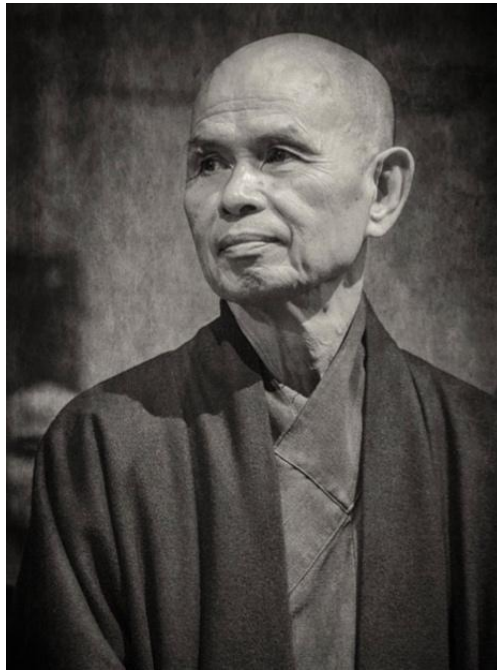


# THICH NHAT HANH: A Biography



## CONTENTS

Early life

Monastic training: traditional roots

Monastic training: seeking a new path

Creating a renewed, engaged Buddhism

Experimental community 1957-61

Princeton Theological Seminary & Columbia 1961-63

Leader in the Buddhist peace & social work movements 1963-66

Leaving Vietnam to call for peace 1966-

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

Paris Peace Talks & engaging new elements in the West

Pioneer of the mindfulness movement 1975-82

Building communities of mindful living 1982-

Renewing Buddhism: deepening roots, extending branches

Buddhism without borders

Return to Vietnam 2005-8

Global spiritual leader and “Father of Mindfulness”

A cloud never dies

*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. 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.

## Early life

**Thầy enjoyed a happy childhood. He was an eager and curious student, and from a young age dreamed of becoming a monk.**

Thầy was born on October 11, 1926, into a large family in the ancient imperial capital of Huế in central Vietnam. 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>1</sup> His mother, Trần Thị Dĩ, was from Hà Trung village, in Gio Linh District, in the neighboring province of Quảng Trị.<sup>2</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 the northern province of Thanh Hóa, about 500 kilometers north in the mountains. A year later, the family moved up to join him. As a boy, Thầy began to eagerly read the Buddhist books and magazines brought home by his elder brother Nho, whom he loved and admired. He registered for a nearby informal homeschool, with the family name “Nguyễn Đình Lang.”

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 awakened a clear and strong desire in him 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>3</sup>

A year or so later, Thầy and his brothers and friends were talking about what they wanted to be when they grew up. His elder brother Nho was the first to say he wanted to become a monk. The boys discussed it for a long time and finally all agreed to become monks. Thầy 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>4</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> 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>3</sup> The magazine was called *Đuốc Tuệ* (“Torch of Wisdom”). This story is told in Thích Nhất Hạnh, *A Pebble for Your Pocket* (2001).

<sup>4</sup> See Thích Nhất Hạnh 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 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.”

About six months later, on a school trip to a nearby sacred mountain aged eleven, Thầy had what he would later describe as his first spiritual experience.<sup>5</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>6</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>7</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>8</sup> The wish to become a monk continued to grow in Thầy's heart, and a few years later that dream would be realized.

In 1942, at the age of sixteen, with his parents' permission, Thầy returned to Huế to begin novice training at Từ Hiếu Temple, 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>9</sup> After three years of instruction, he formally received the novice precepts in the early morning of the full moon of the ninth lunar month of 1945.<sup>10</sup>

## Monastic training: traditional roots

**Thầy experienced a radically simple life as a young monk. His temple was peaceful and harmonious, yet beyond the temple walls Vietnam was facing famine, violence, and injustice, and soon a new war with France. Thay developed a strong determination to renew Buddhism so it could truly address the suffering he saw going on around him.**

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, Thầy recalled his novicehood as a happy time.

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<sup>5</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>6</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 Dữ, the 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>7</sup> This story is told in Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Hermit and the Well* (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love* (1996), pp.11-13.

<sup>9</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>10</sup> The full moon of the ninth lunar month would have been 21 October 1945. Thầy was initially given the aspirant name “Sung” and was known as “Điệu Sung.” Diệu means “aspirant” and Sung comes from the words *sung tuc*, meaning “prosperity” or “to prosper.” 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. 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 [bhikkhu]. 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>11</sup> His years at Từ Hiếu Temple were a time of rustic simplicity.<sup>12</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. Whenever Thầy 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>13</sup> The temple followed the Zen principle of 'no work, no food,' which applied to everyone from the highest monk to the newest member.<sup>14</sup> His Zen training was practical and down-to-earth. Thầy was taught to become fully present and 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>15</sup>

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>16</sup> When the French returned to reclaim Vietnam in 1945, the violence only increased. 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 colonizing powers, just as it had during the renowned Ly and Tran dynasties in medieval Vietnam.<sup>17</sup>

In 1947, Thầy's teacher sent him to study and live at the nearby Báo Quốc Institute of Buddhist Studies in Huế.<sup>18</sup> His studies took place against the backdrop of the First Indochina War (1946-54), as, 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>19</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>20</sup> Although unarmed and nonviolent, many monks, including some of Thầy's close friends, were shot and killed.<sup>21</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.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>11</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 Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* (1999) pp.103-115.

<sup>12</sup> Nhat Hanh, *My Master's Robe* (2002).

<sup>13</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* (1999) p.111.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, p.9

<sup>15</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 Zhouong, and the *Encouraging Words* of Master Guishan. The meditation he learned as a novice in Từ Hiếu Temple was from the Tiantai school.

<sup>16</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>17</sup> Hanh, *My Master's Robe* (2002). For more on Thầy describing being tempted by the communist path himself, see: *Mindfulness Bell*, issue #34, Autumn 2003

<sup>18</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>19</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>20</sup> Thầy recalls sheltering revolutionaries in his letter, Nhat Hanh, "The Magical Sound of the Sitar," October 13, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> Thích Tâm Thường, a very close friend was among those killed. See Nhat Hanh, *Inside the Now* (2015), p.15.

<sup>22</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).

At Báo Quốc, Thầy continued to read progressive Buddhist magazines 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>23</sup> Magazines such as *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.

## Monastic training: seeking a new path

**Thầy broke free from the confines of Huế, to broaden his horizons and further his studies in Saigon. There, in his early twenties, his career as a poet and writer soon took off.**

In late spring 1949, after two years at the Báo Quốc Institute, 23-year-old Thầy left Huế with two other monks and a friend to further their studies in Saigon.<sup>24</sup> As battles were still raging, they took a long route, and in parts travelled by boat to avoid the military roadblocks. 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”).<sup>25</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>26</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.<sup>27</sup> Capturing his experiences of war and loss, his poetry was well received and were considered some of the best examples of Vietnam’s new and influential “free verse” poetry movement.<sup>28</sup> From this time, he established a reputation first and foremost as a poet rather than as a monk or teacher; a real distinction since for centuries poets had been esteemed figures in Vietnamese culture and society.

In autumn 1950, Thầy helped co-found Ân 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,

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<sup>23</sup> For example, *Tiến Hóa* Buddhist magazine. Thầy was also inspired by the writings of Zen Master Thích Mật Thể (1912-1961) and the author Nguyễn Trọng Thuật (1883–1940). 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, 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>24</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>25</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 10-11th Centuries, 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>26</sup> See footnote 11, above.

<sup>27</sup> *Tiếng Địch Chiều Thu* (“Reed Flute in the Autumn Twilight,” a collection of fifty poems and a play in verse) published under the name Nhất Hạnh by Dragon River Press in autumn 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>28</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Inside the Now: Meditations on Time* (2015), pp.23-24

and is today one of the most prominent temples in the city.<sup>29</sup> It was there that Thầy received the Bhikshu precepts the following year.<sup>30</sup> While completing the formalities of his education, Thầy published in 1950 his first book on Buddhism, *Oriental Logic*, a discussion of Eastern logic in the light of Aristotle, Hegel, Marx and Engels.<sup>31</sup> He also continued with initiatives to renew Buddhism and apply Buddhist teachings to the issues and challenges of his time. He was invited to Đà Lạt, up in the Central Highlands north of Saigon, to edit a Buddhist magazine and train young monks. There he began to publish a new kind of book for lay Buddhists, proposing ways to apply the teachings in daily family life, beyond just offering incense and prayers.<sup>32</sup> For the Lunar New Year of 1952 in Đà Lạt, Thầy directed his students in his adaptation of *Le Tartuffe*.<sup>33</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>34</sup>

## Creating a renewed, engaged Buddhism

**Thầy emerged as a leading Buddhist voice teaching the young generation. As the political situation harshened, he found every way he could to make use of the printed word to galvanize efforts to unite Vietnam’s Buddhist schools and offer a compassionate Buddhist response to the crisis.**

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 in the South.<sup>35</sup> The board of the Ấn 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 of whom were drawn to Marxist ideals; or, feeling that Buddhist courses were neither rigorous nor relevant, were drawn by the promise of diplomas in secular professions, like medicine or engineering. Thầy was charged with creating a more relevant and inspiring Buddhist program, which would also, for the first time, offer them a diploma comparable to secular courses. While teaching at Ấn Quang, continued to write and publish his own poems, articles and books.<sup>36</sup> He also completed his own university studies and graduated with a BA in French and Vietnamese Literature from the newly-opened university Faculté des Lettres de l’Université de Saigon.

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<sup>29</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, Dharma Talk in Hanoi, May 6, 2008. They founded the temple in 1949 together with Brother Trí Hữu. At first they called it Ứng Quang. Today Ấn Quang temple is one of the most well-known temples in the city.

<sup>30</sup> In October 1951, at the age of 25, Thầy formally received full ordination as a bhikshu at Ấn Quang Temple, with Venerable Thích Đôn Hậu as his Ordination Master. See: *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>31</sup> Thầy’s first book on Buddhism: *Đông Phương Luận Lý Học* (“Oriental Logic”) was published by Hương Quê publishing house in 1950. Formalities of his education: Thầy took the baccalauréat exams at Vương Gia Càn High School in Saigon, and in 1954 was accepted into the first cohort at the newly-opened Faculté des Lettres de l’Université de Saigon. Thầy completed his university studies while continuing to teach and publish his own poems, articles, and books, and was awarded a BA in French and Vietnamese Literature.

<sup>32</sup> Nhất Hạnh, *Là Phật Tử* (“Being Buddhist,” 1953), published by Hương Quê; and Nhất Hạnh, *Gia Đình Tin Phật* (“Buddhist Families,” 1953), published by Đuốc Tuệ (this was a collection of articles first printed in the magazine *Hương Thiện* in Dalat in 1951).

<sup>33</sup> Later published with the title *Câu Đòng*

<sup>34</sup> Nhất Hạnh, *Cultivating the Mind of Love* (1996), p.11

<sup>35</sup> It was created in 1951.

<sup>36</sup> Trí Không, unpublished memoirs.

(It is interesting to note that it was in enrolling for university that Thầy first took the opportunity to adopt the name Nguyễn Xuân Bảo, which has remained on his ID ever since.<sup>37</sup>)

In 1955, the regime of Vietnamese Catholic leader Ngô Đình Diệm began to consolidate power, using every means possible. Catholics were explicitly favored 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>38</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 crystallized. 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>39</sup> The tenth and final article was a bold Buddhist critique of President Diệm's doctrine of "personalism."<sup>40</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>41</sup>

As his recognition and standing grew, in 1956 Thầy was appointed Editor in Chief of *Vietnamese Buddhism*, the official magazine of the new National Buddhist Association.<sup>42</sup> He used a dozen pseudonyms to author articles on Vietnamese history, international literature (including Tolstoy, Albert Camus, Victor Hugo), philosophy, Buddhist texts, current affairs, short stories, and even folk poetry—doing everything he could to promote reconciliation and a spirit of togetherness between Buddhists of North and South.<sup>43</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.

## Experimental community

**Seeing the limitations of what was possible in traditional temple settings, Thầy explored a new model of Buddhist community, and began to develop the kind of spiritual practices that would later flourish in the West.**

Towards the end of 1956, Thầy began to spend more time in B'lo, a remote tea-growing region in the central highlands. There, Thầy retreated to a small thatched hut built out among the tea trees in the

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<sup>37</sup> Xuân Bảo can be translated as "Spring Treasure."

<sup>38</sup> According to Thich Nhat Hanh's private papers, they were published in 1955.

<sup>39</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Dharma Talk in Hanoi, May 6, 2008.

<sup>40</sup> His alternative to liberalism and Marxism which every government employee was required to follow.

<sup>41</sup> Nhat Hanh, unpublished private papers.

<sup>42</sup> *Vietnamese Buddhism* magazine: *Phật Giáo Việt Nam*

<sup>43</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), Minh Thư 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.

grounds of Phước Huệ Temple. 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.

Thầy dreamed of creating a monastic community there in the mountains, and was soon joined by a number of young monastic brothers and students from Ân Quang and Báo Quốc. 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. And it was also here that Thầy had a memorable dream, recorded in his writings, in which he saw his late mother.<sup>44</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>45</sup> In January 1958, they began clearing the land and that summer started erecting some simple wooden structures.

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>46</sup> With this new dream of a “rural practice center” Thầy definitively broke free of the mold 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.

Thầy put great effort into editing *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>47</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 and was hospitalized for almost a month in Grall Hospital in Saigon, where he was treated by French doctors.<sup>48</sup> His body was weak and he suffered from chronic insomnia. Even the doctors were unable to help, and his spirits were lower than ever.

**Practicing to stay alive: faced with sorrow and disappointment, it was by cultivating mindfulness and engaged action that Thầy found a way forward.**

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<sup>44</sup> See: Thich Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves: Journals 1962-66* (1999), p.99-100; and Nhat Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names*, p.122, “That Distant Autumn Morning,” a poem remembering the day his mother died, with notes.

<sup>45</sup> The land was bought from K'Briu and K'Brôi on August 7, 1957.

<sup>46</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* (1999), p.19

<sup>47</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>48</sup> *ibid.*, p.7



Thầy later described this period as a time of deep depression.<sup>49</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 gave him the spiritual strength he needed to find a way forward. As a young monk, Thầy studied the principle of counting and following the breath and trained in formal 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>50</sup> He began this practice at Ân Quang and continued to experiment with it in B'lo and at Phương Bôi, and later at Princeton Theological Seminary in the U.S.; and over the coming decades as his understanding of the sutras on meditation and breathing deepened.<sup>51</sup>

In spring 1959, known for his work as the Editor of *Vietnamese Buddhism* magazine, Thầy was invited to attend the international Buddha's birthday celebrations in Japan. Although his health was still weak (for part of the trip he was hospitalized in Tokyo), it proved to be an important journey that expanded his horizons. It was Thầy's first trip outside of Vietnam and the first to expose him to the network of the wider Buddhist community, who had gathered from around the world. From the other delegates, Thầy heard about the great Buddhist collections in libraries in the west; and he realized the importance of learning English. On his return, he resolved to master the language within a year.

In November 1959, at a weekly lecture series he started giving 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. Known as 'Phương', she 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, captured in his articles, books, and lectures, for the first time found its practical application and field of action. For Thầy, there was no longer a question of having to choose between continuing to meditate in the monasteries or to go out and help those suffering in the violence and turmoil of war: he was determined to find a way to do both. 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>52</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.

## Princeton & Columbia

### **A rare opportunity to study in the West broadened Thầy's horizons, deepened his understanding of Christianity and western culture, and created timely conditions for personal healing and**

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<sup>49</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>50</sup> Nhat Hanh, Q&A in Plum Village, July 25, 2013:

<sup>51</sup> Nhat Hanh, unpublished private papers

<sup>52</sup> [Shambhala Sun interview](#), July 1, 2003

**spiritual breakthrough. There, Thầy crystallized his unique style of Buddhist writing and teaching, and created a new way to share the “Dharma” in the modern world—instantly broadening Buddhism’s appeal, and defining a what a contemporary Buddhist voice could sound like.**

In 1961, Thầy was offered one of the very first South Asia Fulbright Fellowships, to broaden his experience and scholarship, and travel to the U.S. to study Comparative Religion at Princeton Theological Seminary, from 1961-62.<sup>53</sup> It was in Princeton that Thầy 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>54</sup> 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 generations of Buddhist students in Vietnam. But I can say now that it was in the West that I realized my path.”<sup>55</sup>

In summer 1962, while guiding young people 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, inspiring the reader to cherish what they have right now in the present moment.<sup>56</sup> Thầy sent it to one of his student ‘cedars’ in Vietnam, who arranged for its publication right away.<sup>57</sup> The spirit and approach of *A Rose Your Pocket* broke entirely new ground in Buddhist writing, and crystallized Thầy’s distinctive writing style. There had never before been a book in Vietnamese which so lyrically applied Buddhist insights into a spiritual perspective on daily life, and it 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. The reader could touch the fruit of meditation without having to turn their heart and mind into a battlefield, fighting anger, grief, or craving. With its publication Thầy, who hitherto had been known primarily as a poet, editor, and Buddhist scholar, became known for his deep and accessible Buddhism. Already on Mother’s Day that year, Thầy’s students organized a “Rose Festival” to celebrate motherhood, based on the book.<sup>58</sup> The festival soon became an annual tradition celebrated across Vietnam, and it is today an integral part of Buddhist culture in the country. The book has sold over a million copies, and can be found in every Buddhist home.<sup>59</sup> Its fresh and intimate tone that so appealed to Vietnamese Buddhists created a new genre in modern Buddhist writing, adopted in both East and West.

After completing his year at Princeton Theological Seminary, Thầy stayed on in the U.S. and continued his research at Columbia (1962-3). It was an exciting time in religious scholarship in the West, with the Second Vatican Council just beginning. Within just a few years, many archaic forms and observances in Christian settings would be swept away. Monastics were asking themselves: What is the role of contemplation in a world of action? How can monastic life be authentically renewed for modern times?

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<sup>53</sup> Thầy’s private papers record it as a Fulbright Scholarship; it would have been one of the very first. Surviving records listing recipients of the Fulbright South-East Asia Scholarships only begin the following year. At Princeton Theological Seminary, Thầy stayed in Brown Hall.

<sup>54</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* (1999)

<sup>55</sup> Nhat Hanh, *A Home in the World* (2016), p. 87

<sup>56</sup> Nhất Hạnh, *Bông Hồng Cài Áo* (1962)

<sup>57</sup> He send 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. In 1965, the professional singer Phạm Thế Mỹ performed it as a modern Vietnamese song.

<sup>58</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>59</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 mother’s day in Vietnam began.

<sup>60</sup> At Columbia, Thầy made the most of the extensive Buddhist collection in the Butler Library, encountered the work of contemporary theologians, and benefited from the mentorship of the distinguished Professor Anton Zigmund-Cerbu. <sup>61</sup> Prof. Cerbu tried his best to persuade Thầy to start a Dept. for Vietnamese Studies at Columbia; but eventually, Thầy chose the difficult path of returning to Vietnam to do what he could to help the situation there. <sup>62</sup> (Half a century later, in 2017, Columbia's Union Theological Seminary would create a "Thich Nhat Hanh Master's Program for Engaged Buddhism" in his honor.)

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. Two decades earlier he had also been studying in the U.S. when he made the difficult decision to return to do what he could to help his homeland, even though it put his life at risk. Bonhoeffer returned home, became an outspoken voice of spiritual conscience against the Nazis, was imprisoned, and was executed in 1945. <sup>63</sup> Thầy was struck by Bonhoeffer's courage, compassion, and serenity in his final days in prison, and it led to a profound spiritual insight:

...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>64</sup>

### **Decision to return to help in Vietnam**

It was in 1963, during the annual spring Vesak Festival, that the Diệm regime's suppression of Buddhists dramatically escalated. <sup>65</sup> In the U.S., 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>66</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>67</sup> Before long, Thầy got news of the self-immolation of more monks and nuns. <sup>68</sup> His poem, "The

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<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (1965)

<sup>61</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>62</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Fragrant Palm Leaves* (1999), p.153

<sup>63</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>64</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>65</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.

<sup>66</sup> "Man Sets Himself Afire", *The New York Times*, July 1, 1969, p. 14. The Most Venerable Thích Quảng Đức was 73 years old.

<sup>67</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh Dharma Talk in Plum Village, June 7, 2002

<sup>68</sup> In August 1963: Br. Nguyễn Hương; Br. Thanh Tuệ; Sr. Diệu Quang; and Br. Tiêu Diêu

Fire That Consumes My Brother,” captured his agony and his firm resolve to continue to work for peace.<sup>69</sup> In August 1963, 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>70</sup>

After the Diệm regime fell in November 1963, Thầy received a cable from Thích Trí Quang, one of the leading monks in Vietnam, calling him back to Saigon to help once more in efforts to support Vietnamese Buddhism and galvanize its response to the worsening situation.<sup>71</sup>

## Leader in the Buddhist peace & social work movements

**Returning to Vietnam in January 1964, Thầy entered into a leadership role in the Buddhist movement for peace and social action, the so-called “Third Force” in the Vietnam War.<sup>72</sup>**

Thầy met with Buddhist leaders and students, and 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 to address the violence and discord:

1. *The Buddhist Congregation should publicly call for cessation of hostilities in Vietnam, and organize peace talks between North and South.*
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, to 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 organizing village affairs—in order to help bring about nonviolent social change based on the Buddha’s teachings.*

The following years were a period of intense activity and engagement as he galvanized the young generation through his teaching, writings, community-building and vision for social service. 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. They set up two pilot villages to begin their social work programs, and began offering classes to 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>73</sup> Within a few months they began publishing

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<sup>69</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>70</sup> Chan Khong, *Learning True Love* (Rev. 2007), Ch.5.

<sup>71</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>72</sup> See Sophie Quinn-Judge, *The Third Force in the Vietnam War: The Elusive Search for Peace 1954-75* (2017)

<sup>73</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 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.”

what soon became the Buddhist weekly paper, *Voice of the Rising Tide* (Hải Triều Âm).<sup>74</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 reports on the monks' hunger strikes and protests against ongoing government oppression.

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 and went 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>75</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>76</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>77</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>78</sup> Nonetheless, they circulated widely underground and became popular peace songs, sung in the streets and at student meetings.

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 to help shift public opinion in the West. In June 1965, Thầy wrote to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., while his colleagues wrote to Jean-Paul Sartres, Henry Miller and others.<sup>79</sup> There was a lot of misunderstanding in the West at the time, about the shocking images of self-immolations. 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 cannot remain silent.”<sup>80</sup> By the time they met a year later, in Chicago, Dr. King had joined the International Committee of Conscience on Vietnam.

### **Engaged Buddhism: Training a new generation of politically-neutral, engaged young Buddhist social workers**

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<sup>74</sup> The first issue was published on April 22, 1964.

<sup>75</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Call Me By My True Names* (1999).

<sup>76</sup> William S. Turley, Neil L. Jamieson and Others, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “The two Vietnams (1954–65),” see: [Britannica.com](http://Britannica.com)

<sup>77</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Chấp Tay Nguyện Cầu Cho Bò Câu Trắng Hiện* (1965).

<sup>78</sup> Thầy himself never considered the poems “anti-war” poetry, as he said they were not ‘anti’ anything; they were simply “peace poems”

<sup>79</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>80</sup> Thầy's letter to Dr. King: <https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/letters/in-search-of-the-enemy-of-man/>

In September 1965, Thầy and his colleagues formally founded the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS).<sup>81</sup> Rallying thousands of student volunteers, the SYSS provided a formal structure for the engaged social action that Thầy and the ‘thirteen cedars’ and colleagues were pioneering. They created a 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>82</sup> They were a kind of neutral ‘peace corps,’ inspired by the ideal of service.

But 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 workers were threatened, and armed soldiers would challenge them unexpectedly.<sup>83</sup> “If you don’t have a spiritual practice, you can’t survive,” Thầy explained.<sup>84</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 to care for a child who has been wounded by bullets or bombs.”<sup>85</sup>

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>86</sup> It was during this time that one of the villages they had been helping near the De-Militarized 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>87</sup>

### **Moral Courage: formulating a new code of Buddhist ethics for polarized and divided times**

In February 1966, Thầy established the Order of Interbeing, a new order based on a version of the traditional Buddhist Bodhisattva Precepts, which he revised and expanded to support a new kind of modern, Engaged Buddhism.<sup>88</sup> “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,” he later said.<sup>89</sup> The order embodied Thầy’s teaching of “not taking sides in a conflict,” and emphasized non-attachment to views, and freedom from all ideologies. For Thầy, these precepts were “a direct answer to war, a direct answer to dogmatism,

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<sup>81</sup> SYSS in Vietnamese: Thanh Niên Phục Vụ Xã Hội (TNHSXH). 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).

<sup>82</sup> A brochure of their activities can be seen [here](#).

<sup>83</sup> Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World* (2016), p.57 “The Airfield”

<sup>84</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Q&A at Blue Cliff Monastery, August 29, 2013

<sup>85</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Dharma Talk in Plum Village, June 21, 2009

<sup>86</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Q&A at Blue Cliff Monastery, August 29, 2013

<sup>87</sup> “Not Giving Up,” in Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World* (2016)

<sup>88</sup> The Order of Interbeing in Vietnamese: Dòng Tu Tiếp Hiện

<sup>89</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, “A History of Engaged Buddhism,” Public Talk in Hanoi, Vietnam, May 5, 2008 (speaking in English)



where everyone is ready to kill and die for their beliefs.”<sup>90</sup> Today there are over 3,000 order 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 strictest neutrality. Buddhists tried their best to speak for all the people and not take sides, but we were condemned as ‘pro-communist neutralists.’ 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>91</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>92</sup>

## Leaving Vietnam to call for peace

### **A three-month speaking tour that became thirty-nine years of exile. From the temples of Vietnam, Thầy finds himself suddenly a key spokesperson in the heart of the U.S. peace movement**

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. 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>93</sup> He left Vietnam on May 11th, 1966 for the short trip. On the eve of his departure, his teacher formally transmitted him the Dharma Lamp.<sup>94</sup> It would be thirty-nine years before he could return home.

When he left, Thầy was a leading figure in the Buddhist peace and social work movement, had published ten books, and was one of the country's most popular poets.<sup>95</sup> Thầy's 1966 speaking tour saw him visit nineteen 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, 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

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<sup>90</sup> Talk on April 7, 2008 in Hanoi. The first version of The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings: 1. Do not be bound by doctrines and theories. 2. Do not think there is one changeless or absolute truth. 3. Do not force others to accept your views. 4. Do not close your eyes to suffering. 5. Do not become wealthy while others go without food. 6. Do not hold on to anger and hatred. 7. Do not say things that cause discord. 8. Do not say untruthful things. 9. Do not use Buddhism for personal gain. 10. Do not do work that is harmful to humans or nature. 11. Do not kill. 12. Do not possess things harmful to others. 13. Do not mistreat your body. 14. Finally, do not assume that your teacher, Thầy, is able to follow each of these rules perfectly.

<sup>91</sup> Nhat Hanh, *Love in Action*, p.39

<sup>92</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Public Talk at the Riverside Church, NYC, September 25, 2001

<sup>93</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>94</sup> In this important Buddhist ceremony, Thầy formally became a Dharma Teacher of the Liễu Quán Dharma Line, in the 42nd generation of the Linji School. Thầy's teacher also expressed his wish to transmit the abbotship of Từ Hiếu Temple to Thầy in the future.

<sup>95</sup> See his short biography at the time in *The New York Review of Books*, June 9, 1966, when they featured his peace poems

to this frail, earnest figure, one wondered whether the State Dept. would permit President Johnson direct exposure to him.<sup>96</sup>

In the U.S., 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>97</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>98</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>99</sup> That same day, he was denounced as a national traitor on Saigon radio, in newspapers, and by the South Vietnam government of General Thiệu and Prime Minister Kỳ. 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>100</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 sixties.

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 year. The book made an eloquent, hard-hitting, insightful, 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>101</sup>

<sup>96</sup> James A. Wechsler, “A Plea For Life,” *New York Post*, May 18, 1966.

<sup>97</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>98</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>99</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>100</sup> [New Yorker, June 25, 1966.](#)

<sup>101</sup> Published by Hill & Wang in America in 1967. Vietnamese edition: Nhất Hạnh, *Hoa Sen Trong Biển Lửa* (1967).



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>102</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 U.K.<sup>103</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>104</sup>

As he was traveling from city to city calling for peace, Thầy received word of tragedies in his community in Vietnam. Shortly after Thầy left, the SYSS campus was attacked with grenades; and again in April 1967, killing a student social worker and a visiting professor, and injuring sixteen others.<sup>105</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. On the June 24, 1967, five of his young SYSS social workers had been led to bank of the Binh Phước River by armed men and shot. One fell into the water and survived; the other four died immediately.<sup>106</sup> Upon hearing the news, 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 in wrong perceptions. 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.”

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

### **An unlikely encounter between two spiritual visionaries, which would define both their paths forward**

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>107</sup> A few months later, on April 4, 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>108</sup>

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<sup>102</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>103</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>104</sup> Thầy's private papers.

<sup>105</sup> 24<sup>th</sup> April 1967. Nhat Hanh, unpublished private papers.

<sup>106</sup> The attack is recounted in Chan Khong, *Learning True Love*, Ch.11

<sup>107</sup> See full text of the nomination letter [here](#).

<sup>108</sup> For example, on March 25, 1967 leading a march against the Vietnam war in Chicago ([Los Angeles Sentinel](#))

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.

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>109</sup>

## Paris Peace Talks & engaging new elements

**Tireless efforts to work for peace in Paris may have brought disappointment; but Thầy’s years of high-profile peace activism led to profound encounters with a diverse range of engaged spiritual leaders, and allowed him to explore more deeply what “true peace work” looks like for society, beyond the empty promises of conferences and accords.**

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), officially representing Vietnam’s Buddhist Peace Delegation.<sup>110</sup> Together with volunteers and friends who came to assist, they rented a small apartment in a poor Arab neighborhood in Paris. In addition to their peace activism, they continued their efforts to support relief operations in Vietnam, and soon began to sponsor thousands of 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>111</sup> Working long days, Thầy guided their small community to incorporate mindfulness and compassion in every action: whether making phone calls, drafting documents, writing letters, eating meals together, or simply washing dishes. The days would end with songs and silent sitting meditation. At the weekends, Thầy organized public sessions of meditation and mindfulness at a nearby Quaker meeting house, attracting many young seekers. It was during this time that Thầy deepened his friendships and dialogue with other faith leaders, in particular Christian priests and pastors, later leading to a series of powerful books on Buddhist-Christian dialogue.<sup>112</sup> Jesuit priest and radical pacifist Father Daniel Berrigan came to live with him for several months to learn meditation.<sup>113</sup>

While in Paris, Thầy began teaching Buddhism at the prestigious Sorbonne École Pratique des Hautes Études. As a professor he had access to the extensive Buddhist manuscript collections at the National Library. There, Thầy discovered rare documents detailing the life of Master Tăng Hội, a monk of Vietnamese-Indian heritage in the third century, who became the first Zen Master in China and Vietnam, three centuries before Bodhidharma.<sup>114</sup> Master Tăng Hội practiced and taught Zen, and was a pioneer in the Mahāyāna tradition, drawing on the meditation texts of early Buddhism, including those emphasizing conscious breathing and mindfulness (the *Satipaṭṭhāna* and *Ānāpānasati* sutras).

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<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Thầy was nominated to this role by Vietnam’s Unified Buddhist Congregation

<sup>111</sup> Chan Khong, *Learning True Love* (2007), pp.306-7

<sup>112</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ* (1995); Thich Nhat Hanh, *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers* (1999)

<sup>113</sup> Father Daniel Berrigan arrived in September 1974. Their remarkable late-night conversations in the offices in Sceaux were recorded and published with the title *The Raft Is Not the Shore: conversations toward a Buddhist-Christian awareness* (Beacon Press, 1975)

<sup>114</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).

Discovering the writings of such an important early Vietnamese Zen master was a deep source of inspiration, and laid a path for the kind of Zen Thầy would develop and teach in the West.

Thầy's public activism was not restricted only to Buddhism and peace. Together with Alfred Hassler (of the Fellowship of Reconciliation) and other leading intellectuals and scientists, 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 neighbors on Planet Earth" (which addressed environmental destruction, pollution, and population growth) was signed by over 2,000 scientists.<sup>115</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 Dai Dong (Great Togetherness) Environmental Conference alongside the U.N. Summit on the Human Environment in Stockholm.<sup>116</sup> 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>117</sup>

## Pioneer of the mindfulness movement

**Thầy dug deep into his own difficulties to crystallize a whole suite of effective mindfulness methods for his students back in turbulent Vietnam. When they were published in the West, they began to seed a revolution.**

In 1975 Thầy finished the manuscript for *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. Written originally as a manual for his social workers back in Vietnam, to give them the spiritual strength they needed to continue their work without burning out, it rapidly became a leading meditation manual in the West. As Jon Kabat-Zinn has said, it was "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 eighties, 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>118</sup> Today it has become a bestselling meditation classic published in over 30 languages.<sup>119</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 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>120</sup> From Singapore, Thầy, Phụng, and their associates rented two large boats, the *Roland*, a cargo ship, and the *Leap Dal*, an oil tanker, as well as a small airplane to search the water. Within a few weeks, they had rescued over eight hundred people from the high seas.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Published in the UNESCO periodical *Courier*

<sup>116</sup> While in Stockholm, Cao Ngọc Phụng 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

<sup>117</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>118</sup> Prof. Mark Williams, University of Oxford, in a new foreword to Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (Gift Edition, 2015)

<sup>119</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."

<sup>120</sup> Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World* (2016), "At Sea on Solid Ground," p. 61

<sup>121</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Sun My Heart* (1982)

Their 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>122</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.

### **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>123</sup> Thầy led the delegation to walk slowly, in peace, but their pace was too slow for the crowd behind them, many of whom became angry as they overtook the group. "There's a lot of anger in the peace movement," he observed. And so Thầy's focus shifted from demonstrations and press conferences to the deeper work of transforming consciousness through mindfulness retreats and community living. "Even if we were able to transport all the bombs to the moon, we'd still be unsafe, because the roots of war and bombs are still there in our collective consciousness," he said. "We cannot abolish war with angry demonstrations. Transforming our collective consciousness is the only way to uproot it."<sup>124</sup>

## Pioneering communities of mindfulness and peace

### **Thầy realised the power of immersive environments of mindfulness practice, to effect deep personal transformation and societal change**

From his active involvement in Vietnam in the fifties and sixties, to his time in Paris in the seventies, 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. In Paris, Thầy and his colleagues had begun to spend time at a farmhouse near the Foret d'Othe, where they retreated at weekends. They called it "Sweet Potatoes," and there, as in Phương Bối in Vietnam's Central Highlands, Thầy saw the healing potential of exploring the art of mindful living, as a community, close to nature.

### **Creation of Plum Village**

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. The existing Plum Village 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.

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<sup>122</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>123</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."

<sup>124</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Dharma Talk, February 21, 1991

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 on both East and West Coasts.<sup>125</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 Japanese Zen traditions in the West; the *pujas* (ceremonial retreats) offered by Tibetan Buddhists, or the silent retreats offered in Theravada traditions. Thầy developed a retreat program that emphasized the practice of “uninterrupted mindfulness” in every activity throughout the day, whether sitting, standing, walking, washing dishes or using the bathroom. He incorporated a new style of guided sitting meditation, his new form of relaxed outdoor walking meditation, a more intimate and less formalized practice of eating meditation, guided lying-down relaxations, small discussion groups, tea meditation, “service meditation” (working in the garden, cleaning the bathrooms or washing pots), and guided instructions for deep prostrations (a practice known as “Touching the Earth”). He drew on his strong foundation in Buddhist psychology and understanding of Western culture to develop uniquely Buddhist practices for compassionate communication and reconciliation.

All these practices, developed by Thầy himself in Plum Village in France, created a powerful new model for mindfulness retreats that has today been popularized around the world. 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. Thầy’s teachings on ‘everyday mindfulness’ and his style of walking meditation have now been taken up and popularized by the secular ‘mindfulness movement’ and brought healing to millions around the world.

### Coining the word “interbeing”

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.<sup>126</sup> 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>127</sup>

For example, you call me Vietnamese. You may be quite sure that I’m a Vietnamese monk. But in fact, legally speaking, I don’t have a Vietnamese passport. Culturally speaking, I have elements of French in me, as well as Chinese culture and even Indian culture. In my writing and teachings, you can discover several sources of cultural streams. And ethnically speaking, there’s no such race as the Vietnamese race.

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<sup>125</sup> Including the Insight Meditation Society, Omega Institute, Ojai Foundation, and the San Francisco Zen Center

<sup>126</sup> Using the root verb ‘to be’ like this was a powerful new way to translate *sahabhūta* or *pratītyasamutpāda* (Skt.) sometimes explained as ‘interdependent co-arising.’ 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>127</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Other Shore* (2016), p.28

In me there are Melanesian elements, Indonesian elements, and Mongolian elements. Just as the flower is made of non-flower elements, so am I made of non-me elements. The insight of interbeing helps us touch this wisdom of non-discrimination. It sets us free. We no longer want to belong just to one geographical area or cultural identity. We see the presence of the whole cosmos in us. The more we look with the insight of emptiness, the more we discover and the deeper we understand.<sup>128</sup>

In his early retreats, Thầy taught 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 words and the idea of ‘being’ is a skillful 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. He could not return for the funeral. 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 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>129</sup>

## Deepening roots; extending branches

**At the same time that Thầy’s grassroots community and popularity as an author grew, he also continued to deepen his research and practice into ancient Buddhist texts, made possible by his mastery of classical Chinese and his own applied mindfulness experience.**

Over the years, Thầy embraced and healed the pain of not being able to return to Vietnam. It was, he explained, “thanks to the practice I was able to find my true home in the here and the now. 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.

### **Buddhist scholar**

In the early years of Plum Village in the 1980s, Thầy devoted his time to continuing to research ancient sutras and publish new books and translations, bringing new life to classic texts and making them available to a wider audience. His translation of the Heart Sutra, the most important sutra in Mahāyāna Buddhism, soon became the authoritative modern English translation; while his Buddhist primer, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teachings*, remains a classic textbook.<sup>130</sup> Equipped with mastery of both classical Chinese, Pali and English, he produced modern translations of the *Ānāpānasati Sutta*, the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, and the Diamond Sutra, transforming them from obscure texts into practical manuals of meditation and contemplation that were both applicable and relevant. His seminal biography of the Buddha, *Old Path White Clouds*, a bestseller published in over twenty languages, with its lyrical language and accessible Buddhist teachings, and told without miraculous embellishments, successfully established the Buddha as a human being, not a god.

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<sup>128</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Living: Peace and Freedom in the Here and Now* (2016), p.17

<sup>129</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, Dharma Talk, June 20, 2014

<sup>130</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding* (1987)

Over his decades of teaching, Thầy has resisted categorising his approach as either Mahayana or Theravada, saying simply that he is “presenting the teachings of Early Buddhism in a Mahayana spirit,” or “taking Mahayana Buddhism to bathe in the waters of Early Buddhism.”<sup>131</sup> Although Thầy succeeded in making Buddhism accessible to Western audiences, he maintained that Buddhism should never be diluted. Even his most deceptively simple messages were rooted in his scholarship and research of the Chinese and Pali canons, and his deep grasp of Buddhist psychology. Many of his scholarly teachings and courses were given in Vietnamese to his community in Plum Village, and await translation into English.<sup>132</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.<sup>133</sup> He came to value the importance of the teacher-student relationship: making a lifetime commitment to study and practice together without interruption in the context of a residential community of mindful living. 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 contexts.<sup>134</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>135</sup> He made the revolutionary step of revising the monastic vows (*Pratimokṣa*) for Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis (monks and nuns).<sup>136</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>137</sup>

### **A new way of practice**

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. He developed concrete methods of mindfulness practice including clear training in the art of mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful dish-washing, teeth-brushing, cooking, or working, and the art of complete stopping and listening whenever the temple bell (or telephone) rang. And, unlike other Buddhist teachers, he emphasized the need to *enjoy* mindfulness practice: “In life, there’s a lot of suffering. Why suffer more practicing Buddhism?” he says.<sup>138</sup>

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>139</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

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<sup>131</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

<sup>132</sup> see Appendix: Buddhist Lectures by Thich Nhat Hanh

<sup>133</sup> On Vulture Peak in India, in November 1988, Thầy ordained his long-time student and collaborator Phương (Sister Chân Không, “True Emptiness”), together with others, including Annabel Laity (Sister Chân Đức, “True Virtue”), who became his first Western monastic disciple.

<sup>134</sup> see Thich Nhat Hanh, *Joyfully Together: The Art of Building a Harmonious Community* (2003)

<sup>135</sup> 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 Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation.

<sup>136</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Freedom Wherever We Go: A Buddhist Monastic Code for the 21st Century*. Thầy presented his revised monastic code at Joong Ang Sangha University in Seoul, Korea, on March 31, 2003.

<sup>137</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>138</sup> Interview in *Shambhala Sun*, January 2012.

<sup>139</sup> Interview with John Malkin, *Shambhala Sun* magazine, July 1, 2003



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.

In response to a growing demand of people eager experience Thầy's immersive mindfulness practices in a retreat setting, in the late 1990s, the community opened additional monastic-led mindfulness practice centers in the U.S., in Vermont (Green Mountain Dharma Center); and California (Deer Park Monastery). 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, the Americas, 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, creating one of the largest grassroots Buddhist communities in the West. 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 1990s and early 2000s Thầy began to bring Buddhist practices and teachings out of their “religious” context, and made them available and applicable to people of all faiths and all walks of life.**

Thầy began to lead special retreats for psychotherapists, teachers, business leaders, politicians, scientists, environmentalists, artists, police officers and even for Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>140</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.

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

Thầy emphasized 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>141</sup> Thầy insisted that ethics and mindfulness could not be separated; and that meditation or mindfulness without ethics is not true mindfulness. He drafted a new universal code of ethics in the Buddhist tradition—the Five Mindfulness Trainings—which he presented at an international summit at the White House; the Indian Parliament; and the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.<sup>142</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>143</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

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<sup>140</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>141</sup> *The New Buddhism: The Western Transformation of an Ancient Tradition* by James William Coleman (2002)

<sup>142</sup> India 1996; Davos 2000; White House, December 2000.

<sup>143</sup> See: <http://www.peace.ca/manifesto2000codeofethics.htm>



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>144</sup>

### **Deep ecology: responding to the climate crisis**

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>145</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>146</sup> His deepest insights for those working to protect the environment are captured in his book *Love Letter to the Earth*. They are an invitation to "fall in love with the Earth," to create a truly sustainable source of energy to inspire action and engagement. His book *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*, compiling his most recent writings on deep ecology and engaged actions, will be published by HarperOne in 2021.

### **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 nonviolence and forgiveness in a memorable speech to over two thousand people at New York's Riverside Church. 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.**

Thầy was accompanied by a large delegation of over 200 monastic and lay followers, and greeted by crowds at the airport. Thầy gave public talks and retreats in a strictly controlled format, and a number of his books of his were finally allowed to be legally published in Vietnam. Despite tight controls and limits on publicity, crowds of thousands attended Thầy's days of mindfulness and retreats. As he had done in capitals around the world, Thầy met with political leaders and offered concrete proposals to support ethics, prosperity, and progress in civil society, education, and international relations. Hundreds of young Vietnamese asked to ordain as his monastic students, and from 2005 were welcomed at Bat Nha Monastery, a large new temple in the Central Highlands, built close to the land of Phương Bối. Thầy returned to Vietnam in 2007 to lead a series of giant requiem masses for those who had died in the war, and in 2008 to offer a keynote speech at the international Wesak celebrations in Hanoi. On each

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<sup>144</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>145</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The World We Have: A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology* (2008), p.43

<sup>146</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.

occasion he met the country's political leaders.<sup>147</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.

From 2005 to 2008, Bat Nha Monastery grew rapidly. It soon had over 400 young monks and nuns ordaining in Thầy's tradition, and hundreds of young visitors every month.<sup>148</sup> But the favorable conditions did not last long. The communist government considered its rapid growth a threat, and took measures to shut it down. After months of harassment, the monastics were forcibly dispersed on September 27, 2009. Monks and nuns sought sanctuary in the few temples willing to take the risk of sheltering them. Although the loss of Bat Nha was painful for Thầy, one consequence was that hundreds of his monastic disciples were granted visas to spread his teachings outside of Vietnam, making it possible to found new monasteries in Europe, North America, Asia, and Australia.<sup>149</sup>

## Global spiritual leader and “Father of Mindfulness”

The years 2008-9 marked a new wave of expansive growth and activity for Thầy and his community. Thầy revised the term “Engaged Buddhism” to become “Applied Buddhism.” Just as with applied mathematics or physics, Thầy 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, Thầy 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. 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. With over three decades of experience sharing mindfulness with families and children, Thầy 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.<sup>150</sup> Thầy 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, organizing weekly gatherings, flash-mob meditations, mindful hikes, weekend retreats, and engaged actions. When young people organized a sitting meditation event with Thầy in London's Trafalgar Square, over 3,000 gathered, making it the largest meditation event in the city's history; and in Barcelona, Spain, a crowd over 6,000 gathered to meditate with Thầy under the iconic Arc de Triomf, Passeig Lluís Companys. In 2010, *The Independent* in the UK called him “The Zen Master Who Fills Stadiums.”

### 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>151</sup> In 2008, he was invited to make an official visit to India as a distinguished guest of the Government of

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<sup>147</sup> In 2008, Thầy had an official meeting with the President of Vietnam, Nguyễn Minh Triết.

<sup>148</sup> Bat Nha Monastery even made an impact in popular culture, becoming an iconic spiritual refuge for the young generation: a popular TV series even had its lead character visit for a mindfulness retreat in one episode

<sup>149</sup> Including 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 Institute of Applied Buddhism on Lantau Island, Hong Kong; and Stream Entering Monastery in the Australian state of Victoria

<sup>150</sup> See [wakeupschools.org](http://wakeupschools.org), and Thich Nhat Hanh and Katherine Weare, *Happy Teachers Change the World: A Guide for Cultivating Mindfulness in Education* (2016).

<sup>151</sup> In 2006 TIME magazine named him one of Sixty Heroes of Asia

India. He gave lectures and retreats, a speech to the national Parliament, met with Sonia Gandhi, President of the Indian National Congress, and was the 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 to speak at the U.K. Parliament in Westminster and the Northern Ireland Assembly in Stormont (in 2012), and the French Senate in Paris (also in 2012). After his public speech in Dublin, *The Irish Times* dubbed him "The Father of Mindfulness."<sup>152</sup> In 2014, the Vatican sent an official envoy to Plum Village to invite Thây to Rome to represent Buddhism for a global declaration of all faiths against slavery and human trafficking. When President Obama visited Vietnam, he quoted Thây's teachings on reconciliation in a major speech delivered in Hanoi.<sup>153</sup>

### **Growth in the East**

From 2008 onwards, Thây'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. His largest community in Asia, at Plum Village Practice Center in Thailand, has grown to over 200 monastics. They travel widely across the region to share Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings and mindfulness practices, in particular in Japan, Indonesia, the Philippines and Taiwan. 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.

It was in the East that Thây'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), Vancouver (2011) and Bangkok (2013). Thây'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>154</sup> It is estimated that Thây created more than 10,000 calligraphies for his students in his lifetime.

Thây's Plum Village tradition is one of the few international Buddhist traditions to actively offer the teachings in Africa. His monastic and lay disciples have led programs on mindfulness, meditation, community-building and compassionate dialogue in South Africa, Botswana, Uganda, and Liberia—where the Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation sponsors a network of conflict resolution hubs ('Peace Huts').

### **From Indochina to Silicon Valley**

On Thây's final teaching tour of North America in fall 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 Thây and his message. "Do you want to be 'number one,' or

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<sup>152</sup> *The Irish Times*, April 10, 2012.

<sup>153</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>154</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *This Moment is Full of Wonders: The Zen Calligraphy of Thich Nhat Hanh* (2015)

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>155</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>156</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>157</sup> It was a time of explosive popularity of secular mindfulness, during which even the U.S. military were turning to mindfulness professionals, and even some of Thầy’s own lay Dharma Teacher disciples, 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.”

### **A cloud never dies**

True to the spirit of his heritage in the meditation schools of Master Tãng 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 of millions and changed countless lives. One expert describes him 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>158</sup> In a recent academic survey of ‘The Buddhist World,’ he was selected as one of the ten most influential leaders in Buddhist history, given his influence on contemporary global Buddhism.<sup>159</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 five million books in the U.S. alone, and tens of millions worldwide. Far from offering a “light” form of Buddhism, he has offered a deep yet *deceptively accessible* form of Buddhism that can respond to the suffering of our times, and the very real and intractable problems of war, violence, polarization, and discrimination.

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 globalization, and consistently offered a Buddhist response that can respond to the challenges of the time. 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>160</sup>

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<sup>155</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>156</sup> Leo Barraclough, “Alejandro G. Inarritu on Mindfulness Documentary ‘Walk With Me’”, *Variety*, March 9, 2017.

<sup>157</sup> Published in Nhat Hanh, *The Art of Living* (2016).

<sup>158</sup> Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (2014), p.34

<sup>159</sup> John Powers, Ed. *The Buddhist World* (2016), p.5; pp.606-616

<sup>160</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.

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>161</sup> With his own 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 twenty-first 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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<sup>161</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.

## **NOTE FROM THE EDITORS**

*This biography has been edited by Sister True Dedication and Sư Cô Định Nghiêm. We would like to express our deep appreciation to our elder sisters and brothers, and the international fourfold community of Plum Village for guidance, research, translations, edits, corrections, and assistance in compiling the text. Please send any additional details or corrections, with references if possible, to: [press@plumvillage.org](mailto:press@plumvillage.org).*

## **ENDNOTES**