Mādhyamika Śāstra*); on the *Records of Zen Master Linji*; and on the principal Mahayana sutras, the Chinese Dharmapada, and Arthapada.<sup>269</sup>

### Creating a monastic community

In 1988, after over thirty-five years of teaching, Thầy finally began to ordain his own monastic disciples and establish a monastic community. He came to value the importance of the teacher-student relationship: the lifetime commitment to studying and practicing together without interruption in the context of a residential community of mindful living. Over the coming decades, Thầy would ordain over 1,000 monks and nuns to continue his work and teachings in the world. The first ordinations took place on Vulture Peak in India, in November 1988, when Thầy ordained his long-time student and collaborator Phụng (Sister Chân Không, “True Emptiness”), together with others, including Annabel Laity (Sister Chân Đức, “True Virtue”), who became his first Western monastic disciple. Other ordinations soon followed and by the mid-1990s, there were about thirty monks, nuns, and lay disciples from half a dozen nationalities living and training with Thầy in Plum Village. As the community evolved, so did Thầy's teachings on spiritual practice in community.<sup>270</sup> Thầy pioneered greater equality between nuns and monks, and emphasized decision-making by consensus rather than by authority, becoming the first Buddhist master from the East to combine seniority and democracy in the governance of the monastic community.<sup>271</sup> He made the revolutionary step of revising the monastic vows

<sup>267</sup> First published in 1975 in Vietnamese as *Kinh Quán Niệm Hơi Thở*, and in 1988 in English as *The Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing*. See also: Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Breathe! You are Alive: Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing* (Rev. Ed. 1996), p.18. Many Mahayana traditions have focussed instead on later teachings such as the Avatamsaka Sutra, the Lotus Sutra, etc.

<sup>268</sup> Thầy's own explanation in a Dharma Talk given in Đà Nẵng, Vietnam on April 10, 2007 and published in *The Mindfulness Bell*, [issue No. 46, Autumn 2007](#): “The Three Spiritual Powers.”

<sup>269</sup> See Appendix. Principle Mahayana sutras: including the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* and the *Prajñāpāramitā Ratnaguṇasamcayagāthā*, the *Ratnakūṭa Sūtra* collection, the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, the Lotus Sutra (*Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*), the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, and the Diamond Sutra (*Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*).

<sup>270</sup> See Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Joyfully Together: The Art of Building a Harmonious Community* (2003). In Vietnamese: *Sống Chung An Lạc* (2002).

<sup>271</sup> See Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Joyfully Together: The Art of Building a Harmonious Community* (2003). For more about women in the Plum Village Tradition, see: “Female Buddhas: A Revolution for Nuns in the Plum Village Tradition,” on the [website](#) of the Thích Nhất Hạnh Foundation.

(*Pratimokṣa*) for Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis (monks and nuns).<sup>272</sup> Thầy emphasized the insight that mindfulness and precepts go hand in hand, and assert that in Buddhism’s Triple Training, *śīla* (precepts) and *smṛti* (mindfulness) are one and the same: if you practice mindfulness, you are practicing precepts; the precepts help you practice mindfulness.<sup>273</sup> Thầy’s updated handbook for novice monastics (*Stepping into Freedom*, 1997) and textbook on Buddhism (*The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, 1998) are today used in Buddhist institutes around the world.<sup>274</sup> His new liturgy, published in 1989, was the first Vietnamese Buddhist daily chanting text to be written in vernacular Vietnamese rather than classical Chinese.<sup>275</sup> Thầy distilled the underlying principles of his core teachings and practices into Forty Tenets of the Plum Village Tradition.<sup>276</sup>

### A new way of practice

In training his young monastic community, Thầy began to crystallize the principles of his “renewed” Buddhism. The emphasis in Plum Village continued to be very practical. The goal was not to try to seek nirvana, or rebirth in a Pure Land, or perfect enlightenment, or to accumulate merit—as may be the case in some traditions. Instead, he taught his monastics to calm and relax the body; understand the mind; recognize, embrace, and look deeply into suffering in order to give rise to understanding and love; transform anger and practice loving speech and deep listening to restore communication and reconcile. Thầy taught his students that mindfulness practice and monastic training should not be hard labor; the ‘outer form’ of the practice should not be followed mechanically, but with true presence and heart, nourished by mindful breathing and *gāthās*. Emphasizing the importance of generating the energy of mindfulness—as taught in the *Ānāpānasati* and *Satipaṭṭhāna* sutras—Thầy intentionally moved away from older Zen practices such as koans or silent illumination, and even many traditional rituals, which he maintained were no longer as effective in cultivating deep spiritual practice in the 21st Century as they may have been in the past. Thầy trained his students not to seek something in the future—even enlightenment—but to come back to the present moment where, he said, happiness, healing, peace and the “Pure Land” are already available. Mindfulness practice, he explained, is not to run away from suffering, or to ‘gain’ enlightenment, but to heal and transform our suffering right in the present moment. Thầy’s deep practices of ‘Touching the Earth’ and connecting to ancestors (both spiritual and genetic), became very concrete ways to touch ‘the reality of interbeing’.<sup>277</sup> Drawing on elements of Vietnamese culture, Thầy introduced his international students to the practice of creating an ancestral altar; connecting and reconciling with genetic and spiritual ancestors within; and taking refuge in ancestors for spiritual support.

These teachings may seem deceptively simple, but in fact represented a profoundly radical new approach to Buddhist meditation. With all the concrete methods of mindfulness practice Thầy developed—from mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful dish-washing, teeth-brushing, cooking, or working, or stopping and listening to the bell, to name but a few—Thầy was one of the first modern meditation teachers to remove the mystique of Zen, and make the practice of going home and touching the present moment truly accessible.

<sup>272</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Freedom Wherever We Go: A Buddhist Monastic Code for the 21st Century*. Thầy presented his revised monastic code at Choong Ang Sangha University in Seoul, Korea, on March 31, 2003.

<sup>273</sup> The tradition preserves two versions of the three elements of the Triple Training: *śīla*, *samādhi*, *prajñā*; and *smṛti*, *samādhi*, *prajñā*. Thầy was the first to assert that *śīla* and *smṛti* are one and the same.

<sup>274</sup> *Stepping Into Freedom* was published in Vietnamese in 1996, with the title *Bước Tới Thành Thoi*.

<sup>275</sup> Vietnamese edition: *Nghi thức Tụng niệm*, Lá Bối Press California (1989). English edition: Thich Nhat Hanh, *Chanting from the Heart: Buddhist Ceremonies and Daily Practices* (1991).

<sup>276</sup> Presented in lectures in Plum Village between 2005 and 2007, and published in Vietnamese (not yet translated into English). The core 40 principles can be read online at: <https://orderofinterbeing.org/2016/07/forty-tenets-of-plum-village/>

<sup>277</sup> Thầy continued to develop the practice of Touching the Earth over subsequent years. See Thich Nhat Hanh, *Touching the Earth: Intimate Conversations with the Buddha* (2004)

In response to a growing demand to attend retreats with Thầy, in the late 1990s, the community opened additional monastic-led mindfulness practice centers in the U.S., in Vermont (Green Mountain Dharma Center in 1998); and California (Deer Park Monastery in 2000). Thầy also ordained dozens of senior lay students to become Dharma Teachers continuing his work and teaching out in the world. Many of them started mindfulness communities in Europe, America, and Australasia, and have become distinguished teachers in their own right. Thầy emphasized the power of collective meditation practice for healing and transformation; and the importance of building local mindfulness groups (or ‘sanghas’), to offer companionship, joy, and solidarity, and address the loneliness, alienation, and individualism prevailing in the modern world. Today, his lay students have established a network of over 1,500 mindfulness communities in more than forty countries. And Thầy went on to found seven further monastic practice centers: Blue Cliff Monastery in upstate New York; Maison de l’Inspir in Paris; European Institute of Applied Buddhism in Germany; Thai Plum Village Practice Center in Khao Yai, Thailand; Magnolia Grove Monastery in Mississippi; the Asian Institute of Applied Buddhism (AIAB) on Lantau Island, Hong Kong; and Stream Entering Monastery in the Australian state of Victoria.

## Buddhism without borders

The nineties and early 2000s saw Thầy bringing Buddhist practices and teachings out of their primarily religious context to be of service to the world, as he led special retreats for psychotherapists, teachers, business leaders, politicians, scientists, environmentalists, artists, police officers and even for Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>278</sup> In the U.S., he led retreats for American war veterans—the very people who had been sent to attack his homeland—to deepen reconciliation between all sides. Plum Village continued to attract people from all walks of life. Through contact with them, Thầy and his community began to develop appropriate, skilfully-adapted, non-sectarian mindfulness practices that could be widely shared in schools, healthcare settings and workplaces. Thầy explained that mindfulness offered “a spiritual dimension” in daily life, accessible to everyone of all faiths or none. Today there are senators and representatives on Capitol Hill who practice mindful walking to place their votes, teachers who invite the bell in their classrooms, and even priests who offer tea meditation to their congregations. “My Buddhism,” he has said, “has been one without boundaries.”<sup>279</sup> Thầy encouraged people to stay with their own tradition, rather than to convert to Buddhism.<sup>280</sup> For Thầy, “Everyone can profit from the

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<sup>278</sup> Teachings for businesspeople and political leaders: Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Power* (2007). Thầy’s teachings for law enforcement officers and prisoners are published in Thich Nhat Hanh, *Be Free Where You Are* (2002). For Israelis and Palestinians: Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Begins Here: Palestinians and Israelis Listening to Each Other* (2001)

<sup>279</sup> Thầy speaking in South Korea, April 1995, recounted in Daniel J. Adams, “[Thich Nhat Hanh Then and Now](#),” Thomas Merton Center archive.

<sup>280</sup> Interview with Don Lattin for *The San Francisco Chronicle*, October 12, 1997: “When you are open to other traditions, and you are ready to learn from other traditions, you have an opportunity to understand your own tradition differently. That is what I have learned. [...] There are those who have practiced Buddhism and have gone back to their tradition and have discovered many things they have not seen before. [...] We have the right to benefit from every spiritual tradition. You need to know [and] profit from each tradition. Because each tradition has its own jewels, values. It’s like eating fruit. If you love apples or oranges, that doesn’t prevent you from trying mangoes or bananas. You don’t betray your orange at all when you try bananas and mangoes. We have the right to enjoy all kinds of fruits, and we have the right to enjoy every spiritual tradition of humanity. You should not exclude any other tradition, saying “My tradition is the only authentic tradition”—that is too narrow. We have to free ourselves from that kind of thinking. [...] I always urge [people] to be themselves, to go back to their roots. There is no danger at all if [they] like to try my practice, because my practice has the aid of bringing people back to their own cultural and spiritual roots. My only concern is for people to have an opportunity to practice so they will suffer less. Then they will go back to their roots, to their tradition and try to renew their tradition...”

teaching and practice of Buddhism. Buddhism is a heritage for the whole of mankind, not for Buddhists alone,” since, as he explained, “Buddhism is made *only* of non-Buddhist elements.”<sup>281</sup>

### **A code of global ethics**

In Thầy’s years in Vietnam, in the context of colonial oppression, occupation and a struggle over foreign ideologies and foreign weapons, Thầy dug deep into the heritage of Vietnam’s own Buddhism to offer a way out. And later, as his horizons expanded, he did the same on a more global scale: digging deep into the spiritual heritage of Buddhism, to offer concrete practices and ethics that could transcend cultural and religious boundaries, and help seed a ‘collective awakening.’ Thầy presented a Buddhist vision for global ethics—The Five Mindfulness Trainings—at an international summit at the White House; and to the Vice President of India, K.R. Narayanan, who set up a Parliamentary Ethics Committee as a result; and to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.<sup>282</sup> It is estimated that over the last four decades hundreds of thousands of people have made a formal commitment to apply these ethics in their daily life. In 1999, UNESCO invited Thầy to join Nobel Peace Prize laureates in helping draft the “Manifesto 2000” for the new millennium, based on his text.<sup>283</sup> The final manifesto gathered over 70 million signatures worldwide, including those of many heads of state.

Thầy was invited to bring his teachings on applied ethics to China, in a series of trips at the turn of the millennium, as an official guest of the Buddhist Association of China. He was hosted by the deputy Minister for Religious Affairs, and received a large reception at leading Zen temples. There, he paid his respects to the patriarchs of his Zen lineage, and was invited to offer teachings and retreats. Thầy brought back to China a renewed Buddhism that was more relaxed, joyful, practical, and accessible; his books *Anger*, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, and *Old Path White Clouds* have found popularity with a new generation of seekers. His new handbook for novice monastic training became the first translation into modern Chinese in over 400 years and is read widely in Buddhist institutes.<sup>284</sup>

### **Deep ecology**

In the early 2000’s, Thầy became a leading Buddhist spokesperson for ‘deep ecology,’ developing his teachings on the environment that began with the Dai Dong conferences in the early 1970s. The insight of ‘interbeing’ became a foundation for his engaged action. Thầy published *The World We Have* (2008), fearlessly telling the truth, and outlining a Buddhist approach to the growing environmental crisis. “If the human race continues on its present course, the end of our civilization is coming sooner than we think,” he wrote.<sup>285</sup> In 2007 he led his entire community to become vegan, as a powerful message on how a plant-based diet can reduce suffering and protect the Earth.<sup>286</sup> His deepest insights for environment activists, captured in his book *Love Letter to the Earth*, are an invitation “fall in love with the Earth,” to create a truly sustainable source of energy to inspire action and engagement.

### **Engaged ethics for peace**

In September 2001, Thầy was in the U.S. leading retreats and giving public talks and interviews on his book, *Anger*, when the World Trade Center in New York was attacked. He led hundreds of people on walking meditation around Ground Zero and addressed the issues of non-violence and forgiveness in a

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<sup>281</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh Dharma Talk in Plum Village, June 21, 2009.

<sup>282</sup> India, 1996; Davos, 2000; White House, December 2000

<sup>283</sup> See: <http://www.peace.ca/manifesto2000codeofethics.htm>

<sup>284</sup> Novice training manual: Thich Nhat Hanh, *Stepping Into Freedom: An Introduction to Buddhist Monastic Training* (1997). In Vietnamese: *Bước Tới Thành Thoi* (1996).

<sup>285</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology* (2008), p.43

<sup>286</sup> See Thầy’s Blue Cliff letter, “Sitting in the Autumn Breeze,” guiding the entire residential community of all his practice centers to become vegan, to reduce not only animal suffering but also their carbon footprint.

memorable speech to over two thousand people at New York’s Riverside Church—where Dr. King had spoken nearly 35 years earlier about the Vietnam War. There were many who tried to dissuade him from speaking, knowing that he would be in danger if he spoke out for calm, compassion, and tolerance at a time of such heightened tension. “Even if I get shot,” he told them, “I would still be your teacher. But if I am too afraid to speak out, I’d no longer be worthy of being your teacher, and the loss would be far greater.” Two years later, at a time of heightened tensions with North Korea, he gave a speech in South Korea observing that “Our political leaders have been trained in political science but not in making peace, inner peace and outer peace. We have to support them to bring a spiritual dimension to our political life.”<sup>287</sup> Six months into the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Thầy spoke boldly for peace at the U.S. Library of Congress, met with Senator John McCain to raise his concerns, and led a two-day mindfulness retreat for U.S. congressmen and congresswomen. He reaffirmed the importance of not demonizing the enemy, and described compassion as a sign of great courage and strength—not of weakness—and the best way to guarantee true security and peace.

## Return to Vietnam

In 2005, following a year of preparation and negotiations that coincided with Vietnam’s application to enter the World Trade Organization, the communist government of Vietnam finally granted Thầy permission to return home after 39 years of exile, accompanied by a large delegation of over 200 monastic and lay followers. He gave public talks and retreats in a strictly controlled format, and a number of his books were finally allowed to be legally published in Vietnam.<sup>288</sup> Despite strict controls and limits on publicity, crowds of thousands attended Thầy’s days of mindfulness and retreats. Hundreds of young people who wanted to ordain as monastic students of Thầy were welcomed at Bat Nha Monastery, a large new temple in the Central Highlands, which had been built adjacent to Phương Bôi.<sup>289</sup> In 2007, Thầy returned to lead three Great Requiem Ceremonies for the millions on all sides who had died in the war, and in 2008, he returned once more to give the keynote speech at the United Nations International Vesak celebrations in Hanoi.<sup>290</sup> On each occasion he met the country’s political leaders.<sup>291</sup> In these encounters, as on his visits to Capitol Hill, the Parliament of India, Westminster in London, and Stormont in Northern Ireland, Thầy offered concrete recommendations to support ethics, prosperity, and progress in civil society, education, and international relations.

But the favorable conditions did not last long. The rapid growth of Bat Nha Monastery, which soon had 400 monks and nuns and hundreds of young visitors every month, caused the communist government to consider it a threat. After months of harassment, the monastics were forcibly dispersed on September 27, 2009, and in small groups sought sanctuary in the few temples willing to take the risk of sheltering them. Today, many of those same monks and nuns have become young teachers serving in Thầy’s monasteries thriving outside Vietnam, in Europe, America, and Asia. From 2007, these additional monasteries included Blue Cliff Monastery in upstate New York, Maison de l’Inspir in Paris, Thai Plum Village Practice Center in Khao Yai, Thailand; Magnolia Grove Monastery in Mississippi; the Asian

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<sup>287</sup> “Spiritual Reflections on War and Peace”, reprinted in *Mindfulness Bell* #34, Autumn 2003.

<sup>288</sup> Ahead of the trip, four books were allowed to be published; by autumn the total was twelve. See Thich Nhat Hanh, Q&A in Deer Park, 17 September 2005.

<sup>289</sup> For more detailed reports on this trip, including details of the talks Thầy gave, see *The Mindfulness Bell*, [issue No.39, Summer 2005](#).

<sup>290</sup> See *The Mindfulness Bell*, [issue No.48, Summer 2008](#) (Great Requiem Ceremonies) and [issue No.49, Autumn 2008](#) (Wesak in Hanoi).

<sup>291</sup> In 2008, Thầy had an official meeting with the President of Vietnam, Nguyễn Minh Triết.

Institute of Applied Buddhism on Lantau Island, Hong Kong; and Stream Entering Monastery in the Australian state of Victoria.<sup>292</sup>

## Global spiritual leader and “Father of Mindfulness”

The years 2008-9 marked a new wave of expansive growth and activity for Thây and his community, in the West and in Asia—in many ways mirroring his intense activity of 1964-66, in the fields of ethics (precepts); education; and engaged action. Thây revised the term “Engaged Buddhism” to become “Applied Buddhism.” Just as with applied mathematics or physics, Thây saw the importance of truly applying the Buddhist teachings of mindfulness and interbeing to every aspect of life and society. Following an invitation to address UNESCO in Paris, Thây expanded and updated his one-page code of ‘global ethics’ (the Five Mindfulness Trainings) to become a truly universal ethical code that can address the roots of social injustice, violence, fear, anxiety, craving, loneliness and despair.<sup>293</sup>

He established the new European Institute of Applied Buddhism in Germany, today the largest Buddhist institute in Europe, offering courses on bringing mindfulness practices into every sector of society. He created the Wake Up Schools program training teachers to integrate mindfulness in education.<sup>294</sup> Schools, Thây said, can offer students ‘a second chance’ to learn things they may not learn at home: how to handle stress and tension; how to handle strong emotions; how to listen deeply and speak compassionately; how to create a happy moment for themselves and others; how to identify and realise their deepest dreams. Thây explored non-sectarian ways to share ‘the art of happiness’ and ‘the art of suffering’ with young people all over the world. With over three decades of experience sharing mindfulness with families and children, Thây saw the need to keep the spirit of true mindfulness as it made its way into classrooms and educational settings. He co-authored the book, *Happy Teachers Change The World*, which outlined a vision for an embodied, community-based way of sharing mindfulness in schools.

Thây also established the Wake Up movement (of “Young Buddhists and non-Buddhists for a Healthy and Compassionate Society”), which today comprises a network of over 100 local groups in Europe, America and Asia, organising weekly gatherings, flashmob meditations, mindful hikes, weekend retreats, and engaged actions together. Thây’s honesty and authenticity about his own experience appealed to the hearts of the young generation, eager to learn from Thây’s way of handling difficult moments and strong feelings (including love), and his own deep aspiration to make the world a better place.<sup>295</sup> When the young people organized a sitting meditation event with Thây in London’s Trafalgar Square, over 3,000 gathered, making it the largest meditation event in the city’s history.

### The way out

Thây realised that it is a mistaken idea of happiness that lies at the root of suffering in the West: many people think that by chasing after wealth, status, influence, power, and pleasure, they can be happy, but

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<sup>292</sup> The new Blue Cliff Monastery brought together the sanghas of Maple Forest and Green Mountain Dharma Center (in Vermont); Maison de l’Inspir was the new name for the Fleur de Cactus sangha house (est. 1985) in Paris after the property was rebuilt and monastics became permanent residents (in 2008)

<sup>293</sup> Thây’s speech at UNESCO took place on October 7, 2006 and can be read [here](#). For more on his teachings on global ethics, see his lecture series, “The Path of the Buddha” (a 21-Day Retreat in Plum Village in June 2009). Edited teachings of these lectures are published in Thich Nhat Hanh, *Good Citizens: Creating Enlightened Society* (2012). The revised Five Mindfulness Trainings are published in Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Mindfulness Survival Kit: Five Essential Practices* (2013).

<sup>294</sup> See [wakeupschools.org](#), and Thich Nhat Hanh and Katherine Weare, *Happy Teachers Change the World: A Guide for Cultivating Mindfulness in Education* (2016).

<sup>295</sup> Thây’s own experience of falling in love was shared with the young generation in 1992, and later published in Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love* (1996).

this only leads to more alienation, craving, and restlessness—as well as inequality and destruction of precious natural resources. When asked what had struck him the most during his early years in the West, Thầy said, “the first thing I learned was that even if you have a lot of money and power and fame, you can still suffer very deeply. If you don’t have enough peace and compassion within you, there is *no way* you can be happy.”<sup>296</sup> Thầy’s teachings emphasized the importance of touching what he called ‘true happiness’ right in the heart of the present moment. He maintained that helping people touch true happiness is the best way to address the root causes of injustice, inequality, and a runaway consumption society. When we know what true happiness is, he says, it is very easy to live more simply, and to take care of ourselves, our relationships, and the Earth.

### **Global platform**

With his courage to speak boldly on some of the toughest contemporary issues, and to teach concrete mindfulness practices as a way out, Thầy became a sought-after speaker in both East and West.<sup>297</sup> In 2008, he was invited to make an official visit to India as a “distinguished guest” of the Government of India. He gave lectures and retreats, a speech to the national Parliament, met with Sonia Gandhi, President of the Indian National Congress, and was guest editor of *The Times of India* for Mahatma Gandhi’s Memorial Day. He was invited to address the World Parliament of Religions (2009), and Thai politicians at the University of Mahidol in Bangkok (2010). He was invited back to address the U.S. Congress for a second time (2011), and in 2012 to speak at the UK Parliament in Westminster, the Northern Ireland Assembly in Stormont, and the French Senate in Paris. After his public speech in Dublin, *The Irish Times* dubbed him “The Father of Mindfulness.”<sup>298</sup> In 2014, the Vatican sent an official envoy to Plum Village to invite Thầy to Rome to represent Buddhism for a global declaration of all faiths against slavery and human trafficking. When President Obama visited Vietnam, he quoted Thầy’s teachings on reconciliation in a major speech delivered in Hanoi.<sup>299</sup>

### **Growth in the East**

Over his decades of teaching, Thầy has defied categorisation as a teacher of Zen, Pure Land, or Theravada Buddhism, preferring to say that he was “presenting the teachings of Early Buddhism in a Mahayana spirit,” or “taking Mahayana Buddhism to bathe in the waters of Early Buddhism.”<sup>300</sup> At his centers, he has stripped away many rituals, formalities, and esoteric observances to restore the living essence of Buddhist meditation practice. In so doing he has gone beyond simply teaching “Mahayana Zen” Buddhism, per se, to teaching a modern, renewed, revitalized Buddhism and meditation practice in harmony with the spirit of the Buddha’s original teachings. This unique combination of Buddhism’s two main branches has added significantly to Thầy’s appeal in both East and West.

From 2008 onwards, Thầy’s influence in Asia bloomed, especially among the young, who were drawn to his new style of Buddhism, free from dogma, ritual, and superstition. In 2013, over 10,000 people attended his public talk in Busan, South Korea; and 12,000 people attended his talk in Hong Kong, where he also led special training sessions for teachers and health professionals. As the main hub of his community in Asia, Plum Village Practice Center in Thailand has grown to over 200 monastics, who travel to lead retreats in Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines and Taiwan. In Thailand, Thầy has given

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<sup>296</sup> Interview with John Malkin, *Shambhala Sun* magazine, July 1, 2003

<sup>297</sup> In 2006 TIME magazine named him one of Sixty Heroes of Asia.

<sup>298</sup> *The Irish Times*, April 10, 2012.

<sup>299</sup> “We learned a lesson taught by the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, who said, “In true dialogue, both sides are willing to change.” In this way, the very war that had divided us became a source for healing.” - President Obama, National Convention Center, Hanoi, Vietnam. May 24, 2016. Source:

<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/05/24/remarks-president-obama-address-people-vietnam>

<sup>300</sup> Interview with Melvin McLeod for *Shambhala Sun*, February 17, 2017, “[Love and Liberation: An interview with Thich Nhat Hanh](#)” (“presenting the teachings...”); “bathe in the waters of Source Buddhism” the 37th tenet of the 40 Tenets of the Plum Village Tradition.



lectures and retreats at Mahachulalongkorn University (MCU), the largest Buddhist university in the world, and home to distinguished scholars in Theravada Buddhism.<sup>301</sup> In China, his modern translations of ancient sutras have been re-translated back into contemporary Chinese and found a wide audience.

It was in the East that Thầy's simple and elegant calligraphies were first celebrated, with a huge exhibition at the Hong Kong University Museum and Art Gallery in November 2010, and subsequent exhibitions in Taiwan (2011) and Bangkok (2013). Exhibitions were also hosted in Vancouver (2011) and Germany (2012).<sup>302</sup> Thầy's calligraphies began as inspiring phrases to remind his students to be mindful in daily life, with phrases like "Breathe, you are alive" or "Smile to the Cloud in your Tea." Today they have become sought-after works of art, and have been published in book form.<sup>303</sup> It is estimated that Thầy created more than 10,000 calligraphies for his students in his lifetime.

### **Monk of influence**

On Thầy's final teaching tour of North America in 2013, he led a retreat for over 1,500 educators in Toronto; opened an exhibition of his calligraphies on Broadway, N.Y.C.; lectured at Harvard Medical School; led mindfulness workshops at the World Bank headquarters in Washington, D.C.; spoke at Stanford University; led a day of mindfulness for over 700 Google employees; and guided an afternoon of mindfulness for some of Silicon Valley's leading CEOs, including the head of Salesforce, Marc Benioff, who became a strong supporter of Thầy and his message. "Do you want to be 'number one,' or do you want to be happy?" Thầy asked. "You can be a victim of your success," he said, "but you can never be a victim of your happiness." In Spring 2014, Thầy offered support to his student Christiana Figueres, as she prepared to lead the COP21 climate talks in Paris, which resulted in the landmark Paris Agreement. Ms. Figueres later credited her success to Thầy's teachings and guidance.<sup>304</sup> Thầy's influence has also extended to Hollywood. Oscar-winning directors Alejandro G. Inarritu and Alfonso Cuarón have attended Thầy's retreats, and follow his teachings; the late comedian Gary Shandling, another keen follower, introduced Thầy when he spoke at the U.S. Congress.<sup>305</sup>

### **A path, not a tool**

In June 2014, as Thầy's health was weakening, Thầy led a 21-day retreat entitled "What Happens When We Are Alive? What Happens When We Die?" in which he presented his insights on the art of living and dying.<sup>306</sup> It was a time of explosive popularity of secular mindfulness, during which even the US military were turning to mindfulness professionals to train soldiers to improve their performance. When asked whether teachers should train the military or not, Thầy explained that wherever his students teach, they should offer the complete teaching, including ethics, and never dilute or de-naturalize the practice, or use it for unethical ends. "Mindfulness," he explained, "is a *path*, not a tool." In September 2014, Thầy completed a radical new translation of the Heart Sutra, making it clear that 'emptiness' does not

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<sup>301</sup> Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU) and Plum Village International signed an interchange agreement (MOU) in March 2011, to collaborate in sharing retreats and days of mindfulness; to support the growth of the Wake Up movement in Thailand (sharing Plum Village's renewed Buddhist teachings and applied ethics with the young generation); and to develop a Master's Degree Program in Applied Buddhism at MCU.

<sup>302</sup> Taiwan: April 8-23, 2011 at [Dharma Drum Mountain's World Center for Buddhist Education](#), New Taipei City. A joint Exhibition of Chinese Calligraphy Works of Master Thich Nhat Hanh and Master Sheng Yen, curated by Dr. Eva Yuen. Bangkok: April 2-12, 2013 at Bangkok Art and Culture Centre (see [Bangkok Post](#)). Vancouver Exhibition: August 6-11, 2011, at the Asian Centre Auditorium, University of British Columbia; Germany Exhibition: August 2012 at the European Institute of Applied Buddhism (EIAB), Waldbröl, Germany.

<sup>303</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *This Moment is Full of Wonders: The Zen Calligraphy of Thich Nhat Hanh* (2015)

<sup>304</sup> Jo Confino, "This Buddhist Monk Is An Unsung Hero In The World's Climate Fight," [interview](#) with Christiana Figueres for the *Huffington Post*, January 22, 2016.

<sup>305</sup> Leo Barraclough, "Alejandro G. Inarritu on Mindfulness Documentary 'Walk With Me'", *Variety*, March 9, 2017.

<sup>306</sup> Published in Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Living: Peace and Freedom in the Here and Now* (2016).

mean ‘nothingness,’ and demonstrating that even one of Mahayana Buddhism’s most sacred texts can be transformed into a living practice.<sup>307</sup>

## A cloud never dies

True to the spirit of his heritage in the meditation schools of Master Tăng Hội and Master Linji, Thầy has never sought to hold a title or position, nor has he ever courted the limelight. And yet this simple, gentle monk has touched the hearts and changed the lives of countless people. He has been described as “the most important figure in Western Buddhism... in terms of direct influence through number of students taught and the degree to which terms and concepts he has coined or emphasized (“engaged Buddhism,” “interbeing,” “mindfulness,” etc.) impact the very language of contemporary Western Buddhism itself.”<sup>308</sup> In a recent academic survey of ‘The Buddhist World,’ he was selected as one of the ten most influential, distinctive, or representative leaders in Buddhist history, given his influence on contemporary global Buddhism.<sup>309</sup> Thầy’s mindfulness practices and model of retreats—developed from his own challenges and insights—have been taken up by hundreds of thousands of people, on every continent and from every walk of life. He has sold over three million books in the U.S. alone, and tens of millions worldwide.

In an extraordinary teaching career spanning 65 years, Thầy has revitalized Buddhism for the twenty-first century, and transformed Buddhism from a devotional or scholarly pursuit into a living practice that can continue to renew itself. Thầy has lived through the turbulent fallout of colonialism, militarization, and globalisation, and consistently offered a Buddhist response appropriate to the times. He has integrated ancient Buddhist wisdom with elements from Western psychology, science, ecology, ethics, and education, to address the deep roots of fear, violence, oppression, injustice, and environmental destruction; and offer a way forward for the human family to touch peace, reconciliation and true happiness.<sup>310</sup>

On 11th November 2014, a month after his 89th birthday, Thầy, suffered a severe brain hemorrhage, which left him unable to speak or walk. Doctors at first said it would be impossible to survive, but he made an extraordinary recovery. After recuperating in France and then San Francisco, where he made significant progress, Thầy returned to Plum Village for the whole of 2016, before moving to join his large community of young Vietnamese monastics in Thailand. Still unable to speak or walk, yet communicating vividly, in October 2018, he decided to return to Vietnam to live his remaining days at his “root temple,” Từ Hiếu Temple in Huế, where he first began his monastic life, and where he has been titular Abbot since 1968 and Head of the Lineage since the 1990s. In this bold gesture of both homecoming and reconciliation, Thầy’s life comes full circle, as he connects his large international following to the spiritual roots of his teachings and Engaged Buddhism in his homeland.<sup>311</sup> With his own

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<sup>307</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Other Shore: A New Translation of the Heart Sutra* (2016).

<sup>308</sup> Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (2014), p.34

<sup>309</sup> John Powers, Ed. *The Buddhist World* (2016), p.5; pp.606-616.

<sup>310</sup> In 2017, Union Theological Seminary in New York launched a course in his honor (Thich Nhat Hanh Program for Engaged Buddhism), exploring Buddhist engagement with issues of peacebuilding, climate change, racism, violence, incarceration and inter-faith collaboration.

<sup>311</sup> In April 19, 2019, nine leading U.S. Senators travelled to Huế on an official visit to pay their respects and offer their gratitude. Thầy was in good health, strong, and bright, and able to spend over an hour with the delegation. The delegation included Senators Leahy, Murkowski, Stabenow, Whitehouse, Udall, Portman, Baldwin, Hirono, and Kaine, and their spouses. A number of them attended Thầy’s lectures on Capitol Hill in 2003 and 2011, and have even joined Thầy on retreat. They shared that Thầy has taught them what peace is, and how to smile, and how to enjoy every step as they walk to make their votes.

life, Thầy teaches us that we can embrace even the greatest adversity with courage and compassion, and that our true presence is the best gift we can offer those we love.

Thầy's students continue his work of healing, transformation and reconciliation, establishing "communities of resistance" around the world. Increasing numbers of Western disciples have come to ordain in Plum Village, which has transformed from a small rural farmstead into Europe's largest Buddhist monastery—one whose high level of interaction with lay practitioners underscores the need for strong monastic sanghas in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Thầy's monastic and lay Dharma Teachers continue to lead a growing number of retreats and training programs for families, teachers, scientists, social workers, businesspeople, ecologists, activists, and the young generation. With the ARISE sangha, Thầy's community is exploring ways to be of support to people of color; with the Earth Holder sangha, the community is developing ways to protect the Earth, and offer teachings to address fear, alienation, and despair in the face of climate crisis. The strength, diversity and vitality of Thầy's international community may be his greatest legacy of all. His aspirations and hopes live on in a thriving community of all ages, nationalities, and backgrounds, continuing to evolve and develop his teachings and practices, making them ever more appropriate to our times.

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Thầy is made of infinite non-Thầy elements, and this biography could easily have been ten times longer. There are many different ways to write the truth; this is just one of them. It has been written with the sangha eye and sangha heart. Although we've done our best to balance diverse perspectives, we recognise it still has its shortcomings. We regret that space has not allowed us to include the names of every person who influenced Thầy's teaching, thinking, and actions; nor have we been able to include the names of all those who wholeheartedly continue his teachings, engagement, and practice in the world today, including all his lay and monastic disciples. We hope that in reading this biography you can see yourself in Thầy and Thầy in you, and that this one way of telling the story of his life can be a source of inspiration, nourishment, and strength, as you continue to carry Thầy into the future.

Despite our best efforts to resolve factual inconsistencies (including those in books and articles already in print), and to correct errors, we may still have overlooked some mistakes, for which we apologise. If you notice any outstanding errors, please submit suggested corrections, including reference to sources, to: [press@plumvillage.org](mailto:press@plumvillage.org). We would also be very happy to receive photos, anecdotes, or other stories about Thầy you may wish to share.

## ENDNOTES

## APPENDIX 1: EARLY BOOKS BY THICH NHAT HANH

1949 – *Tiếng Địch Chiều Thu* (“Reed Flute in the Autumn Twilight”), and *Ánh Xuân Vàng* (“The Golden Light of Spring”). Two collections of poems published by Dragon River Press, under the pen name Hoàng Hoa.

1949 – *Vấn Đề Nhận Thức trong Duy Thức Học* (“The Matter of Cognition in Vijñānamātra”)

1950 – *Thơ Ngụ Ngôn*, (“Fables”). Collected poems, published by Đuốc Tuệ publishing house, under the name Hoàng Hoa.

1950 – *Đông Phương Luận Lý Học* (“Oriental Logic”). Published by Hương Quê publishing house. The book included discussions of Oriental and Buddhist logic (*hetu-vidya*, 因明), in the light of Aristotle, Hegel, Marx & Engels. It was published under his own name, Nhất Hạnh.

1953 – *Gia Đình Tin Phật* (“Buddhist Families”), Nhất Hạnh. Published by Đuốc Tuệ. A collection of articles first printed in the magazine *Hương Thiên* in Đà Lạt in 1951.

1953 – *Là Phật Tử* (“Being Buddhist”), published by Hương Quê.

1955 – *Chỉ Quán Yếu Lược* (“An outline of Shamatha and Vipashyana (Stopping and Looking Deeply)”). A collection of his articles printed in the magazine *Từ Quang*, published by Hội Phật Học Nam Việt (the South Vietnam National Buddhist Association).

1957 – *Đạo Phật Qua Nhận Thức Mới* (“A Fresh Look at Buddhism”). A collection of the first series of ten articles printed in *Dân Chủ* newspaper in 1955. Published under the pen name Thạch Đức, by Hội Phật Học Nam Việt.

1958 – *Duy Thức Học* (“Vijñānavāda Studies”). Published by Phật Học Đường Nam Việt, under the pen name Thạch Đức.

1958 - *Cậu Đông* (“Uncle Dong”). A translation and adaptation of Molière’s *La Tartuffe*, published by Sen Vàng. Foreword and translation by Nhất Hạnh

1958 – *Đời của Phật* (“Life of the Buddha”). Published by Phật Học Đường Nam Việt.

1959 – *Để Hiểu Đạo Phật* (“Understanding Buddhism”). Published by Phật Học Đường Trung Phần (the Buddhist Association of Central Vietnam), under the pen name Phương Bối.

1962 – *Bông Hồng Cài Áo* (“A Rose for Your Pocket”). Published under Nhất Hạnh.

1964 – *Đạo Phật Ngày Nay* (“Buddhism Today”). Published under his own name, Nhất Hạnh, by Lá Bối press, which he had recently founded. It was a collection of a series of articles that had appeared in *Liên*

*Hoa* magazine in Hue, in 1961. A French translation was also published in Paris in 1964, with the title *Aujourd'hui le Bouddhisme* (translation by Le Vinh Hao). It was Thich Nhat Hanh's first book to be published in the West, and was reviewed by Thomas Merton.

1964 – *Tình Người*. Published under the pen name *Tâm Quán*, by Lá Bối press.

1964 – *Đạo Phật Đi Vào Cuộc Đời* (“Engaged Buddhism” or literally “Buddhism entering into life.” Thich Nhat Hanh translated the title as “Engaged Buddhism”). It was published under his own name, Nhất Hạnh, by Lá Bối press.

1965 – *Chắp Tay Nguyễn Cửu Cho Bò Câu Trắng Hiện* (“Palms Joined in Prayer for the White Dove to Appear”). It was published under his own name, Nhất Hạnh, by Lá Bối press.

1965 – *Nói Với Tuổi Hai Mươi* (“Message to a Twenty-year-old”). It was published under his own name, Nhất Hạnh, by Lá Bối press.

1965 – *Dialogue*. Published by Lá Bối press in English, this was a collection of letters written by leading Buddhists, writers and intellectuals in Vietnam, to leading figures in the US and Europe, to call for their intervention to help stop the war. It included Thich Nhat Hanh's letter to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

1965 – *Đạo Phật Hiện Đại Hóa* (“Actualized Buddhism”). It was published under his own name, Nhất Hạnh, by Lá Bối press.

1966 or 1967 – *Phật Giáo Việt Nam và Hướng Đi Nhân Bản Đích Thực* (“Vietnamese Buddhism: authentic humanism”). Published under the name Thạc Đức, by Lá Bối press (no extant copies).

1967 – *Nẻo Về Cửa Ý* (“*The Mind Finds its Way Home*) *His journals from 1962-66*, published under his own name, Nhất Hạnh, by Lá Bối press. The first English translation, by Vo Dinh, was published in 1969, with the title *The Return Path of Thoughts*. A new translation by Mobi Warren was published in 1999 by Riverhead Books, with the title *Fragrant Palm Leaves: Journals 1962-66*.

1967 – *Hoa Sen Trong Biển Lửa* (“Lotus in a Sea of Fire”). It was published under his own name, Nhất Hạnh, and circulated underground in Vietnam. The English edition *Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, was published by Hill & Wang in America the same year (he translated it himself). It was his first book to be published in English, and his second book to be published in the West (after *Aujourd'hui le Bouddhisme* in France in 1964).

1967 – *Nhìn Kỹ Quê Hương* (“Look Back at Your Homeland”). Published illegally by the Van Hanh University Student Union. They gave the name of the publishing house as The Association of Vietnamese Buddhists Overseas.

1968 – *The Cry of Vietnam*. The first edition of Thich Nhat Hanh's poetry in English, published by Unicorn Press in the USA.

1968 – *Đối Thoại: Cánh Cửa Hòa Bình* (“Gateway to Peace”). Published underground under the name Nhất Hạnh.

1969 – *Vấn Đề Nhận Thức Trong Duy Thức Học* (“The matter of cognition Vijnanamatra”) This was first published in 1949. Published under the name Nhất Hạnh by Lá Bối press.

1970 – *Đạo Phật Ngày Mai* (“Buddhism Tomorrow”). Published by Lá Bối press, under the pen name B’su Danglu (taken from the name of the village of the montagnards in B’lao near Phương Bối Hermitage).

1971 – *Nẻo Vào Thiền Học* (“Zen Keys”). Published under the name Nhất Hạnh by Lá Bối press. The French edition, *Les Clés Pour le Zen* was published by Seghers in Paris in 1972, his third book to be published in the West. The English edition, *Zen Keys: A Guide to Zen Practice*, was published in 1974.

1972 – *The Path of Return Continues the Journey*. A play by Thich Nhat Hanh telling the true stories of the challenges, courage and sacrifices in choosing a path of non-violence and peace in war-torn Vietnam. Published by the Hoa Binh Press at the Thomas Merton Life Center in New York, with a Foreword by Daniel Berrigan.

1973 – *Đạo Phật Áp Dụng Vào Đời Sống Hàng Ngày* (“The Application of Buddhism in Daily Life”). Published by Viện Hóa Đạo press in Vietnam.

1974 – *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận* (“Treatise on the History of Vietnamese Buddhism”, Volume 1). Published by Lá Bối press, under the pen name Nguyễn Lang.

1975 – *Ý Thức Em Mặt Trời Tỏa Rạng* (“Awareness is the Bright Sun”). A book of recommendations for Thầy’s young student social workers in Vietnam, written by Thich Nhat Hanh in Europe and distributed in Vietnam in 1975 under the pen name Thạc Đức. Published underground in Vietnam in 1976 with the new title, *Hàm Tiếu Thiền: Phép Lạ Của Sự Tỉnh Thức* (“Zen with a Smile: the miracle of mindfulness”). The first English edition was published in the US in 1974 by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, with the title *The Miracle of Being Awake*. Only after it was accepted for publication by Beacon Press in 1975 did it receive its present title *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. It was also later published by Pax Christi in London in 1987 with the title *Be Still and Know: Meditation for Peacemakers*. The French edition had the title, *Le Miracle est de Marcher sur Terre* (“The Miracle is to Walk on Earth”).



## APPENDIX 2: BUDDHIST LECTURES BY THICH NHAT HANH

*Courses delivered by Thầy during 90-Day Winter Retreats and 21-Day June Retreats, from 1988 to 2014. Please note: Winter teachings were primarily given in Vietnamese; June teachings in English. Details of publication given where applicable.*

**Winter 1988-89:** Vasubandhu's *Thirty Verses on Manifestation Only* (*Triṃśikā-vijñaptimātratā*, 唯識三十頌).

**Winter 1989-90:** *Southern Transmission: The Five Nikāyas of the Sutta Piṭaka in the Pāli Canon*, a comparative study with texts in the Chinese Canon.

**June 1990:** *Buddhist Psychology and the Satipaṭṭhāna Sūtra* (念處經) – a 21-Day Retreat in English; a comparative study of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sūtra* in Pali and Chinese. Published in *Transformation and Healing: Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness* (1990).

**Winter 1990-91, and Winter 1991-92:** A course in Mahāyāna sūtras, including the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* (八千頌般若經) and the *Prajñāpāramitā Ratnaguṇasamcayagāthā* (般若波羅蜜多寶德藏偈), and the *Ratnakūṭa Sūtra* collection (寶積經), the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (維摩詰經), the *Lotus Sutra* (*Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*), the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (華嚴經), and the *Diamond Sutra* (*Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* 金剛般若波羅蜜經). Diamond Sutra teachings published in: *The Diamond that Cuts Through Illusion: Commentaries on the Prajñāparamita Diamond Sutra* (1992). See also: *Awakening of the Heart: Essential Buddhist Sutras and Commentaries* (2012).

**June 1992:** “Cultivating the Mind of Love: *Vipassanā* in the Mahāyāna tradition” – a 21-Day Retreat in English. Published in *Cultivating the Mind of Love* (1996).

**Winter 1992-93:** Thich Nhat Hanh's *Fifty Verses on Consciousness*, building on Vasubandhu's *Twenty and Thirty Verses* (唯識二十頌, 唯識三十頌) and the teachings of the Indian Yogācāra scholar Sthiramati (安慧), the Chinese scholar Xuanzang (玄奘), and the Chinese patriarch Fazang (法藏). Later published in English: *Transformation at the Base: Fifty Verses on the Nature of Consciousness* (2001), incorporating further teachings from a course in Key West, Florida in 1997.

**Winter 1993-94:** “The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings” (an applied exploration of the essence of Buddhist teachings, epistemology and ontology). Published in Vietnamese: *Trái Tim Của Bụt* (1997), and in English: *The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings* (Rider, 1997).

**Autumn 1994:** *Samiddhi Sutta* (三彌提經), the Discourse on Youth & Happiness. Published in Vietnamese: *Thương Yêu Theo Phương Pháp Bụt Dạy* and *Hạnh Phúc Mộng Và Thực*.

**Winter 1994-5, 95-6, 96-7:** “The Living Tradition of Buddhist Meditation”: exploring the development of meditation practice from the time of the Buddha through to Mahayana Zen. Published in Vietnamese: *Truyền Thống Sinh Động Thiền Tập* and *Thiền sư Khương Tăng Hội*. Selected teachings published in English in *Master Tăng Hội: First Zen Teacher in Vietnam and China* (2001).

**June 1996:** “The Heart of the Buddha’s Teachings” – a 21-Day Retreat in English (see publication details above).

**November 1997:** Buddhist Psychology (teachings given in Key West, Florida; see publication details above).

**October 1998- March 99:** Commentary and new sutra translations for the Plum Village Daily Liturgy (*Công Phu Nữ Đóa Sen Ngàn Cánh*). New translations published in English in *Plum Village Chanting and Recitation Book* (2000), later revised with the title, *Chanting from the Heart: Buddhist Ceremonies and Daily Practices* (2007).

**May 1998:** “The Path of Emancipation” – a 21-Day Retreat in English on the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (*Discourse on the Full Awareness of Breathing*). Published in *The Path of Emancipation* (2000).

**Winter 1999-2000, 2000-01:** Asanga’s *Mahāyānasamgraha* (攝大乘論).

**June 2000:** “The Eye of the Buddha” – a 21-Day Retreat in English.

**Winter 2001-2 and 2002-3:** Nāgārjuna’s *Mādhyamika Shastra* (*Commentary on the Middle Way*: 中觀論). Published in Vietnamese (*Trung quán luận*): *Đập Vỡ Vô Hồ Đào* (2014).

**June 2002:** “The Hand of the Buddha” – a 21-Day Retreat in English on the *Lotus Sutra* (*Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*). Published in *Opening the Heart of the Cosmos: Insights on the Lotus Sutra* (2003).

**Spring 2003 and Winter 2003-4:** *The Records of Master Linji* (臨濟語錄), published in Vietnamese: *Người Vô Sự* (*Bình Giảng Lâm Tế Ngữ Lục*), and in English: *Zen Battles: Modern Commentary on the Teachings of Master Linji* (2009). These seasons also included teachings on the *Fourteen Verses on Consciousness* (*Samatha* and *Vipassanā*), and the *Essentials of the Vinaya*.

**June 2004:** “The Feet of the Buddha” – a 21-Day Retreat in English.

**Winter 2004-5 (cont. 2005-6):** Commentary on “The Tenets of the Different Buddhist Schools” by Vasumitra (also known as the *Treatise on the Wheel of Propositions of Different Schools*, *Samaya bhedoparacanacakra*, 異部宗輪論). Published in Vietnamese: *Những Con Đường Đưa Về Núi Thửu* (2014).

**Winter 2005-6, 2006-7:** “The Forty Tenets of Plum Village Buddhism.” Published in Vietnamese: *Làng Mai Nhìn Núi Thửu*. English translation forthcoming: *The Heart of Plum Village Teachings* (Parallax Press, 2021).

**June 2006:** “The Breath of the Buddha” – a 21-Day Retreat in English on the *Ānāpānasati Sutta* (*Discourse on the Full Awareness of Breathing*). See *Breathe, You are Alive!* (Rev. Ed. 2008).

**August 2006:** “The Brain of the Buddha” – a Retreat for Neuroscientists in the Field of Consciousness. Publication forthcoming.

**Winter 2007-8:** Fazang's *Treatise on the Golden Lion* (金獅子章). Published in Vietnamese: *Con Sư Tử Vàng Của Thầy Pháp Tạng* (2015).

**Winter 2008-9:** “The Path of the Buddha: the Buddhist Contribution to a Global Ethic” (developing a new version of the Five Mindfulness Trainings in the light of comparative ethics from West and East).

**June 2009:** “The Path of the Buddha” – a 21-Day Retreat in English. Teachings published in *Good Citizens: Creating Enlightened Society* (2012) and *The Mindfulness Survival Kit: Five Essential Practices* (2013).

**Winter 2009-10:** “The Art of Happiness”: Commentary on the *Arthapada Sutra* 義足經 in the *Sutta Nipata*. Published in Vietnamese: *Đạo Bụt Nguyên Chất* (2017).

**Winter 2010-11:** *Chinese Dhammapada* 法句經, including the *Nirvana Chapter*. Published in Vietnamese: *Kết Một Tràng Hoa* (2016) and *Rong Chơi Trời Phương Ngoại* (2017).

**Winter 2011-12:** Asanga’s *Yogācārabhūmi-sāstra* 瑜伽師地論 and Dignāga’s *Ālambanaparīkṣāvṛtti* 觀所緣論. Vietnamese publication forthcoming.

**June 2012:** “The Science of the Buddha” – a 21-Day Retreat in English. Publication forthcoming.

**Winter 2012-13:** “Are you a Soulmate of the Buddha?”: examining ways in which core teachings of the Buddha on suffering, nirvana, no-self and reincarnation have been misunderstood over the centuries. Published in Vietnamese: *Tri Kỳ Của Bụt* (2017). English translation forthcoming, Palm Leaves Press.

**Winter 2013-14:** “Revisiting the Manifestation-Only Teachings of the Yogācāra School” (*vijñapti-mātratā* 唯識宗), including teachings on the Ultimate Dimension and a comparison with Freudian psychology.

**June 2014:** “What Happens When We Die? What Happens When We’re Alive?” – a 21-Day Retreat in English. Teachings published in *The Art of Living: Peace and Freedom in the Here and Now* (2017).