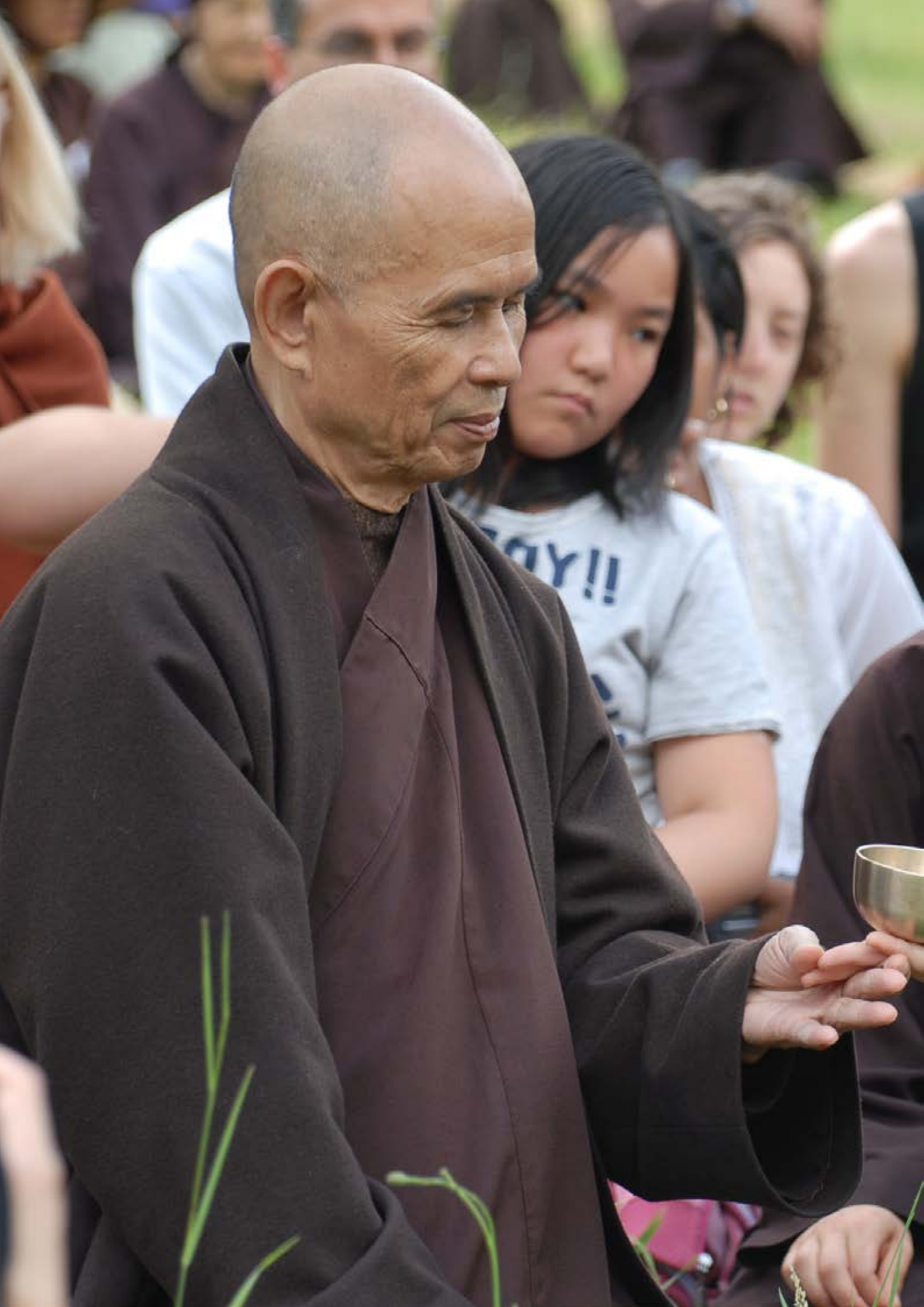


EIAB MAGAZINE

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE EIAB AND THE INTERNATIONAL SANGHA · AUGUST 2024

*in love and trust,
thầy*







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european institute
of applied buddhism

eiab

Editor

European Institute of
Applied Buddhism gGmbH
Schaumburgweg 3 | 51545 Waldbröl
+ 49 (0)2291/907 13 73
info@eiab.eu | registrar@eiab.eu
www.eiab.eu

Editor: Brothers and Sisters of the EIAB
Photos: Sr. Chuẩn Nghiêm and others
Layout: Dieter Spitzer
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In particular, we would like to thank all those who have made this magazine possible with their contributions.

Your Loved One Will Always Be With You

*If you establish yourself in the present moment,
and touch the present moment deeply,
you can gain deep insight into
who you are.*

*If I am really in touch with myself,
I discover that at the same time I am the sun,
I am a cloud, I am the earth, a river, a mountain,
a squirrel, a tree.*

*Everything is in everything else.
Could I even be here without the squirrel,
without the mountain, without the cloud?*

*If you took the mountain out of me,
I would no longer be here.*

*If you took the cloud out of me,
I would not be here either because actually I am all these things.*

*I am the cloud, the squirrel, the deer, the mountain.
I am my loved one.*

*You cannot take my loved one out of me.
This is the insight of interbeing that I can touch
when I touch the present moment deeply.
When you touch the one, you touch the all.*

*If you can see yourself as a leaf, as a flower,
as a beautiful cloud in the sky,
you will easily understand
that you have never been born,
you have not come from nowhere,
and you will never die.
And you can never be without the ones you love.*

Kaleidoscope

When I was a child, I used to enjoy playing with a kaleidoscope that I made from a tube and few pieces of ground glass. When I turned the tube, many wonderful patterns and colours revealed themselves. Every time I made a small movement of my fingers, one image would disappear and give way to the next. I didn't cry at all when the first spectacle disappeared, because I knew that nothing was lost; another beautiful sight always followed.

When we look into a kaleidoscope, we see a beautiful symmetrical image; and whenever we turn the kaleidoscope, the image disappears. Can we describe this as birth and death? Or is the image merely a manifestation? After this manifestation, there's another manifestation that's equally beautiful – nothing is lost. I have seen people die very peacefully, with a smile, because they understand that birth and death are only waves on the surface of the ocean, not the ocean itself, just like the beautiful images in the kaleidoscope.

*There is no birth and no death.
There is only continuation.*

Thich Nhat Hanh:

At Home in the World: Lessons from a Remarkable Life, Rider, 2022, p.22

The Wave and the Water

A friend of mine who was a research scientist went through a tremendous spiritual crisis one winter. Hearing of this, I sent him a drawing of a wave riding on silky-smooth water. Beneath the drawing I wrote, "As always, the wave lives the life of a wave and, at the same time, the life of water. When you breathe, you breathe for all of us." As I wrote those words, I felt that I was swimming alongside him, helping him to get through that time of great difficulty; and fortunately, it helped us both.

Most people view themselves as waves and forget that they are also water. They are used to living in the realm of birth and death, and they forget about the realm of no birth and no death. Just as a wave lives the life of water, so, too, do we live the life of no birth and no death. We need to know this, and to be in touch with the reality that we are living the life of no birth and no death. The know here is very important. To know is to realize. Realization is mindfulness. All the work of meditation is aimed at awakening us in order to know one thing: that birth and death can never touch us in any way whatsoever.



1.

The Poetry of Enlightenment

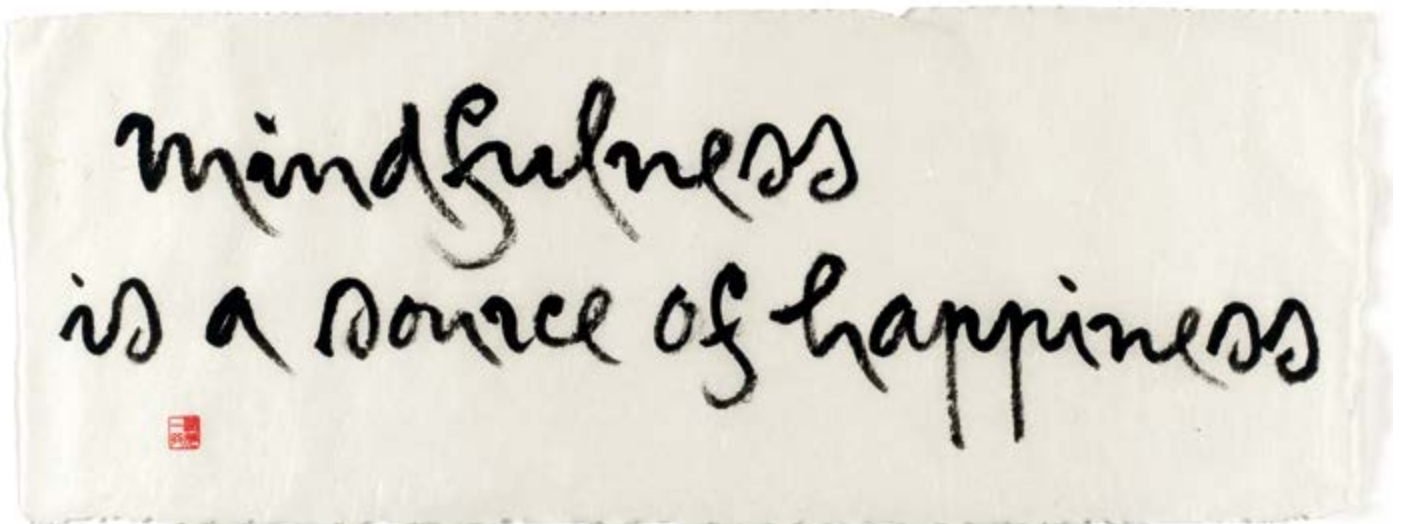


The Poetry of Enlightenment

How Thầy's mindfulness flowered

By Thầy Pháp Ấn

Our teacher Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh (Thầy) made many spiritual breakthroughs. But perhaps his greatest was to understand the Buddha's teaching from the perspective of mindfulness. This became the foundation of Thầy's own practice and of the Plum Village tradition of mindful living. In an article that is part history, part practice and part personal memory Thầy Pháp Ấn, Elder Monk in the Plum Village tradition and EIAB's Director and Dean of Studies, reflects on various aspects of Thầy's life including writings and poems in which he traces our teacher's spiritual struggle to create a new form of Buddhism for modern times.



One life, many manifestations

Once when Thầy was on a panel in Amsterdam, in the late 1980s, a theologian stood up and asked him to recall his feelings at the time he wrote *Vietnam - Lotus in a Sea of Fire*¹ more than 20 years earlier. Thầy replied: "That person is already dead. I don't

want to talk about that dead person". On another occasion, a journalist asked Thầy: "Where are you from in Vietnam? Are you from the north or the south?" Thầy replied: "I'm from the center."

Most of us want to put other people – especially famous people – into a category because we believe that makes it easier to

identify who they are. But Thầy's life is so big, so great, it defies any attempt to squeeze it into a box. Nor is it possible to say definitively "this is Thầy" or "that is Thầy" because over the course of 95 years, our teacher manifested in many ways.²

Thầy was a spiritually gifted Buddhist monk, a social activist who engaged deeply with the

suffering around him, a peace activist, and an environmental activist collaborating with scientists since the 1970s to protect Mother Earth. He is commemorated in the West as “the father of mindfulness”. He established the Plum Village tradition, named for his monastery in southwest France, and introduced simple but effective practices such as the walking meditation, eating meditation, total relaxation and beginning anew to help people transform and cope with their difficulties in daily life. Thầy was also a brilliant Buddhist scholar, a talented writer, a poet, a calligrapher...

With so many different facets to his life, how should we present Thầy? This question was at the core of a course EIAB offered in April this year on Thầy's life story and what we can learn from it. I was fortunate and honored to be joined for those five days by Sr. Chân Không, Elder Nun in the Plum

Village tradition, who worked closely with Thầy for more than six decades³, and by Sr. Định Nghiêm, Abbess of New Hamlet at Plum Village, France, who was Thầy's attendant for many years. Both respected sisters presently reside at New Hamlet.

Together, we tried to look below the surface of Thầy's life to understand the substance that gave rise to his many manifestations. Approaching this challenge with humility, we bowed to Thầy; for Thầy is a living energy whose transmission to his students is so deep, far deeper than any voice, image, or written word. We expressed our hope that, in sharing about Thầy's life, we would not distort his message or his wish to transmit the Dharma to his students.

It is an exercise in the practice of mindfulness to look at how, through deep spiritual struggle, Thầy found a way to renew

Buddhism by developing a new form of the Buddha's practice of mindfulness. Out of this came Engaged Buddhism, Applied Buddhism, and Plum Village meditation practice centers around the world. We honor Thầy as the founder and First Patriarch of the Plum Village lineage. Although Thầy's mindfulness is rooted in the teachings of different traditional Buddhist schools, it is truly an innovative, creative form that is meant to help us to live our modern and busy life with joy, happiness, peace and to have a deeper meaning for our existence.

This article is based on what I shared in the course. It comes from studying Thầy's life in the context of his times, my own direct experience as a student of Thầy, and from looking closely at selected writings and poems by Thầy. Through these works, we are able to see distinct stages in Thầy's spiritual life.

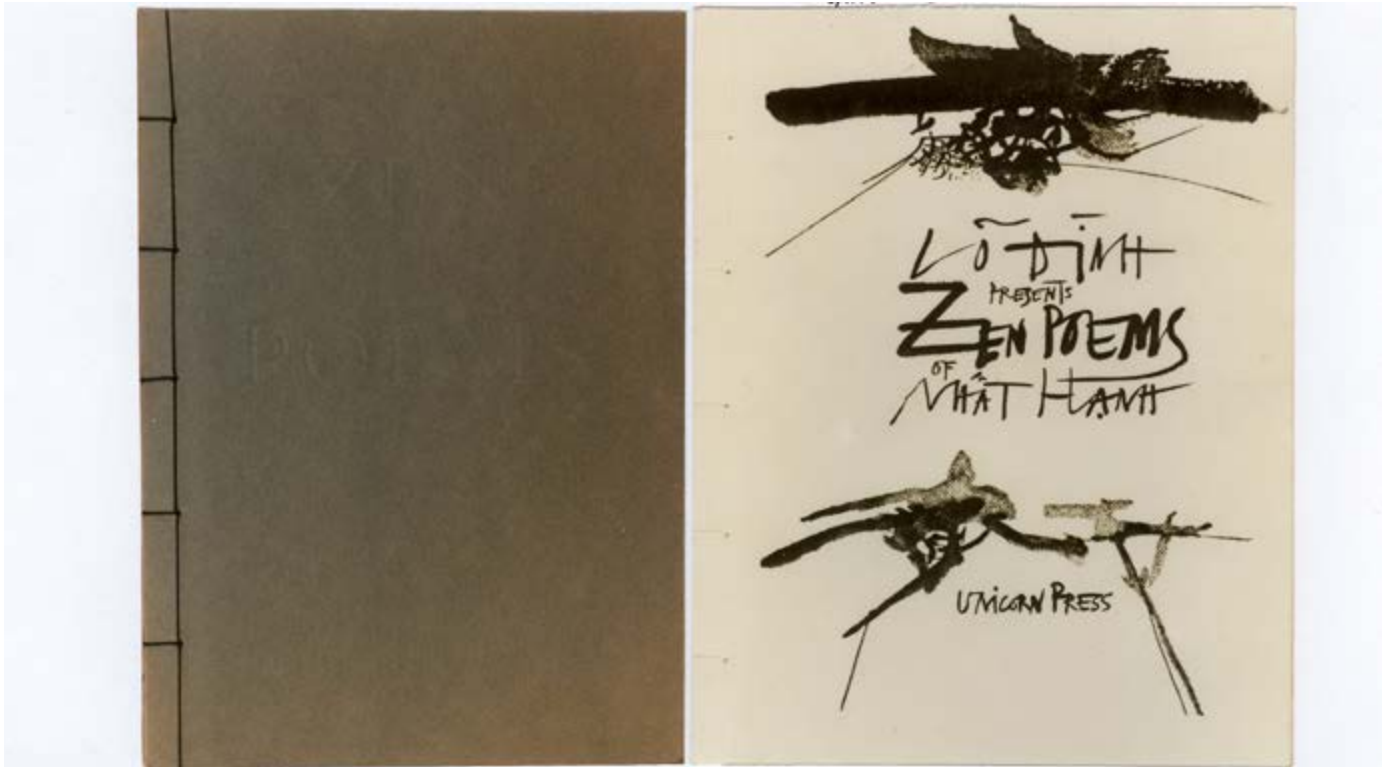
Year	Selected books/writings	Selected poems
1962, USA	<i>A Rose for Your Pocket</i>	
1963, US (Columbia University)	Master Thesis (<i>Vijnanavada</i>)	
1965, Saigon		The Sunflower
1966, Saigon		The Fruit of Awareness is Ripe
1967, Paris		The Virtuous Man
1970, Tokio		Twenty-Four Brand-New Hours
1970, Fontvannes (Frankreich)		Illusion Transformed
1974, USA	<i>Zen Keys</i> (from 1971 book in Vietnamese)	
1975, USA	<i>The Miracle of Mindfulness</i>	

The 1950s and '60s were like an incubation period. Thầy had a deep intention to renew Buddhism but did not know how. With war and political and social upheaval all around, he continued to practice the traditional Zen way, whilst also being in contact with the suffering of the Vietnamese people. Slowly, through his spiritual investigation and experiments with mindfulness techniques

such as mindful walking, Thầy began to give shape to his new form of Buddhism.

I have always felt especially drawn to Thầy's poems⁴. Many years ago, I asked Thầy what he experienced whenever he felt awakened or enlightened. He replied that, often, a sudden flash of insight turned into a poem. So, Thầy's poems – some of which are also set

to music as Plum Village songs – are not only beautiful they reveal his flashes of insight, what the Japanese call “satori” or awakening. They help us see how our teacher changed and grew spiritually through different periods, phases, and experiences. I see them as a record of his process of enlightenment, to which I shall presently return.



Bằng tiếng Anh và tiếng Việt, do họa sĩ Võ Đình minh họa, Unicorn Press xuất bản năm 1976 ở Mỹ (P.O. Box 3307, Greensboro, NC 27402). Số ISBN 0-87775-038-6 (pbk) và 0-87775-061-0 (cloth). Hình trên (trái) là bìa, kẻ bên là trang trong.

Published in 1976 by Unicorn Press in Vietnamese and English. Several English translation poems were previously published in Paintbrush & Webster Review. Above (left) is the cover.

Opening to life's full spectrum

Any attempt to understand another person is bound to be limited because there are different levels of existence in what I call our spectrum of consciousness. This spectrum goes from being very thin and superficial at the most basic levels of awareness, to very deep and sophisticated at higher levels where we have words, notions, and ideas.

In the Zen tradition in which Thầy trained, the teacher tries to teach his or her student by transmitting the energy from the whole spectrum of his or her wisdom, insight, and compassion. He or she tries their best to transmit their totality not only in words but through all elements of practice that carry their energy, including songs, poems, and art.

When I first went to Plum Village in 1992 to become a monk, I was immediately immersed in practice songs and poems. These, along with the lightness of Thầy's energy, are what

nourished me the most. As a Zen master's student, we discover that learning only by words, notions, and ideas can be very limiting and misleading because, right away, we tend to polarize what we receive into right or wrong, good, or bad, black or white. We see just one side of reality. Without practicing what the Buddha called the middle way, we cannot receive the whole teaching.

The goal of a student is to dissolve our mind. We learn to let go of words, notions, and ideas so we may open our heart, open our own energy field to the whole spectrum of life and receive the Zen Master's whole teaching. Teaching in a Zen monastery or practice center is therefore very different from a traditional school, institute, or university.

This insight greatly influenced how Thầy developed his way of teaching. By the time he established Plum Village in 1982, Thầy's understanding had matured to the point he was able to complete the spectrum of teaching he needed to transmit his energy.

This energy manifested in the light, gentle atmosphere I experienced when I first set foot in Plum Village.

Walking meditation – the first steps

When Thầy entered Từ Hiếu monastery, Huế, as a 16-year-old novice in 1942, Vietnamese Buddhism was generally passive. Most monks lived quietly in monasteries, offering lay people kind gestures of spiritual support and comfort but not actively engaging in social change. Outside the tranquility of the temple grounds, Thầy witnessed enormous suffering from war, occupation, and a catastrophic famine that was largely man-made.⁵ He struggled within himself over whether he should continue his novice training or join a political party, become a revolutionary, and fight for Vietnam's independence.

Ultimately, his belief in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha prevailed.

Thầy knew that Buddhism had helped the Vietnamese people for more than a thousand years, enabling them to weather many crises. He was convinced there must be a way to practice and apply Buddhism in modern times and circumstances. In Saigon in the 1950s, Thầy led a movement to renew Vietnamese Buddhism.

I believe that Thầy's impetus for change and reform came from an open heart and deep source of compassion, rather than from any discriminative or judgmental thinking about existing Buddhist practices in Vietnam. Thầy all along recognized the value of earlier traditions and practices and how these had worked for people in previous eras. His interest lay in going beyond traditional insights, methods, and techniques, to meet the needs of people in the current era.

He started by experimenting with his own practice. He wanted to find a form of Buddhism that fitted his activism while at the same time enabling him to maintain his spiritual life and monastic path. This was not easy because of Vietnam's deteriorating political and social situation, in addition to resistance to reform from within the Buddhist hierarchy. Thầy also had to deal with the passing of his beloved mother. By the end of the 1950s he was physically weakened and exhausted.

Thầy began wholeheartedly to follow the practice of stopping and looking deeply. He had discovered this practice while studying the 6th century writings of Master Zhiyi, a patriarch of the Zen meditation school in China. The first of six steps is to count our breaths from one to ten, and then back to one. The second is to make sure our mind stays with our breathing. Then we stop, look deeply, return to "the source" and touch nirvana. The method, which was based on the Buddha's teaching on mindfulness, had evolved over time into a Chinese technique. It was not the pure practice of mindfulness.

Thầy tried counting his breaths but that was not effective. Then, he had an insight: perhaps he should take a step as he counted each breath. So began Thầy's practice of walking meditation. Fully aware of the contact between the feet and the ground, fully aware of the soles of his feet, Thầy began

to walk slowly. He focused his mind, fully, on his feet and discovered that the technique worked. During those moments, Thầy was able to put aside personal worries.

This soon became a strategy for survival for Thầy, Sr. Chân Không and fellow social activists in Vietnam's war and disaster zones. The energy of mindfulness, which they often expressed through songs and poems, put them in touch with the positive qualities of life amid suffering and sorrow. It helped them restore themselves, offering further proof – through direct experience – of its power.

When we practice walking meditation, we allow our step to sink into the earth. We imagine the energy in our whole being sinking deeply into the earth. As we sink the energy down, we lift ourselves up and become lighter. When I first saw Thầy walking at Plum Village in 1992, I noticed he walked with the lightness of a cloud but at the same time was rooted; he left a footprint. Thầy had many responsibilities, but when you saw him walk, he was completely free. His practice of walking meditation was another teaching of the Buddha's middle way – neither floating in the sky nor embedded in the earth.

During a trip to Japan in the late 1950s to attend a conference, Thầy had more time available to continue his practice of walking meditation, sinking the energy down and taking root in his body. His mind calmed down and healing began to happen. Slowly, Thầy began to recover his health.

Mindfulness: the first seeds

In 1961, Thầy was offered a scholarship to study comparative religion at Princeton Theological Seminary in the US. In stark contrast to what was happening in his troubled homeland, Thầy found the cloistered campus and the university town of Princeton, New Jersey, peaceful and quiet. There, he also experienced the wonder of his first North American fall, snowfall, and spring. In this gentle, supportive environment, Thầy practiced dwelling in the present moment and underwent further healing.

Thầy came to realize that the Buddha's teaching on dwelling peacefully and

joyfully in the present moment provided the foundation for all other growth and maturity in the practice. The following year, he wrote *A Rose for Your Pocket*⁶, a slender volume in which he shines the energy of awareness onto mother love. The book was also a way for Thầy to touch and appreciate his late mother in the here and now. We can see in this publication the beginning of our teacher's practice of mindfulness.

During that peaceful period in his life, Thầy experienced a moment of awakening that went beyond earlier flashes of understanding. He describes in his journal: "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. There is nothing permanent, and there is no separate self. Neither is there impermanence or no-self. When we see life deeply, there is no death."⁷

Studying in the West gave Thầy access to a wider range of Buddhist teaching than was possible in Vietnam. Back home, most Buddhist institutes did not talk about the *Sutra on the Awareness of Breathing*, or the *Four Establishments of Mindfulness* but mainly sutras and treatises from the Mahayana school. The focus was on reciting popular Mahayana sutras such as *The Lotus Sutra*. Zen meditation as practiced in Vietnam had been highly regarded in earlier centuries, but by the time of colonization by France in the 19th century, it was no longer advocated.

In 1963, Thầy moved to Columbia University, New York, to continue his research. South Vietnam was reeling from the "Buddhist Crisis" caused by official repression, discriminatory policies, and violence against Buddhists. In Saigon that summer, Venerable Thich Quảng Đức, with whom Thầy had once lived, immolated himself at a busy intersection to draw attention to the suffering of Buddhists.⁸ Soon, other monks and nuns also self-immolated. Far away in the US, Thầy thought of doing the same.



Được dịch ra tiếng Đức và xuất bản song ngữ ở Đức vào khoảng thập niên 1980 hoặc 1990.

Translated into German from Vietnamese and published either in the 80s or 90s by VIDI-Druuckerei und verlag, Am Zippen 1, 4600 Dormund 1



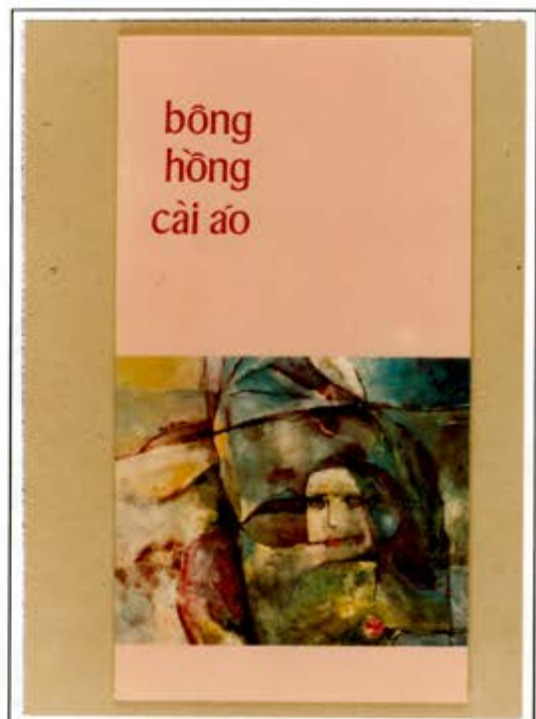
Được dịch ra tiếng Pháp và xuất bản ở Pháp do nhà xuất bản Lá Bối vào khoảng thập niên 1980.

Translated into French and published in France by Lá Bối publisher in the 80s



Được dịch ra tiếng Hoà Lan và xuất bản song ngữ ở Hòa Lan bởi tạp chí Việt Nam nguyệt san vào năm 1990.

Translated into Dutch from Vietnamese and published by the monthly magazin Việt Nam in the Netherlands



Được dịch ra tiếng Hoà Lan và xuất bản song ngữ ở Hòa Lan bởi tạp chí Việt Nam nguyệt san vào năm 1990.

Translated into Dutch from Vietnamese and published by the monthly magazin Việt Nam in the Netherlands

In August, Thầy met with his Professor Horace L. Friess, chair of Columbia's Department of Philosophy and Religion, and told him about the dire situation in Vietnam. According to Thầy's journal, the professor was silent for a long time. Then he looked up and asked, "So, what do you plan to do?" Thầy felt uneasy as definitely his intention to self-immolate could not be shared with anyone, even the professor. So Thầy, too, was silent for a while. Finally, the professor looked at Thầy and said very calmly, "It's good that you are here to help your fellow monks back home. They are all in prison now; what else can they do? Use your time and energy to advocate for them." After reflecting deeply, Thầy decided to abandon the idea of self-immolation. Our teacher had his own way to serve the Dharma and the world.⁹

While in the US, Thầy remained heavily occupied with the social reform programs his students were implementing in Vietnam. It left little time for research and study at Columbia, but he managed to write a 78-page master thesis in 21 days.¹⁰ For most of us, this would be a near-impossible task. But Thầy had already written 12 or so books in Vietnam and was well versed on many Buddhist topics..

The Miracle of Mindfulness

From around that time, Thầy began to consolidate his insights into the energy of mindfulness, including how it enlightens our experience of reality in the present moment. He wrote a book in Vietnamese in which he included koans from a 13th century Vietnamese master when many other Vietnamese Buddhists were taking reference from Zen meditation masters in Japan and ancient China. Appearing in English in 1974 as *Zen Keys: A Guide to Zen Practice*, this book marked the beginning of the ripening of Thầy's practice of mindfulness in a way that also reflected his roots in Vietnamese culture and Zen.

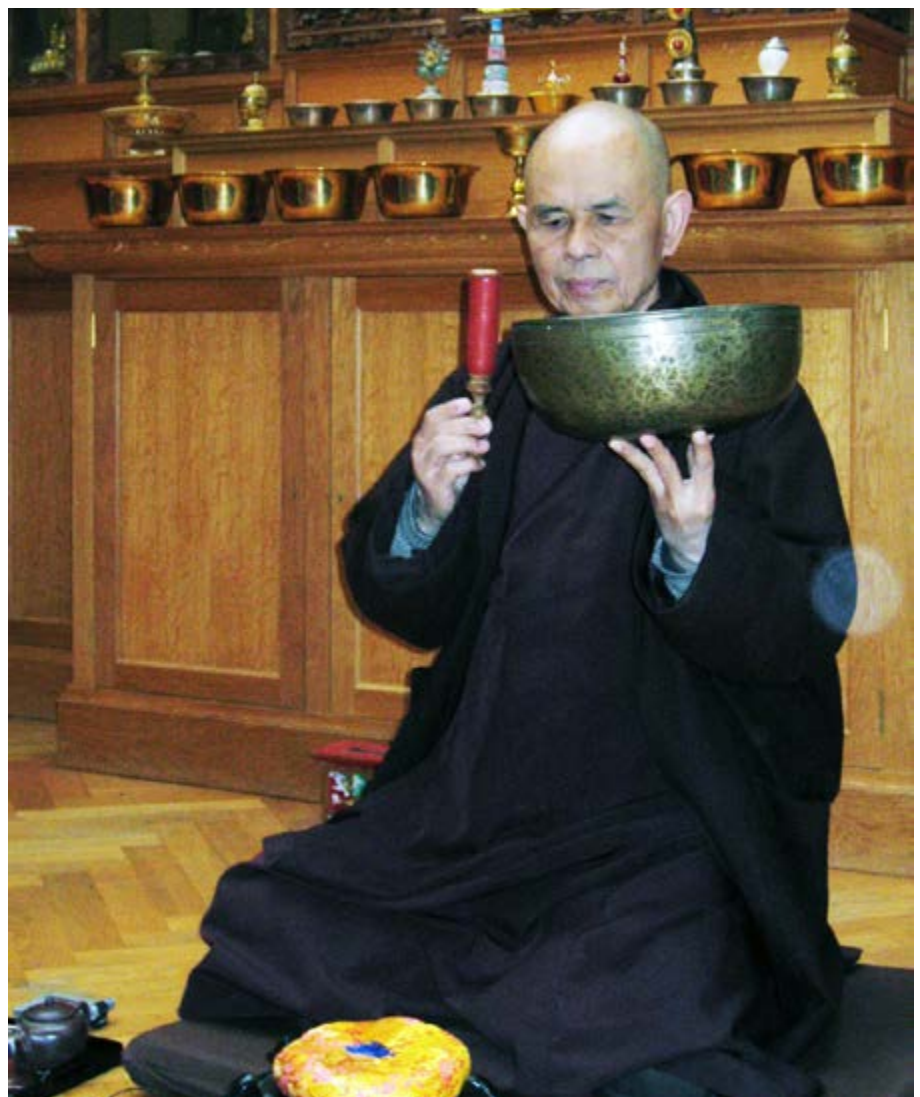
Thầy's insights into mindfulness fully blossomed in *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, published to international acclaim in 1975. It renewed the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness for modern times, prompting many in the West to describe Thầy as the "Father of Mindfulness". The book was, in

fact, an English version of a manual Thầy first wrote in Vietnamese to support young social workers continuing his work of helping war victims in Vietnam. The mindfulness essence of the book goes back further to "Twenty-Four Brand-New Hours", a poem Thầy wrote in 1970 and which we shall discuss later.

For Thầy, meditation has to do with life as it happens right here and now. It is a continuous activity from the moment we wake up to the moment we go to bed. Our goal is to face our challenges and difficulties by practicing all the time, anywhere, throughout the day. It is a transformative, creative, living process helping us to connect deeply to the source of life, the living energy within us. It helps to heal our whole body, heal our whole mind, and face the world even in the most difficult of times.

The word "mindfulness" is, itself, a teaching tool. Being "full", our mind creates this "ness" or source of energy. Often our mind is fragmented. Our body is here but our mind is somewhere else. We are not fully in the here and the now. To be mindful is to bring our mind *fully* into the here and the now and not to be carried away by the past or the future.

One of Thầy's great contributions to the practice of mindfulness is the mindfulness bell. He recognized that, most of the time, we slip back into forgetfulness. We need a reminder. The bell of mindfulness helps us return to our practice. When we listen, we stop what we are doing, we come back to our self and silently say: "Aware of my inbreath, I breathe in. Aware of my outbreath, I breathe out. Aware of my whole body, I breathe in. Relaxing my whole body, I breathe out." Just



The mindfulness bell was one of Thầy's most important discoveries to support the practice of mindfulness

a few moments like that and we are already in meditation. It was one of Thầy's most important discoveries.

At EIAB we invite the bell to sound at times throughout the day both as a mindfulness bell and to announce different activities, such as Dharma talks or mealtimes. We listen to the bell simply to stop, breathe, and come back to ourselves. We can use anything as a mindfulness bell, whether it is a chime of a clock in the dining hall, a traffic light, our mobile phone ringing, or an app we install on our computer.

With this and other Plum Village practices, it is impossible to overestimate the significance of *The Miracle of Mindfulness* in Thầy's life and teaching. He once shared that all his work after its publication was to support and complement the insights and practices he presented in the book. For this purpose, Thầy began translating (with commentaries) key sutras such as the *Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing*, the *Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness*, and the *Sutra on the Better Way to Live Alone* and published related books in Vietnamese and English.¹¹

Mindfulness miracles

Prior to the *Miracle of Mindfulness*, many spiritual explorers in the West as well as the East had taken guidance from the Japanese Zen Buddhist scholar and philosopher Professor D.T. Suzuki. But often, they found it difficult to practice the Japanese meditation style of just "sitting" (Zazen) and to integrate it into the daily life. Thầy's approach seemed more practical, versatile, useable, and useful. It offered a meditation technique that was easy to access for modern people leading busy lives. Thầy began to attract a strong following in the West. From the mid-70s on, he devoted his energy to sharing his mindfulness meditation practices at retreats around the world and, from the early 1980s, at his home base in Plum Village, France.

Everything has its own cause and conditions. In 1987, Thầy was invited to lead a retreat at the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts. One of the participants was medical scientist and professor Jon Kabat-Zinn. He had read *The Miracle of Mindfulness* as early as 1976 and appreciated the health

benefits of the simple exercises it offered, such as eating a tangerine mindfully.¹² The professor's special insight was that for mindfulness to be more widely adopted in the West it needed to be presented from a scientific and secular point of view, not a religious one.

In 1979, Professor Kabat-Zinn founded the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School where he created a famous program later called mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) for people suffering from stress, anxiety, depression, and pain. We have Professor Kabat-Zinn largely to thank for spreading mindfulness practices into health systems in the US and beyond.

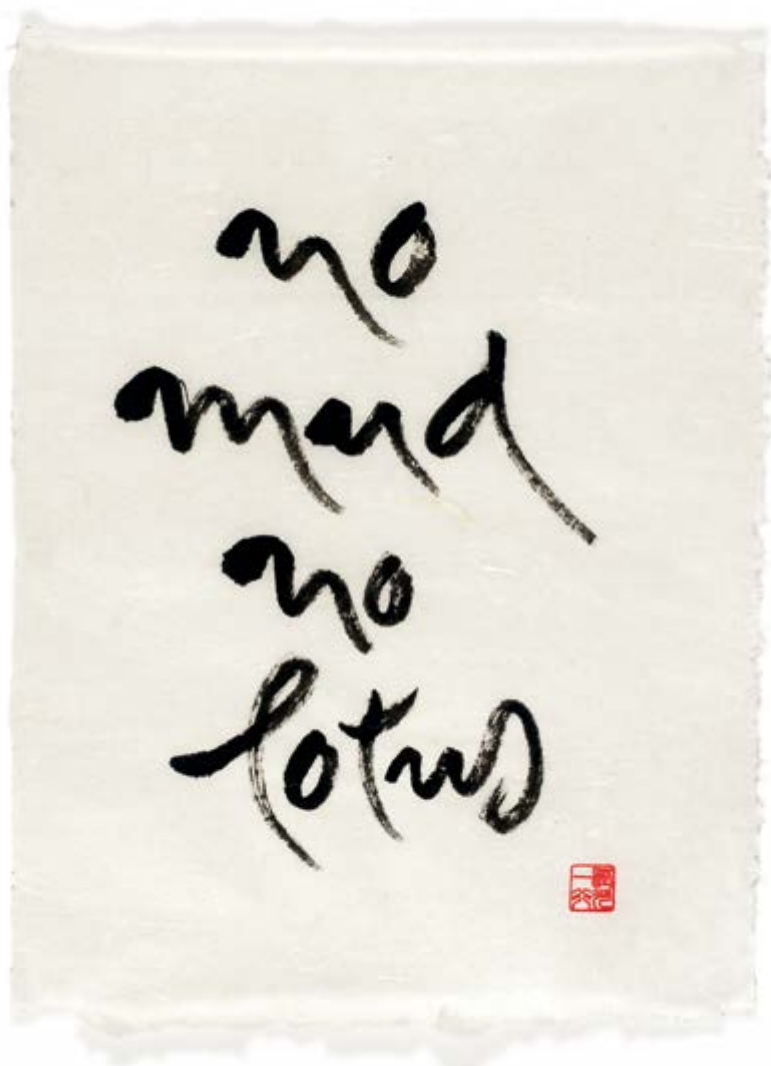
The connection between Thầy and Professor Kabat-Zinn runs even deeper. Thầy's mindfulness practice emerged from the deep suffering caused by the Vietnam war. Professor Kabat-Zinn was a leading campaigner against the war while a PhD

candidate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. I believe that he truly understood the essence of Thầy's work for peace.

In a tribute after Thầy's passing, Professor Kabat-Zinn said: "...his message was basically to be peace. Not to get peace, but to actually be peace and let that inform how you act."¹³ After Thầy's retreat at IMS (Insight Meditation Society), Professor Kabat-Zinn stood up and declared that, for him, the Vietnam war "ended that morning". For Thầy, the statement was so significant that he noted it in his journal. In April 2023, I was with Professor Kabat-Zinn at a symposium and celebration launch of the Thich Nhat Hanh Center for Mindfulness in Public Health at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.¹⁴ During hugging meditation, I could feel the energy of deep love in this kind, gentle man.

No mud, no lotus

To help us develop a broader perspective on suffering, Thầy offered fresh insights



into the Buddha's teaching on what Thầy called "interbeing". The idea of interbeing, interconnectedness, interdependence is embedded in the *Avatamsaka Sutra* but mainly at a theoretical level that is perhaps best left for Buddhist scholars to interpret.

Thầy came up with a wonderful way of expressing the concept in a phrase everyone can instantly understand because we experience it every day: "No Mud, No Lotus". It can be as simple as feeling stiff and sore from sitting on a meditation cushion for a long time then feeling relief from standing up and stretching.

Over the course of his life, it became clear to Thầy that without suffering, the Buddha could not have become enlightened. Moreover, there is no permanent or absolute enlightenment because everything changes every moment. So, even if we reach enlightenment after many years of practice, it can never last because that goes against the fundamental principles of impermanence and interbeing.

Thầy never looked, therefore, for complete enlightenment. Rather, he saw enlightenment as a process. To paraphrase Thầy, there is no way to complete enlightenment because there is no such enlightenment for us to reach. There is no way to enlightenment because enlightenment is the way. Enlightenment is our orientation. Like Thầy, we need to practice it. We need to cultivate our lives in every moment if we are to walk with him in this direction and continue Thầy.

Lessons from Thầy

In high school in Vietnam, while in a refugee camp in Malaysia, and in the US before going to France to become a monk, I tried different forms of Buddhist practice including meditation, evoking the name of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, reciting mantras, and even practicing koan. In the US, I also read many books on Zen. But it was only on that first day at Plum Village – when I observed Thầy walking slowly, mindfully, peacefully like a cloud floating in the sky – that I saw a Zen master in action.

Sometimes I feel ashamed that, after many years of practicing walking meditation,

the way I walk is still heavy, without much freedom of spirit, liberation, and lightness. While Thầy walked gently with ease; I find it is difficult. But Thầy was a compassionate, progressive Zen master. He never thought his own practice applied to everyone. On the contrary, he wanted his students to find – and walk – their own path. I experienced this directly in 2007, during an episode of serious illness at Plum Village.

I was in bed when Thầy came to visit me in the monks' residence in Upper Hamlet. He said something like: "You know, in the past, I was also very sick and had to find a way out. You are very sick now. You have to find your way out. The way that I could get out was suitable for me. But perhaps you need to find out for yourself the way that is suitable for you." What Thầy communicated is that he could help by sharing his experience of how he had practiced and overcome difficulties, but only I could find my way out. It took a long time to find my way and heal myself completely. But, eventually, I did.

As we know, a Zen master's teaching is transmitted in many ways. During my first six months at Plum Village, I dreamt of Thầy every night. The image was of Thầy in a sitting position. It was beautiful, peaceful, calm, and very detailed. I could see Thầy's face, hands, his jacket, and would awake from the dream with a very pleasant feeling.

When we come to a monastic community with an open heart and an intention to learn – when we really respect our teacher – we are fully open to his or her spectrum of consciousness. In this case, I received Thầy in the image of someone who sits in the sitting position. That is teaching without a word. It was not Thầy's intention to make this deep impression on me. It was a working together of two energies. Thầy was willing to open his heart to teach. I, as his student, was willing to open my heart to receive. That is how I met Thầy nightly in those dreams. After all, at the most fundamental level of existence, we are all part of the same web of life, as in the image of Indra's net, in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*.

There are times when a Zen master's way of teaching seems sharp and abrupt. On my first day at Plum Village, I was in a group of monastics sitting with Thầy after lunch

and he asked if I knew how to sing. When I said "yes", Thầy invited me to go ahead. I chose a song I liked very much by a famous Vietnamese musician. When I finished, Thầy said "your voice is too wet. I'm not sure you can become a monk." What he meant was that my way of singing was too emotional, too full of feelings. Startled, I sat down. It was my first direct teaching from Thầy.

Monastics have precepts to help us develop awareness and mindfulness. We follow the precepts out of deep faith in the teaching and out of respect for our teacher and, whatever he or she says, we just do it. If we cannot surrender our pride and ego and submit – if we cannot accept that the way we think, our perspective, has no absolute validity, if we cannot just "do it" – we cannot learn. I was about to have another teaching directly from Thầy.

It happened two years after I came to Plum Village, when I was a work coordinator helping to prepare for the big summer retreat. We had very few monks and nuns at that time, so every helping hand counted. After an organization meeting conducted directly by Thầy, two brothers had volunteered for certain tasks. However, when the retreat was almost upon us, they informed me they were not able to work together because they could not get along. I appealed to them to change their mind, but the conflict could not be resolved.

As the retreat was about to start, Thầy came to Upper Hamlet to speak to all the brothers and sisters. He focused only on positive things and watered the good seeds in us, saying it was very worthy for Plum Village to offer this retreat so that many people could take refuge in us. We all felt inspired. Then Thầy asked if there were questions. I raised my hand, stood up and spoke about the situation with the two brothers, expressing concern that I did not have others who could stand in for them.

The whole atmosphere suddenly changed. Before I could finish the story, Thầy said "Sit down and shut up." A Zen master. Boom. Very commanding, very strong. For two hours, Thầy had tried to set things up beautifully and inspire everyone. In a few sentences, I had ruined everything. I respected Thầy

greatly, so I sat down, not daring to utter another word.

When the meeting ended, I followed Thầy as he walked slowly back to his Sitting Still hut. After some distance, I bowed to him and asked: "Dear Thầy, why did you ask me to shut up and sit down? I thought I was telling the truth, that I was practicing the truth and speaking only the truth. I just wanted to tell you about the difficulty in our community before the retreat. We needed to know the truth in order to resolve it. So why did I have to shut up and sit down?"

Thầy replied – and this is very important, this was the teaching – "The truth is not a truth unless it brings about joy and happiness." A difficult lesson to learn, yes? Our world is so black and white, so easily divided into good and bad. The brothers did not want to help, for sure they were in the wrong; they were not doing something good. When I spoke out, I felt proud to be telling Thầy the truth so that he could fix the problem. My hidden hope was that Thầy would use his power to force the two brothers to work together harmoniously.

But life is not like that. Thầy could not fix the problem either. The reality was that these two brothers were in conflict and could not work together. It was not in Thầy's power to force them to work together. Our practice is not to force anyone into a certain course of action. We are not controllers. Thầy would often say: "Practice because you enjoy the practice. I'm not going to police your practice or control you."

When I said what I believed was the truth, it was one truth. The two brothers not being willing to work together for that summer retreat was another truth. With my one-sided view, I could see only that I needed to report this conflict to Thầy. We fail to see the truth in its completeness, wholeness, and totality. We only see a part of the truth and believe it is the whole truth. We only see a part of the reality and believe that is the total reality. It was a hard lesson to learn. And I still had not fully learned it...

In 2007, when Thầy was planning to establish EIAB, I once more made the mistake of believing in my limited truth and acting upon it. Trained as a scientist who, as a

layperson, had conducted feasibility studies on projects, I saw that there were not enough monastics, Dharma teachers and finances. Moreover, Plum Village already had a new project in Vietnam and monasteries were still establishing themselves in other parts of the world. From this limited truth about reality, I tried to tell Thầy not to go ahead with EIAB, at least not at that time. But Thầy did go ahead. He bought the estate on which our Institute now stands and sent me here in 2008 to set it up.

I know, now, that Thầy was completely right. If he had not opened the Institute that year, he would not have had enough time to help and to bring the energy forward before suffering a severe stroke in 2014. Thầy knew his health was declining and that he could not wait. His wish to create EIAB sooner rather than later came out of his compassion. It was not for his own benefit but to benefit the people of Europe so that they, their children, and future generations could receive the teaching. That was another truth I did not see at the time. As it turned out, many people stepped forward to help EIAB. And more than 15 years later, the Institute continues to manifest.

The poetry of enlightenment

From a young age, Thầy was very sensitive and able to open himself up to the full spectrum of consciousness. Aged 11, during a school trip to a sacred mountain, he went exploring alone and discovered a natural well of fresh, pure water. Hot and thirsty, he drank from the well, completely present to enjoy the water, which he described as the most delicious in the world. Such early experiences helped Thầy to direct his spiritual life and to explore further.

Poems were foremost among the creative channels Thầy used to describe his journey to enlightenment. I read Thầy's poems in the context of the Vietnamese people's suffering from war and Thầy's deep aspiration to help. The seed of a bodhisattva was present from his time as a novice at Từ Hiếu Temple when, one moonlit night, he vowed to bring unlimited living beings to the shore of liberation. Perhaps that is the moment when – dwelling in the present moment, opening himself completely to the full spectrum of consciousness – he allowed compassion

and great bodhicitta to rise in him. It was an experience of enlightenment.

Thầy never told us how to interpret his life or analyze his poems. We can only try to understand Thầy's poems through the prism of our own spiritual search. I shall try my best.

The Fruit of Awareness is Ripe¹⁵

My youth

an unripe plum.

Your teeth have left their marks on it.

The tooth marks still vibrate.

I remember always,

remember always.

Since I learned how to love you,

the door of my soul has been left wide open

to the winds of the four directions.

Reality calls for change.

The fruit of awareness is already ripe,

and the door can never be closed again.

Fire consumes this century,

and mountains and forests bear its mark.

The wind howls across my ears,

while the whole sky shakes violently in the snowstorm.

Winter's wounds lie still,

Missing the frozen blade,

Restless, tossing and turning

in agony all night.

– Saigon 1966

We feel the turbulence of what was happening in Vietnam – and Thầy's life – at that time. At the end of 1963, senior monks in Vietnam asked him to return and support Vietnamese Buddhism. Thầy's professors at Columbia, meanwhile, wanted Thầy to stay at Columbia to establish a Vietnamese studies course and further expand Buddhist studies in their department. His professors counselled him against returning to a Vietnam that could not yet accommodate intellectuals.

It was a turning point. Thầy knew that if he left the peace and tranquility of US campus life, his path would be very different; that



The beautiful illustration above and others accompanying selected poems of Thầy featured in this article was created by artist Sabine Nimz, a committed and generous member of our Phu Dong Thien Vuong Sangha in Tyrol, Austria

back in Vietnam, he would become a different person. But he simply could not close his eyes to the immense suffering in his country. So, he chose the path of a revolutionary, not in the sense of pursuing violent revolution but as a bodhisattva stepping forward to serve in the face of all manner of dangers and difficulties.

Returning to Vietnam in 1964, Thầy became a leader in the Buddhist peace and social work movements. Through "The Fruit of Awareness is Ripe" he makes clear that dwelling peacefully in the present moment, as he had done while at Princeton, does not mean hiding away in a cave. Through his practice of mindfulness, he gets in touch with himself, once more opening himself

completely to the totality of life, the full spectrum of consciousness. That is the first stage of enlightenment. The door of his soul "has been left wide open" and, as a result, Thầy begins to have many new experiences.

When, like Thầy, we are in touch deeply with ourself and reality – continuously – the fruit of awareness is already ripe "and the door can never be closed again". Why? Because we begin to sense we are not an individual separated from everyone else; the energy of full awareness begins to take away the deep-rooted illusion within us of a separate self.

By practicing in the present moment, learning to touch everything around us, dwelling peacefully in the present moment,

and remaining in this state of "samadhi", we begin to open our heart. We begin to touch other people's suffering, joy and happiness, the suffering of the whole society, nation, and the world. We become a different person, like the metamorphosis of a caterpillar turning into a butterfly. This is the first stage of spiritual transformation. It is also called "the fruit of entering the stream."

When our awareness is open, we enter the stream of life. Before that, we see only that ourself is our self, our partner is our partner, our suffering is our suffering, our partner's suffering is our partner's suffering, the suffering of society is the suffering of society, and so on. Each "suffering" exists in isolation. But if we maintain awareness

of the present moment and practice sinking the energy down into our lower abdomen, where it can be collected and concentrated, something interesting happens – we widen the base of the energy. This, in turn, allows metamorphosis to begin.

The Virtuous Man ¹⁶

The two leaves of the pine gate fall shut.

A shimmering arrow leaves the bow, speeds upward, splits the sky, And explodes the sun.

The blossoms of the orange trees fall until the courtyard is carpeted –

flickering reflection of infinity.

– Paris 1967

In Vietnam, Thầy calls for peace talks between the governments of North and South, advocates for nonviolent social change, and leads teams of young social workers into conflict zones to bring relief to victims of natural disasters and to help the rural poor improve their lives. As the war escalates, with the involvement of US combat troops from 1965, Thầy departs Vietnam in May the following year for what is supposed to be a short trip to raise international awareness of the suffering in his country.

In a statement in Washington, D.C., on 1 June, he presents a five-point plan for peace.¹⁷ Immediately, the government in Saigon publicly denounces Thầy as a traitor and cancels his passport. Stripped of his Vietnamese citizenship and identity, unable to travel internationally and forced into exile in the West, it is a traumatic experience for Thầy.¹⁸

Throughout this period of intense activity, Thầy continues to cultivate mindfulness, collectedness, and insight. He calms himself with the practice of mindful breathing, walking meditation, and dwelling peacefully in the present moment. Thầy used to tell us that without this kind of discipline he, Sr. Chân Không and others working with them for peace could not have survived.

Thầy's language in "The Virtuous Man" is strong and powerful, to express his determination and will to reach a domain that is higher than the ordinary at a time when even the most righteous are taking sides in Vietnam. They are being pulled into the conflict by strong ideological forces. Day by day, it is becoming harder for them to keep their humanity and sanity, let alone to act according to their conscience.

"The two leaves of the pine gate fall shut." At first, that seems like a contradiction. If the goal is to open our door to the full spectrum of consciousness, why keep the gate shut? For

Thầy, however, the gate represents pine trees standing high in the mountain, separating enlightened beings from people in the ordinary world. The gate is closed to all that is unwholesome. This is an important practice. We learn to pay attention to the positive things of life and refrain from focusing on the negative, judgmental, and discriminatory. We know that negative things are "out there" because we have full awareness. But we focus our mind on the positive.

In Plum Village, the Five Mindfulness Trainings serve as five pine gates that help us close ourselves to unwholesome activity

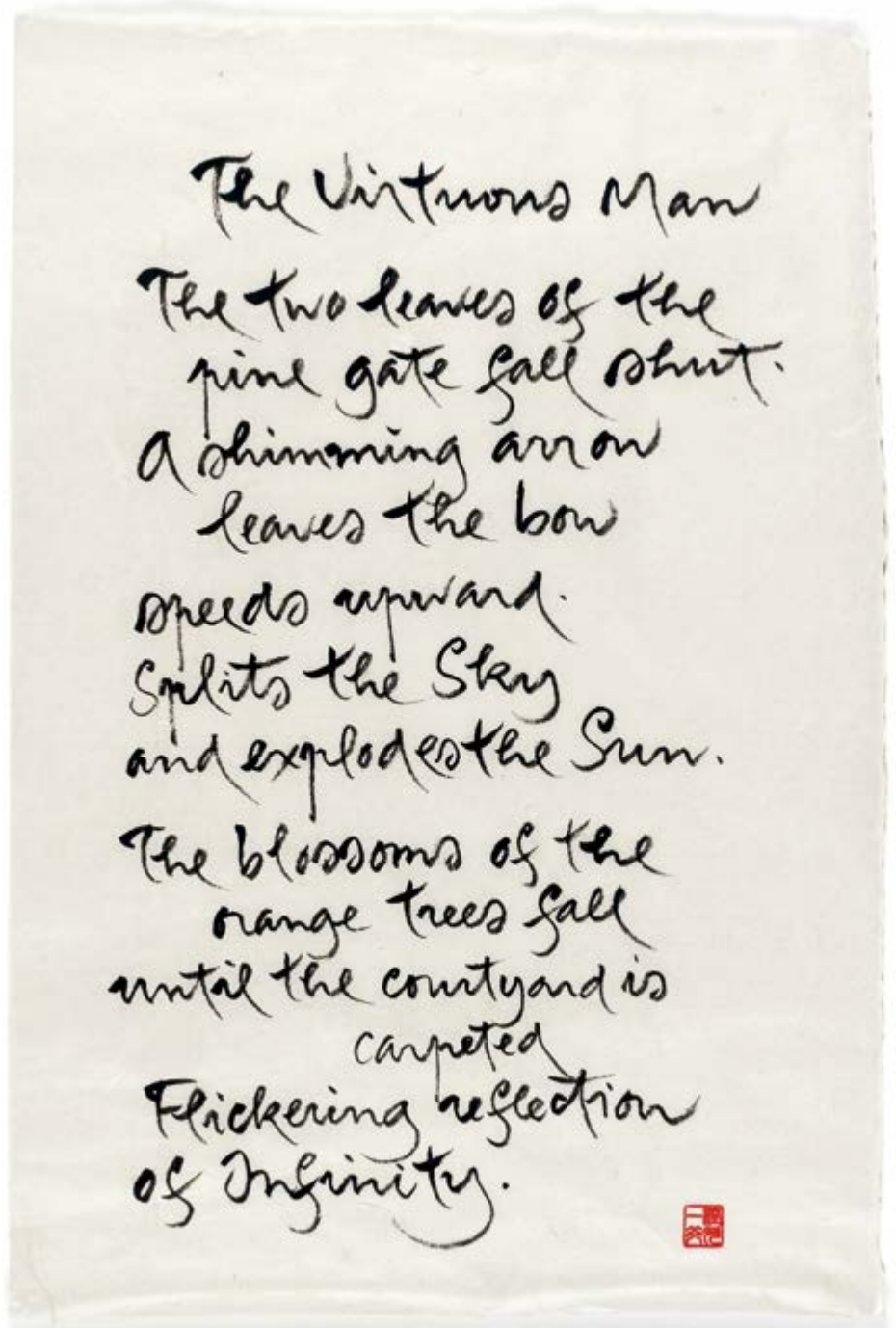




Illustration: Sabine Nimz

and open ourselves to wholesome activity. For monastics, “the two leaves of the pine gate fall shut” refers to the mindful practice of precepts. We close all gates to our senses to protect ourselves from disturbances so that our mind can be collected, and we can be still and peaceful.

“A shimmering arrow leaves the bow, speeds upward, splits the sky, And explodes the sun”. Here, the speeding arrow represents the energy of collectedness. Thầy’s image of the exploding sun comes from an ancient legend about a time when 10 suns circled the Earth and decided to come out all at once, making Earth too hot. A superhero saves Earth by taking out his bow and shooting the suns down, one by one. However, he leaves one sun in place so that Earth does not become

dark and cold. Thầy’s use of the image is very creative. The “exploded” suns are sadness, depression, delusion, misunderstanding, jealousy, hatred, fear, and so on. They represent the partial truth of our limited view about reality.

When the suns of illusion, misunderstanding etc. are shot down, there is only one sun left – the sun of full awareness – and “The blossoms of the orange trees fall until the courtyard is carpeted –.” In Buddhist language, this represents the fruit of enlightenment. It also draws on another beautiful image from Buddhist legend. On the night of his Enlightenment, the Buddha was sitting in meditation when the demon Mara came with his entourage, shooting arrows (representing greed, hatred, fear, and anxiety) at the

Buddha who continued to sit peacefully. As the arrows reached him, they turned into falling flowers.

When we break through to touch the “flickering reflection of infinity,” we see that we are one with the Buddha, with Thầy, and that all living beings are one. This is the meaning of “infinity” in Thầy’s poem. It is not something vague or separate. With deep concentration and insight, we can touch infinity and connect to the oneness of life. We can truly experience it. In that moment of oneness our heart opens completely, melting into the infinity of love. We are filled with understanding and deep compassion. We feel so much love for anyone with whom we are in touch. All living beings, the whole cosmos become objects of our love.

"The Virtuous Man" is a record of this happening to Thầy as he opens up to the full, infinite spectrum of consciousness. Thầy's practice of shooting down the suns of delusion, misunderstanding etc supports his ongoing peace advocacy in the midst of the world's ignorance and confusion about the

war in Vietnam. It is not unlike the ignorance and confusion today over the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East.

In time, Thầy will inform Sr. Chân Không that "The Virtuous Man" is one of two poems he would consider for inclusion in a future

record of his sayings as a Zen Master (the other is "Illusion Transformed", to which we shall come in a moment). This indicates that Thầy, himself, sees the poem as a channel for expressing his spiritual insight and experience of enlightenment.

Twenty-Four Brand-New Hours ¹⁹

*Waking up this morning, I see the blue sky.
I join my hands in thanks
For the many wonders of life;
for having twenty-four brand-new hours before me.
The sun is rising.
The forest becomes my awareness
bathed in the sunshine.*

*I walk across a field of sunflowers.
Tens of thousands of flowers are turned towards the
bright east.
My awareness is like the sun.
My hands are sowing seeds for the next harvest.
My ear is filled with the sound of the rising tide.*

*In the magnificent sky, clouds are approaching
with joy from many directions.
I can see the fragrant lotus ponds of my homeland.
I can see coconut trees along the rivers.
I can see rice fields stretching, stretching,
laughing at the sun and rain.*

*Mother Earth gives us coriander, basil, celery, and
mint.
Tomorrow the hills and mountains of the country
will be green again.
Tomorrow the buds of life will spring up quickly.
Folk poetry will be as sweet as the songs of
children.*

– Tokyo, 1970 (written as a song)²⁰

"Twenty-Four Brand-New Hours" contains all the teachings Thầy has developed since his book *A Rose for Your Pocket*. By now, he is four years into what will become nearly four decades of exile. This painful context makes the lightness, joy, and hopefulness in these lyrics all the more poignant.

Most of the time we live in forgetfulness, drowning in the negative energies of suffering, pain, sorrow, sadness, and anxiety, which block us from seeing the wonders of life. The miracle of mindfulness is that we see that there is more to our life than our sadness, anger etc. The rising sun in

"Twenty-Four Brand-New Hours" is the energy of mindfulness helping us see all the positive conditions around us for which we can be thankful. To see that life is more than our own suffering is the first fruit of being awake.

Illusion Transformed ²¹

*Horizon's heavy eyelids,
mountains leaning,
seeking rest from Earth's pillow --
at nightfall
grass and flowers perfume sleep.
schläft der Duft des Grases und der Blumen.*

Illusion shifts her veils.

*Wind lifts up her hands.
Jade candles*

*shimmer in the silver river of the sky.
The hillside's open doorway
frames a falling star that writes
the sacred words in fire.
Ten thousand lives are spinning,
circling dream's illusion.
The moment of this night
reveals
this world's reality.*

– The Fontvannes hermitage,
France, 1970



Illustration: Sabine Nimz

This poem, also chosen by Thầy for his future Zen Master's record, marks a climax in his years of practice towards enlightenment. At the heart of this poem are teachings from *The Sutra of Complete Enlightenment*, *The Avatamsaka Sutra*, and traditional Buddhist thought about the manifestation of the cosmos. In the original Vietnamese, it also alludes to Thầy finding his true self, true nature, a concept from his traditional Zen training.

The poem begins with a peaceful, idyllic scene at nightfall – horizons, mountains, perfumed grasses, and flowers – representing the pure Buddha nature of our original mind. In Thầy's imagery, the head of cosmic man is

lying on the pillow of the earth and the whole universe is sleeping.

Suddenly, a wind blows, representing movement of the mind. From just a single defiled or illusionary thought, the whole cosmos manifests. The "jade candles" are the Milky Way. We can perceive our galaxy as a wonderful manifestation of reality in the present moment or – with one defiled thought – we can transform it into an illusion.

Through infinite cycles of rebirth, one illusion transforms into another. But, fortunately, tonight the door to the hillside is wide open. The true reality of the whole cosmos presents itself. All notions, ideas,

concepts – represented as the frames of doors shutting us in with our illusions – fall away. The self is absent, and true emptiness is revealed. The shooting or falling star lights up – even burns away – the mystery hidden underneath the words of the sutra.

In a flash, one understands the sutra's teachings. Suddenly, we realize that everything we see is an illusion, all is samsara, an endless cycle of suffering, lifetime after lifetime. At that instant, we penetrate the world of reality, we truly are. It is a portrayal of the insight, the great enlightenment of Thầy.



Illustration: Sabine Nimz

*Sunflower*²²

*Come, dear, with your innocent eyes
and look at the clear, blue ocean of the
Dharmakaya,
and look at the green color,
the manifestation of suchness.*

*Even if the world is shattered,
your smile will never vanish.
What did we possess yesterday,
and what will we lose today?*

*Come, dear, look right into existence,
adorned by illusion.
Since the sunflower is already there,
all flowers turn toward it and
contemplate.*

— Saigon, 1965, in Vietnamese

Though published much later in English, this poem first appeared in 1965 in a Vietnamese collection of Thầy's poems entitled "Chấp tay nguyện cầu cho bồ câu trắng hiện" ("Joining palms and praying for the dove of peace"). The book was illustrated by the artist Hiếu Đệ and published by Lá Bối, Saigon.²³

Thầy used to say that the sunflower is the energy of mindfulness. He wrote this poem at one of the most difficult times in Vietnam's modern history. The sunflower in this poem is the fully radiated perfect wisdom ("prajna paramita") of the Buddha, destroying all illusions. The poem is Thầy's prayer for peace

as American combat troops begin arriving in large numbers to fight in Vietnam. This energy of the "prajna paramita" is also the energy of mindfulness. It is the fundamental living energy for our life and is what leads us in the direction of Buddhahood over many lifetimes.



Illustration: Sabine Nimz. Thầy associated the sunflower with the energy of mindfulness

The poem's meaning is that, with the energy of mindfulness, we can enjoy the full, beautiful manifestation of life in all its forms while at the same time knowing it is an illusion. Even if our world comes crashing down, as happened in Vietnam when the war escalated, we are able to see that the metaphorical sunflower is always blooming and that all other flowers can take refuge in it.

Thầy was very happy to discover the energy of mindfulness which is also the transcendental energy of "prajna paramita", or perfect understanding of reality. With the energy and practice of mindfulness we experience both the miracle of manifestation and the realization that the essence of the miracle is true emptiness..

The flowering of Thầy's mindfulness

At the end of EIAB's course, I was happy to hear friends say it had helped them put many pieces into place about Thầy's life and spiritual development. In my Dharma talk on the last day I spoke about the poem "Illusion Transformed" and played a recording from the 1980s of Sr. Chân Không singing a musical version (also composed by Thầy) of his poem. A long-time meditation practitioner and senior Dharma Teacher later shared that she woke in the middle of the night and all her meditation experiences somehow came together so that she experienced the spirit of "Illusion Transformed". I shall try, here, to pull together this article's many threads.

Thầy remained loyal to his traditional Zen training in Vietnam for nearly 30 years, from 1942 when he entered Từ Hiếu, to 1970, after being exiled in the West. We can sense this loyalty in Thầy's thesis "The Problem of Knowledge in the Philosophy of Vijnanavada" (1963), which is a traditional teaching from the Yogacara school. "Sunflower" (1965) is the fully radiated perfect wisdom "prajna paramita" of the Buddha that destroyed all the illusions of the world. Thầy's loyalty to his traditional training is also present in his poems "The Virtuous Man" (1967) and "Illusion Transformed" (1970).

The traditional Zen spirit is one of being *of* the world but not belonging to it. Detachment and remoteness are often associated with the Zen way of living, which is likened to that of

a wanderer. While Thầy was immersed in the cultural environment of the Zen school, and fully inclined to go on the Zen path, he was also deeply engaged with the suffering of his time. He alludes to this in "The Fruit of Awareness is Ripe" (1966). This inherent conflict led to a long spiritual struggle within him. Thầy wanted to find a way out of the traditional framework of Buddhist teaching and practice. There is a deep longing in Thầy for a form of Buddhism that could be *of* and *in* the world.

As soon as Thầy began to practice walking meditation, and working with the energy of mindfulness, a new and creative line of spiritual growth began to emerge. We see it in *A Rose for Your Pocket* (1962), with its teaching on dwelling peacefully in the present moment and touching the energy of awareness. It is also in *Sunflower* (1965) in which Thầy intuitively sensed the energy of mindfulness which is also the transcendental energy of "prajna paramita", or perfect understanding of reality.

The energy of mindfulness is also in "Twenty-Four Brand-New Hours" (1970), the poem

Thầy included in his book *Zen Keys* (1974), where it signals the maturation of Thầy's insight into the depth of spiritual and healing power which comes from embedding the energy of mindfulness into every aspect of our daily life. Thầy had found how to practice a new form of Buddhism in a way that enables us to engage with the suffering of the world (Engaged Buddhism) and which can easily be practiced in everyday situations (Applied Buddhism).

These two streams of Thầy's thought – his traditional Zen training and his emerging mindfulness – co-existed for some years. With *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (1975), Thầy's inner struggle between "old" and "new" forms of Buddhism ended, with mindfulness as the final fruit. Like the Buddha, Thầy saw that the path of mindfulness is the way. By developing that insight, he renewed Buddhism.

To be continued...

There was so much more I hoped to say during our EIAB course (I was able to cover only about one-tenth of what I had prepared!). I believe that Sr. Chân Không and Sr. Định

Nghiêm similarly found it challenging to convey all that was in their hearts about Thầy. Both have kindly indicated a willingness to consider a follow-up EIAB course on Thầy's life at some point in the future.

Thầy was a great Zen master who came to understand the teaching of the Buddha from the perspective of mindfulness. Out of compassion and his bodhisattva vow, he went further by developing this understanding into a living body of teachings and practices – the Plum Village tradition – to help us cope with our suffering and difficulties in daily life.

If we follow Thầy's path and guidance, we might one day be able to open ourselves to the complete spectrum of life, enabling us to receive the full transmission of our beloved teacher. That is the hope and aspiration. The reality, of course, is that it will probably take most of us many lifetimes of diligent mindfulness practice. No mud, no lotus.



Acknowledgements and in gratitude: The author would like to express his deep gratitude to Ms. Sarah Monks for her detailed, creative and careful editing work as well as for transcribing all Dharma Talks the author gave during the course "Thay's Life Stories and What can we Learn from It", offered at EIAB from 10-14 April 2024; to Sr. Song Nghiêem for her creativity in organizing this course together with Sr. Chan Khong and Sr. Dinh Nghiem as a way to honor Thay's life and work; and last but not least, to Ms. Gabriele Gassen for her generosity in time and energy in translating this article as well as many others for this issue of EIAB Magazine into German..



(Endnotes)

- 1 *Vietnam – Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, by Thich Nhat Hanh, Hill and Wang, New York, 1967
- 2 Thầy was born on 11 October 1926 and passed away 22 January 2022
- 3 A biographical note on Sr. Chân Không can be found at <https://plumvillage.org/about/sister-chan-khong>. Background on Sr. Định Nghiêem can be found at <https://www.parallax.org/authors/sister-chan-dinh-nghiem/>
- 4 The author's final thesis and presentation for an English literature class while an undergraduate at UT Austin was based on Thay's book *Vo Dinh Presents Zen Poems of Nhat Hanh* by Unicorn Press, 1976, P.O. Box 3307, Greensboro, NC 27402. The English course was a requirement for attaining a Bachelor of Science in Chemical Engineering
- 5 The occupying Japanese military commandeered food crops to burn as fuel for power stations and locomotives
- 6 The text can be accessed on EIAB's website at https://www.eiab.eu/lw_resource/datapool/systemfiles/elements/files/fe0e660a-9281-11ea-8875-7e3f01e0ab96/current/document/A_Rose_for_Your_Pocket_English_-_Thich_Nhat_Hanh.pdf
- 7 *Fragrant Palm Leaves: Journals, 1962-1966* by Thich Nhat Hanh, Riverside Books, New York, 1999. Kindle Edition pp98–99
- 8 A photo of the Venerable is on the altar of EIAB's Ashoka Hall
- 9 *Đi Gặp Mùa Xuân*, by Sr. Định Nghiêem, Thầy Nguyên Tịnh, Sr. Tại Nghiêem, Thầy Pháp Ân, Công ty Cổ phần Sách Thái Hà, Hà Nội, Vietnam, 2022, pp92–93. (Thay's biography is soon to be published in English)
- 10 Thầy attained a master's degree in religion at the Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University. His thesis can be accessed at <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/efz6-7n73>
- 11 Among them: *Kinh quán niệm hơi thở*, 1975, 75 copies for friends, La Boi USA 1987; *Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing*, Parallax Press 1988; *Kinh người biết sống một mình*, La Boi Europe

- 1978; *Our Appointment with Life (Sutra on the Better Way to Live Alone)*, Parallax Press 1990; *Từng bước nở hoa sen*, La Boi Europe 1985; *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment*, Parallax Press 1990; *Đường xưa mây trắng*, La Boi USA 1988; *Old Path White Cloud*, Parallax Press 1991; *Con đường chuyển hóa – Kinh Bốn lĩnh vực quán niệm dịch và chú giải*, La Boi USA 1990; *Transformation and Healing, Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness*, Parallax Press 1990; *Sen búp từng cánh hé – những bài thiền tập hướng dẫn có công năng chuyển hóa và trị liệu*, La Boi USA 1994, and *The Blooming of a Lotus*, Beacon Press, Boston 1993
- 12 A video tribute to Thầy by Professor Kabat-Zinn is on the website wisdomfeed at <https://wisdomfeed.com/tribute-thich-nhat-hanh-from-jon-kabat-zinn-the-miracle-of-mindfulness/>, accessed 27 April 2024
- 13 Ibid
- 14 Please also see the author's article "The Eternal Spring of Thầy" EIAB Magazine 2023, p15 https://www.eiab.eu/lw_resource/datapool/systemfiles/elements/files/6fc66eae-7b20-11ee-b812-2ea10f70b7db/live/document/EIAB_Magazin_2023-englisch.pdf accessed 27 April 2024, and video recordings of the symposium at [youtube.com/watch?v=r_xrZTeeN3s&list=PLNYW1vTwx72vkoFgHn1BT26RitKrvhv](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_xrZTeeN3s&list=PLNYW1vTwx72vkoFgHn1BT26RitKrvhv)
- 15 *Call Me by My True Names – The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hahn*, Parallax Press, Berkely, California, 1999, p61
- 16 Ibid, p131
- 17 *Vietnam – Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, pp109-14, Statement by the Venerable Thích Nhất Hạnh, June 1, 1966, Washington, D.C. p113: *My solution would be along the following lines:*
1. *A clear statement by the US. of its desire to help the Vietnamese people to have a government truly responsive to Vietnamese aspirations, and concrete U.S. actions to implement this statement, such as a refusal to support one group in preference to another.*
 2. *A cessation of the bombing, north and south.*
 3. *Limitation of all military operations by U.S. and South Vietnamese forces to defensive actions; in effect, a cease-fire if the Viet Cong respond in kind.*
 4. *A convincing demonstration of the US. intention to Withdraw its forces from Vietnam over a specified period of months, with withdrawal actually beginning to take place as a sign of sincerity.*
 5. *A generous effort to help rebuild the country from the destruction which has been wreaked upon Vietnam, such*
- aid to be completely free of ideological and political strings and therefore not viewed as an affront to Vietnamese independence*
- 18 This author and Sr. Chân Không both believe that Thầy's decision to return to Vietnam in 2018 to spend his final years was, in part, to bring healing and closure from that experience
- 19 *Call Me by My True Names*, p182
- 20 Thầy intended for these lyrics to be in the first edition of *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, whose title was to be was to be *My Awareness – the Sunshine* from an English translation of the Vietnamese title "Your Mindfulness is the Sun Shining Brightly"
- 21 It was later set to music and sung in classical Vietnamese style by Sr. Chân Không in a way that reaches deep into the soul
- 22 *Call Me by My True Names*, p165
- 23 Thầy entrusted the famous Vietnamese musician Anh Việt to set this poem to music in 1995. In 1996, Anh Việt and his wife, the writer Tố Oanh, came to stay in Plum Village and helped to render Thầy's compositions in music notation. The CD "Drop of Emptiness" was recorded, and a Plum Village music book of the same title was released in 1997



– Carrying Thầy into the Future – Finding the Buddha in Ourselves

By Thầy Pháp Ấn

In our spiritual tradition, our beloved teacher Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh (Thầy) now resides symbolically with other patriarchs in the Ancestral Hall of the root temple in Huế, Vietnam. But Thầy's Bodhicitta ("mind of love") is everywhere, says EIAB Director and Dean of Studies Thầy Pháp Ấn, because Thầy's highest goal is to be a fully enlightened Buddha. Thầy Pháp Ấn encourages us to carry our teacher forward by embodying Thầy's Bodhicitta ideal, following his path towards Buddhahood, and building the Sangha to support our practice.^{1,1}



Venerable monks and nuns process solemnly through the grounds of the root temple in Huế during the Great Memorial Ceremony to mark the second anniversary of Thầy's passing.

The Sangha travels to Thầy

Forced into exile after calling for peace in Vietnam, our teacher began building a monastic Sangha in the West from 1988.² We witnessed a magnificent flowering from that seed earlier this year when the international

Plum Village community gathered at our root temple Từ Hiếu, in Huế, on 29 January for the second anniversary of Thầy's passing, and to commemorate our teacher's life and work.³

The occasion was the Great Memorial Ceremony marking Thầy's transformation

into a patriarch of the lineage, the enshrinement of his relics, and the end of our formal mourning for Thầy. We also honored Thầy as founder and First Patriarch of the Plum Village lineage. Some 420 Plum Village monks and nuns from 11 different nationalities were present,



Above (left): nuns and monks from Plum Village practice centers around the world assemble at Từ Hiếu Temple and are joined (above, right) by devoted lay practitioners.

supported by 150 lay friends from 32 different nationalities. Also present were thousands of Thầy's lay followers from across Vietnam.

Silently, they lined the path from the Guest Hall to the Deep Listening Hut, where Thầy spent his final years. They joined their palms and bowed as a procession bearing Thầy's

relics progressed slowly through the historic temple's grounds.

Từ Hiếu Temple is where our teacher became a novice in 1942 at the age of 16 and where he passed away at the age of 95.⁴ During three hours of chanting and formal ceremonies led by High Venerables of Huế, who have been very supportive of the Plum Village

community, we placed Thầy's relics in a newly established shrine in the Deep Listening Hut.

When Thầy traveled to teach and offer retreats, he liked to bring with him as many of the Sangha's monastic disciples as possible. He harnessed their collective energy to help radiate his core message that peace, ease and happiness are available now to



Above (left): bearing Thầy's relics to a permanent altar for our teacher in the Deep Listening Hut, where he spent his final years at Từ Hiếu Temple, are (left to right): Thầy Pháp Ứng, Ven. Thích Từ Đạo (Head Monk of Từ Hiếu Temple) and EIAB's Thầy Pháp Ấn. Behind Thầy Pháp Ấn is Ven. Thích Chí Thắng (Thầy's younger Dharma brother). Above (right): in the Full Moon Hall, High Venerables from Huế offer incense and pray for Thầy. Centre is High Ven. Thích Đức Thanh; to his right is High Ven. Thích Lưu Hòa, and in the foreground is High Ven. Thích Giác Quang.



Above (left): Before the Great Memorial Ceremony, monastic brothers and volunteers worked hard, fast and joyfully to renovate Thầy's hut. Now housing Thầy's relics, the Deep Listening Hut otherwise remains just as it was when our teacher lived there. Above (right): lay friends at the ceremony are keen to get close to Thầy's hut, which now serves as a memorial and place of pilgrimage.

those who practice living mindfully in the present moment. For the Great Memori-

al Ceremony, it was the turn of the Plum Village monastic Sangha to travel to Thầy.

We share more about the ceremony on pp48 -55.



Thầy liked to bring the energy of the monastic Sangha with him when traveling to offer retreats around the world. Above: a Day of Mindfulness at La Défense, Paris, in 2012



Above: Plum Village monastics “go as a river” during walking meditation through the forested grounds of Từ Hiếu Temple during a monastic retreat before the Great Memorial Ceremony for Thầy.

Going as a river

Thầy is a living energy. The spiritual purpose of the Great Memorial Ceremony, therefore, was to discover for ourselves the true nature of Thầy and to reflect on his life as a practitioner (please also refer to my article “The Poetry of Enlightenment”, on the flowering of Thầy’s mindfulness, pp 12–29).

While in Huế, the Plum Village international Sangha held a monastic retreat on the theme “Go as a River”, one of Thầy’s fundamental teachings on being a monastic member of the Sangha. This was followed by a retreat for lay persons and monastics on the theme “Receiving our Spiritual Heritage”. We concerned ourselves with Thầy’s legacy, his continuation into the future, and how each of us can sustain our spiritual commitment beyond the immediate goal of easing our own suffering.

We asked ourselves how do we “go as a river” to bring the Plum Village tradition forward in the spirit of Thầy? How do we each embody Thầy’s

Bodhicitta goal of becoming a fully enlightened Buddha? How do we continue Thầy’s path of practice and his Bodhisattva vow to benefit all sentient beings by sharing the Dharma?

I believe the answers lie in following Thầy on the path of self-realization, self-awakening and perfect enlightenment, and of helping others to awaken to full enlightenment. It is the path of the Buddha.

Teacher, student; student, teacher

At the retreat two days before the Great Memorial Ceremony, we enjoyed a night of poetry and music meditation. Monastic brothers and sisters began by reading Thầy’s poem “A Teacher Looking for His Disciple”⁵ and ended with a Plum Village song based on another of Thầy’s poems, “Looking for Each Other”⁶. There was a reason behind that sequence.

The first poem is about the teacher looking for the student. Throughout his lifetime,

Thầy was a teacher looking for his students. He offered his hand to pull us out of the dark cave of ignorance so we could take care of our suffering, our difficulties and join him on the path towards awakening and full enlightenment. The song based on the other poem, meanwhile, is about the student looking for the teacher.

During our practice and contemplation, we see clearly that a teacher looking for the student and a student looking for the teacher are, in fact, two manifestations of our inner spiritual energy, as beautifully expressed by Thầy in those two poems.

We each suffer from restlessness and a yearning for inner peace and freedom. Who is that teacher we are looking for? It is our true nature – the Tathagata Buddha, the one beyond all coming, all going; the inner Buddha that is always present, always calling us to return to the Buddha in ourselves.

When lay friends come to EIAB to search for the Buddha within, I am very moved because



Above: Juxtaposed in a photograph, Thầy appears to be conducting as the Plum Village monastic choir performs the song based on his poem “Looking for Each Other” during a retreat in Huế for the fourfold Sangha of lay friends and monastics.

I know it is not easy for them to put down everyday commitments. I share with them that our first step is to understand who we are, why we have this body, why we have these feelings, why we perform this or that mental action, and why we have a sense of being aware.

The web of “being conscious”

We learned this practice from our teacher. On the last day of retreats, Thầy always encouraged us to ask ourselves where we come from, where we are going and who we are in this vast cosmos. It is the essence of Buddhism and, for Thầy, the cream of the Buddha’s teaching.

We can approach these questions from the perspective of consciousness. Based on the enlightenment of the Buddha, and over 2,600 years of his followers practicing, teaching and transmitting his insight, many models of our being are rooted in the Buddha’s insight into consciousness. Consciousness

is explained in many ways and is a part of the five aggregates (“skandhas”) that make up our existence and through which we experience life.

1. **Form:** our physical body and its living response or experience of, for example, being hot, cold or bitten by snakes and mosquitos
2. **Feelings:** the sensation or the bioenergetic field that makes us feel pleasant or unpleasant
3. **Perceptions:** our perceptual impression of the world around us. For example, its color or shape
4. **Mental formations:** which lead us into temporary states of mind such as happiness or sadness
5. **Consciousness**

Of the five skandhas, consciousness is the most difficult to understand. The Buddha was able to define it with a miraculously simple formula: consciousness is an act of being conscious. I shared this in last year’s *EIAB*

Magazine.⁷ But it is so important as a basis for understanding Buddhism, Thầy’s life of practice, and our own practice, that it bears repeating.

Consciousness is an action arising from “being conscious” – a natural state embedded in all existence, from the microscopic world of quantum reality to the macroscopic world of the cosmos. Over time, patterns of interactions are memorized (we do not know how) to become potential habit energies or karmic formations.

In humans, this process evolves into store-consciousness where all potential karmic seeds are kept and from where they manifest in our daily interactions. These karmic seeds are, in turn, transformed into manas-consciousness, or self-afflicted consciousness. The latter refers to the ceaseless, conscious activities we direct at preserving and defending an illusory self that stems from our wrong perception and misunderstanding about our true nature

and reality. Based on manas-consciousness, mind-consciousness arises along with the five sense consciousnesses of eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body.⁸ That is how we experience the world with our consciousness.

Through this process, the natural state of “being conscious” at every layer of existence evolves into individual as well as collective consciousness. It becomes a karmic pattern of interactions known as individual and collective karma. Individual, collective, and cosmic interactions over many lifetimes produce karmic forces.

Consciousness, the fifth of the five aggregates, is also known as karmic consciousness. It is the foundation for the formation of the other four aggregates. Over many lifetimes, karmic consciousness gives birth to a physical body, feelings, perceptions, and mental formations. Each of the other four aggregates, in turn, modifies karmic consciousness through a very intricate and complicated non-linear process. Again, at every level of

manifestation, the five aggregates come from the complex cosmic web of living energy that is “being conscious”.

For example, a friend comes up and invites us home for a cup of tea. His or her impulse to approach us comes from a karmic seed of kindness along with a hidden web of collective, cosmic interactions. These interactions are, in turn, governed by the natural state of “being conscious” that exists in all living beings spread out in space and time, including us. Our friend’s invitation is therefore an act of consciousness manifesting from the complex cosmic web of living energy that is “being conscious.”

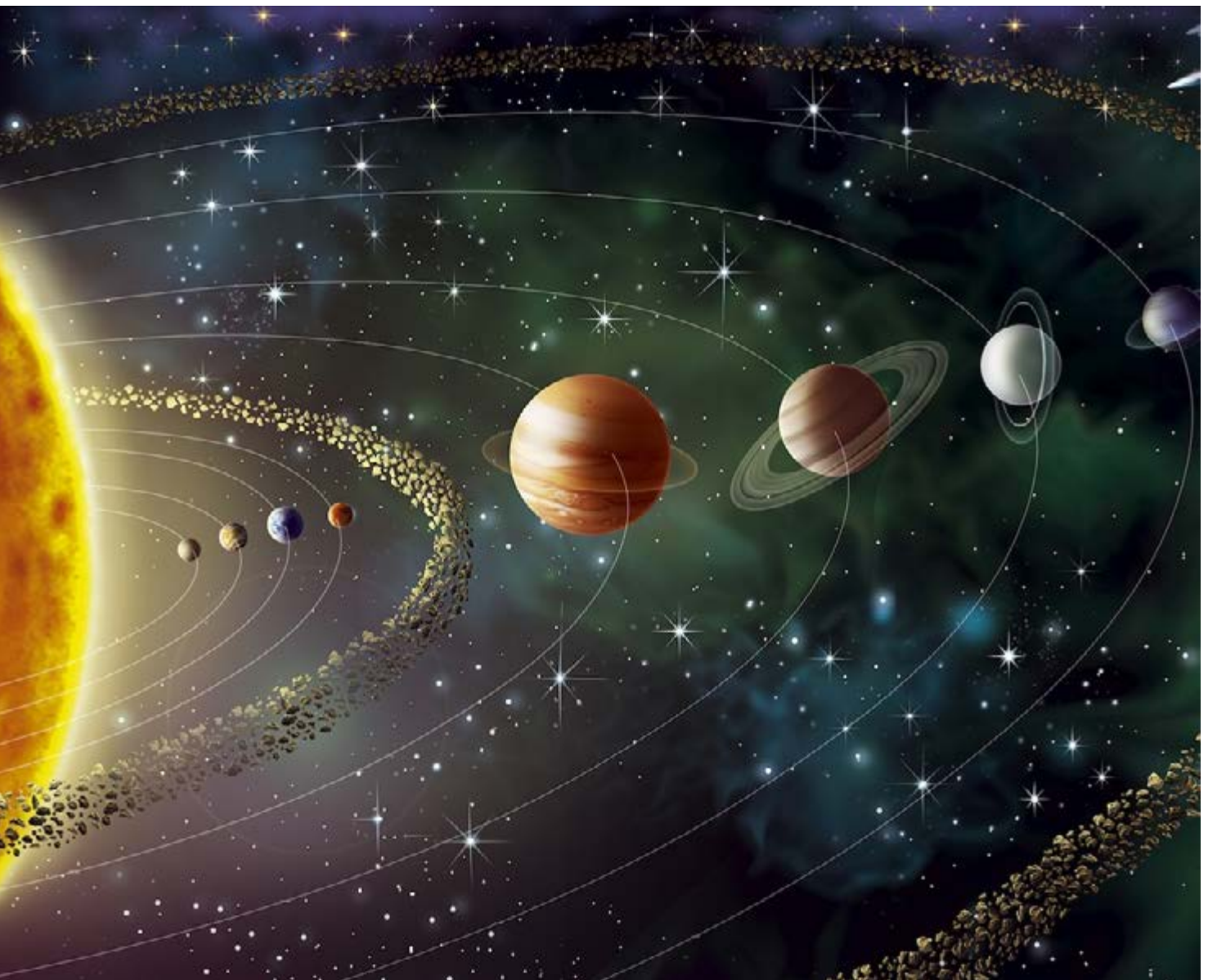
The Buddha’s formulation “consciousness is an act of being conscious” is very important because it tells us that karmic consciousness is a process of interacting with the entire universe. Indeed, the entire universe is a manifestation of the cosmic web of karmic consciousness playing out in a vast cosmic drama.

Layer after layer, wave after wave, karmic consciousness pushes us into different manifestations. Because of ignorance, we do not see this process at work. We let the waves carry us from one life to the next. We become victims of the momentum behind karmic consciousness. *Thầy* illustrates this in his poem “A Teacher Looking for His Disciple” when he says: “Sometimes I manifest myself right on the path you are treading, but you still look at me as if I were a stranger. You cannot see the connection between us in our former lives...You have not recognized me.”

The natural state of “being conscious” embedded in all existence forms the Dharmabody of the cosmic Buddha, known as the Vairocana Buddha. We all share with the Vairocana Buddha the deepest reality of knowing or “being conscious”. Yet, still, we float along according to our karmic consciousness. We do not live with the clear natural state of “being conscious” or the intelligent consciousness that *Thầy* often called Right Mindfulness.



Waves of karmic consciousness push us into different manifestations. Above: Sr. Song Nghiêm watches waves pounding southern Italy’s Adriatic coast near Bari, where EIAB offers an annual spring retreat for the local Sangha.



Because the cosmos is alive with innate intelligence, celestial bodies are “aware” of each other’s position, and orbit accordingly. Image source: NASA

Lifetime after lifetime, clear intelligent consciousness has always been there. All existence in nature is imbued with clear, intelligent consciousness. All living entities are aware of each other and revolve or navigate around each other, just as Earth avoids falling into the sun.

Every day, in every situation, however karmic consciousness is ready to pull us away from our innate, complete knowing. The life of a practitioner is to practice leaving the realm of this cosmic web of karmic consciousness so we may return to complete knowing, and live in perfect mindfulness. To live in perfect mindfulness is to live with peace, solidity, and inner freedom.

As practitioners, we search constantly for the Buddha until, one day, we discover that the Vairocana Buddha is already present within us! We realize that student and teacher are not separate. In that instant, we are aware of everything happening around us without being carried away by karmic consciousness. Instead, we practice getting in touch with the peace, solidity, and inner freedom in our heart.

Traveling with a Bodhisattva vow

It is not easy to live continuously in a state of peace, solidity, and inner freedom. While we may touch these states of being, we have difficulty dwelling in them for any

length of time. That is why it is desirable for monastics to stay in one place for as long as possible so that our spiritual tree has a chance to take root. If we keep uprooting and re-planting ourselves elsewhere, it is difficult for our “tree” to grow tall and strong enough to withstand the storms of karmic consciousness.

With his great Bodhicitta, Thầy traveled the world to help many people receive the Dharma so they could experience happiness and peace within. Often, friends would invite Thầy to enjoy this or that sightseeing spot. Thầy would just smile because traveling to see the world is not the goal of a monk or nun. While Thầy traveled widely from country



Thầy traveled widely because he wanted to help people experience the Dharma and cultivate joy, happiness and peace in themselves. Above (left): Thầy with close attendants Br. Pháp Nguyễn (to Thầy's right) and Br. Pháp Hữu at a railway station in Rome. Above (right): monastics travel joyfully with Thầy from Milan to Paris. Both photographs were taken in 2012.

to country, he rarely ventured out to walk around. He usually went from an airport or train station to the retreat venue, then to his accommodation.

EIAB's monastic Sangha travels because our goal, like Thầy's, is to transmit the Dharma and fulfil our Bodhisattva vow to save sentient beings. When I conduct a retreat away from EIAB, I try to follow Thầy's example. I mostly go straight from the airport to the venue and, as soon as the retreat ends, straight back to the airport. I encourage monastic brothers and sisters to do the same. I know little about the cities I visit, other than each is just another wonderful manifestation of karmic consciousness.

In the biological world, when we view a scene, light passes through our eyes, electrical signals travel along the optic nerve and our brain processes the information to assemble what we "see". From a Buddhist perspective, what we "see" is the manifestation of our karmic consciousness, along with the hidden web of collective, cosmic interactions governed by the natural state of "being

conscious" that exists in all things spread out in space and time.

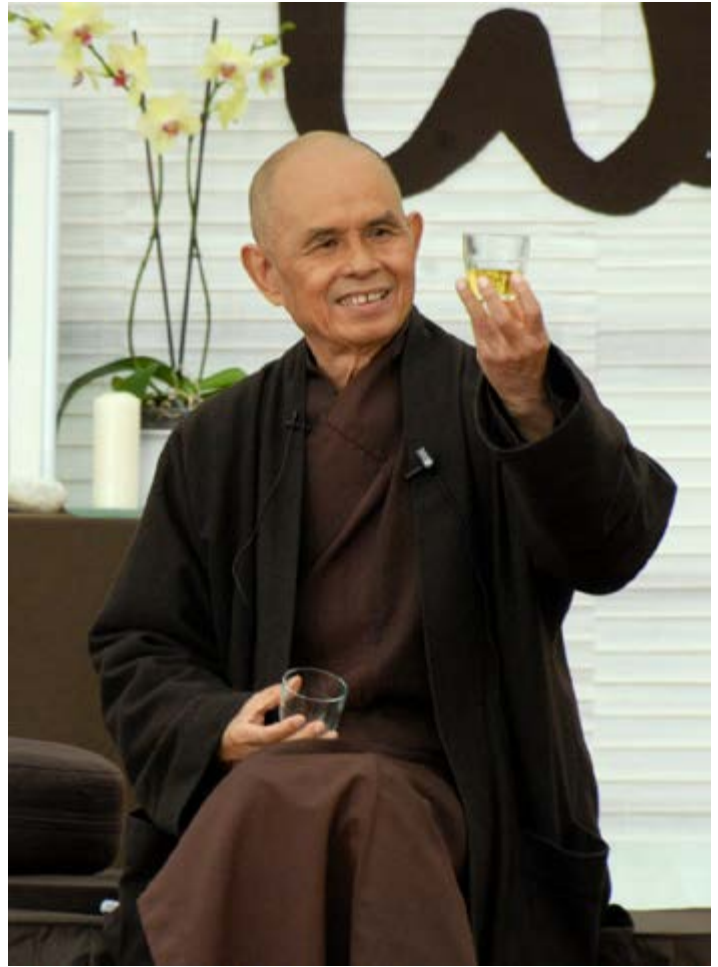
In the language of the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the activities of cosmic consciousness are called One Mind, from the subjective side, and One True Dharma Realm, from the objective side. The cosmic process of karmic consciousness is the painter that paints the world of our subjective as well as objective experiences. Thus, we know that we do not find our true home by traveling outside. Our true home is freedom from all cosmic acts of "being conscious", and full understanding and insight into this full manifestation. It is the domain of knowing and being of the Vairocana Buddha within all of us. That is the true home for which we yearn.

We learned from Thầy the practice of dwelling in the here and now. Doing so is essential if we are to take root and withstand the karmic forces relentlessly pushing us. But where do we start? The answer is deceptively simple: in our feet. When we take a step, we *really* take that step, we dwell deeply in that step. Mindful walking, as practiced by the Buddha

and refreshed in modern times by our teacher, is one of our most fundamental practices.

Similarly, when we pour a glass of water, we pour it slowly, hold the glass of water and be present for the glass of water. That is peace, solidity and inner freedom, that is the Vairocana Buddha inside us. If we drink a glass of water just to finish it, without really being present for that glass of water, we lose the Vairocana Buddha. And when we lose the Vairocana Buddha within, where do we go? Pushed by karma, we continue to wander around in endless cycles of rebirth.

I am sure being a lay person is even more difficult than being a monastic. Lay practitioners face unceasing pressures and responsibilities every day which can easily overwhelm their practice of taking root and dwelling. But we need to persevere with mindful walking, drinking, speaking etc. because only on this path towards self-awakening can we get in touch with the peace, solidity, and inner freedom of the Vairocana Buddha within. Only by doing so can we continue Thầy.



For generations of Plum Village practitioners, the simple joy Thầy always radiated when drinking a cup of tea in mindfulness is a memorable image.

Practicing for Thầy

When we follow his path, we practice not only for ourselves but for Thầy and for all the living beings he has vowed to bring to the shore of liberation, joy, and happiness.⁹ The *Avatamsaka Sutra* uses a beautiful image to explain how this is possible by referencing an ancient Vedic metaphor in which Indra, King of the Gods, asks an artist to decorate his palace.

According to the sutra, the artist created a net expanding in infinite directions in space and, perhaps, in time. At each “eye” within the net the artist hung a jewel. Each jewel, while keeping its own identity, reflected all the other jewels as well as its own image as reflected in the other jewels.

Indra’s net is a perfect metaphor for interconnectedness, interpenetration, interdependence and what Thầy called

interbeing. It also perfectly illustrates that web of “being conscious” that exists in all things spread out in space and time.

Because we all belong to this cosmic net, how we practice affects all living beings within it. At the beginning of our practice, we might be experiencing suffering or pain because life is not proceeding in accordance with our wishes. We embark on a search for our own happiness. But slowly we come to the insight that our happiness is deeply connected to that of others. In our family, for example, our happiness is deeply connected to that of our children, our husband, our wife. There is no such thing as individual happiness. The reality of happiness is one of interconnectedness.

A stupa made of practice

We may have encountered Thầy through YouTube, his writings, his poetry, his

calligraphy, or we may have seen Thầy in person and talked with him. Whatever the case, Thầy’s way of life has somehow entered us. Thus, today, when we see a monastic brother or sister walking calmly and peacefully, it reminds us of Thầy. Even though that brother and sister may not walk completely peacefully yet, or sit completely peacefully yet, there is a certain quality of Thầy in them.

Thầy made it clear he would not, in future, be found in a stupa made of bricks and mortar, but in a stupa made of practice to help transform and heal people in our time. He urged us to take refuge in the Sangha because the Sangha can help us overcome our worries, fears, and anxiety.

In a letter from Thầy to embrace and support his students at the time of his passing, he says: “Sangha is a beautiful community, walking together on the joyful path,

practicing to liberate ourselves, and to bring peace and happiness to the world.”¹¹ Thầy also underscores how the monastic Sangha and lay Sangha rely on one another, support one another “as we practice to transform, and to serve all living beings”.

It is very difficult to practice alone. As Thầy used to say, if we practice by ourselves, sooner or later we will lose our practice. The Sangha is not perfect but if we make the effort to practice with the Sangha then we will help the Sangha and the Sangha will help us.

This phenomenon has to do with the material as well as the spiritual world. At the material level, scientists have identified a class of neurons in our brain called mirror neurons.

When, for example, a friend practices walking meditation, the mirror neurons in our brain begin to activate. They send a signal so that we, too, want to do walking meditation. If a friend is practicing loving speech and deep listening, our mirror neurons are activated again and we start to imitate our friend’s behavior because, deep inside, we also want to practice loving speech and deep listening.

In the wholesome environment of a Sangha, where everyone is practicing, we benefit all the time because our mirror neurons are activated positively all the time. Conversely, if we are with a group of friends who speak loudly and exhibit unwholesome behavior, then we will imitate and follow that

unwholesome behavior. That is why it is so important to be in a wholesome environment.

Science’s recent discovery of mirror neurons, in fact, validates ancient wisdom passed on by the Buddha and the patriarchs, namely that interconnectedness and interbeing are the ultimate reality.¹² By coming together in a Sangha and supporting each other, we help each other. By practicing and working as a Sangha, we are able to achieve much more.

Building EIAB’s Sangha

Building the Sangha was foremost in my mind when I arrived in Germany in 2008 to establish EIAB for Thầy. I told the 20 brothers and sisters accompanying me from



While Thầy is not to be found in a stupa, bricks from the garlanded structure in which he was cremated now form a pyramid at Công Viên Vĩnh Hằng Vườn Địa Đàng, a cemetery near Huế, where Thầy’s cremation took place on 29 January 2022. The pyramid is flanked by two stone memorial tablets bearing (left) the likeness of Thầy and (right) of Elder Ven. Thích Trí Quang, a prominent leader of non-violent Buddhist protests in Huế during “the Buddhist Crisis” of 1963.¹⁰ Above: Plum Village monastics in Huế for Thầy’s Great Memorial Ceremony pray and pay respect at what has become a place of pilgrimage for many Buddhists.



Strengthening bonds within the monastic Sangha was a top priority for Thầy Pháp Ấn during EIAB's early days. Above: EIAB monks and nuns photographed in 2009. Photo: Rolf Franke

Plum Village that we would not open the new Institute to the public for six months. Instead, we would spend that time just being together. Coming from different backgrounds and communities, we needed to adjust to life in another country and new practice center. Each week we had a Dharma talk and practiced “Beginning Anew”, a Plum Village practice for opening or restoring honest, healthy communication in relationships.

My thinking was that all of us in EIAB's fledgling monastic community should get to know, understand, and connect with one another deeply before engaging widely with the world outside. For if we did not understand and take root in each other, love could not blossom. Unless love blossomed in our heart, we could not authentically transmit it to those who would soon attend EIAB retreats and courses. So, for those first six months we practiced together, learned to work together and to be happy together as a way of strengthening our monastic Sangha.

This is the 16th year of EIAB. We continue to embody Thầy's deep wish that future generations may benefit from studying

the Dharma and from putting the Buddha's teachings into practice in ways that are relevant and effective in today's world.¹³

In Vietnamese tradition, 16 is a very special number. According to the lunar calendar, the 15th day of the month is the full moon. But for Vietnamese, the moon that appears on the 16th day is even more beautiful. Likewise, 16 is regarded as the age when a young person's full beauty begins to bloom. EIAB is blooming, too, thanks to the love, support, encouragement, and generosity of so many Sangha friends in Germany, France, Hong Kong, the US and beyond. EIAB could not have progressed as we have without this help..

Continuing Thầy's peace advocacy

A perpetual priority for EIAB is to continue Thầy's peace advocacy. We learned from our teacher that to have peace in the world, we start by cultivating peace in ourselves.¹⁴ Thầy knew from years of experience that peace activists often have noble intentions to serve the cause of peace but are not peaceful in themselves. They suffer a lot. *Being Peace*

and its sequel *Touching Peace: Practicing the Art of Mindful Living* were among the first books Thầy wrote in English.

On New Year's Eve 2021, when the world was full of fear, anxiety and loss arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, EIAB issued a special prayer in which we contemplated the possibility for violence in the world to proliferate and offered a “Mindfulness Training for Peace on Earth”.¹⁵

Barely two months later, war broke out in Ukraine. In April 2022, Sr. Chan Khong and I wrote an open letter calling for peace in Ukraine.¹⁶ It was hand delivered with letters to the presidents of Russia and Ukraine via their embassies in Berlin. Sadly, that war continues. We update and read EIAB's prayer for peace each New Year's Eve.

As a spiritual community, we acknowledge and embrace the suffering of *all* who are caught up in conflict anywhere and we advocate for peace within the human family. At no time do we act as a political organization or with political motives. Our position is to try to change the situation in

any conflict without taking sides. We know it is not easy to do so because, as Thích has said, “In true dialogue, both sides are willing to change.” It is rare that opposing leaders emerge in tandem who have the courage, will and the power to end longstanding hostility between their peoples and change the course of history.¹⁷

Last October, when a new conflict broke out in the Middle East, we wrote an open letter asking President Joe Biden to use the pivotal influence of the US in that region to bring about an immediate halt to the killing and violence there. Accompanying

the letter, conveyed to the White House through various channels, were a guided meditation, teachings, practice tools and prayers to support all in President Biden’s administration who wish to cultivate understanding, compassion, tolerance and peace in themselves, their families, their communities, and nation. We reproduce these documents on pages 41–41

EIAB is determined to continue Thích by cultivating peace in ourselves and by nurturing a culture of peace in a world where suffering from war is widespread. Each Sunday, we set aside a time to pray for

all who suffer from conflict. Here one such prayer we have been saying:

In the sacred room at EIAB that houses Thích’s altar, we have set up a special shrine. It holds our “Prayer for the Nectar of Compassion” to trickle down and ease the suffering of all individuals we hold in our hearts. Many who visit the room to honor and take refuge in Thích are experiencing personal loss and fear. The shrine is on a table placed next to Thích’s altar so that his love, insight, and spiritual energy can embrace them and all who are in distress.

A Prayer for All Who Suffer from Conflict

We send our love and spiritual energy to support all Israelis, Palestinians and other peoples caught up in the tragedy of the latest conflict in the Middle East.

Our prayer is also for Ukrainians, Russians, the people of Sudan and all who presently suffer from war. There are more than 110 armed conflicts going on around the world, some of which have lasted more than 50 years.

May these people be safe and secure. May they find peace in themselves even as they live daily with danger and hardship. May their leaders be awakened to the energy of compassion so that, together, they bring an end to immense suffering caused by war and achieve lasting peace in the world.

EIAB is also continuing Thích’s work for peace by wholeheartedly pursuing our plan to build a meditation hall to be named the Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh Great Hall of Peace. I shared computer-generated images of the hall’s architectural design in last year’s *EIAB Magazine*.¹⁸ Our application is presently with relevant government departments, and it is our fervent prayer it will be approved (please refer to my progress update on pp 56–58). If it is, the meditation hall’s construction will

be a major undertaking for EIAB in coming years. in wichtiges Projekt für das EIAB sein.

Sangha togetherness

As humans, we all suffer from a sense of being separated. The togetherness we experience as part of a Sangha helps to heal this existential state of loneliness. For thousands of years, enlightened teachers have advised

that for humans to develop, for our species to evolve, we need to learn to cooperate with each other and come together to live peacefully with each other. Taking refuge in the Sangha is how we, as practitioners, attain the dimension of togetherness.

Society in many parts of the world has gone so far in the direction of individualism that we tend to live just for ourselves. We are concerned only with our own happiness,



EIAB has set up a shrine in the room with Thầy's altar. It is for friends in special need of spiritual support for themselves or loved ones in times of great difficulty or distress. Above: Sr. Chan Khong and Thầy Pháp Ấn chant a "Prayer for the Nectar of Compassion" for family members of a practitioner impacted by the tragic conflict in the Middle East. We send our love and spiritual energy to all peoples suffering from the conflict in that region. We hold them all in our hearts.

our own benefit, our own material security. This narrow orientation is among the world's biggest problems. We do not offer much time or energy to others. We cannot listen deeply to each other; we cannot make compromises in the way we live because we want to "have it all" and fear that will not happen if we open up too much to others.

Yet, whether we like it or not, we all belong to the same net of existence I referred to above. As an individual, I may have the illusion that I can be separated from this net, I can take myself out of it, be on my own and do everything by myself, but the opposite is true. The Buddha called that confusion, or ignorance. By taking refuge in the Sangha, we learn to be part of something that is bigger than ourselves, and to live together harmoniously.

Sangha harmony

In the monastic tradition, we have a practice called the Six Harmonies to help us build, strengthen, and preserve our spiritual

community. It originated in a crisis involving another spiritual community during the Buddha's day. After Mahavira, the leader of Jainism in that era, passed away his whole community was in turmoil. Followers argued over how to understand his teaching and precepts. Some even became violent.

Hearing about this, anxious students of the Buddha came to him and asked how to avoid such a situation when the Buddha passed away. What practice would hold the community together when he was no longer present? The Buddha gave them the practice of the Six Harmonies, saying: "So long as we can practice these six harmonies, we can help the Buddha to go further into the future."¹⁹

While developed for monastics, I believe this practice is also useful for lay practitioners dedicated to continuing Thầy by further building and nurturing the Sangha. But, first, each of us must ensure that the foundation for our own practice is solid.

Setting our foundation

The basic practice is to stop, go back to our body, and sink the energy down to our lower abdomen, our center of gravity. We practice meditation in such a way that we return to our in-breath and out-breath, we feel our body, relax our body and slowly, slowly we bring the energy down into our center of gravity.

Sinking the energy down comes from the wisdom of the Buddha and other spiritual masters of Asian traditions. While today's neuroscientists know a lot about our brain, most pay less attention to ancient knowledge that we have a "second brain" which is also very important.

The brain in our head has to do with our emotions, perception. The second brain is in our gut area and is the root of our spiritual as well as physical energy. Scientists call this "brain" the enteric nervous system (ENS) in which more than 100 million nerve cells line

our gastrointestinal tract from esophagus to rectum.²⁰

If we cannot sink the energy down, we are unable to feel pleasantness and relaxation in the body, or to taste the joy of meditation. When I first became a monk, I did not know this practice. My sitting meditation was not effective until many years later when I researched and studied “Jhana”, the meditation discovered by the Buddha.

It is my belief that when the Buddha practiced Jhana meditation and reached the highest of four levels – i.e. when he felt total pleasantness, total peacefulness, total calmness of his body, with the greatest level of clarity in his mind – his understanding penetrated the depth of our existence and he

had a direct experience into the web of life, Indra’s net.

From pleasantness and liberation in the body, the Buddha was able to develop liberation and full awareness in the mind. Thus, from “Jhana” meditation, the Buddha discovered the energy of equanimity mindfulness that became the source of his Enlightenment and all his later teachings and practices.²¹

To heal and transform ourselves, therefore, we need to reduce the activity in the first brain and bring the energy down to our lower abdomen. Once we bring the energy down to the second brain, a cognitive process develops which can help us achieve balance and harmony in our body. It is easier to open our heart, accept other people and

understand different viewpoints. We no longer see our own views as absolute truth.

Practicing harmony

We practice the six harmonies in both the historical dimension and the ultimate dimension. We begin by harmonizing acts in the worldly historical dimension and end by dwelling in the ultimate dimension, where we harmonize our practice of mindfulness training and our understanding about the true nature of life.

It is significant that in his teaching on the six harmonies, the Buddha is concerned with fundamental practices we need to master to live in a community. First, we must transform our karmic consciousness, i.e. our karmic



Dwelling peacefully together, in harmony with others and with nature, we learn to share physical living space as well as the beauty and bounty of our planet. Above: Plum Village monastics pause during walking meditation at Từ Hiếu Temple in January this year to dwell with tranquility upon Half Moon Lake.



In his poem "Voyage", Thầy wrote: "I find myself looking for my footprints, left during one cycle of birth and death."²² Photo: Teresa Power

activities of body, speech and mind. Only then is it possible for us to advance further on the path of a Bodhisattva by realizing and practicing the remaining harmonies.

The *first harmony* has to do with the body, bodily activity and dwelling together. In Buddhist wisdom, we have an internal body and an external body. The external body is our entire surroundings, including all the brothers and sisters in the Sangha, all countries and societies.

Harmony in the body means being in harmony with all "bodies" around us, be they tables or chairs, plants, mountains, animals or plants, family or friends. Our practice is to reflect continuously so that we see that our body is not just this body. We learn to develop awareness of ourselves and others with whom we share the same physical space,

air, and planet. We come to see our position in the universe and the whole web of life. It is not an individual life.

There are people with many material advantages who take up a lot of space. Those with few material advantages usually have very little habitable space. As a species, we have spread over almost all the planet, taking so much physical space away from other species, and destroying their habitat. We see, also, that climate change linked to human activity is forcing insects, birds, and other creatures to invade the native habitats of other species for survival. The overall extinction rate of species on our planet is accelerating, and biodiversity is declining.

By practicing dwelling peacefully together and in harmony with others, we learn to share physical living space and contribute

to preserving all life in our natural surroundings. Moreover, we can expand the practice to offer family and friends more mental space.

The *second harmony* has to do with verbal activity, or harmony in respect of our "mouth". It is about avoiding all verbal conflict, arguments, disagreements. We learn to calm down, express ourselves with loving speech and to listen deeply to each other, trying to understand other people's viewpoints and to resolve differences with gentleness.

The *third harmony* is to do with mental activity. During daily interactions within the community, we each try our best to harmonize our own intention and karmic impulse with the intention and karmic impulse of others, so we may be happy

together. These first three harmonies have to do with the historical dimension, the domain of the world. At this level, we practice harmony by sinking the energy down from our “first brain” and developing our “second brain”, as explained earlier. Harmony in the body is the foundation for us to have verbal harmony and mental or intentional harmony.

The *fourth harmony*, too, is part of the worldly, historical dimension. It is mainly to do with material life. We practice spiritual life in a spiritual community but, to survive, we all need material resources! We share our material resources and distribute our material benefits equally.

The fifth and sixth harmonies belong to the domain *outside* the world. In the *fifth harmony*, we practice the same mindfulness trainings together. For monastics, this also means practicing mindful manners daily to cultivate harmonious community living. The *sixth harmony* has to do with the ultimate dimension and cultivating our common understanding about the true nature of life.

We can only succeed in doing this if we are well rooted in our second brain.

Practicing the Six Harmonies, we learn to live together in unity as a Sangha. We see more clearly that the direction of our practice over infinite lifetimes is the direction of Thầy, namely, to reach the dimension of Buddhahood and to have a direct experience of the formless, indescribable reality of the Buddha’s infinite Dharmabody.

Carrying Thầy forward

Thầy has entered a higher, more remote realm, where we no longer sense his physical presence but still can access his spiritual energy. Our biggest task, now, is to grasp the true essence of what he wanted to pass on to us and to future generations. It is, I believe, to embody his Bodhicitta ideal by setting our own intention to become a fully enlightened Buddha. Yes, our goal is no less than Buddhahood. And what Thầy truly wanted to transmit is how to find the Buddha in ourselves.

The Sangha is there to support us. Thầy devoted his life to sharing the Dharma and creating a harmonious, peaceful, “beloved community” anchored in the practice of mindfulness and in touch with the suffering of the world in our time. To make it easier for us to practice, he opened many new Dharma doors, such as the Bell of Mindfulness, walking meditation, mindful eating, Dharma sharing, Touching the Earth, the practice of Beginning Anew, and gathas (meditation poems) to support us in carrying out all our daily activities in mindfulness.

How many more generations Thầy can continue, how many more monks, nuns and lay practitioners can transmit Thầy’s teachings over how many more years depends on us right here, right now. Our mindful footsteps and mindful actions, our diligence as practitioners... all these will play a part in determining how far we carry Thầy into the future.



Acknowledgements and in gratitude: The author wishes to express his deep gratitude to Ms. Sarah Monks for her detailed, creative and careful editing work for this article and, when his presence was required in Huế, to EIAB’s Sangha and Sr. Song Nghiêm for organizing a parallel Great Memorial Ceremony to honor Thầy. This made a significant contribution to the overall success of activities for Thầy in Huế and at Plum Village practice centers around the world. Especially appreciated was Sr. Song Nghiêm’s initiative in developing a Great Memorial Ceremony retreat, which included a memorable concert featuring EIAB Sangha luminaries.²⁴

The author expresses his deep gratitude to Ms Hai Yen Victoria Tran for her generosity and hard work in translating and transcribing from Vietnamese into English Dharma talks upon which this article draws, to Ms. Sabine Nimz for her spiritual intuition expressed gently and beautifully in her illustration, and last but not least, to Ms. Gabriele Gassen for her generosity in time and energy in translating this article into German..





We walk with Thầy into the future by accessing his spiritual energy, as beautifully represented in this illustration by artist and Austrian Sangha member Sabine Nimz.²⁵

(Endnotes)

- 1 This article is based on a series of Dharma talks the author offered in Vietnamese to monastics and lay friends in Huế on 22 and 28 January 2024, and a Dharma talk in English to the Sangha in Hong Kong on 4 February 2024
- 2 The spiritual foundations of our teacher's new monastic Sangha were the Order of Interbeing (OI) founded by Thầy in Vietnam in 1966. Our teacher first established the Plum Village practice center in southwest France in 1982 and, in 1988, ordained the first Plum Village monastics – sisters Chân Không, Chân Đức, and Chân Vị – on Vulture Peak in India
- 3 Thầy passed away at Từ Hiếu Temple on 22 January 2022, at the age of 95. However, 29 January 2024 was the second anniversary according to the lunar calendar
- 4 The author's article "The blooming of a white lotus – reflections on the passing and life of our teacher" in *EIAB Magazine* 2022 pp14-57 gives an account of Thầy's return to Vietnam at the age of 92 and his final years at Từ Hiếu Temple. See <https://www.eiab.eu/files/ugd/d17071dcf57a5375de4f58a37471ae37e6e226.pdf>, accessed 19 July 2024
- 5 A poem by Thầy published in *The Mindfulness Bell* in January 2000 <https://www.parallax.org/mindfulnessbell/article/poem-a-teacher-looking-for-his-disciple/>, accessed 20 July 2024
- 6 *Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh*, Parallax Press, Berkeley, California, 1999, pp116–119
- 7 *Ibid*, p27, also p97
- 8 Thầy discusses consciousness in depth in *Understanding Our Mind*, Parallax Press, Berkeley, California, 2006
- 9 This was the Bodhisattva vow Thầy made while a teenage novice at Từ Hiếu Temple
- 10 The Elder Venerable had been cremated in November 2019 in a hand-built crematorium originally intended to be ready for Thầy when the time came. It was later enhanced for our teacher's cremation. Both Thầy and Elder Ven. Thích Trí Quang played leading roles in Vietnamese Buddhism's peaceful resistance to official oppression by the regime of South Vietnam's President Ngô Đình Diệm. It was Elder Ven. Thích Trí Quang who wrote to Thầy – when our teacher was studying in the US in 1963 – imploring him to return home to support Vietnamese Buddhism at that critical time (see also the author's article "The Poetry of Enlightenment – How Thầy's mindfulness flowered", pp12–29). Now, Thầy and Elder Ven. Thích Trí Quang are remembered and honored side by side at the cremation ground, perhaps reflecting the depth of their connection through their individual Bodhisattva vows to serve all living beings
- 11 *EIAB Magazine* 2022 pp60–61; "Climbing together the hill of the century – a love letter from Thầy", dated 20 November 2020, and composed with Thầy's permission. The author of this article read this letter at Thầy's cremation ceremony to an assembly of more than 2,000 monks, nuns, lay dignitaries and practitioners
- 12 Of note, the 2022 Nobel Prize in physics was awarded to experimentalists looking into the phenomenon of "quantum entanglement" where two particles behave like a single unit even when separated by vast distances <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/physics/2022/press-release/>
- 13 Please refer to the author's article "From war, to peace, to the cosmos" in the 10th anniversary edition of the *EIAB Magazine* 2018, pp2–27
- 14 "Peace In Oneself Peace In The World", a famous calligraphy of Thầy, is inscribed over the stone gate at the entrance to EIAB
- 15 Reproduced in *EIAB Magazine* 2022, p50
- 16 *EIAB Magazine* 2022, p37
- 17 The coming together of South Africa's F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela is an outstanding example of people who, by doing so, change the course of history. In 1993, these one-time political adversaries were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their work in ending apartheid
- 18 https://www.eiab.eu/lw_resource/datapool/systemfiles/elements/files/6fc66eae-7b20-11ee-b812-2ea10f70b7db/live/document/EIAB_Magazin_2023-englisch.pdf, pp22–26, accessed 9 March 2024
- 19 *Middle Length Discourse of the Buddha*, MN.104 Sāmagāmasutta
- 20 See also "The Brain-Gut Connection", Johns Hopkins Medicine <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/the-brain-gut-connection#:~:text=Scientists%20call%20this%20little%20brain,tract%20from%20esophagus%20to%20rectum>, accessed 14 April 2024
- 21 *Deathlessness – The Buddha's innovative and meaningful approach to our existence*, by Thầy Pháp Ấn, *EIAB Newsletter*, August 2015, p16
- 22 *Call Me by My True Names*, pp161–162. In an accompanying note Thầy says he was alone on the French Riviera working on another book: "I went to the beach and sat there without thinking or doing anything for a whole day, until ten o'clock at night. I allowed my five skandhas to be washed by the sound and sight of the waves." (*The book was A Taste of Earth, about the myths of Vietnam, published in English in 1993 by Parallax Press.*)
- 23 The illustration first appeared on the cover of *EIAB Magazine* 2022
- 24 Sr. Song Nghiê'm's article is on page 76–79

The Great Memorial Ceremony for Thầy

Our teacher's transformation to spiritual ancestor and First Patriarch of the Plum Village lineage

In Vietnamese tradition, which is influenced by Confucianism, when a parent or beloved teacher passes away, we hold two ceremonies to show our filial piety and respect. The “small joy” ceremony (Lễ Tiểu Tường) is on the first anniversary, when we still feel the sadness and pain of loss. The “great joy” memorial ceremony (Lễ Đại Tường) is on the second anniversary when we are able, once more, to be happy and show joyful feelings.

The Great Memorial Ceremony held at Từ Hiếu Temple in Huế on 29 January 2024, the second anniversary of our teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh's passing according to the lunar

calendar, was to mark his transformation to a spiritual ancestor of the lineage.¹

Thầy is no longer considered “present” in daily life but sits symbolically in the Patriarchs Hall of the root temple, alongside the ancestral teachers. The ceremony recognized Thầy as the Fifth Patriarch of Từ Hiếu, which he had entered as a novice in 1942, and founder of the Plum Village tradition. We honor Thầy as First Patriarch of the Plum Village lineage.

This was the last in a series of ceremonies that began with Thầy's funeral on 29 January 2022², seven days after his passing,

followed by ceremonies on the 49th and 100th days and the “small joy” memorial ceremony on Thầy's first anniversary. From this point, each anniversary will be commemorated at Từ Hiếu Temple with a smaller ceremony.

In Vietnamese Buddhism, elder disciples must be present at the Great Memorial Ceremony for their teacher. Elder disciples of Thầy were among 420 Plum Village monks and nuns – Thầy's spiritual descendants – who gathered from across the world at Từ Hiếu Temple with 150 lay friends of 32 different nationalities and thousands more from across Vietnam.



As with Thầy's funeral, retreats were organized at Plum Village practice centers around the world to coincide with the events in Hue³. In a pre-ceremony video, posted on the Plum Village website, Thầy Pháp Dung said it was more like a celebration of Thầy's life than the end of mourning after his passing.⁴

He described the three-hour ceremony as empowering followers to continue Thầy's path to develop and renew Buddhism and to engage with the suffering of the world. "We are empowered to do what Thầy has done, so (we're) living with Thầy in our heart. The ceremony is to not be caught with Thầy or Từ Hiếu or Vietnam as the place where Thầy was and is. But it's in our footsteps, it's in our breath. That's what Thầy is telling us. These ceremonies are just formal ways to express that," he said.

In an album at the end of this article, we share photographic highlights from the day.

The Great Memorial Ceremony began with monks and nuns forming two lines of a long procession. Large screens were placed in Từ Hiếu Temple's grounds so that that everyone could follow the proceedings. Once again, the international communication team in Plum Village France arranged for livestreaming so that practice centers and followers across the world could participate in real time. Later, practitioners could watch the full recording with English commentary.⁵

The procession went first to the Deep Listening Hut, where Thầy spent the final years of this life. There, High Venerables performed a ceremony to purify and bless every corner with the nectar of compassion. The hut has been beautifully renovated to house Thầy's relics, while otherwise remaining just as it was when he lived there. Thầy did not want a stupa, but his hut now serves as a memorial, a place of pilgrimage his followers can visit.

The next stop was the Full Moon Hall, which had served as Thầy's "temporary" altar and where, two years earlier, Thầy's body had gently been laid in his coffin. Once again, the hall was magnificently adorned with yellow and brown chrysanthemums, Thầy's favorite. After chanting and prostrations

led by High Venerables of Huế and by Plum Village elders, a ceramic urn containing Thầy's relics was gently lifted off the altar and carried carefully to the Deep Listening Hut, their final resting place.

The High Venerables returned to the hut to pay their respects to Thầy. They bowed in front of the bed where he had passed away and looked at photos and books on Thầy's shelves. Plum Village elders, in turn, touched the earth to the High Venerables in gratitude for the support they offered in the ceremony.

A particularly poignant moment was the carrying of Thầy's original sanghati robe, incense urn and alms bowl, and dragon plaque to the hall of the ancestral stream of teachers who gave Thầy the precepts and transmitted to him the practice. This is now his official shrine. Leaders of the procession touched the earth three times to the patriarchs of the root temple. Among them is Thầy's own beloved teacher Zen Master Thanh Quý – Chân Thật. The High Venerables offered words of praise to Thầy's teachers, asking permission for Thầy to rest alongside them.

According to the Most Venerable Thích Giác Quang from Huế, a great supporter of Thầy and the Plum Village tradition, Thầy continues through the impact of his teachings and books. "Even if Plum Village experiences ups and downs, its teachings and practice will remain stable. In the future, people will recognize Thầy as a global spiritual teacher,"

the Most Venerable has said.⁶ "When something becomes a truth, a reality, it will never go up and down."

(Endnotes)

- 1 Thầy belongs to the 42nd generation of the Lâm Tế Dhyana School (Linji), established in China in the 9th century by Master Linji Yixuan, and the 8th generation of Liễu Quán Dharma Line, established in Vietnam in the 18th century by Master Liễu Quán
- 2 See article by Thầy Pháp Ấn, "The blooming of a white lotus", EIAB Magazine 2022, pp24-32 https://www.eiab.eu/lw_resource/datapool/systemfiles/elements/files/4df37e39-6fe2-11ed-8d7b-fe08df3aa0f4/live/document/EIAB_Magazine_2022_E.pdf accessed 24 March 2024
- 3 The program of retreats at Plum Village centers during the period of the Great Memorial Ceremony for Thầy can be found at <https://plumvillage.org/articles/my-life-is-my-teaching-honoring-our-ancestor-Thầy> accessed 24 March 2024
- 4 The Deeper Meaning – Nhất Hạnh's 2-Year Memorial". <https://plumvillage.org/articles/Thầys-2-year-memorial-ceremony> accessed 1 April 2024
- 5 <https://deerparkmonastery.org/thich-nhat-hanh/full-broadcast-of-2-year-memorial-ceremony-in-vietnam-english-commentary/>
- 6 "Traditional Ceremonies Honoring Thầy's Passing" Br. Pháp Dung and Br. Pháp Lưu *The Mindfulness Bell*, 5 January 2024 <https://www.parallax.org/mindfulnessbell/article/traditional-ceremonies-honoring-Thầys-passing/>



Morning Meditation at Từ Hiếu Temple on the day of the Great Memorial Ceremony for Thầy.



After being formally received, High Venerables proceed to the Deep Listening Hut to purify Thầy's former residence, which is to be the final resting place for his relics.



Thầy's relics are gently carried from a temporary altar in the Full Moon Hall and placed peacefully in the Deep Listening Hut.



Thầy's incense urn, dragon plaque, sanghati robe, alms bowl and memorial portrait are ceremonially moved to the Patriarchs Hall.



The solemn procession continues to the Buddha Hall and Patriarchs Hall.



Permission is formally sought for Thầy to rest alongside his ancestral stream of teachers in the Patriarchs Hall, where his official shrine will be located.



Plum Village Elders touch the earth in gratitude to the High Venerables before being photographed together in Thầy's hut.



Ven. Nuns and lay friends enjoy lunch at the end of the Great Memorial Ceremony.



Our Future Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh Great Hall of Peace

– A progress update from Thầy Pháp Ấn –



Mindfulness Concentration Insight

08 July 2024

Dear Beloved Community;
Dear Friends,

At EIAB and wherever Sr. Song Nghiem and I travel for retreats, kind friends constantly ask what is happening with our Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh Great Hall of Peace. Your care and concern for our longed-for meditation hall – now to be an offering to our beloved teacher as we honor and continue his life's work for peace – are truly heartwarming and inspiring. I wish to take this opportunity to update you.

As with all such projects, advice and permission from various authorities is necessary, not least because our main Asoka Institute building is a listed historical monument. Already, EIAB has done much to revitalize this important Waldbröl heritage site.

Since opening our doors in 2008, we have welcomed close to 100,000 friends from all over Europe and beyond and have some 20,000 on EIAB's email list. In physically catering for retreats and days of mindfulness, we source fresh produce from local, regional and vegan suppliers, contributing wherever



we can to the economy of Waldbröl and surrounding areas.

Throughout these years, we have worked harmoniously with planning, heritage and construction authorities. We are deeply grateful for their assistance and for how Waldbröl, as a whole, has accepted EIAB. Phase by phase, we have faithfully completed extensive government-mandated renovations. Now – finally – the way is clear to revive and pursue once more EIAB's longstanding goal of building a meditation hall.

We all know why the Institute needs a purpose-built meditation hall. Sitting for hours in the Asoka Institute's long, cold corridors, brings much physical discomfort

to practitioners of all ages. The narrowness of the building also constrains activities we can offer, especially during summer and year-end retreats when we may welcome more than 350 participants.

In persevering to solve this once and for all, EIAB is most fortunate to be guided by our legal advisor in this matter, our architect, and other valued advisers, and to have your continued support, love and generosity. We could not do this without you. Below is a quick review of steps taken in recent times to keep the project moving forward.

EIAB's deep aspiration is that, with the Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh Great Hall of Peace, we shall be able to realize Thầy's vision for the Institute to convene international

gatherings of mindfulness practitioners, scholars, researchers and teachers. In this, we are indeed honored to collaborate with the Thích Nhất Hạnh Center for Mindfulness in Public Health at Harvard.

Dear Beloved Community, Dear Friends, EIAB's efforts to construct a meditation hall have become a long, winding road and a journey of many years. But, one by one, conditions are bringing us closer to our destination. Let us join our palms in gratitude for progress thus far. Let us also make a deep, loving wish that those deciding upon our application will see our project's value to humanity at this turbulent, violent time for the world, be accepting of its architectural merits and sensitivity, and open their hearts to approve it.

We would like to thank all of you wholeheartedly for being there over so many years, and for continuing to support Thầy's vision.

*With deep gratitude,
love and respect,*

Bhikshu Thích Chân Pháp Ấn
Elder Monk in the Plum Village Tradition

Dr. Thu Pham
EIAB's Director and Dean of Studies

pháp ấn



(Endnotes)

- 1 Thầy passed away at his root temple Từ Hiếu in Hue, Vietnam, on 22 January 2022. He is recognized as the Fifth Patriarch of Từ Hiếu and the founder and First Patriarch of the Plum Village lineage
- 2 https://www.eiab.eu/files/ugd/d17071_ead7dd2f688a4d75963b54e0a55cef7d.pdf_pp_22-26
- 3 Ibid

Key developments (2022 – 24)

December 2022: complications over accessways to our chosen site for EIAB’s meditation hall – at the back of the Asoka Institute – are, at last, resolved. As the Memorial Ceremony approaches for the first anniversary of Thầy’s passing¹, we hold a ceremony to symbolize the start of construction on the Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh Great Hall of Peace. The hall is to be an offering to honor Thầy’s life and work for peace.

September 2023: following intensive consultations and interactions with district level officials on technical and architectural aspects of the project, we confidently submit final design plans for approval. Our prayer is that we shall be able to start construction in time for the two-year Memorial Ceremony for Thầy, in early 2024.

September 2023 (cont.): we celebrate the 15th anniversary of EIAB’s establishment with an actual ground-breaking for the Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh Great Hall of Peace, in hope and anticipation that approval will be forthcoming. We are honored that day by the presence of Sr. Chân Không and Sr. Định Nghiêm who, in 2007, helped Thầy found EIAB by establishing it as a legal entity.

January 2024: EIAB’s project team, including our lawyer and architect, facilitates an on-site visit by officials reviewing our construction permit application. They are from district, regional and town-level authorities dealing, respectively, with construction, monument preservation and historical heritage. We follow up by sending each a summary of points discussed at the meeting.

March 2024: we receive a response from the regional monument preservation office citing technical objections to the construction project in its current planned form.

June 2024: EIAB’s project team volunteers further documentation, backed by official records, in support of our application. Included is an appeal from Thầy Pháp Ấn, offering broader perspectives on why approving our application is overwhelmingly in the public interest. We also attach a letter from Dr. Walter Willett, director of the Thich Nhat Hanh Center for Mindfulness in Public Health at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, EIAB’s “twin” institute. Dr. Willett affirms the Center’s intention to work closely with EIAB to combine scientific theory with application and practice in advancing global understanding of how mindfulness improves both community and individual health.

Since July 2024: EIAB’s project team stands ready to respond to any further requests from the relevant authorities. Our entire community continues to wait in hope and anticipation for a positive response. In last year’s EIAB Magazine², I shared computer-generated images of how beautiful the future Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh Great Hall of Peace will be. The spatial expanse of its architectural design mirrors the spiritual vastness of three great Mahayana sutras – the Diamond, the Lotus and the Avatamsaka – which are at the heart of Thầy’s teachings and everyday Plum Village practices.³

The Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr.
 President of the United States of America
 By email and by hand to the US Embassy in Berlin



Your Middle East Mission

An Open Letter from the International Plum Village Community of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh

19 October 2023

Dear Mr President,

At this time of war, the world looks to the United States to use its influence in the Middle East to bring about an immediate halt to the killing and violence there, and to speed the flow of humanitarian aid to Gaza.

From long experience, Mr President, you know that conflicts – no matter how intractable – are best resolved when peace negotiations – no matter how complex – can move forward. There can be no end to the suffering in the Middle East if things continue as they are.

It is our belief that, as the Buddha said, hatred cannot respond to hatred; only love and compassion can respond to hatred. And as our teacher Venerable Thích Nhất Hạnh said in a lifetime of peace advocacy during and after the Vietnam War: “There is no way to peace, peace is the way.”

During an historic visit to Vietnam in 2016, President Obama hailed how the former enemies had transformed their relationship, quoting the words of our teacher: “In true dialogue, both sides are willing to change.” Vietnam and the US are proof of that, as reinforced by your recent visit to Hanoi.

As Venerable Thích Nhất Hạnh’s students, today we issue an open invitation for people to sit together for peace in the Middle East, Ukraine, and other war zones. We also offer a meditation, teachings, practice and prayers to support all who wish to cultivate understanding, compassion, tolerance and peace in themselves, their families, their communities, and nations.

We respectfully invite you, Secretary Blinken, and your entire team to sit with us whenever, wherever you can as there is no time to lose. It is our fervent hope that you will succeed in initiating true dialogue in the Middle East between all who yearn for peace and are willing to change.

Yours sincerely,

Bhikshu Thích Chân Pháp Ấn
 Elder Monk



Seal of Plum Village

Bhikshuni Thích Nữ Chân Không
 Elder Nun



An Invitation
to Sit Together for Peace

From the International Plum Village Community of
Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh



19 October 2023

The Buddha, a peace worker amidst the violence and conflicts of his time, said that hatred cannot respond to hatred; only love and compassion can respond to hatred. He called this an eternal truth, an eternal law.

The current conflict in the Middle East is a response to a long, complex, and troubled history. It is so painful to see what is happening there, especially to civilians on both sides. We appeal to all combatants to put an immediate stop to killing and acts of violence. This is difficult but there is no other way. There can be no solution, no end to the suffering if things continue as they are.

Our teacher Venerable Thích Nhất Hạnh, who experienced decades of war in Vietnam and dedicated his life to peace, has said that man is not our enemy. “Our true enemy is hatred, ignorance, fear and the seed of violence deep in our consciousness.”

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

We can begin by resolving daily conflicts in ourselves, our families, our relationships with friends, our societies. The whole world needs to practice being peaceful. It is always possible to live together. It is always possible to sit down and discuss reconciliation so that a solution can be found. We need a global community of individuals living in this awareness to address the world’s problems and crises.

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

Our beloved Israeli and Palestinian friends urgently need the support of the international community – of each of us. They need to know that the whole world shares in their suffering and sorrow, that we send our love and pray for their safety and wellbeing. This is a time for the entire human family to manifest our capacity for wisdom, compassion, tolerance, and peace.

As our teacher says: “There is no way to peace, peace is the way”.

All our ancestors and descendants are counting on us to build a peaceful life on Earth.

With love and trust,



Bhikshu Thích Chân Pháp Ấn
Elder Monk



Seal of Plum Village



Bhikshuni Thích Nữ Chân Không
Elder Nun

A Guided Meditation to Cultivate Stability, Radiate Compassion

(Abridged)

At this painful time for the world, we offer a meditation to help us cultivate solidity and stability, so we may open our hearts, radiate compassion, and support all who suffer from war and other disasters. The great energy of compassion can cool down anger, hatred, and violence.

We begin by sitting up straight and gently following our inbreath and our outbreath.

We relax our body and gradually focus our attention on our lower abdomen, gradually

sinking the energy down to our lower abdomen, which is our energy center and root.

Allowing the energy in my body to sink down to my lower abdomen, I breathe in.

Visualizing roots extending beneath my body into the Earth, I breathe out.

Deeply connected to the Earth, I breathe in

Allowing the energy to sink deeper into the Earth, I breathe out.

Feeling even more stable, more solid, more peaceful, I invite all who are suffering in war zones to sit with us.

I invite all Israelis and Palestinians to sit with us, now, in stability and solidity.

We take root deeply into the Earth, so that anger, hatred, sadness, depression, and hopelessness cannot move us.

With solidity, we do not let this war blow us away, nor turn us into its victims.

Man is not our true enemy. Our true enemy is the hatred, violence, and ignorance within us.

I am deeply connected to the Earth. I am very stable and solid.

I now invite friends from Ukraine, Russia, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia and all troubled places on Earth, to sit with us.

I invite friends from places destroyed by earthquakes, fires, floods, and other disasters to sit with us.

We shall sit together solidly and stably, our roots connected deeply into the Earth, so these difficulties cannot blow us away or make us victims.

I am solid as a mountain, free from all hatred, free from all violence.

I allow the energy of compassion from my heart to flow out to embrace myself and all who are going through trauma, violence, and death.

May the energy of compassion embrace all of us on Earth to help us heal and transform our difficulties.

May the great energy of compassion help to cool down the hatred, the anger, the violence, so that all friends in war zones can be protected.

The Buddha taught: "Hatred cannot respond to hatred; only love and compassion can respond to hatred. This is the eternal truth, the eternal law."

It is always possible to live together. It is always possible to sit down and discuss reconciliation so that a solution can be found.

May everyone on Earth open their heart, so that everyone can see the light, the light of God, the light of goodness, of beauty and truth.

We continue to cultivate our solidity and our stability, so that we can offer support right now to all who suffer from conflict between humans and with nature.

The only way out is our peace, our solidity, our stability.

With this energy, we offer help; we support them.

We embrace them with all the compassion in our hearts.



We also offer related teachings, practice and prayers. :

- Dharma talks and the extended version of the guided meditation by Bhikshu Thích Chân Pháp Ấn at a retreat in Tyrol, Austria, for "Cultivating Compassion in a Time of War"
- An Open Letter Calling For Peace, issued by the International Plum Village Community on 2 April, 2022, as the war in Ukraine began to unfold
- Cultivating a Culture of Peace – Our Community's Commitment and Prayer on New Year's Eve 2021, issued as the world struggled with fear and loss during the Covid-19 pandemic
- Teachings offered by Venerable Thích Nhất Hạnh during retreats at Plum Village Monastery, France, inviting Israelis and Palestinians to practice mindfulness together <https://plumvillage.org/articles/peace-between-palestinians-and-israelis>
- Teaching tours by Plum Village monastics to Israel and Palestine <https://plumvillage.org/articles/touching-peace-in-palestine>
- More groups of Israelis and Palestinians have since been invited to practice together in Plum Village

Online are:

- A Cloud Never Dies, a biographical documentary recounting Venerable Thích Nhất Hạnh's life's work for peace https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRObW9noiVk&ab_channel=PlumVillage

Extracts from two Dharma Talks by Bhikshu Thích Chân Pháp Ấn¹

Cultivating Compassion in a Time of War

At a retreat in Tyrol, Austria, 12-13 October 2023

With the outbreak of war in the Middle East, these past few days have been disturbing for the whole world. It's very painful to see the killing on both sides. I ask myself: "Is it possible for humans to have peace?"

As humans we are very fortunate in that we have awareness; we're able to think logically, rationally. But, still, we allow our emotions to control us, and often we are unable to overcome painful feelings. Our behavior can be destructive for ourselves and others. Is being peaceful possible? Is it possible to offer peace to ourselves and to those around us?

Almost 30 years ago, at a retreat in the US with our teacher Thay, I shared that because of the deep suffering caused by the Vietnam War I had depression for years. Friends asked if I wished the war in Vietnam had happened elsewhere in the world. I replied that it didn't really matter whether the war was in Vietnam or somewhere else, because it was a collective manifestation of human consciousness, of the collective destructive energy within humanity.

When we're angry, we contribute to this collective destructive energy. When we suffer from fear, anxiety, depression, and sadness, we contribute to this collective energy. Many of us are suffering deeply but don't know it. Then we spread our suffering. We cause ourselves suffering and we cause other people suffering.

That's the significance of the Buddha's discovery of the Four Noble Truths, or the

truth as perceived by the Enlightened or Noble One. And what did the Enlightened One perceive? Enlightened people realize that they suffer. They recognize that, as human beings, we suffer and that they themselves – are suffering. That's very important.

In Buddhism, to know that we are in a state of suffering is enlightenment. When we're *really* aware that we're suffering, we begin to wake up and feel we have to do something about it. We all suffer, regardless of whatever conditions we have. We don't feel satisfied. We sit and, in a few minutes, we want to change our position. We feel an urge to move to reduce a sense of unease within us.

Take the analogy of fish in a pond. We see that most move all the time. The few that stay stationary are enlightened ones! But most of the fish are not enlightened so they keep moving. The pond is small. So, where are they going? Only the fish that keep moving feel the pond's boundary. The fishes that stay still do not, so they are liberated, they're free.

The Buddha, the Enlightened One, woke up to the root of our suffering. And what is that? We are a dynamic living system which means that we're constantly in a state of motion and perturbation. All the time, there's some disturbance in our body, our mind. As a dynamic system, we strive for a state of harmonious equilibrium, some kind of balance within us. The Buddha called this craving. He discovered that the root of suffering is craving – for stability, for harmony, for... something.

In the Plum Village tradition, we invite a bell of mindfulness to sound at various intervals. It is a technique or practice that helps us return to the state of the stationary fish. We are moving, the bell sounds, and we stop. We come back to our inbreath and outbreath. We learn to be at peace with our breathing. "Aware of my inbreath, I breathe in; aware of my outbreath, I breathe out. It is so wonderful to breathe in; it is so wonderful to breathe out." After a few breaths taken with awareness, we calm down our physiological and mental craving.

A two-part autonomic nervous system regulates human physiology, in tandem with two breathing cycles. The in-cycle of breathing activates the *sympathetic nervous system*. We take in oxygen, and we're ready for action; ready to run from danger or whatever. In this way, the sympathetic nervous system activates a part of us called "**doing**". The out-cycle of breathing activates our *parasympathetic nervous system*, the part of us that is "**being**" – just being there, relaxed. So, we have our in-cycle and out-cycle of breathing, plus our *awareness* of breathing.

The physiological craving within us comes from a disharmony or "dis-synchronization" between these two aspects of our breathing – either too much of the sympathetic, or too much of the parasympathetic. But when we shine the light of awareness on these two cycles, something amazing happens. The energy of love embedded in this awareness begins to embrace the inbreath and the

outbreath. The cycles begin to synchronize with each other, to come into harmony and balance. We begin to have a sense of well-being within us.

The more we train ourselves to be aware of our inbreath and outbreath, the more our sense of uneasiness – that we lack something, that we must search for something to secure our happiness and well-being – begins to calm down, begins to transform. Peace is a feeling that comes when we have a deep sense of physiological well-being within us, when we feel rooted in the here and the now. So, is being peaceful possible? According to the Buddha, yes. But we need to train ourselves. It's not something given to us automatically.

We have the *potential* to be peaceful. But we need to make it a reality.

Thay has said: "There is no way to peace, peace is the way". This simple phrase helps us understand that peace is not a state we reach, but a training, a way of living in which, at a fundamental physical level, we learn to harmonize our two cycles of breathing so that we can sense that the two parts of our nervous system are synchronized.

With the outbreak of war in early 2022 in Ukraine, and now the war in the Middle East, there is an urgency for us all to practice peace. The whole world needs to practice being peaceful. The problems and crises of

the world cannot be solved by one group of people. It requires a global effort. The whole world needs to practice being peaceful. That's why it's crucial at this time of war for the Buddha's teaching to be communicated to people everywhere. States of being unstable, out of harmony, being disturbed are always present within us. We need to practice calming them. The Buddha said it's possible to do so when we know how to cultivate the energy of awareness. It is also called the energy of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is the capacity to be fully present for what is going on within and around us here and now. Often, the disharmony between our inbreath and outbreath gives



rise to disharmony between our body and mind. Just like our inbreath and outbreath, they are not synchronized. Our body is here, and our mind is travelling somewhere else. There is this tension within us. Our body says: "Please come back." But our mind says: "Wait a minute, there's something more interesting out there." The body says: "I'm in pain." The mind says: "Don't worry. I'll come back later."

It's the same in our relationships. Disharmony between our body and mind gives rise to disharmony in the environment of our family, our society, our nation, other nations, and the whole world. That's how it works. A very small disturbance within our body and mind radiates out – manifesting bigger and bigger – to different relationships and, ultimately, to the whole world. Sometimes we don't pay attention to the suffering going on in our family. Our partner, our son, our daughter may suffer very deeply but we don't notice, we're not there for them, we're not mindful. Our mind is somewhere else. We're busy with different projects, our work, our other interests. Disturbances at an individual or family level gradually spread out to become collective disturbances that give rise to collective suffering.

If we want to change the situation, the Buddha advises us to start by training our mindfulness. First, learn to come back and to establish harmony in our breathing: "Aware of my inbreath, I breathe in; aware of my outbreath, I breathe out. Coming back to my breathing, feeling my breathing, and feeling very happy with my breathing. Letting my mind calm down and releasing all the tension in my mind." Then: "Aware of my body; feeling my body and letting go of all the tension in my body..." We practice like this all day.

Sometimes we wish to live only for ourselves. We're not sensitive towards other people and their needs. This changes when we learn to establish harmony in our breathing. Then, the energy of mindfulness helps to create harmony in our body and our mind. We begin radiating compassion and learn to embrace our environment – our friends, our family,

our society. That is what the whole world needs to learn now. We need to embrace each other, to love each other and bring each other up to humanity's next stage of evolution. Our existence is much more meaningful when we can exist with those around us. It would be so beautiful if Israelis could live peacefully alongside the people of Gaza. And it would be so beautiful if the people of Gaza could live peacefully alongside the people of Israel.

Like a garden with many flowers, life needs variety, variation, completeness. We need to train ourselves in that way of thinking. And that's called mindfulness. It's the energy that does not exclude anything. It's the energy that embraces everything and is happy with everything. It's what the word "mindful" means. Literally, the mind is "full". Most of the time our mind is fragmented, divided. We live in a world of division. The practice is to make our mind full, to be complete, to be whole. With this type of mind, we do not exclude anyone. We learn to embrace everything. When we practice this way, and our mind is full, we become very peaceful.

According to the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the mind of the Buddha expanded to embrace the whole cosmos – multiple universes, infinite universes. That is the scale of his mindfulness. Because of that, according to the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, the Buddha remains at the place where he was enlightened – Bodhgaya in India. He remains there for infinite time (which implies that he didn't, in fact, go around the Indo-Gangetic plain teaching the Dharma!). This immutable aspect of the Buddha is called the "dharmakaya", or absolute body of the Buddha. It is everywhere, it does not move, it is there from the beginningless of time and will continue to be there until the end of time. The Buddha's energy of mindfulness is complete, is full, expansive, immense, great and extends to the whole universe. So, his absolute body remains. The Buddha continues to be in this state of absolute concentration for infinite time. He doesn't move.

There is another aspect of the Buddha that *did* indeed go round the northern part of

what today is India to teach. That is called the "nirmanakaya" or responding body; the body that is responding to the needs of living beings. So, the historical Buddha manifested in the form of a human and went around teaching. According to the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, an infinite number of nirmanakaya bodies are teaching the Dharma in different Buddha lands, different Buddha world systems, which means there is an infinite number of Buddhas.

We, too, have our dharmakaya: it is the degree of our mindfulness, the outward expansion of its energy. The more we practice mindfulness, the greater our energy of mindfulness becomes. When our mind is full and expanded, we have the capacity to embrace all differences; we have the capacity to include everyone and everything in our lives. We don't want to eliminate anyone; we don't discriminate against anyone.

The constant movement of the fishes I mentioned earlier is like our craving for our ideas, opinions, and perspectives to prevail. We have a certain idea about life, and we want everyone to follow our idea. We have an opinion and want everyone to agree with it. So, the "fish" within us keeps moving to compel other people to follow our own views and way of life. With the practice of mindfulness, however, we simply let other people be themselves. We allow them to live. We allow them to manifest, and we allow co-existence between ourselves and them. It is possible for us to have different perspectives and live together. It is possible to hold different opinions and live together. That is the power of mindfulness.

With his capacity to embrace everyone, the Buddha made a very beautiful declaration: "The world can be at war with me, but I have stopped all war. I am not at war with anyone." In other words, the Buddha is saying: "I am not in conflict with anyone in the world. My mind is completely empty. I'm completely at peace. I *am* peace." The Buddha was able to reach this state because of practicing in a way that allowed his mindfulness to grow infinitely.

Cultivating Compassion in a Time of War

(cont.)

The practice of mindfulness (“smṛti” in Sanskrit) will help us to be fully aware in any situation we experience. And if we continue to cultivate the energy of mindfulness, it will lead to the energy of collectedness (“samādhi” in Sanskrit).

The nature of our mind is that it’s always moving. Whenever anything happens, we can be carried away very easily because there is no stability, no root. Our mind just wanders from one object to another. When we practice mindfulness, we learn to have “an object of being mindful”. We come back to our self and learn to *be* with an object for a certain time. This practice helps us cultivate stability and solidity.

A tree with strong roots stands firm and solid even in a gale, thanks to its root system. A tree without strong roots is more easily blown over. Often in daily life we are blown over when we come into contact with something we feel is unpleasant. For example, our partner makes what we believe is a critical comment about us. He or she just says it out of habit energy without any intention to be hurtful. But when we hear it, receive it, right away we are blown over like a tree in a gale. We suffer throughout the day. “Why did he/she say that to me?” Our mind fixates on what he/she said and we lose our roots.

The practice of mindfulness helps us re-establish our root system within us. The Buddha said that there are four areas in which we can establish our mindfulness, our roots. Mindfulness can be established by being aware or mindful of these four areas.

Our first root is our body. We focus on being mindful, aware of our body, all the time.

When we walk, we know we are walking; when we sit, we know we are sitting; when we are standing, we know we are standing. When we put on a robe, we know we are putting on a robe. When we walk forward, we know we are walking forward; when we walk backwards, we know we are walking backwards. Whatever our physical posture – standing, sitting, lying, moving – we are fully aware of that and focus on these aspects. It’s a training because when we focus that way, it can become our habit energy.

So, we take root in the body. When someone makes a personal comment we find unpleasant, instead of fixating on it and being blown over, we remember this practice of mindfulness of the body. We listen, yes, but the content of what we hear does not blow us over. We’re still aware of our body. That is the training. For example, right now I’m giving a Dharma talk, but I also practice being mindful of my body. I don’t let the content of my talk carry me away. I’m fully aware of my body position, fully attentive to how I move my body and I continue to return to my body when I’m giving the talk. The talk is part of my existence, but another part of my existence is being aware of my body. And that’s the first place for establishing mindfulness. It’s so important because if we cannot take root in our body, then we don’t know what’s happening with our body.

We also don’t know what is happening to our mind because we are split. The body is here but the mind is somewhere else. This disharmony in the body and the mind radiates out to become disharmony in the family, the community, the whole world, and with the environment.

When our partner makes a remark that blows us over, what happens is that all the negative energy within us grasps onto this remark and we create a virtual world, a reality that might not even exist. All the memories we have of living with this partner come into reality right now. All the anger, the sadness from our parents comes into this moment, all the negative energy of our culture and history comes into this moment and we see a reality that is not as it is. There’s a lot of exaggeration; we create a lot of illusions.

What our partner says might be as small as a peanut. But right away our mind grasps onto this peanut and it grows into a melon – within minutes – and we live the reality of the melon, when the true reality is only a peanut. That’s how it happens. Yes, there’s suffering, we should not deny that. But we should see the suffering as it is and not blow it up into something much bigger. That’s very important. Otherwise, things will get worse; the situation will become very bad. So, our partner says: “How come you are not kind to me today?,” and after that one small sentence, we begin to retaliate: “How can you say that to me? I’m always kind to you. Remember when we were just married (it could be 30 years ago)...” and then we bring in our kindness at the time of the wedding or later. “Ten years ago, I did this, five years ago I did that...” You bring in everything to defend how kind you are to her/him. And you lose yourself. The Buddha called this confusion or delusion, ignorance.

When we are not mindful and lose our self, we fall into this confusion. We create a reality based on something that’s very small. The practice of mindfulness is to learn to see things as they are. When the suffering is as

small as a peanut, then we say to our self: “Oh, that suffering is just peanut suffering.” We may feel pain or sorrow after our partner’s remark, but we come back to our inbreath and outbreath; we feel our body, we feel the unpleasant sensation from what he or she said, and we embrace it with love. My partner has said: “How come you’re not kind to me today?” I hear it, I recognize it, and I embrace it with all my love and care, before I act, before I express myself. The practice is to return and to embrace what I feel right now. I do not do anything yet. I learn to take root. That is the practice of mindfulness. We learn to go back and embrace the body.

The second root in which we learn to establish our mindfulness is our feeling or sensation – the bioenergetic field in us. We can say to our self: “I’m fully aware of what I’m feeling; the sensation within me. And I embrace it with love.” Do not be blown over by the situation. Come back and take root. Recognize the suffering and stay stationary. In a previous talk, I gave the analogy of a fish that stays stationary in a lake. There lake ripples around it, but the fish is immovable. Other fish move constantly around the lake, following the ripples. But, like the fish “practitioner”, we remain stable and solid.

The third root in which we can establish our mindfulness is our emotions, or mental formations. We embrace with our love and care all the pain and the sorrow we’ve felt. We do not let our suffering spread, we learn to hold it with our love because the moment our suffering spreads out, it’s difficult to retract. It’s difficult to correct what has been damaged. For example, when our partner says: “How come you are unkind to me today?”, we begin to explode, to say negative things and the relationship is damaged. We cause a wound in the relationship that will be very difficult to heal later. In our normal daily relationships, we need to learn to embrace the fire within us – the fire of anger, depression, sadness, and fear – and not let this energy explode. That’s very important. So, emotions or mental formations are the third root in which we need to establish our mindfulness.

The fourth root is our perception about life. Our perception is that there is this “me”, I am “separate” from the universe. And we always

defend this “me”, this “I”, regarding this “I” as the most noble thing in the world, and our self as the center of the whole universe. But this “I” is only a construction of our mind. Our existence depends on other people. We cannot exist by our self. Coming back to the example of our partner who says: “How come you are unkind to me today?” We try to defend our self; to represent ME, MYself as something noble. Perhaps our partner doesn’t mean to condemn us completely as a person. Language can be very misleading. He or she may just be expressing a small irritation, a small frustration. But we identify this with the totality of who we are. We see it as a comment that we are *totally* unkind and so we launch into a total defence of our self.

Perceptions are such that, in any relationship, nobody is completely right; nobody is completely wrong. We see this in the wider world, too. In any conflict, each side has its own perspective. It’s partially true to a degree, and partially false to a degree. If we act with our mind, our rational thinking, it becomes impossible to resolve differences equitably because there is no complete truth on either side. We are unable to find a way to co-exist. But if we approach the same problem differently – that is, with our heart – we are able to recognize that we each have needs for security, peace, and a way to make a living. We can come to a resolution. For sure it will not be a perfect resolution but at least we can co-exist.

Even at the level of families – in relationships with our partner, our parents, our son or daughter – we often find it hard to practice that way. We fall into the trap of using our mind, our rational thinking, to look for what is right and wrong. We use our logical mind to judge a situation. As a result, we see that not many couples can maintain their relationship for 30, 40 or 50 years. Perhaps they love each other very much at the beginning and want to share their lives. But after five, 10 or 15 years, their relationship is broken. They cannot go further because they can only look at the other person with their mind. When we come back to the heart, embracing the heart, we begin to develop this energy of mindfulness. The energy of mindfulness gives rise to the energy of compassion. Only with compassion can we live together and accept each other. With our

mind it’s very difficult to accept each other, but with our heart it’s much easier.

So, when we take root in the four aspects of our existence – body, feelings, emotions, and perceptions – we calm down the violence, the fire within us. It’s a holy, healing energy. There’s so much pain within our body. There’s so much pain within our feelings. There’s so much pain in our emotions and perceptions. When we come back and embrace all this pain with our love and care, the energy of compassion begins to heal us. That is the only way we can live with another person. Without that energy, the other person is always doing things we cannot accept with our rational mind.

So, learn to cultivate the energy of mindfulness. Take root in the four aspects of our existence that make up our being. It should be a training. Each of us has the potential to develop compassion and live a life of mindfulness. The Buddha assured us of that. He called this potential the “Buddha nature”. It’s the potential within us that can give rise to the energy of compassion. But we need to develop this potential. We need to practice in order for us to be able to live together peacefully.

I’ve seen many couples going through deep suffering who still live unhappily with each other. We don’t have to live that kind of life. We can live together peacefully, harmoniously, accepting each other and supporting each other to grow and develop. It’s possible to do that. I’ve seen couples whose relationship is broken because one partner does not practice cultivating this energy of mindfulness, of compassion within him or her. That person causes a lot of pain in the relationship. Each of us is responsible for our self and for the other. Each of us has to be responsible for our own part. In any conflict, it’s not only one side that errs. Mistakes are always made by *both* sides. Conflict arises because of confusion, delusion, ignorance on *both* sides. It’s never only one side.

If we come back to our self, learn to take good care of our self, embrace our self with love, embrace the wound within our self so that this rationality can calm down, then we’ll be able to see many things. That’s why it’s called *mindfulness*. “Full” means the mind is not

fragmented. We have a fuller perspective, view about things. So, come back to our self, embrace our self deeply with love and compassion. From conflict within families to conflict between peoples and countries, humans need to learn our lesson and stop all destructive or violent acts. We need to calm our self and embrace our pain, our sorrow, with deep love. From this deep love and healing for our self, we can help others to heal.

We are all suffering today with the Palestinians and Israelis. They need support from the international community and from each of us. As humans, we are all responsible for war, wherever it breaks

out. We have the duty and responsibility to cultivate compassion in our hearts, deep compassion. We can begin by resolving conflicts in ourselves, in our families, in our relationships with friends, in our societies and in our countries. We have a duty, and responsibility to do that. For our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren to have a future, it's very important that we all practice.

The world seems to be getting into more and more difficulty, with the ongoing war in Europe and now, renewed conflict in the Middle East. This collective manifestation of human consciousness is a sign that we each need to return to our self and ask: "Do

I have peace in my family?"; "Do I have peace in my relationships with my parents, my son, daughter, partner, our society?" Without peace in all these relationships, this difficult energy will one day spill into the collective consciousness and manifest here or there.

The way out is not by talking or reasoning but by practicing mindfulness to cultivate the energy of compassion within so we each can help the overall situation. The need is urgent. We all have a responsibility and duty to practice. We need to return to the fundamentals of who we are and take root in the four aspects of our existence. From a Buddhist perspective, I believe that is the *only* way out.



A Guided Meditation to Cultivate Stability and Radiate Compassion

(Extended version)

Offered by Bhikshu Thích Chân Pháp Ấn³
At a Retreat for Cultivating Compassion in a Time of War

Tyrol, Austria, 12 October 2023

Gently coming back to my body and my mind, I enjoy my inbreath and my outbreath.

Gently coming back to my breathing, recognizing this is my inbreath, I breathe in.

Recognizing this is my outbreath, I breathe out.

It is so wonderful to return to my breathing, and to enjoy my breathing.

It is so wonderful to breathe in, it is so wonderful to breathe out.

Allowing my inbreath to become deeper, I breathe in.

Allowing my outbreath to become slower, I breathe out.

Deeper inbreath; slower outbreath.

Gently shifting my attention to my lower abdomen, allowing the energy in my body to sink down to my lower abdomen, I breathe in.

Allowing my outbreath to relax my whole body, I breathe out.

Sinking the energy, relaxing the body.

Sinking the energy down deeper, relaxing the body deeper.

Visualizing thousands of roots extending down from my body into the Earth

Deeply connected to the Earth, I breathe in.

I am very stable and solid, I breathe out.

I am connected deeply into the Earth. I am very stable and solid.

Allowing the energy to sink deeper into the Earth, feeling even more stable, more solid.

Deeper roots into the Earth, more stability, more solidity.

With this solidity and peacefulness, I invite all who are suffering in war zones to sit with us.

I invite all Israelis and the Palestinians to sit with us now, in stability and solidity.

Allowing ourselves to take root deeply into the Earth, so that all that anger, hatred, sadness, depression, hopelessness cannot not move us.

I am deeply connected to the Earth and invite all Palestinian and Israeli friends to sit with us, now, in stability and solidity.

With solidity, we do not let this war blow us away, nor turn us into its victims.

Man is not our true enemy. Our true enemy is the hatred within us; the violence, the ignorance within us.

I am deeply connected to the Earth. I am very stable and solid.

I now invite friends from Ukraine, Russia, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, and all troubled places on Earth to sit with us.

I invite friends from places impacted by earthquakes, floods, and other disasters to sit with us.

We shall sit together solidly and stably, our roots connected deeply into the Earth, so that these difficulties cannot blow us away or make us victims.

I am solid as a mountain, free from all hatred, free from all violence.

I allow the energy of compassion flow out from my heart to embrace myself and all who are experiencing trauma, violence, and death.

May the energy of compassion embrace all of us on Earth to help us heal and transform our difficulties.

May the great energy of compassion help to cool down the hatred, the anger, the violence, so that all friends in war zones can be protected.

The Buddha taught: "Hatred cannot respond to hatred; only love and compassion can respond to hatred. This is the eternal truth, the eternal law."

It is always possible to live together. In God's house there are many mansions.

It is always possible to sit down and discuss reconciliation, so that a solution can be found.

May everyone on Earth open their heart, so that everyone can see the light, the light of God, the light of goodness, of beauty and truth.

This is a meditation for our practice during this difficult time on Earth. We continue to cultivate our solidity and our stability, so that we can offer support right now to all who suffer from conflict between humans and with nature.

The only way out is our peace, our solidity, our stability.

With this energy, we can offer help. We support our friends who are suffering, we embrace them with all the compassion in our hearts.

We will now gently come out of our meditation.

Coming back to feel my physical body, I breathe in.

Relaxing my physical body, I breathe out.

Feeling the physical body, relaxing the physical body.

Aware of my inbreath, I breathe in.

Aware of my outbreath, I breathe out. In, out.

Endnotes

- 1 Elder Monk in the International Plum Village Community of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh.
- 2 Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh
- 3 Elder Monk in the International Plum Village Community of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh
- 4 Elder Monk in the International Plum Village Community of Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh.



大智度論
三藐辣吽
南唵提哩
底南提哩
始南提哩
吒胝提哩
瑟矩細
阿馱婆
謨沒嘑





2. Living Dharma



Thay's Memorial Retreat

A Retreat in Memory of Thich Nhat Hanh Retreat with the Fourfold Sangha in Memory of Thay

Thay, our teacher Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, departed his body on 22 January 2022. In accordance with Buddhist tradition, the second anniversary of the 'death' of our teacher is also the time for the most important commemoration of his passing.

To celebrate this occasion, the nuns and monks of the EIAB, as well as lay Dharma

teachers, organised a joint retreat from 25-28 January 2024 to express our love, gratitude and respect for Thay.

Now more than ever, Thay's spirit is alive in each and every one of us. His monastic and lay students continue to keep his teachings alive in numerous forms in countless places. This is how we strive to realise the bodhisattva

vow for the benefit of all living beings and to ensure it manifests in the world.

In this retreat, Thay manifested in many different forms: in talks, in our memories of meetings with him, in Dharma sharings, in meditation and in the contemplation of Thay's calligraphies. Also in music, poetry and in sharings about our own spiritual



practice, which supports us in the face the challenges of the present and helps us to generate peace and joy.

At the end of the retreat, we held a concert with music, poems by Thay and singing. It was a gift from our spiritual community to Thay, whose insight and wisdom guides us through life.

The retreat was a great success. It helped many participants gain new insights and provided them with a great deal of spiritual support.

Thay's teachings are being put into practice by groups in various areas of activity: **Wake Up Schools and Wake Up Teachers, Mindfulness in Schools, Earthholder**

Sanghas, Prisons, Animal Welfare, Mindful Economy, Christian-Buddhist Dialogue, Art and Mindfulness, Rainbow Sanghas, BiPoc Sangha, etc. During this retreat special emphasis was placed on the Order of Interbeing and Sangha Building.

Two panel sessions shared about the continued work of Thich Nhat Hanh. They







offered us much inspiration and hope for a happy, peaceful and harmonious coexistence, as well as a great deal of spiritual support on the path of understanding and love.

We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to Uwe Sander, Anne von der Lüche, Werner Heidenreich, Uli Pfeifer-Schaupp, Steffen Handke, Annabelle Zinser, Jürgen Krantz, Klaus Helmut Schick, Andrew Denis, Nguyen Le Kim Viet, Hinnerk Brockmann, Elmar Vogt, Anke Berghäuser, Annika Seebach, Anette Schramm and Isabelle Schupp, as well as our brothers Duc Tri and Brother Khiet Tam, for their commitment and determination to follow the path of the bodhisattvas, to help people, animals and plants, to protect the earth and to make our lives beautiful and happy.

At the end of the retreat, our long-standing musical friends from the EIAB: Christian

Bollmann and Jutta Reichardt, Marc Iwaszkiewisz, Bernd Immisch, Elmar Vogt and Walther Glaubitt, as well as our sister Chinh Nghiem, brother Phap Xa and brother Duc Tri, enchanted the audience with their skill and talent.

The guests of honour at the concert were Monika and Michael Höhn from the Protestant community in Wiehl, Dr Heike Braun from radio (WDR) and television, Dr Beate and Alexander Puplick, David Lee Schlenker from the DLS bakery, and the former mayor of Waldbröl, Mr Peter Köster, and his wife Bertamini-Köster. We would like to thank them sincerely for all their support.

The retreat ended with a formal lunch in the foyer of the EIAB, where the monks and nuns in sanghati robes and Thay's lay students shared lunch with Thay in a solemn ceremony. In the afternoon, there was

another tea ceremony with a sharing to give guests another opportunity to express their love, gratitude and appreciation for Thay.

A special highlight of this retreat was the wonderful bouquet of flowers and video film the EIAB received from Uwe Sander. This film was made with great love and commitment during the retreat in honour of our beloved teacher.

This wonderful film gives a vivid impression of the EIAB's spiritual community of nuns and monks, and lay people. It shows how the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh and the bodhisattva vow for the benefit of all living beings is manifesting in the world. The footage of the retreat in memory of our beloved Thay was accompanied by music and song and showed sitting and walking meditations and touching the earth, as well as conveying the spirit of the dharma talks. The film is a source of motivation for practitioners to fulfil the bodhisattva vow to help all living beings. In addition, it provides an opportunity for those who are interested to get to know the spiritual community of nuns and monks at the EIAB.

Link to the film: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1yOHP7AldCT1e-Bm9pOg00ofbITRPhuLY/view?usp=sharing>

We would like to thank Uwe Sander for this invaluable and touching gift.

We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to all the brothers and sisters, friends and participants who supported the retreat in so many ways.

The retreat clearly showed how we are continuing Thay's work and carrying it into the future, and how we can realise Thay's vision together.

*'Individually we are words,
together we are a poem!'*

*With much love, appreciation,
respect and gratitude!*

*A lotus flower for you
and your loved ones.*

Sr. Song Nghiem

I have arrived, I am home

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

Even though Brother Troi Hai Thuong no longer manifests in physical form, we can

still be in contact with him through his writings, which express the thoughts of a sensitive spirit filled with a sincere love for life.

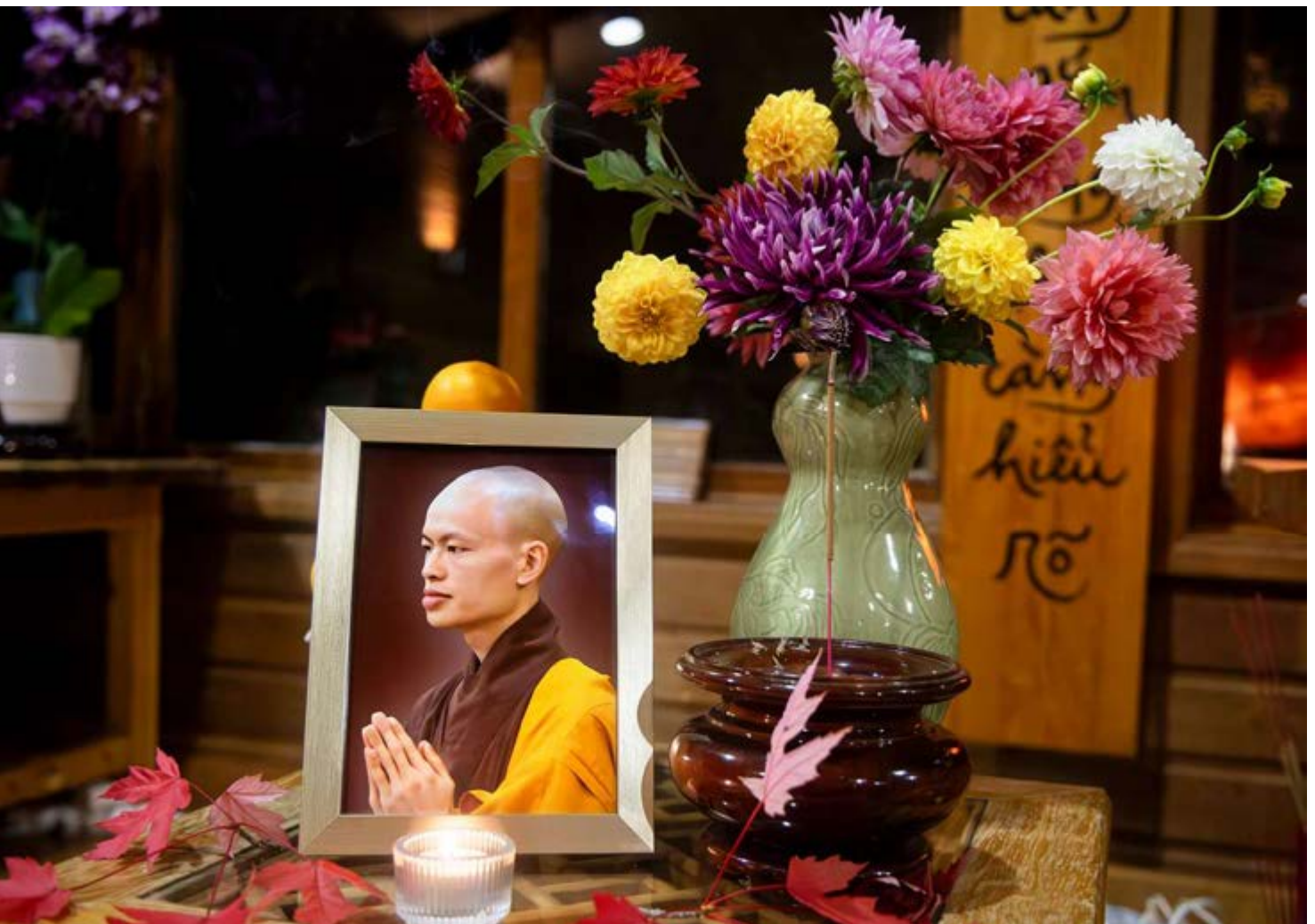
The following text is a translation of an extract from the magazine *Giếng Nước Thơm Trong (Fragrant Spring)* #2 by Thai Plum Village.

Monday

I was lying in the green hammock in the corridor just to the right of the garden in the middle of the monks’ accommodation. Normally the Hamlet is full of people, but Lazy Day turns it into a deserted place. Everyone had gone out, so I didn’t have to

look for a peaceful place somewhere else. After a long time, a brother walked by, saw me absorbed in my reading and teased me, “Are you really lazy?” – Knowing that the brother was just teasing me, I smiled. “Being lazy” is the opposite of “being industrious”. What an interesting thought that at the beginning of the week, when everyone out there is busy going back to work to earn a living, we had no sitting meditation, no walking meditation, no eating in noble silence on the schedule.

Brother Kai Li shared that on his first visit to Plum Village, he was shocked to learn that there was inactivity in a monastery! Don’t people normally encourage each other to be diligent? It wasn’t that there weren’t lazy monks, but a day of inactivity as part of the



weekly schedule for the whole monastery was astonishing. At that moment, Thay said quite seriously to Brother Kai Li: “Yes, you should be as lazy as possible.” Later, Brother Kai Li understood just what a truly profound practice this was.

Every now and then we hear people say: “Don’t just sit around, do something!” It is so common because our society is goal-orientated. We have a tendency to continually strive towards a goal or pursue a specific intention. In contrast, Buddhism teaches us the practice of being free of desire (aimlessness). Mindfulness practitioners often say: “Don’t do anything, just sit!” Doing nothing is actually doing something. This teaching reminds us that we don’t have to set a goal to chase after, because everything is already within us.

When we practise noble silence as a whole Sangha, when everyone keeps their distance from books, pens, papers, internet and devices, I usually have less success at being lazy. Honestly, I use Mondays as rest days to have a break from “work” or to go out, not exactly in the spirit of “going nowhere, doing nothing”. After all these years of going to school and working, participating in the busyness of society, I still feel guilty when I’m lazy. If there are 15 or 30 minutes left, I try to do something to make the best use of them. A Zen master, on the other hand, would spend several hours just meditating on tea, being aware and savouring every single moment. It was only after I became a monk that I realised that the image of a monk sitting doing nothing was actually not what it seemed. The ‘activity’ of a monk is different from the activity of people in society.

When evening came the Hamlet residents returned from their hiding places. Some brothers and novices, in their long robes, were chanting and making offerings in the ceremony for hungry ghosts. The fast rhythm of the wooden fish drum in harmony with the chanting voices was very pleasing to the ears. There was an activity on tonight’s programme, so Brother Tam Nguyen invited me to start the walking meditation earlier than usual. After asking around, we ended up with four people at the walking meditation. The echoing sounds of the bell and the

wooden fish drum had not yet finished and the chanting could still be heard:

“May we be born now in the pure land within the heart of a lotus flower. In the moment when the lotus blossoms, we touch the reality of no-birth and no-death.”

Brother Tam Nguyen, who used to be a novice in a traditional Buddhist temple, explained that Thay had not written these lines himself. In order to open the hearts of the listeners, our patriarchs would have introduced teachings into the rites and rituals such as:

“The Pure Land is already part of the true mind. Amitabha Buddha appears from our true nature, illuminating the three times (past, present and future) in the ten directions without leaving the present moment...”

I was happy to see how much Brother Tam Nguyen had grown. He had become calmer, learned how to return to himself and was an avid reader. When I first introduced him here, I had worried that it would be difficult for him to adjust to the environment in Plum Village, because he had grown up in a temple

in the countryside where they only practised the invocation of Buddha Amitabha’s name. But now I could see that he had the ability to combine these two streams.

Friday

I left my room early to go to sitting meditation so I could savour every step along the way while the echo of the Great Temple Bell still reverberated, accompanied by chanting. When I arrived at the meditation hall, I saw that someone was already practising touching the earth. Many of the older brothers had left the monastery today, so I felt a little uncomfortable as I had to sit closer to the altar than usual during the chanting. Used to living in both a large and small sangha, I particularly appreciated the powerful chanting that the bright morning light brought forth. Each chanting session usually consisted of chanting and sutra reading.

At Plum Village we don’t have to memorise the sutras or precepts, but nevertheless they seep into our hearts through the repeated practice of sutra reading and chanting



throughout the year. Phrases like “We vow to touch the Pure Land with every step, we promise to be in touch with the ultimate dimension at every contact” may not require much time poring over books to understand, partly because they are written in everyday language. If we use the Sino-Vietnamese version, it would be just like learning a foreign language because although the pronunciation sounds familiar the meaning is completely different.

This morning I was alone in the room because all the novices had gone to their language classes. I looked at some photos on the pages of a back issue of the Plum Village newsletter on Brother Tam Nguyen’s desk. I was captivated by a comment from Thay about a poem by Bang Ba Lan. It was exactly what I had been looking for:

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

This paragraph reminded me of a time in Germany when a laywoman asked Thay if he had any unfulfilled dreams now that he was older. Thay replied:

“Every day, Thay can live and do the things he wants to do. Thay no longer has any projects or dreams.”

What Thay emphasised was that we could touch our dreams directly now if we wanted to. How? Thay had already taught us this. Countless times we monks and nuns had sung: “It needs you to breathe gently for the miracles to be displayed.” (from the song/poem “Our True Heritage”). During sitting meditation, we may hear Thay’s voice full of warmth in our ears again:

“Honoured Lord Buddha..., breathing in I see that I have arrived. Breathing out, I see that I am home. I am at home in the present moment. This is my true home. I have arrived, I am in touch with the wonders of life, with the Pure Land in the present moment. This can happen in a single in-breath or out-breath. If I am able to arrive, to come home, what else do I need to do? I can enjoy life as I wish in the land of the Buddha.”

Like the word “happiness”, the expression “right now” has become so familiar to our ears that many in our Sangha have forgotten its true meaning. Does it just mean to fulfil our immediate desire for the taste of instant noodles? The Buddha’s teachings transcend time, if we cannot savour them right now, we will never be able to taste them. It’s now or never!

I wanted to reserve Friday evening to look for the last piece of missing information for my article. I felt partly pressurised, partly relaxed. I visited the online temple “The Land of the Present Moment” (plumvillage.org) to search for a calligraphy by Thay, but none seemed to fit. There were certainly plenty of good ideas I could take from Thay’s Dharma talks, but this treasure trove was so vast, how could I find anything in it?

Searching around, I stumbled across an article by Brother Minh Hy who shared some of Thay’s teaching:

“The first fruit of the Plum Village practice “I have arrived, I am home” is a little different from the fruit of the traditional practice of stream-entry. Someone who has entered the stream needs to go further, while someone who practices “I have arrived, I am home” no longer needs to search for anything. It is not necessary to keep searching (Người chẳng tìm cầu chi nữa) – this is a very good sentence; we must write it down. It would be a shame if we lost it. Whoever has realised this fruit of practice, when we see such a person, we would immediately know that it is not necessary for that person to say anything.”

The complete corresponding verses read like this:

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

The Pure Land is here, wander in it at will, there is no need to seek further. The ultimate dimension is now, dwell here at your heart’s desire, there is no need to strive for anything

I was unsure which meditation hall contained what I was looking for. Unable to



find the calligraphy I needed, I was about to give up. It probably wouldn’t really matter if the article contained a calligraphy or not. The computer room was empty, except for a younger brother watching a recording of an evening of meditative music. There are many types of entertainment at Plum Village. These evenings of meditative music are of the highest quality because so much is invested in each performance. My computer doesn’t have speakers and the headphone socket was no longer working, so I briefly joined in. The brother told me that only one short story was read that whole evening, divided into several sections, interwoven between the pieces of music. It turned out that Thay had written a short story called “The Story of a River” (Câu chuyện của dòng sông):

“During the night, the river went back to herself. She could not sleep. She listened



to her own cries, the lapping of her water against the shore. But then, a revelation: during a lonely night, she listens deeply to herself. Her water is made of clouds—the very clouds she chased after. The object of her search is within her. She touches peace, realizing she is already what she wanted to become. The blue sky reflects in her water, and she rests. Suddenly, she could stop. She no longer felt the need to run after something outside herself. She was already what she wanted to become. The peace she experienced was truly gratifying and brought her a deep rest, a deep sleep.”

If we chase after something and reach for it, we will suffer. If we have nothing to chase, we will also suffer. If you have been a river, if you have ever chased a cloud and suffered, complained about feeling lonely, please take your own hand and hold it as you would a

friend's. Looking deeply, you will see that what you have been looking for has been here all along, namely yourself! You are already what you want to become.

It was a story of the seeker and the sought. “Who seeks and who finds?” Looking for a quiet place, I took my hammock and some books with me: *The Miracle of Mindfulness*; *The Sun, My Heart*; *Fragrant Palm Leaves*... to take another look at the focussed insights from Thay's early teachings that I had marked for my article.

“We are used to living with birth and death, and we forget no-birth and no-death. A wave also lives as water, and we also live in the world of the birthless and deathless. Everything is in the word ‘knowing’: To know is to recognise. Recognising is mindfulness. All the work of meditation is aimed at

awakening so that we know one thing and one thing only: Birth and death can never touch us in any way.” (from *The Sun, My Heart*)

Closing the book, I looked up and saw my reflection in the large glass door, saw myself lying in the hammock under the eaves, my back turned to the sunlight that mixed the colours to make the hills appear green and the flowing swirls of white clouds. Leaves fell everywhere as I hung in mid-air. The soaring white clouds were beautiful; surely there was a river somewhere, clinging to the clouds in its heart, yet still restless. The reflection of the clouds passed by, someone's small calligraphy behind the glass door in the room attracted my gaze, “What else are we looking for? This is it!” (Ta còn tìm cầu chi nữa?) This is it! Right there, that's it!

Bruder Chân Trời Hải Thượng

Illusion Transformed: a poem – a song – a retreat

with Sister Chan Khong, Sister Dinh Nghiem and Thay Phap An at the EIAB in April 2024

One evening, Thay Phap An plays a song for us based on a poem by Thay:

*Sister Chan Khong
sings the song
'Illusion Transformed'.*

Inside me I feel everything begin to vibrate. I feel my breath and let myself be carried completely by the melody, by the tender voice of the sister.

How can this woman sing so tenderly in the midst of the incredible suffering of this

war in her homeland? Something must have completely melted in her, and she passes on this energy of transformation in her singing.

I let myself be cradled by these waves of energy like a small child in the arms of its mother. I sit in the large entrance hall of the EIAB among other retreat friends and watch the shimmering clouds in the sky in this early evening hour. They carry me. I feel completely safe in these clouds, in the melody of this song. I dive under and resurface. I am not afraid of sinking. It is incredibly beautiful.

Thay wrote the poem 'Illusion Transformed' in 1970 in the hut at Fontvannes, a place in the countryside near Paris. There Thay spent weekends with people from different countries who were committed to peace in Vietnam. They meditated together, talked about their opposition to the war, did gardening and relaxed.

In 1970, the war in his home country of Vietnam was at its height, and Thay and Sister Chan Khong were unable to return home.



Illusion Transformed

*Horizon's heavy eyelids,
 mountains leaning,
 seeking rest from Earth's pillow –
 at nightfall
 grass and flowers perfume sleep.
 Illusion shifts her veils.
 Wind lifts up her hands.
 Jade candles
 shimmer in the silver river of the sky.
 The hillside's open doorway
 frames a falling star that writes
 the sacred words in fire.
 Ten thousand lives are spinning
 circling dream's illusion.
 The moment of this night
 reveals
 this world's reality.*

– Thich Nhat Hanh –

For three days now, we have been hearing stories about Thay during the Vietnam War from the mouths of Sr Dinh Nghiem, Sr Chan Khong and Thay Phap An. We have heard about the great suffering, the despair of the people, the courage, compassion and commitment of Thay and Sr Chan Khong to the people:

- How Thay and Sr. Chan Khong tried again and again to give themselves and the people around them stability and hope – in the midst of the destruction, insecurity and hatred of war.
- How they tried to understand the people who had carried out the murders, even in the most terrible moments of grief when their closest friends had been murdered.

Listening to the stories about Thay and Sister Chan Khong's life during and after

the Vietnam War, which I was already very familiar with, made me realise the great depth of his understanding of interbeing.

After the war, Thay and Sister Chan Khong tried to help the very people, the American Vietnam War veterans, who had killed so many of their fellow countrymen and devastated their homeland.

A well-known story goes that at a veterans' retreat in the USA, an American war veteran told how he could no longer be in the same room with children. He had put sandwiches filled with dynamite in front of Vietnamese village children in revenge for his fallen comrades and watched them die in agony.

Thay said to him: 'You killed those children and you cannot bring them back to life. Now your task is to be there for the many children

who are suffering and to help them so that they suffer less.

This is an expression of the bodhisattva Samanthabhadra, who acts on the basis of her deep understanding and her unconditional love and compassion.

Samanthabhadra not only understands, but she or he also becomes active and tries to alleviate the suffering of living beings in a very concrete way through their actions.

Thay knew that the war veterans were suffering greatly. Many of them were unable to reintegrate into American society after the war, committed suicide or became addicted to drugs because they had not learned to deal with their suffering.

They were unable to cope with the experience of fear, hatred and violence that they had themselves inflicted and experienced.

At that time, in the 1980s and 1990s, post-traumatic stress disorder – PTSD – was still little understood, and there were no helpful therapies. These have only developed in the

last 20 years, with ‘Somatic Experiencing’ by Peter Levine or with the trauma therapies of Gabor Mate and others.

As recently as 2002, after the attack on the Twin Towers in New York, trauma survivors were treated with therapies that often led to re-traumatisation rather than healing.

In the retreats with Thay and Sister Chan Khong, the nurturing aspects of mindfulness training were always at the forefront:

Thay’s teaching and practice consists of training us to come into contact with the wonders and beauties of life before and while we touch the suffering within ourselves.



The sisters enjoy sitting in front of Thay's hut

This approach enabled the veterans to expand their awareness and not to get lost in the terrible images and sounds that repeatedly flashed back to them as a result of their participation in the war.

They learned to breathe with their difficult feelings of guilt, fear, despair and hatred and to lovingly embrace them.

Through walking and sitting meditation, mindful body exercises and mindfulness in everyday life, the veterans learned to bring body and mind together and not to be consumed by the terrible images that arose.

When I first started at Plum Village, I sometimes met US veterans, especially at the winter retreats, who talked about

their transformations in the Dharma sharings.

The song 'Illusion Transformed' transported me from the images of war that had arisen in my mind to the beauty of an infinite expanse of mind, where there is nothing to fear and I no longer have to exclude anything that would normally be unbearable.

A poem/song by Thay is singing within me:

*„My joy 's like Spring so warm.
It makes flower bloom all over the earth.*

*My pains 's like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.*

*Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,
so I can hear
that my joy and pain are one.*

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

The door of compassion”

*„Meine Freude ist wie der Frühling, so warm,
dass sie Blumen auf der ganzen Erde erblühen lässt.*

*Mein Schmerz ist wie ein Tränenstrom,
so mächtig, dass er alle vier Meere füllt.*

*Bitte nenne mich bei meinen wahren Namen,
damit ich all mein Weinen und mein Lachen gleichzeitig hören
kann, damit ich hören kann,
dass meine Freude und mein Schmerz eins sind.*

*Bitte nenne mich bei meinen wahren Namen, damit ich erwache und
die Türe meines Herzens offen bleibt:*

die Türe des Mitgefühls.“

*Thich Nhat Hanh,
'Please Call Me By My True Names' – poetry collection*



Annabelle Zinser

True Fragrance of the Mindfulness Trainings,
Berlin, May 2024

Experiences with the book: ‘Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet – Healing and Harmony for Ourselves and the World’

After the terrorist attack in New York on 11 September 2001, there was a period of global uncertainty. At the time, we responded to this general crisis in our ‘spiritual centre CitySpace Cologne’ with an additional evening group that met weekly to promote personal sharing and deepen our own practice. After more than 20 years, this group, although fluctuating, still meets every Wednesday evening.

The original reason for the group has faded into the background over the years, but today we once again live in a time that is no less oppressive and unsettling. The climate catastrophe that is approaching us is closer and more tangible than it was 20 years ago, and the crises in the Middle East, the war in Ukraine, the so-called ‘turning point’ and the growing anti-democratic and inhumane mood worldwide unsettle many people.

This sense of crisis does not stop at our group’s door, of course, and today, as then, we are faced with the pressing question of how we can respond to the crises. We are looking for answers based on our practice and our need for peace, harmony and love.

We hoped to find answers in Thich Nhat Hanh’s book ‘Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet: Healing and Harmony for Ourselves and the Earth’. It was published posthumously by the nun Sister True Dedication, who also added her own contributions.

The somewhat unwieldy title could give the impression that the book is solely concerned with ecological issues and making suggestions about how to save our natural world. And yes, ecology and the climate crisis do take centre stage, but the book also contains other important aspects for a mindful, happy and ethical life.

In the style of the Plum Village tradition, the first chapters invite readers to look at themselves, to become aware of themselves, to accept and respect their own shortcomings. These sections created a relaxed and friendly atmosphere in our group. However great our world-weariness may be, contact with ourselves should be the basis for our actions.

At the beginning of the book, Thich Nhat Hanh describes an episode that took place in New York a few days after the terrorist attacks. In an atmosphere of hatred, anger and fear, he summoned the courage to call for ‘non-action, calm, reflection and non-violence’.

We were reminded of the beginning and the reason for our group, and at the same time we realised how relevant the situation back then is for us today. Thich Nhat Hanh makes it clear elsewhere that he is concerned with a state of mind that is capable of empathy and protects us against violence, hatred and jealousy. We had founded our group to deepen our practice. What could that mean

other than to cultivate this state of mind, to cultivate it daily, in small and large ways.

The book provides us with role models and practical help, for example the bodhisattva Sadapaributha, whom none of us had heard of before. He is considered the ‘bodhisattva of constant respect, who never underestimates or belittles anyone. The activity of this bodhisattva consists of eliminating complexes such as worthlessness and low self-esteem.’

Sometimes it seemed to us as if Sister True Dedication were a member of our circle; she describes her own practice, which also includes errors, weaknesses and emotional difficulties, so sincerely and convincingly. Thanks to her honesty, we could identify with her words and they helped us talk openly and honestly about our own weaknesses and shadow-sides.

Receiving such powerful and helpful advice week after week motivated all the participants in our group to take more care to deepen and intensify their practice and rekindled the original reason for our group. After just a few weeks, we noticed how strongly the book influenced our practice and gave us a reliable orientation for our spiritual path.

Thich Nhat Hanh and Sister True Dedication describe a practice that cannot be

implemented overnight, that does not deliver immediate results, but rather aims for a gradual process of unfolding and cultivation from the depths. For example, when writing about the 'art' of non-violence, they explicitly point out that it is a long-term endeavour that involves more than just making a one-off cognitive decision or forming an opinion about violence or non-violence.

We were constantly surprised by the relevance of what we read in those evenings, as it always fitted perfectly with the topic we had just been discussing in the group. Sometimes it seemed almost magical, and we couldn't help suspecting that the book, or the late Thich Nhat Hanh himself, was listening in on our conversations and answering us.

I am not writing a review of the book, but rather reporting on our group's experience with it. I think I can say that it has achieved the most important goal a publication can hope for, namely to trigger a noticeable change.

We have been practising mindful speech in our group for decades and I have given many seminars on the subject, but the chapter on communication inspired us to take a fresh look at our own communication. And it is a similar story with our environmental awareness, which has grown steadily over the past few years. And yet the book reminds us in its own way of the interconnectedness of all things and invites us to think about the whole in our everyday lives, the whole that is behind every little part.

We have not yet read the important last part, which is about our commitment and actions in the world. But even now we are fascinated by the clear connection between spiritual practice and worldly behaviour.

In public, the question of whether a meditative lifestyle and social commitment can be reconciled is repeatedly discussed. I would say that Thich Nhat Hanh and True Dedication do not answer the question, but go beyond it by showing that there is no

separation between the two. Those who look more deeply into worldly phenomena, who have sufficient inner peace and stability to listen and empathise, will want to support and preserve and will work for peace and non-violence.

Using the example of Thich Nhat Hanh's life and his worldwide commitment, the book shows that this is not just a theory. And as his successors continue to demonstrate today, even after his death, the practice of mindfulness and loving kindness always involves a commitment to the world. The book and the practice of Plum Village or the EIAB and the other centres also show that it is not only not a contradiction to be involved, but that involvement also requires the practice of mindfulness and that social action becomes more powerful and effective when it is carried out by in a peaceful, benevolent spirit.

Werner Heidenreich



Planting a seed

Memories of Thay

When Thay led walking meditation at Plum Village, he would sometimes stop for a few minutes in silence in front of a group of trees that stood right next to the Upper Hamlet car park. He had planted them himself years before and affectionately referred to them as 'my friends'. One day, Thay told us that he always looked at the forests in the valley while having breakfast in the morning and made contact with the trees inside. He reminded us that we are not separate from the plants. When we breathe in, the trees touch every cell of our body through the oxygen they produce. The trees are in us and we are in them. Then he asked the sangha to buy the forest in the valley to save it from being cleared at some point.

During another walking meditation, he led us into a small forest that did not belong to the sangha. In the treetops, nets and cages had been set up to catch songbirds, which are considered a delicacy in southern France. There was a ghostly silence. Thay walked carefully through the forest, while we followed him slowly, shocked by the sight. He wanted to teach us not to close our eyes to suffering and pain – neither to our own suffering, nor to the suffering in the world.

When we start to practice mindfulness, the first thing we often have to do is take care of our own pain. For most of us, this is the normal process. But over time, it is necessary to extend our compassion to other beings. Thay's compassion was especially directed towards the weakest: children, refugees, victims of war, people suffering from hunger, but also animals and plants. He took his heart and his practice wherever they were needed.

However, when we extend our compassion and turn to the suffering in the world, we can quickly become overwhelmed and fearful. We see the great pain in the world – with the wars; climate change; environmental destruction; refugees and discrimination – and we slide into despair and helplessness. What can we do?

In my practice, I follow 3 instructions from Thay to avoid slipping into feelings of being overwhelmed, powerless or afraid:

1. Stability

Thay emphasised again and again that we must be stable. Because if we are not stable within ourselves, we cannot take good care of others. We must practice and live peace, freedom, joy, lightness and love – here and now. Only then can we be there for other beings.

2. You are not alone

Thay often asked us to look with the eyes and the heart of Buddha; to walk with the feet of Buddha; to eat with the hands of Buddha and to speak with the mouth of Buddha. Because Buddha is within us. We just have to learn to touch him.

In my practice, I have replaced Buddha with Thay. When I make a decision, I often ask myself beforehand: 'What would Thay have done? What would Thay have decided?' This is how I make contact with Thay within me. Who or what is Thay within me? It is the energy of compassion and silent presence that is present in all of us – our Buddha nature.

3. Planting a seed

When we meditate while walking or working, we do not focus on the goal, but instead invest 100 % in this one step or in this one action. In the same way, when we are committed to climate change, equality, peace or animal welfare, we should not think about the results we want. We plant a seed – here and now – through our commitment, however small or large it may seem to us. Then we let go. We cannot know if and when the seed will grow. We trust that the energy we put in now will have an effect.

The very first suffragettes who campaigned for women's suffrage never voted themselves. Nevertheless, their efforts had a huge impact on all subsequent generations. Your efforts are effective, even if you may not see the result directly.

In a television programme, a former sex worker who now helps other women to leave prostitution was interviewed. The reporter wanted to know what the decisive moment was that made her decide to quit. She then told the reporter that she had been completely down at the time, but one day she was riding up an escalator in a subway station. A woman was coming up the opposite escalator. When their eyes met, the woman smiled at her. It was this smile that flipped a switch in the sex worker and she decided to quit her job.

Sometimes the seed you plant is a smile. And you never know what effect that smile will have. Here and now, you give the best that you can, and maybe it's 'only' a smile.

It's not about how much we do when we get involved. It is about doing it from an inner stability, with the knowledge that we are not alone and the desire to sow a seed of peace, hope and compassion in that moment.

Commitment was important to Thay. It was important to him to stand up for the weakest, to get involved and to speak up and out. That is why he coined the term 'Engaged Buddhism'. One of many examples comes from 2006. When another war broke out

between the Palestinian Hezbollah and the Israeli state - which was militarily supported by the American government - Thay wrote the following letter to the then US President George W. Bush:

Honourable George W. Bush
The White House
Washington, D.C., U.S.A.
Plum Village
Le Pey, 24240 Thénac
France
8.8.2006

Dear Mr President,

Last night I saw my brother (who died two weeks ago in the USA) coming back to me in a dream. He was with all his children. He told me "Let's go home together." After a millisecond of hesitation I told him joyfully: "OK, let's go."

Waking up from that dream at 5.00 a.m. this morning I thought of the situation in the Middle East and for the first time I was able to cry. I cried for a long time and I felt much better after about one hour. Then I went in the kitchen and made some tea. While making tea I realized that what my brother had said is true: Our home is large enough for all of us. Let us go home as brothers and sisters.

Mr President, I think that if you could allow yourself to cry like I did this morning, you will also feel much better. It is our brothers that we kill over there. They are our brothers. God tells us so and we also know it. They may not see us as brothers because of their anger, their misunderstanding, their discrimination. But with some awakening we can see things in a different way. And this will allow us to respond differently to the situation. I trust God in you. I trust the Buddha nature in you.

Thank you for reading

In gratitude and with brotherhood

Thich Nhat Hanh, Plum Village

Präsident George W. Bush, Das Weiße Haus, Washington, D.C., Vereinigte Staaten von Amerika

Plum Village
Le Pey, 24240 Thénac,
Frankreich
8.8.2006

Sehr geehrter Herr Präsident!

letzte Nacht sah ich meinen Bruder (der vor zwei Wochen in den USA gestorben ist) in einem Traum zu mir zurückkommen. Er war mit allen seinen Kindern zusammen. Er sagte zu mir: „Lass uns gemeinsam nach Hause gehen.“ Nach einer Millisekunde des Zögerns sagte ich ihm freudig: „OK, lass uns gehen.“

Als ich heute Morgen um 5.00 Uhr aus diesem Traum aufwachte, dachte ich an die Situation im Nahen Osten, und zum ersten Mal konnte ich weinen. Ich weinte sehr lange und fühlte mich nach etwa einer Stunde viel besser. Dann ging ich in die Küche und machte mir einen Tee. Während ich Tee kochte, wurde mir klar, dass das, was mein Bruder gesagt hatte, wahr ist: Unser Haus ist groß genug für uns alle. Lasst uns als Brüder und Schwestern nach Hause gehen.

Herr Präsident, ich glaube, wenn Sie sich erlauben könnten zu weinen, wie ich es heute Morgen getan habe, würden Sie sich auch viel besser fühlen. Es sind unsere Brüder, die wir dort drüben töten. Sie sind unsere Brüder. Gott sagt es uns, und wir wissen es auch. Sie sehen uns vielleicht nicht als Brüder, aus Wut, Unverständnis und Diskriminierung. Aber wenn wir aufwachen werden, können wir die Dinge anders sehen. Und das wird uns erlauben, anders auf die Situation zu reagieren. Ich vertraue Gott in Ihnen. Ich vertraue auf die Buddha-Natur in Ihnen.

Danke, dass Sie diesen Brief lesen

In Dankbarkeit und in Brüderlichkeit

Thich Nhat Hanh, Plum Village

Impressions from a pilgrimage

At the beginning of 2024, I took part in the pilgrimage 'Returning to our Roots', in which 150 people from 31 nations set out to get to know the roots of their spiritual tradition more deeply and to visit places that had been important to Thich Nhat Hanh. This journey took place on the second anniversary of Thay's death. A large memorial service and procession was held at his root temple in Hue. Around 450 monks and nuns from the many Plum Village centres around the world travelled to Vietnam to take part. (see the article by Thay Phap An in the magazine)

Thay spent his first monastic years and the last five years of his life in this temple, where he died in 2022. I did not go to Vietnam to say goodbye to him during his lifetime; I wanted

to do that now and thus close a circle for me that began in 1985 when I first met him and Sister Chan Khong in Plum Village. I wanted to see some of the places where he lived, which he described in his books and which I translated without having seen them.

Even though I have been back in Germany for months, I still feel that this journey is very close to me and that what I experienced is still quite disorganised inside me, which is why I am not writing a chronological travelogue, but would like to share some experiences and thoughts.

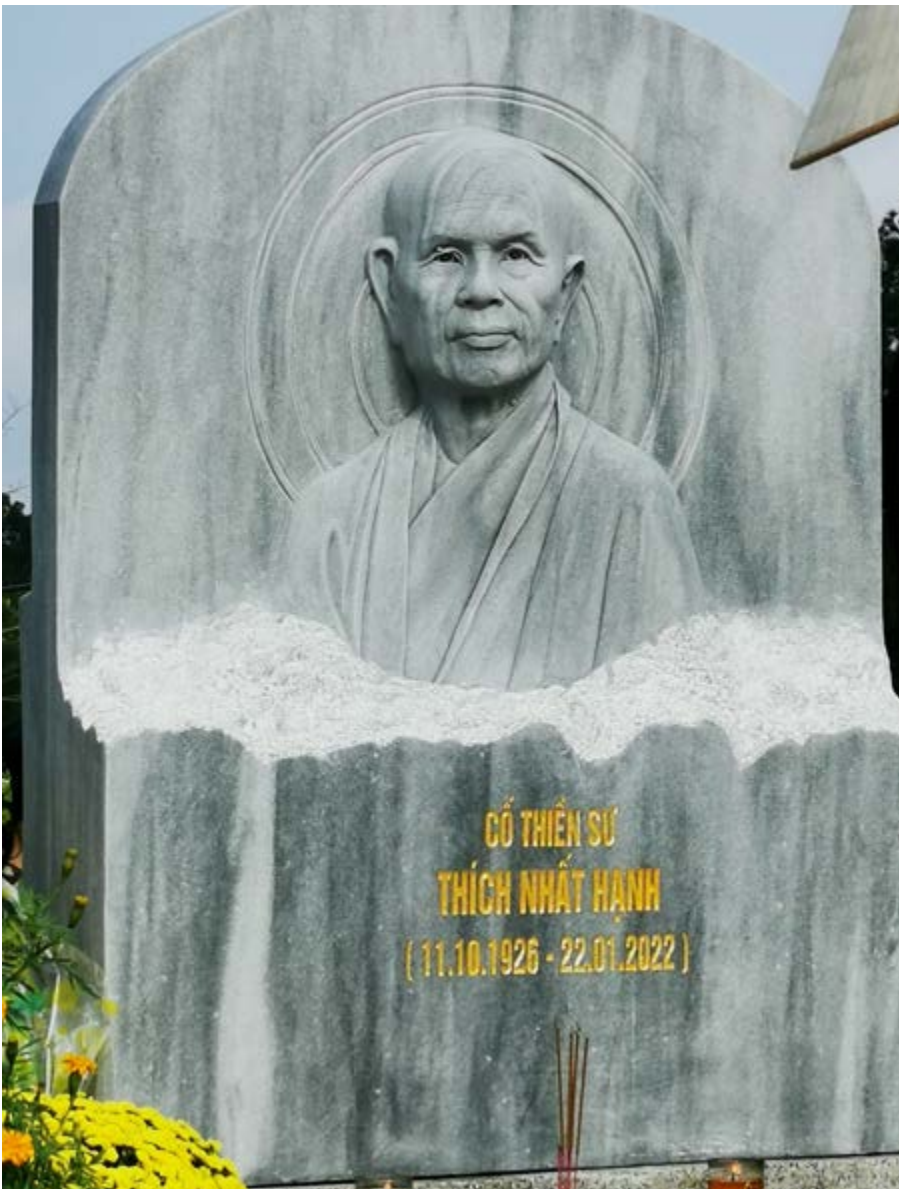
As Sister Chan Khong and I enjoy a long embrace in the large hotel complex in Hue, where we and our large group of pilgrims

are staying for eight days, I have the feeling that this is not the least of the reasons why I came here. Sister Chan Khong, now 86 years old, is in a wheelchair, but she comes from the monastery, where the monks and nuns live, almost every day to be with us. Young nuns help her lovingly to get out of her wheelchair and then, with the help of her crutches, to get onto the stage.

Younger monks and nuns now take to the stage to talk about Thay's life and what it has meant to them. From time to time, Chan Khong grabs the microphone or insists on getting it and adds something, but she also smiles, as it seems to me, full of understanding that it is now the younger ones' turn to tell their stories. In the afternoon she leads the deep relaxation, which she has done for decades in so many places around the world; she sings for almost an hour. Hearing her voice, which has become somewhat fragile, touches me deeply; I feel like a child being sung to sleep by its mother.

Over the next few days, I see her walking a few more times, either in a wheelchair or with the help of crutches. She is usually surrounded by a number of Vietnamese laywomen, some of whom seem to know her well, while others approach her, happy to receive a smile. And she smiles a lot during these days.

The monks and nuns, as well as many lay people, wear a yellow lapel pin with the words 'Coming and going in freedom' (in different languages) written in black calligraphy. They have worn this lapel pin for two years as a visible expression of the mourning period. This period officially ends on the second anniversary of Thay's death. In Vietnamese culture, with its strong sense of ancestor worship, a two-year mourning period is associated with the idea that the deceased is still present in some way. No major decisions are made during this time. No new abbot is appointed in monasteries, and no marriages are contracted in families. After two years, the relationship with the deceased changes; a new level of farewell





begins. The second anniversary of the death is therefore more significant than the first. Thay is now recognised as the fifth patriarch of the temple and founder of the Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism, and this is celebrated in a large memorial service and procession.

I see Chan Khong again a few months later at the EIAB, where she is giving a course together with Sister Dinh Nghiem and Thay Phab An, which is about Thay's life story and what this legacy means for us. We talk about her book 'Learning True Love', which has been out of print for many years, and I promise her that I will do everything I can to get it published again. It is such a precious testimony of those years, which no one else has experienced and which is so important to understand if we really want to appreciate the commitment of Thay and Chan Khong. Most of us only got to know the two of them many years or decades later, or read Thay's books, in which he addresses Western practitioners and emphasises the



psychological and practical dimensions of the Dharma. How can memories of the wars in Vietnam, of the suffering of the population, of the commitment of Thich Nhat Hanh and those who were active with him, of the teachings that have grown out of it, of the first years in exile be kept alive in any other way than through contemporary witnesses and books?

In the monastic Plum Village community, some nuns and monks are currently delving deeper into the first decades of Thay's life in Vietnam in order to better understand him and his work. Thay himself never wrote an autobiography; he taught by example and through his books. Many of his old texts are only available in Vietnamese; they will now be translated little by little, as will letters to his Vietnamese students and retreats held in Vietnamese.

In time, it will surely be possible to gain a more complete picture of Thay and his spiritual roots, and thus of our own. To what extent all this is important for our own spiritual practice is something that each of us must discover for ourselves. For me, after this journey, I have the impression that I still know very little.

In many respects, the experiences in Vietnam simply overwhelmed me; I saw so many things for the first time in my life. I am still filled with wonder at it all. But I was also unable to understand and categorise much of it, as it was so completely foreign to me, even, or especially, in terms of religious expression.

We constantly tell each other stories about ourselves, our lives, our suffering, our joys, and we also tell stories about others. Such stories are not a reflection of an objective reality, but – stories. I am very curious to see whether and how Thay's story will change in the coming years, a story that is no longer in his hands to tell, but in 'ours'. Who will tell it? Which aspects will perhaps become more important, move more to the fore, which more to the background? 'Thay is empty of Thay elements; Thay consists only of non-Thay elements.' And we are his continuation. I think it was Thay Phap An who said in this retreat at the EIAB: 'If you are looking for Thay, look inside yourself.'



But I did meet Thay in Vietnam once, not in the hut where he spent the last years of his life and which has now been restored so that you can visit it and pay homage to Thay by bowing before his picture, not in the temple where his picture, his robes and his ashes are now kept and where he can be venerated together with the other four patriarchs, but in Phuong Boi. In the 1960s, he was able to create a place with like-minded people where they could meditate, be in silence, enjoy nature and be together, a place of regeneration, creativity and healing. Today, only traces of the former buildings can be seen there, otherwise just meadows, shrubs and trees, some of which were probably planted by Thay. A family has leased the land and has been maintaining it ever since to preserve this place as a memorial. I had been in a rather depressed mood that day, feeling cut off, separated and alone. I had finished reading Thay's diary 'Fragrant Palm Leaves' a few days earlier and it had moved me a lot to see Thay as a young man with so many thoughts, hopes, doubts and visions, but also with the sadness of this place that he and his companions had to give up after just a few years. I looked for a place to sit in nature; the others were scattered far and wide throughout the grounds. I sat there and a deep silence surrounded me. And then I suddenly felt Thay's presence very clearly, I could almost see him standing next to me as a young man, kneeling down and turning to me at my level, saying in a friendly but firm voice: 'It's not about loving less, it's about loving more and more.' It was undoubtedly the most important sentence for me on this journey.

Ursula Richard

Our spiritual life encompasses many traditions

As a child, I was an altar boy in the parish church. I look back on this as an enriching experience; it helped me to feel at home in the church, in community with other people and with God. There was a great deal of kindness, a feeling of security in God and the church, as well as in the teachings of Jesus, which were very clear and intuitive.

However, as so often happens, I lost contact with the church in my teenage years, and even with my spirituality in general.

But then it came back in a different form, as we will read in a moment.

As a young man, I felt overwhelmed by the possibilities and options for my life and what I wanted to do with it, how I wanted to earn a living, etc. When I moved to the city at the



age of 19, I asked myself: How can I know what I should do? I need clarity! And intuitively, I

searched for ways to find more clarity within myself, in my mind.



Systematically studying and practising music was one way of doing this – I studied at the conservatory.

So, when I was 21), meditation/Buddhism fell on fertile ground, because it was all about creating clarity, in mind and body. The Buddhist meditation of mindful breathing and awareness of the body, as well as observing the movements of one’s own mind while sitting quietly, were truly a miracle cure. They still are, although they have now become so ingrained and feel so natural to me (i.e. a habit) that they seem less extraordinary than to begin with.

Like most people, I quickly realised that it was about the same things that I knew from church, as expressed in the insight, „we come from God and return to God“. This is a wonderful insight and very true.

Are we with also with God between birth and death, that is, now?

This is a question that leads us to spiritual practice. How can we live with love, understanding, happiness and peace?

Or should we say, how to live in harmony with God’s creation? Or should we say: how to live with an open heart, in connection and deep peace? Or how to feel at home with God?

There are many teachings on this in Buddhism and Christianity.

For me, the goal, meaning and joy of life as a monk is to come into contact with and be in touch with God/the ultimate dimension/our ‘true nature’. Three terms that all point to the same thing (the second of which comes from the broader field of Buddhism, the third from Zen Buddhism).

At the beginning of the path, I was tentative and hesitant, but at some point it became clear to me that I was in direct contact.

As a monk or nun I see cultivating this process, making it more fluid, as our daily bread in order to be in clear contact with the ultimate dimension more and more.

Br Khiet Tam



DLS – Delicious, luscious scrumptious Delight in Life and Sharing. Or simply the name of the founder: David Lee Schlenker.

David has been supplying the EIAB with his delicious, high-quality bread and cakes for several years. His idea of sustainability, economic efficiency and humanity makes his business something special. A place where respect is shown to people, nature and society.

But who is the David Lee Schlenker behind all this? And what does he have to do with Buddhism? In conversation I put these questions to him.

David grew up in a conservative family from an agricultural background in one of the Amish counties in Pennsylvania, USA. His parents sent him to church, which became

an important meeting place for him and his family. After school, his pastor recommended that he attend a liberal arts college, which he did: he graduated with a degree in philosophy and religious studies.

He says that his first encounter with Buddhism was in his first year at college, when he took a course on Gandhi. Both this course and Paul Reps' book "Zen Flesh, Zen Bones", which he read every evening for decades, had a profound influence on him.

After graduating, he continued his studies in his private life – the end of his studies marked the beginning of his learning. At that point, it was already clear to him that he

could not change the world. What he could change was his world, which he could also create.

When he was washed up on the banks of the Rhine in 1981 – as he always describes it – he was just 23 years old. He had around 200 USD in his pockets, an open heart and a willingness to work hard. He had already learnt that at home: only those who work eat.

His career path is not unlike that of a film character – and in films, the protagonists often start out as dishwashers. He was one of them. Not in a pizzeria, but in a vegetarian restaurant, because that was important to him. David has been a vegetarian since he was





14. At a very early age, he asked himself why people have to go hungry, and the answer to that question stopped him from eating meat for the rest of his life.

When the boss lost the lease after two years, he started baking with a business partner and during this time he completed his apprenticeship as a baker. The birth of DLS was in 1991 in hospital directly after a near-death experience. 'I was reprogrammed' – he reports.

In all the years he has been living in Germany, he has never lost interest in books and learning. He realised that the world history he was taught in the USA did not correspond to the history he heard and read in Europe. In the early years in Germany – it must have been in 1981 or 1982 – he found a small English-language bookshop where he came across the books of Thich Nhat Hanh for the first time. They inspired him deeply and from that point on he devoured everything he could find by him.

In 1996, he attended a lecture and saw Thay in person. He had bought a gift with him, but didn't have a chance to get close enough to Thay to give it to him. He believes that this had nothing to do with the sangha, but with his own destiny. Shortly afterwards, he got to know his Taoist grandmaster, Zhi Chang Li from China, who combines the experience of various ancient schools and passes on his knowledge with an open heart.

Although he continued to read all the literature written by Thay, it took years before he encountered the sangha again. That was when he heard that Waldbröl was to be the centre of something. He was immediately interested and wanted to offer his help. A



friend of a friend gave him a phone number and after several unsuccessful attempts, the first meeting with Sister Song took place. He was deeply moved by the story that Sister Song Nghiem and Thay Phap An told him about the founding of EIAB, and he understood that all the help he could offer was just a drop in the ocean.

Since then, David has been supplying the EIAB with his delicious organic bread and cakes, and a wonderful relationship has developed. The EIAB often takes part in the gingerbread competition organised by DLS every year, in which the nuns and monks create a gingerbread temple or bell tower.

For David, Buddhism is one of the doors to his own spirituality. The Buddhist images, stories and values are extremely important

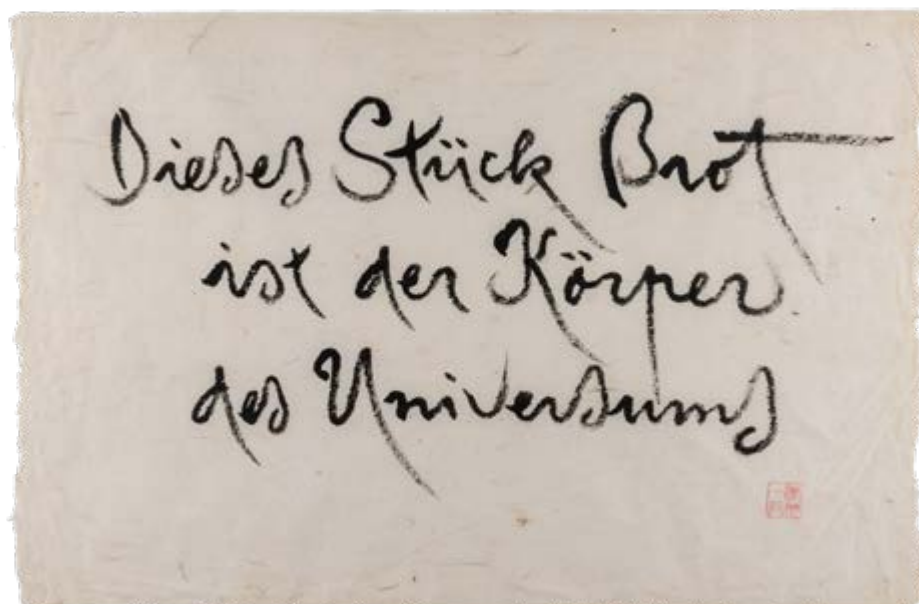
to him and have become part of him. Buddhism has changed its face in every country where it has taken root – or rather, it has adapted without changing its true core. In his opinion, this diversification is based on deep and strong insights.

David is enthusiastic about the diversity of the programmes at EIAB. He appreciates the cultural and linguistic diversity. Not only the kindness of the nuns and monks, but also the depth and breadth of their outreach programmes and the seriousness of the topics addressed.

But the greatest gift the EIAB gives all its visitors is the feeling of being accepted.

The feeling of having arrived home.

Erika Kraft



Deep sharing in the Sangha

We have the wonderful practice of “Dharma Sharing”, where we sit in a circle, listen to the bell and the silence together and finally to what is said and what remains unsaid behind what is shared. We focus all our attention on what comes from another’s heart, listening to the sound of the voice as we follow the sound of the bell: with an open heart, open senses and without judging or evaluating. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara is our role model for deep listening. This gives the person speaking the opportunity to communicate honestly. The rule that what is said remains in the circle makes it easier for the speaker to say things that, in other contexts, could lead to discussion or rejection. Here, however, the speaker can be sure that they will not be criticized, commented on, challenged or condemned. Here she is allowed to show herself as she is – perhaps for the first time in her life. Before she speaks, she listens to herself, to her joy, her pain, her doubts or questions, or remembers insights that have come to her in her practice and in her study of the Dharma. She senses when it is the right time to bow to the group and use this gesture to ask for space to speak. The words then usually follow spontaneously, they are not pre-formulated in thought, but often come as a surprise. They are a gift of the alert presence of the whole

group. This is also where we can feel what Thây taught us: that you and I are not two separate entities, but are deeply connected, that we are inter-connected. Where we share the space of trust and compassion, this connectedness becomes an experience.

You are me and I am you.

It is obvious that we inter-are.

You cultivate the flower in yourself so that I will be beautiful.

I transform the garbage in myself so that you do not have to suffer.

I support you, you support me.

*I am here to bring you peace
you are here to bring me joy.*

(Thich Nhat Hanh)

How could deep spiritual friendship be better expressed than in this poem by Thây. Brotherhood, sisterhood, siblinghood are what make our sanghas so joyful, even if, as in every family, including spiritual families, there are sometimes quarrels, disagreements and suffering. We have many tools to deal with them and to grow together, especially in the face of difficulties.

A study conducted by the Bertelsmann Foundation in March 2024 with 2532 people

between the ages of 16 and 30 showed that almost half of this group felt lonely, with 10% even feeling “very lonely”. We are familiar with this problem among older people. However, the fact that young people are also affected in this way is thought-provoking. Our practice, especially practicing with the Sangha, is certainly an effective measure. If we put Thây’s teachings into practice, we can gradually heal our fears, our feelings of loneliness and depression. We no longer experience ourselves as isolated beings, but experience more and more the connection we have with each other. And the natural world surrounding us is also our Sangha. We touch the earth and experience that we are part of this earth, and receive the gifts of the earth, the air, the sun and the water every day. We are in deep connection with the animals and plants, but also with our human ancestors and have a responsibility for those who come after us. We are by no means alone. We have a diverse Sangha, we have brothers and sisters on the path – these are infinitely valuable gifts that we too easily overlook. Let us practice noticing them, appreciating them and thus nurturing gratitude and happiness in ourselves and in the world.

Andrew Denis



Living with Dementia

A Daily Dance between the Challenges of Life and Joy

Sometimes a single visit to the doctor can change your whole life:

In January 2022, Doris was diagnosed with dementia and in February 2023 she received a second diagnosis: Alzheimer's disease. Since then, our lives have changed fundamentally in many ways.

As absurd as it may seem, the diagnosis also brought some relief: the symptoms, such as increasing forgetfulness, slight difficulties finding words and states of inner confusion, which had been slowly developing over the years were finally given a name. Our awareness of the subtle changes in Doris' behaviour, which no doctor had really taken seriously, were "scientifically" confirmed after a delay of several years. So, we hadn't been imagining things, and I hadn't been an overly concerned husband. Above all, however, the diagnoses of dementia and Alzheimer's came like a punch to the stomach – we were both overwhelmed by hopelessness, fear and sleeplessness. And the reactions of those around us told us we were going to have to face the worst.

But as a caring husband, I was especially ready to take up the fight against Alzheimer's. There were plenty of books on alternative healing methods for Alzheimer's, expensive nutritional supplements promising a cure were advertised on dozens of internet portals and, above all, sold at extremely lucrative prices. So, I began my search, found competent advice from Sangha friends with practical knowledge of healing methods beyond conventional medicine and together we developed a battle plan against dementia.

Emotionally, the burst of activity, as well as the initial hopelessness, were probably

necessary steps towards coming to terms with Doris' illness. Just being able to do something helped us to overcome our initial paralysis and not sink fatalistically into resignation. However, all our efforts have been far less effective in halting the progression of the disease than we had hoped for.

Today, this phase is already behind us and we are now facing dementia in a calmer and more conscious way. This is mainly due to the fact that we are no longer fighting the disease, but, with the help of our practice, accepting it as a fact and learning to live with it in peace. It has been very helpful for us to trust our own feelings, follow our intuition and calmly consider every step. Neither the horror scenarios from Google searches nor the promises of salvation from some pill sellers have proved to be true for either Doris or me.

Looking back, a whole series of internal and external processes and changes, which we continue to benefit from, have helped us:

What helps us:

- 1. accepting what is ('This is it').** Neither resignation nor fighting the illness helped. Looking back, some prophylactic measures that would have at least slowed down Doris' illness would certainly have made sense. This is an appeal to trust your own inner truth and intuition more and to really go with what you feel in the present moment. This is now our attitude, as we have taken over responsibility for the organization of Doris' treatment based on the advice of doctors and experienced alternative practitioners.
- 2. to create an appropriate and supportive living environment at an early stage.**

In autumn 2022, we moved into a rented flat in an anthroposophical centre for seniors. Everything here is built to be suitable for the elderly and disabled and the necessary services are also available. This move has relieved us in many ways, but above all we live with people who meet our needs and increasing limitations with understanding and compassion.

- 3. informing all our social contacts.** There is no reason to be ashamed of dementia. This makes communication easier not only for ourselves, but also for those around us. Our experiences with openness in dealing with the disease have been only positive.
- 4. an attitude of openness in dealing with the disease, also in dialogue with each other.** It is often difficult; it really hurts and takes a lot of strength to tell each other the truth – but it takes away an incredible amount of pressure and helps us avoid falling into new illusions.
- 5. using humility and humour as sources of strength.** Whenever we succeed in such a difficult dialogue and we accept the bitter aspects of the truth, we also regain our sense of humour and can laugh heartily at the small and large mishaps, such as Doris' sometimes bizarre word creations.
- 6. asking for and accepting help.** One thing that we both find really difficult is openly asking for help or simply accepting help when it is offered. Even though it seems natural to us, our childhood conditioning and our attachment to an unrealistic, performance-based self-image still make it difficult for us.
- 7. using the Sangha as a source of strength.** During this time, our Bielefeld sangha and the entire Order of Interbeing sangha have become real sources of strength for

us. All our sangha friends treat Doris and me with understanding and compassion, and Doris is seen and valued by everyone in her dignity and respected with an open heart. At our Sangha evenings, we always use the Dharma sharing to talk about our worries and needs. The mere fact that everyone is really listening to us and that we are able to reflect inwardly on the topic as we speak has a healing and supportive effect on us.

8. learning to live in the now. We were used to planning many things. But how can we plan something now, if we don't know whether the body will play along when

the time comes? In moments like these, when a cherished plan proves utopian, the practice of conscious breathing proves to be an invaluable tool: We can stop and focus on the here and now – and see the many possibilities hidden within it.

9. appreciating the everyday and the 'little' things of life. The limits imposed on us by illness and age force us, gently press us to develop our appreciation of the ever-present treasures in our lives. There are so many healing and life-affirming things in our lives to share with each other every day: The beauty of nature, the kindness of numerous people, our loving partnership

... . Opening our eyes and awareness to these many gifts brings us strength and joy.

When we integrate these experiences deeply into our lives, they unfold their full magical power, as Thay described them:

*Coming and Going
in Freedom*

Doris Schumacher
(True Sacred Ocean) &

Klaus H. Schick
(True Sacred River)
Sangha Bielefeld



Transforming Seeds of Violence in the Home

Last April, practitioners from the LGBTQIA++ community gathered at the EIAB for a retreat with the theme: *At home with oneself, with the Sangha, with the world.* The retreat was a joyous coming together, where we experienced the interbeing of being at home in all three. Returning to our true home in the present moment, releasing tensions and caring for what we found in ourselves, we opened more to others and found connection in our Dharma sharing and playful Sangha activities. The welcome of the EIAB and the space in the Sangha gave us a chance to be fully visible and express who we are, in movement, song and sharing, and to open more deeply to being at home with ourselves. The openness and acceptance in our shared time together and our practice of loving and caring for ourselves strengthened our courage and vision, enabling us to move more

freely in a world where we know we belong; it is our home.

In the last couple years, I have been practicing with deep acceptance of whatever arises in me. Being at home with myself means that I am open to whatever emotions, thoughts, and behaviors manifest in the moment. It means that I practice so that my first response to what is in me is love. Whether I see it as wholesome or unwholesome, beautiful or painful, I know it has arisen in me as part of the wondrous interdependent co-arising of everything that is – and I want my response to that to be loving and caring.

I grew up in a home with many forms of violence. The violence between family members did not stop when I left home. In the 2 years following my mother's death,

I experienced some familial violence in the form of my mother disowning me and exclusion because my sister withheld information from me so she could be the only one who organized and was present for the cremation of our mother.

I have been using my practice with these experiences, and more, as compost for the process of transforming my inferiority complex, which can be very active. The verbal, physical and sexual abuse, the criticism, harm and rejection I received in my family as a child frightened and confused me. I developed a belief that, as I had been told, I was indeed responsible and to blame for all negative things that happened around me and to me, including these attacks. I formed a very negative view of myself – and of course, a separate self, focused only on



me and independent of my surroundings. I hated myself for who I thought I was, for the damage and wrong I saw myself doing at every turn – even when I had no idea what it was or how I was doing it! After decades of healing and practice, I know for sure with my logical mind that this is not true; also my love and understanding of myself and my family members and our interconnection has grown enormously. Still, feelings of shame and self-hate can arise in me, triggered by small interpersonal discomforts.

In the first of the five Mindfulness Trainings we commit to cultivating “openness, non-discrimination, and non-attachment to views in order to transform violence” in ourselves and the world. Perhaps it sounds crazy, but I began to practice radical acceptance of my feelings of self-hate. Whenever they arise, I welcome them with openness and non-discrimination, practicing with the wise words from a song of Evelien Beumkes, a senior Dutch Dharma Teacher: “hello, hello something in me. I am aware, that you are in there, and you sure do have a good reason to be.”

And within myself, I was able to practice Thay’s wisdom that hate will never transform destructive forces –pushing away, hating and being violent with my own self-hate would never help me heal, only tear me more apart. So I began to welcome my self-hate when it arose, relaxing my body, letting go of all resistance to it, respecting it without judgement, without impatience about how long it might stay, without arguing that it was wrong, loving it as the hurt child in me who fostered this feeling in an attempt to understand cruelty, to protect myself from more harm, to alleviate my fear of having a mentally ill mother by imagining myself to have the (negative) power to cause – and thus to fix – the family dysfunction.

I also started to see that a major trigger for this self-hate was when I saw myself as

separate from others, often triggered by a positive role in a group, or even simply from being complimented. Looking at how to practice with this, I realized the insight Thay so often taught – the wave is always water – is what could help me. So, the next time I was in front of a group, I concentrated on knowing I am water, just as the other people present are. It was this practice that helped me feel even more deeply at home and connected with the Sangha during the April LGBTQIA++ retreat at the EIAB. Despite being the facilitator, standing in front of and guiding the group, I was able to open to the love and appreciation offered and did not fall into seeing myself as separate, and my self-hate was not triggered. I am so very grateful for the practice and the freedom it brings.

Recently, initially in my dreams and then in my meditations, a very ragged street cat appeared, who I have named Scraggle Cat. I see this cat as my abused and neglected inner child, who chose hate and further neglect and is so shy of any contact. Now Scraggle Cat sits comfortably on my lap as I meditate, fur well cared for, and not so quick to show its claws or hiss.

I feel I have come to know the seed of violence in myself more deeply. I recognize the slightest trace of aversion, rejection or impatience in my response to myself and the world around me. I embrace it without fighting and judging, seeing its roots in ignorance. I see how this energy hooks into the endless cycle of hate, violence, and harm in the world. I am starting to see how to have an internal “no” – being able to have a “no” is a big issue for an incest survivor! This “no” does not have violence in it, remains rooted in love and interconnection. It is the “no” of a firm boundary, that is peaceful and free, that does not have a motion of aversion, but is simply a blossoming of love. This is the kind of “no” I recognize in Thay’s retelling of the Buddha’s refusal to stop walking, in the story of the conversion of Angulimala,

a serial murderer who became a nonviolent monk. Here is part of the story from OldPath, White Clouds, p 353..

When Angulimala caught up to the Buddha, he walked alongside him and said, “I told you to stop, monk. Why don’t you stop?”

The Buddha continued to walk, as he said, “Angulimala, I stopped a long time ago. It is you who have not stopped.”

Angulimala was startled by the Buddha’s unusual reply. He blocked the Buddha’s path, forcing the Buddha to stop. The Buddha looked into Angulimala’s eyes. Again, Angulimala was startled. The Buddha’s eyes shone like two stars. Angulimala had never encountered someone who radiated such serenity and ease. Everyone else always ran away from him in terror. Why didn’t this monk show any fear? The Buddha was looking at him as if he were a friend or brother. The Buddha had said Angulimala’s name, so it was clear that he knew who Angulimala was. Surely he knew about his treacherous deeds.

To stay true to the path of healing, saying no without violence or force, even to violence, and to offer healing and love: this heals ourselves and is what is needed in the world in these times of increasing polarization of views and violence against fellow humans and the web of life.

Maria Moonlion
True Healing Confidence

Mindfulness in prison

Condemn the deed; respect the offender

When I go out in the evening and say that I have just come from prison, most people feel a little irritated. Or they smile when they find out that I work there as a psychiatrist.

When a convicted offender is released from prison, the people's reactions are usually less friendly.

And what we call resocialisation, namely the integration of former offenders into our society, often does not work. Yet it is so important to integrate these people, who may later become our neighbours, back into society.

If we look at the conditions needed to lead a law-abiding life after a prison sentence, we can see how difficult it is. After years of having all the important decisions of everyday life taken for you and living according to the routine of prison life, a great deal of initiative is required after release. There are many official visits to make, a new identity card, a new health insurance policy, a new apartment or, in most cases, temporary accommodation, new furniture, registration with the residents' registration office, dealing with the job centre, and much more. Some of this can be prepared by social workers before release, but many

prisoners feel overwhelmed after release and experience a great deal of insecurity and a lack of prospects.

Although some prisoners have the opportunity to catch up on their school qualifications or even to study, many former prisoners face the same life, the same contacts and the same conditions after release as before their imprisonment. So what should change?

And yet reliable, stable and supportive social relationships are so important.

It always makes me happy when I see or hear that our protégés are receiving visitors. Because if nobody is waiting for them outside, nobody comes to visit and nobody writes letters, it is incredibly bleak. Loneliness and the feeling of not belonging is a huge problem.

Many of the people who commit crimes and are sentenced to prison have a history of unfavourable conditions. And a large proportion of the crimes are committed under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Many prisoners tend to see themselves as victims and either make light of or repress

their own actions. And part of the truth is that most offenders were indeed victims of childhood violence, abuse, neglect and other things we would rather not think about. So bad seeds were watered that later led to the behaviour that ended in prison. In many cases, behind addiction lies mental illness and trauma.

And despite all the terrible and sometimes even horrific crimes these people have committed, it is important for me to distinguish between the crime and the person. Condemn the crime, but respect the offender. Or as They would say, people are not our enemies. And criminals are made up of non-criminal elements. And these elements need to be strengthened.

Despite all the misery and mud, time and again I also experience the lotus flowers that appear in the penal system. It is impressive and moving to see how many people care with body and soul for these outcasts. There are some wonderful and dedicated full-time staff from the medical sector, the prison service, psychologists, social workers, lawyers, teachers and pastors, etc., who do a great deal of good work. And I am particularly impressed by the great commitment to help of external freelance workers or volunteers

who go into the prisons, who invest their time to water positive seeds.

From our institution, I would like to extend a very special thank you to the members of the psychiatric team. Our psychiatric nurse tirelessly visits the sickest and most needy in our institution and provides assistance on many levels, organising and coordinating a great deal behind the scenes and positively influencing the entire atmosphere in the prison with a great deal of humanity, care and humour.

A dedicated occupational therapist supervises a group of mentally ill patients in occupational therapy and also treats patients who, due to their illness, rarely leave their cells, individually. She also constantly comes up with new ideas on how these patients can be cared for and looked after better.

The officers in the workshop laugh and enjoy encouraging creative processes and

humanity with our patients in the carpentry workshop.

Our sensitive music therapist sings, drums and laughs with the inmates every week to care for their sensitive and wounded parts.

And a big thank you to our volunteer qigong teacher, who with his friendly charisma gets the tough guys to enjoy the soft, flowing movements and experience themselves from a whole new side. Many thanks also to the two meditation teachers, who through skilful contemplation are able to release many a mental block and enable the participants to see life in a new way. I am very much looking forward to a small therapy dog, which will hopefully soon be giving our prisoners positive energy and unbiased friendliness.

In the tradition of Thay's engaged Buddhism, we want to actively transform suffering in the world. This means creating the right conditions. If we take good care of ourselves

and our minds, water helpful seeds and tend to harmful seeds with care, transformation can take place. Peace in me, peace in the world. We can strive for wisdom and compassion and be a force for good in the world. It is so important to work for greater harmony between people, nations and cultures. For a world worth living in. And it always starts with the little things. In our everyday lives, in our relationships, in our families, at work. And above all with ourselves. If we keep peace and love within ourselves, we can bring peace and love into the world.

We need bodhisattvas at all levels, for example in childcare, in schools, in sports clubs, in hospitals, nursing homes, refugee centres, in climate protection, in prevention, in peace work, in women's shelters, or even in prisons. If anyone feels inspired to become active themselves and, for example, to volunteer, I would like to encourage them. It is very meaningful and fulfilling to help other people. But to do so, you need to be able to



deal with your own suffering, have a certain inner stability, a supportive community that provides healing mental nourishment so that we ourselves can become this healing community for our fellow human beings.

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce our non-profit organisation Lernraum Knast. The founder, Mitro Hofmann, is a doctor and mindfulness teacher who has been visiting various prisons for years, selflessly and with a great deal of love, to teach mindfulness to prisoners. She founded the organisation with the help of numerous supporters in order to encourage and support others to do this work and to stand up for people on the fringes of society.

We also support other mindfulness teachers who are, or would like to be active in this particular field through peer consulting or supervision, and we make our experience and expertise available. In addition, we offer

courses in drug and violence prevention in preventive youth work with the help of former offenders. Recently, we have also been encouraging prisoners to write their biographies, which often enables healing to happen.

As a small non-profit organisation, we are always grateful for donations to enable us to continue this work. Anyone who is interested or would like to get actively involved is very welcome to contact us.

Finally, I would like to give a wonderful example of a transformation process: Sven is a tattooed, stocky man who was a drug addict and later an armed drug dealer. One night, he was arrested in his apartment by the police special operations unit and later convicted. During his five-and-a-half-year prison sentence in various prisons, he came into contact with Mitro, who meditated with him very persistently and with great passion. Through these mindfulness courses, many

conversations, the books of Thich Nhat Hanh and a lot of time for reflection, over the years he has developed a new attitude towards life. Even during his time in open prison, he began to hold courses on drug prevention at schools with the support of Mitro. He has been out of prison for a few years now, is drug-free, is a sought-after speaker who can make a lasting impression on young people with his experiences, and also supports transformation processes in others. He now works full-time in a home for autistic people as a carer and says about his charges: 'I really love them!'

Steffen Handke

Loving commitment of the heart
www.lernraum-knast.de



Maitreya Foundation trip to Vietnam 2024

Our original trip, planned before the outbreak of the coronavirus, had had to be cancelled, so we weren't finally able to visit Vietnam until March of this year. Altogether we were six Maitreya Foundation members from Bavaria and a supporter from Berlin, who travelled, at our own expense, to South and Central Vietnam over a period of two weeks to visit a large number of the projects (about 25) we support. We were always accompanied by local social workers (from our partner network 'Hieu va Thuong / Love and Understanding'). Hieu va Thuong is the successor to the 'School of Youth for Social Services', which was founded by Thay during the Vietnam War in 1965, and is now the operational side of the Maitreya Foundation in Vietnam; projects are identified, coordinated and implemented there by them. And the Maitreya Foundation provides the necessary funds.

The activities of the Maitreya Foundation include aid projects for the disabled and the elderly, with particular emphasis on supporting people who are barely able to provide for themselves due to their meagre state pensions. Or support for schoolchildren and students, to whom we provide grants for their education in the form of scholarships. In rural areas, we help to improve the general living conditions through infrastructure projects (bridges, roads and wells). These projects account for more than half of our annual budget. On our journey through the provinces, which we mostly undertook in a minibuss and which was sometimes quite demanding (e.g. through a mountainous



region on the Laotian border), we were able to see for ourselves the success and progress of the various projects. The visits were always very well prepared by the social workers and the management of Hieu va Thuong.

The kindergartens have traditionally been a centrepiece and focus of our work, because this is where the spiritual orientation of the Maitreya Foundation probably finds its clearest expression. And a very large proportion of our funds are also used for the kindergartens. This includes subsidies for the children's meals – on average €3 per child per month, which covers a quarter to a third of the actual cost of food per child. Another important budget item is the subsidies for the teachers' salaries, which enable them to live decently. And finally, we also support

construction measures (e.g. when a kitchen needs to be replaced) or when, as in the colder mountain regions, blankets are purchased for the children. Of the approximately 2,800 children in 42 kindergartens supported by the Maitreya Foundation in the provinces of Binh Thuan and Quang Tri, we were able to visit around 800 children in 11 kindergartens. Despite the large number of kindergartens we visited, each of these visits was special and characterised by lively exchanges, singing Plum Village songs together in English, German and Vietnamese (with the hand gestures we all know!) and a feeling of deep connection.

The following example from a larger facility shows how the children are cared for there. In one of the kindergartens, 260 children are



looked after by 14 teachers; there are 7 classes for children aged 2-5 years, with the younger children in the smaller classes. The opening hours are from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., 6 days a week.

Education in mindfulness

The daily routine is very varied. Breakfast is at 6:30 a.m., followed by lessons in the different age groups or in free groups according to interest. Lunch is at 10:30 a.m.

After that, meditation (half an hour) and 1.5 hours of rest/sleep. During meditation with the children, gentle background music is played. I had never seen children meditate before, and I had never thought it possible that a group of more than 40, including very young, children could be so concentrated. It was deeply moving. The kindergarten director told us: 'It is so important that the children learn meditation. Even if they don't meditate as adults later on, the seeds have been sown.' It should be noted here that not all kindergartens in Hieu va Thuong meditate; only those with enough teachers.

After these two hours of peace and meditation, everyday activities such as combing and washing take place (each child checks that the other's hands are really clean!). At 2:30 p.m. a small meal is served. After that, there is time for play, walking meditation, singing

and other activities. Every day, the teachers ask the children at the end of the day: 'What have you learned today / what will you take home with you?'. And a task: 'When you get home today, tell your mother you love her!'.

Hieu va Thuong believes that good (mindful) education requires three things in particular: bells, songs and (walking) meditation. While working with a group of 30 four- to five-year-olds, we were able to observe the 'game with the bell'. The feeling of silence, often called the 'gateway to all wonders' in Asia, and the sound of the bell alternate. Each child in the circle was invited to strike the bell once, while the others listened spellbound.

And another important principle, probably from Thay, also came up when we were discussing how to design mindful education: 'When the teachers are happy, the children will be happy! In this spirit, the teachers meet once a quarter to practice together and to nurture joy and happiness, to celebrate birthdays and simply to be there for each other: 'That's our sangha! Because our job is so exhausting.' There is much more to be said about our experiences in the kindergartens. Above all, we took away the realisation of how beneficial a mindful education can be.

After our tour of the south, our group flew from Saigon to Hue. The following stay at

the Tu Hieu Pagoda (founded in 1843) was undoubtedly the highlight of our trip. Thay began his life as a monk there at age 16. We had the opportunity to take part in the Day of Mindfulness, which was taking place at the neighbouring Dieu Tram nunnery, and we were given a tour of the Tu Hieu pagoda, also known as the 'Root Temple', and visited the altars of the patriarchs. We also saw the room where Thay had lived most recently and the memorial room that was later created in his honour. A final talk over tea with the nuns and the group from Hue was also very moving.

The two-week trip to our Maitreya Foundation projects was very moving for all of us. The name 'Love and Understanding' keeps echoing through my mind. And the realisation: where understanding grows, love deepens – and deep love in turn gives us a better understanding.

Alois Neudorfer

Source of Deep Clarity, from the Munich Sangha
www.maitreya-fonds.de for more information



Like Oaks in the Storm

Cultivating joy and stability in difficult times

A retreat with Thay Phap An and Sister Song in Selva di Fasano

The recent spiritual retreat in Selva di Fasano, Puglia, was an extraordinary event that brought together practitioners from our sister sanghas in Palermo, Bari, Conversano, Milan and other Italian cities. At a time marked by great challenges and conflicts, this opportunity for meeting and practising together offered us all a refuge of peace and awareness.

Thay Phap An expanded on the theme of the bodhisattva path, a teaching he had offered at previous retreats in Italy. He guided us through deep reflections on how Buddhist practice can help us navigate the difficult times we are currently experiencing. He directly addressed global tensions, such as the conflicts in Ukraine and Palestine, reminding us that these are just two of many armed conflicts causing suffering around the world. Thay Phap An invited us not to view these events in isolation, but as part of a larger fabric of human suffering, emphasising the importance of cultivating inner peace as a means of contributing to world peace.

A few days after our retreat, the G7 summit took place in the same area of Selva di Fasano.

This made the contrast between the silence of our practice and the turmoil of the outside world even more apparent and increased our commitment to bring the peace of our inner practice into the social sphere.

One teaching that touched many of us deeply was about mind loops. Thay Phap An explained how the human mind is constructed in a self-referential way: sense consciousness is fed by the senses themselves and their objects. While mental consciousness is fed by both its own specific object and the senses and their objects, it also has itself as an object. This loop or cycle of self-reflection can trap us in recurring thoughts and habitual mental patterns, preventing us from healing our inner wounds. This is a fundamental cyclical mechanism of suffering, which frequently we nurture within ourselves and project outward to the detriment of others. Mindfulness practice is crucial to recognising and breaking these cycles so that we can live with greater presence and freedom.

We are already looking forward to the next retreat in Palermo, where Thay Phap An will

explore the difference between theoretical Buddhism and practical Buddhism and guide us in understanding the different types of karma. This will certainly be another valuable opportunity to grow in our practice and on our spiritual path.

As always, the Qi Gong practice played a key role in the retreat, preparing us physically and mentally for the morning meditation. Sister Song Nghiem led the practice of touching the earth with her gentleness and wisdom, both in the morning and in the evening. This practice allowed us to experience a deep sense of community and mutual support, strengthening our bonds and our determination on the spiritual path.

One very moving moment was when the entire Palermo sangha chanted the morning chant in unison. We sat facing each other, creating a warm and intimate environment that enveloped us during silent meditation. This is how we usually sit during our weekly meetings. This practice was a tangible testimony to the power of chanting and meditation to create connection and harmony.

This retreat awakened a deep sense of peace and community in all of us. We are grateful to Thay Phap An and Sister Song Nghiem for their guidance and inspiration, and look forward to continuing to explore and practice together, supporting each other on the bodhisattva path.

Andrea Libero Carbone
True Lamp of the Vulture Peak
Editor-in-chief of Gate, the online magazine
of the Italian Buddhist Union



Lines in May

*Lush green moss
on the shoulders of the Buddhas,*

*There – Shakyamuni’s shoulder –
under the cherry tree, on the slope.*

*A blackbird -
its softly enticing call
in the treetops.*

*There is nothing that comes
there is nothing that goes.*

*Silence over the valley.
All is still.*



A few lines I wrote in May 2022, sitting in front of the Buddhas at the Apfelwies, when the moss had not yet met the moss scraper.

Rainer Suthold



The Art of Mindful Help

“As activists, we have a deep desire to succeed in our attempt to help the world. But if don’t maintain a balance between our work and the nourishment we need, we won’t be very successful. The practice of walking meditation, mindful breathing, allowing our body and mind to rest, and getting in touch with the refreshing and healing elements inside and around us is crucial for our survival.

Thich Nhat Hanh, At Home in the World, p.55

When I received the Five Mindfulness Trainings at the EIAB in 2019, I naively thought that a very important training was missing. I would have called it “mindful helping”. It was only a few years later that I realised that Thay’s entire teaching of engaged Buddhism is nothing other than the practice of mindful helping. The Five Mindfulness Trainings are practical tools that help us to recognise, accept and transform our own suffering, and then, in a further step, to help alleviate the suffering of others. This Buddhist ideal of helping for the benefit of all beings has inspired me tremendously and reinforced my determination to live my life in a meaningful and fulfilling way, in line with my own deeply held ideal of helping others.

After the Russian invasion of my home country, Ukraine, in 2022, I realised that Thay’s teachings and practice would probably not have developed in the form we know them without the Vietnam War. Today, I see Thay’s practice as his way of transforming the trauma of war and creating

a counterweight to violence and destruction: To transform the mud of war into a beautiful lotus of the practice of peace, compassion and love.

But what does it mean to help mindfully? Why is it so important to strengthen our own energy of mindfulness when we help, even in an extreme emergency? We can only help in a meaningful way if, aware of our own suffering, we are mindful of our own needs: what nourishes, refreshes, strengthens us, gives us joy, strength and healing. Otherwise, we sink into suffering, have nothing more to give and end up in burnout.

I experienced all of this before the war began. Since the birth of my beloved son with disabilities in 2008, I have made his needs the centre of my life. In 2022, the needs of my large Ukrainian family were added. Eight people – my parents and siblings with their children – came to Germany. For almost half a year, I was unable to practise and breathe deeply. I was in a state of constant stress and

activity; I lost touch with my own needs. I was battling against my son’s life-threatening epilepsy, with the energy of war, hatred and anger in my heart. On top of that, there were unresolved family conflicts and old traumas. In my role as a helper, I felt overwhelmed and exploited, as if I were surrounded by a bunch of hungry ghosts who, no matter how much help they got, always needed more. Burnout, loss of meaning in life and low self-esteem were the worst consequences of my previous life as a rescuer. I also developed serious physical problems such as sleep disorders, migraine attacks and skin cancer. For the last five years my mentor, Sister Bi Nghiem, has been telling me this important message: “Take care of yourself!” But I only understood it recently, when my body also cried out “No! Stop!” Sister Bi Nghiem recommended that I take a day off every week. But I didn’t think I had time for that.

In the summer retreat 2022, I asked in the session Questions and Answers: how can I help others without losing myself? I received

very deep and inspiring answers, for which I am still very grateful today. Thay Phap An talked about the Six Paramitas, which are a monastic navigation system for helping. The Six Paramitas embody certain qualities such as generosity, compassion, deep understanding and right view, patience, perseverance and resilience, meditation, and wisdom. I was particularly touched by one of Thay Phap An's metaphors describing a tree supported by a stick. When we help others, we act like this stick. But the tree has to grow by itself. We cannot give it inner strength or transform its heavy burden.

This is exactly what I experienced in March 2024 in the course on the inner child. During a meditation, I was suddenly in my childhood trauma, which I had experienced at the age of six. My body was shaking badly, I could only feel the energy of fear. When Thay Phap An, with his soft, calm and stable voice, invited us to lovingly embrace ourselves, I managed to listen to him and saw myself from the perspective of an adult. I was able to say the sentence that I needed so much at the time: "Don't worry, I'm with you, it will be alright". I cried and felt a lot of compassion and love for little Arina, who had not only experienced the aftermath of an outburst of violence between her parents, but also powerlessness and guilt that she had not been able to prevent it. That was the moment when my helper-as-saviour syndrome was born: from the childlike need to magically make the conflicts disappear and to create order. With his calmness and stability, Thay Phap An helped me to transform my heavy, chaotic vibration of fear into the higher vibration of compassion and self-love. It was so healing to be able to transform my own heavy, suffering thanks to his safe and compassionate support! Afterwards, I felt a lot of strength and confidence that I could do it myself.

As a mindfulness practitioner in my own right, I can also follow the same steps of the practice when helping others: pause – observe – look deeply – give yourself what you need. In other words, stop and reflect on my situation, on my needs, my energy and joy in this particular moment, whether my help makes sense to me and to others, practise self-care, nourish myself with joy and inspiration, and check whether my mindfulness training is in line with what I am doing.

In order to help in a mindful way, I should first understand myself. In a meditation, I can ask myself the following questions:

1. Is it my need to help, or the need of the other person to receive help? Was I asked for help or am I offering it myself?
2. Is my help really necessary or am I taking over the other person's tasks? Am I one hundred per cent sure that I know better than the other person what solution this problem needs and what decision is the best one?
3. Do I have enough positive energy to help now? What is the current state of my resources: my time, strength, patience and resilience? Am I treating myself with enough love, compassion and understanding to be able to offer and teach this to a person who is suffering?
4. What feeling is driving my desire to help: inner emptiness or fullness, fear or confidence, anger or peace, inner resistance or acceptance, a sense of duty or guilt, or inner freedom?
5. What is my inner attitude towards the suffering of the person in need of help?
 - a) Can I even bear their emotional pain? If not, what exactly about their suffering can I not bear?
 - b) What exactly do I want to alleviate about their suffering?
 - c) What exactly can I alleviate about their suffering?
6. Is there a risk of a "trance" developing between the two of you: emotional entanglement, merging and co-dependence? If I discover an addictive potential in this relationship, can I set boundaries in time, emotionally and energetically? Do I recognise when my original compassion turns into a compulsion to save the other person? Do I understand that in this case I am playing the role of the goddess in white: the irreplaceable, powerful, demiurgic goddess who can supposedly prevent the worst blows of fate?
7. What triggers me about this person's suffering? What unresolved problems and life tasks of my own or of my loved ones does she remind me of? Is there something about her suffering that seems familiar to me: for example, my own old



- mistakes or earlier wrong decisions for which I still feel guilty and which I could make up for by helping her? Do I want the other person to achieve something through my help that I myself have not been able to achieve?
8. What are my projections? Is my compassion really pure empathy or is it a great fantasy coloured by projections of my own pain, which then turns into compassion? If that happens, do I manage to say to myself in time: "Stop, it's not my story and it's not my suffering"?
 9. What emotional pain of my own do I not want to feel right now? When I focus entirely on the problems of another person, am I aware that I am using their suffering as a narcotic for my own pain and that I am running away from myself? Do I want to push my current tasks away by focusing my attention entirely on helping another person? Do I recognise the danger of inevitable disappointment when I see the problems of another person as my most important concern?
 10. Am I helping out of fear for this person and trying to compensate for my worries by seeming to be in control? Do I notice a belief in this: "If I don't help and do something, this person will break down"? Can I smile at my saviour syndrome in this case?
 11. Am I aware of my limits when helping? What exactly am I incapable of alleviating in another person's suffering? Can I carefully ration my strength and time and follow the motto "as much as necessary, as little as possible" when helping? Can I recognise when I am exploiting myself or being exploited by another person and stop it in time?
 - a) Can I see clearly what this person needs, how much and how often, and what I can give her without overtaxing myself?
 - b) Can I accept reality and accept what I cannot change?
 - c) Do I realise that too much help from me is harmful to both of us?
 - d) Can I recognise when the other person is trying to burden me with their tasks or manipulate me by feigning helplessness? In this case, can I give a clear stop signal?
 12. Am I aware of the real limits of the person suffering? Do I realise that I am overtaxing their ability to take in information and that I am demanding capacities and abilities of them that they do not have now or in general?
 13. What are my hidden motives and expectations when I help?
 - a) Do I perhaps recognise some traits of an altruistic narcissist in my role as a helper? For example, do I nurture my superiority complex by letting others know that I am helping them, thereby gaining recognition, admiration





and applause as a particularly good, compassionate and helpful person?

- b) Do I want to control or even manipulate others through my help, to gain power over their lives? And if I don't get it, do I bill them for it?
- c) Or do I perhaps help out of an inferiority complex: out of a lack of genuine self-love? Do I recognise the belief: "I am not good enough for this person"? Do I want to build an exclusive relationship with her through my help and do I expect intense contact, love, special affection, appreciation, gratitude from her: all the things I cannot give myself?
- d) Do I expect something in return, and if so, what exactly?

At the Easter retreat 2024 at the EIAB, I gained another important insight thanks to the lecture by Sister Bi Nghiem. Her main question was: aware of our suffering how can we put joy at the centre of our lives? I realised

again that we can only help most effectively if we start with ourselves: by strengthening our own energy of mindfulness and focusing on joy. Sister Bi Nghiem emphasised that the world needs joy, stability and peace. Instead of touching the seeds of hopelessness, fear and anger in society, we can focus our attention on joy, confidence, love and hope and give that to the world as a gift. The question of why we need suffering was also raised. What kind of maturing, inner growth, and transformation has suffering brought about in our lives? This was about both cultivating joy and respecting and appreciating suffering, whilst not dwelling on pain for too long. We strengthen positive experiences by consciously prolonging them and storing joyful thoughts, feelings and sensations in our brains. We should also find a balance during times of war: have compassion and be open to the suffering of others, but still allow joy into our own lives. Joy as an expression of self-love and self-care, joy without which our resilience and healing are not possible, joy as

a powerful "Yes to life!", joy of gratitude, joy of connection in relationships, joy of helping.

In the guided meditation, Sister Bi Nghiem encouraged us to look deep into the roots of our personal, family and collective suffering and to find the positive counterweight to it. I realised that my greatest suffering on all three levels is violence. And the only way out of these complex traumas can be peace. I thank Sister Bi Nghiem from the bottom of my heart for giving me the desire to give my life a new direction: to strengthen the seeds of joy and peace every day. Instead of being addicted to helping and rescuing, I now want to see how I can make peace with myself and treat myself with more love, how I can bring peace to my Ukrainian family and accept them as they are, and how I can teach my friends in Ukraine the practice of mindfulness and peace. Dr. Arina Kritzka,

Dr. Arina Kritzka
Compassionate Trust of the Heart.





3. Living Practice



Taking a Fresh Look at our Dharma-Practice

Seeds of Awakening in Uncertain Times

The teaching of the Buddha is deep and wonderful. It is an effective medicine for the challenges of our time, which invites us to look mindfully at all inner and outer phenomena, to penetrate and understand them more deeply. The Buddha and his followers have shown concrete ways to be happy even in difficult circumstances. Our practice teaches us that we are not isolated beings, but are always interdependent, resulting in a sense of interconnectedness and natural responsibility – for ourselves and for the world.

In this article, I would like to offer three invitations for self-reflection, presenting three concrete ways that have helped me understand the Dharma more deeply and keep its valuable teachings fresh.

(A) Contemplations on areas of tension in our Dharma practice

(B) Buddhist practice ethics: experiences with the Mindful Business Commitment

(C) Calligraphies by Thich Nhat Hanh, inviting us to practice in everyday life

(A) Contemplations on Areas of Tension in our Dharma Practice

Be still or speak? Alone or with others? Focus on happiness or on suffering? Study or practice? On our path of practice, we repeatedly make decisions and develop our own emphases in relation to the teachings of the Dharma. In doing so, we are always in danger of losing our balance and becoming one-sided or even dogmatic in our practice.

The following contemplations invite us to develop an awareness of different areas of tension within our Dharma practice. It is recommended that after each contemplation we pause, invite a smile and gently connect with our breath.

- *May I look deeply into the Dharma using both language and reason, and experience and appreciate the wisdom of non-duality beyond words.*
- *May I learn to feel connected and at home both in silence and in sharing with others.*
- *May I reflect on both the causes of suffering and the causes of happiness when contemplating the Four Noble Truths.*
- *May I strengthen my inner aimlessness whilst also making good use of Dharma tools to help me in my practice.*



- *May I appreciate the immaterial and the material, may I not place the mind above the body.*
- *May I devote the energy of my heart to bringing about positive change in this world while remaining, or becoming, free from this world and its entanglements.*
- *May I find a balance between the historical and ultimate dimensions, avoiding one-sided practice and not losing myself in either dimension.*
- *May I experience the power and concentration of individual practice in seclusion whilst developing an awareness of the power and energy a community can offer by practising together.*
- *May I find skilful teaching methods and effective Dharma doors for these times without wanting to be available at all costs or sacrificing the profundity of the Dharma through oversimplification.*
- *May I have basic trust in experienced Dharma teachers without blindly following them or closing my eyes to their human imperfections. May I call abuse by its name and at the same time not be overhasty in condemning it.*
- *May I honour the Eastern roots and teachers of the Buddhist tradition while seeking a translation of the Dharma appropriate to our Western culture and language.*
- *May I maintain my sense of humour whilst practising seriously, not look too harshly on myself and the world, and balance lightness and depth.*

The areas of tension sketched out here can help support us in reflecting on our personal Dharma practice and help us avoid one-sidedness in our thinking and our practice. This will increase our respect and openness for alternative Dharma paths and emphases. If we stay on the Middle Way – avoiding the extremes – we nurture happiness, connection and peace.

(B) Buddhist Business Ethics: Experiences with the Mindful Business Commitment

The Mindful Business Commitment (MBC) was developed in 2016 by members of the Network for Mindful Business (NAW). It formulates a mindfulness-based practice for everyday business life based on Buddhist teachings. In six practice areas – (1) Personal

Practice, (2) Mindful Economic Thinking and Action, (3) Work, (4) Consumption, (5) Money and Finances and (6) Acting Mindfully within the Collective – insights are offered into wholesome and unwholesome economic forces, which can be deepened through practice and reflection in our own lives. The MBC serves as a mirror and compass. Its statements are not to be understood as commandments or prohibitions but are intended to draw attention to inner and outer pitfalls in a kind and friendly manner, and to show the path towards a more mindful economy.

The MBC is not just a “piece of paper”, but very much alive and is regularly recited and reflected on online and at NAW retreats at the EIAB. Regular readings and study have proved so helpful that it has been translated into ten languages by experienced practitioners and now has its own website.

Here, it is only possible to offer excerpts from the Mindful Business Commitment. I would like to invite you to contemplate once more how they relate directly to our own lives and economic actions. It is helpful to first collect ourselves and pause briefly after each statement, to be mindful of our emotions, thoughts and inner images that arise and to refrain from an intellectual analysis of the contents...

Excerpts from the Mindful Business Commitment

I will stop regularly and practice:

- ... *giving my spiritual practice sufficient time and energy, both in my daily life and by participating in retreats and practice days.*
- ... *keeping my mindfulness alive throughout the day, particularly in difficult situations.*
- ... *finding reliable support for my path from spiritual companions, connecting to a community of practice or Sangha, and seeking contact with teachers.*

- ... *touching, understanding and healing my difficulties, my hurt and my suffering.*
- ... *developing my own personal criteria for success and gradually letting go of any unhelpful external measures of performance or success.*
- ... *freeing myself from the notion that wealth, influence, popularity or sensual pleasures lead to lasting happiness*
- ... *treating myself kindly, being patient with myself and smiling lovingly at my imperfections.*
- ... *comparing myself less often with others and letting go of the superiority complexes, inferiority complexes and equality complexes.*
- ... *recognizing how much is enough, taming my wants, and wisely choosing from amongst my wishes. I am conscious that increasing demands often lead to dissatisfaction.*
- ... *strengthening my inner and outer generosity and learning to give without intention and to receive without shame.*
- ... *choosing – and creating – healthy working environments.*
- ... *joining together with like-minded people to explore and experience mindful forms of community.*
- ... *seeing money as a powerful form of energy that can produce either healthy or unhealthy effects, aware that every euro I spend represents my vote.*
- ... *foregoing cleverness, manipulation and calculation and not taking advantage of others' weaknesses.*
- ... *viewing even those whose behaviour is destructive through the*

eyes of compassion and to recognize a suffering brother or a suffering sister in them.

... *sharing what I have experienced through my own practice and being aware that the crowning point of sharing is personal embodiment.*

The MBC are practised in the spirit of a free self-commitment; however, they need to be strengthened and nurtured regularly through individual and collective recitations (and sharing of experiences). This gives energy and power to the different fields of practice, make them more alive in everyday life so they can unfold their transformative power.

(C) Calligraphies of Thich Nhat Hanh that invite us to practise in everyday life

In January 2022, one of the greatest Dharma teachers of our time, Thich Nhat Hanh (or affectionately: *Thây*), went to the Great Transformation. One of his favourite practices was calligraphy. Calligraphy and gathas – short mnemonic sentences for contemplation – capture Buddhist teaching in a nutshell and bring us to the heart of the Dharma. Contemplating the gathas with an open mind, we can touch their essence and understand Buddhist wisdom teachings more deeply and relate them to our current situation. Profound calligraphies can touch seeds of awakening in our minds and become seeds of insight in themselves as they accompany and guide us on our path through everyday life. Here I would like to share three calligraphies by *Thây* that can remind us again and again of the essentials on our practice path.

“Peace is every step.” Every step is important. Happiness, peace, transformation does not happen in the future, but right now. We can begin anew with each step, and with every step we can send a message to the world. Right now – in times of war in Europe – this Gatha calls us to calm our minds, collect ourselves and strive to look at all people with friendly eyes – whether at work, on the roads or in challenging situations. Peace can and needs to be practised everywhere.



We come back to our breathing and take the next step a little more peacefully. We enter a meeting with a collected mind. We practise non-reactivity and impulse-distance, and we don't respond to provocation. These are the small acts through which we can patiently transform deep-seated habits and the seeds of violence and division in our bodies and minds.



“You have enough.” When is enough enough? What do we really need? This Gatha reminds us that even in times of inflation and uncertainty, we still have more than enough conditions to be happy. It is the mind that creates our image of the world. Our meditation practice teaches us that our happiness is not found in fame, wealth, power or pleasant sensory impressions. My two years at Plum Village taught me how little it takes to be truly happy when my mindfulness practice is alive day after day. And that it can be the permanent comparison with others that feeds our feeling of not enough. In our sangha in Berlin, contemplating this calligraphy, we quickly came to the conclusion that a feeling of “not

having enough” often hides a feeling of “not being enough”. Consequently, strengthening healthy self-love is the prerequisite for overcoming a never-ending sense of not enough, an insatiable hunger that has the potential to devour our world.



“To be is to interbe.” Loneliness is one of the diseases of our time. We feel separated and begin to suffer. Mindfulness practice shows us that separation is an illusion. We are never alone. We are all constantly interdependent with each other. Since our Western languages did not have a word for this natural law, Thich Nhat Hanh invented the term “interbeing” to describe it. Looking with the eyes of interbeing means that we recognise more and more clearly the interactions, the interpenetration of all things, of all beings – even, and especially, in the smallest things and contexts – and thus experience step by step a deeper feeling of interconnectedness with all beings. This is the medicine for our time, in which a culture of separation, opposition and misguided competition threatens the very foundations of our lives. Experiencing interbeing is active peace work. Interbeing reminds us that we can only overcome the current crises of humanity together.

Epilogue

We can regard the work of the Buddha as that of a gardener sowing healthy seeds in our collective mind consciousness. A seed can be a classical meditation method that we practise in everyday life or an insight into our true nature that fundamentally changes our view of the world. A seed can be the free commitment to a phrase of the Mindful Business Commitment or another

body of ethics. Or the deep contemplation of a calligraphy. Something is triggered and strengthens our understanding. The will not to cause harm grows within us, qualities of the mind such as generosity or compassion receive fresh nourishment and are strengthened.

At first, these seeds may be small, but if we nurture them, they can grow powerfully and transform our lives and the lives of all those with whom we are connected. The Buddha and his followers sowed so many healthy seeds and it is the task of each generation of Dharma practitioners to guard this treasure, to keep it alive and to keep sowing new seeds. And in addition to the tried and tested methods, to find new ways that are helpful for the problems of our dynamically evolving world.

This requires community, this requires Sangha. Thich Nhat Hanh was a great sangha builder. In his vision of Engaged Buddhism, the EIAB plays an important role as a mediator between profound Buddhist practice and application-oriented methods for the problems of our time. Thay once said, "One Buddha is not enough." In this sense: May we always encourage and support each other from the bottom of our hearts on our path of awakening, looking at each other in all our colourful diversity with friendly eyes.

May all beings be happy!

P.S. This article appeared in slightly modified form in the Festschrift of the Austrian Buddhist Religious Society: "Verantwortung leben: Reflections from Science and Religion", Edition Konturen, 2023.



Dr. Kai Romhardt

is an economist, author, poet, sangha builder, business consultant and authorised Dharma teacher of the Plum Village Dhyana School. He is chairman and founder of Network of Mindful Business, which, since 2004, has been seeking to integrate the potential offered by mindfulness and Buddhist teaching into business practice.

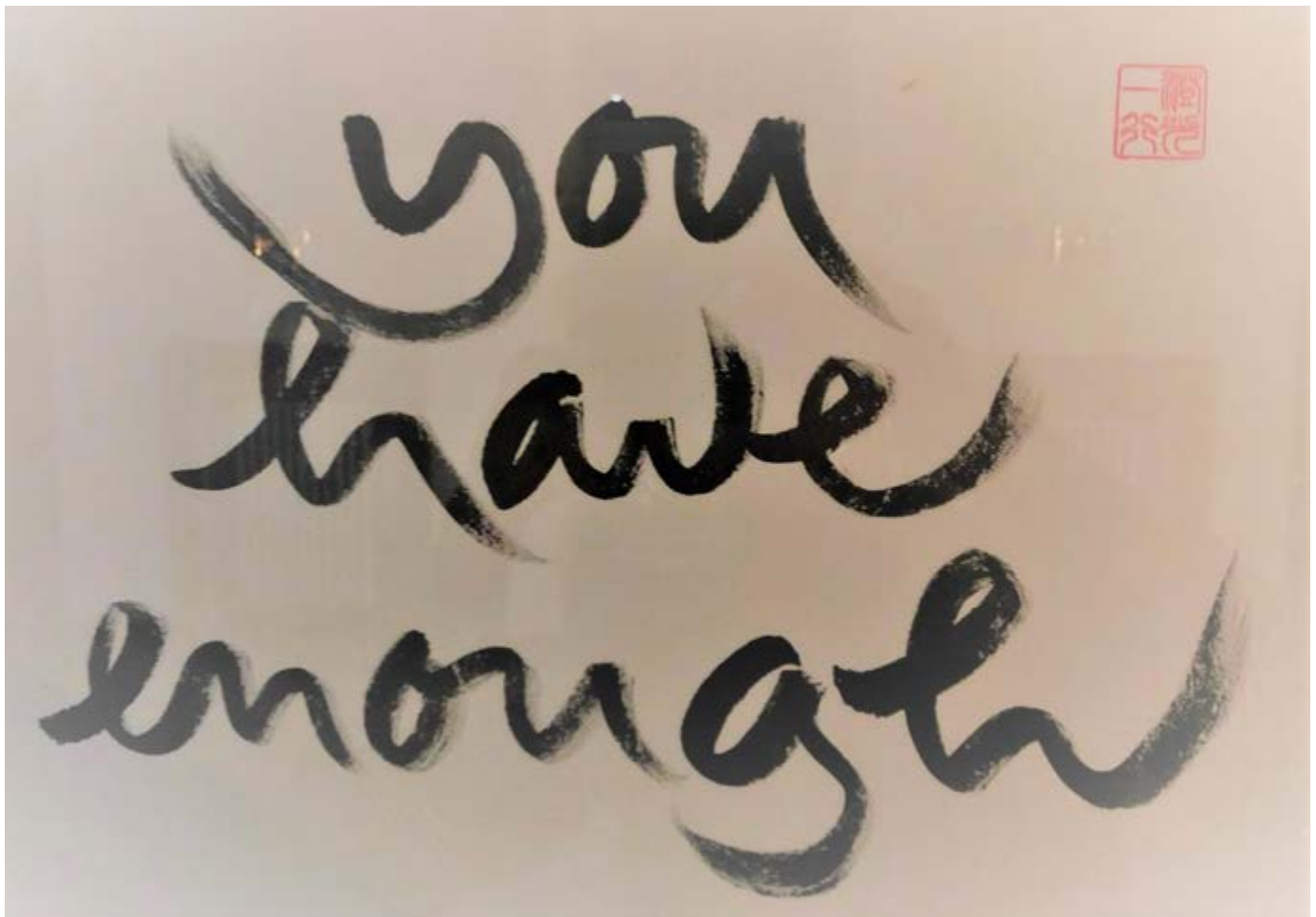
You can find more information at:

www.achtsame-wirtschaft.de

<http://network-mindful-business.org>

<https://www.mindful-business-commitment.net>

www.romhardt.de



In love with Mother Earth

The Earth Holders blossom

The third 'In Love with Mother Earth' retreat for climate activists and people who want to deepen their love for Mother Earth was held at the EIAB in April 2024. In this article, we would like to share some aspects of this retreat. Perhaps we can also inspire you to take part next year. The retreat is different every year!

The name Earth Holder comes from the Bodhisattva Dharanimdhara, bearer, holder, protector of the earth from the Lotus Sutra. The Earth Holders are part of the Plum Village Zen lineage of Thich Nhat Hanh.

Beginning Anew with Mother Earth

'Beginning anew' is part of our practice that helps to transform and heal difficult feelings, conflicts and hurt in relationships. Wherever people live and work together, conflicts, misunderstandings and (unintentional) hurt are inevitable. They offered us this practice to resolve conflicts, refresh our relationships and achieve deeper mutual understanding. At the Earth Holder Retreat, we used this practice to improve our relationship with Mother Earth.

In groups of two, one person took on the role of Mother Earth and listened silently to the other person in an attitude of acceptance and compassion.

The practice consisted of three rounds. In the first round, gratitude and appreciation were expressed towards the earth and all its wonders and beauties. In the second round, we shared with Mother Earth what we individually and collectively regret, what we have done to the Earth and how we have contributed to the ecological crisis. Each of the steps can tap into a deep well of emotions,



be it love for the earth or sadness for its destruction, especially when Mother Earth is sitting in front of us and listening.

It was very nourishing to take a quiet walk in the forest before the third step – making amends – and to stand, sit or lie down with the earth and the community of trees in the forest and renew our relationship with Mother Earth.

The third step was about making amends and our intentions for the future. Once we were in touch with our feelings, which are often hidden deep within us, we were able to reflect and share our very different intentions with joy.

To do this, we each wrote down what makes the world worth living in, and what is particularly important for us. We thought about actions and activities that people can undertake, and chose one that we want to focus on in coming weeks.

We then shared in groups of four, and reflected on how our contribution to small or large changes could look like in order to heal ourselves and Mother Earth.

The plans were both individual – e.g. paying more attention to my movements, slowing down, stopping more, not getting immediately upset when I perceive injustice – as well as planning actions in public spaces, such as regularly practising ‘Standing with



the Earth’ together with others or planning and carrying out a ‘Silent Rebellion Action’.

In the group of four, we decided to discuss what had become of our plans after four weeks.

We experienced the three-steps of beginning anew as a powerful method for deepening and renewing our relationship with the earth.

A different kind of walk

What better way to experience interbeing than a walk through the history of the earth?

During the ‘Deep Time Walk’, we embarked on a journey from the beginning of the earth 4.5 billion (!) years ago to the present day. A walk into the present, where we are on the brink of ecological and social collapse, where life has already survived 5 mass extinctions and where the universe can observe and reflect on itself through us as human beings.

We walked in silence so we could walk together and yet be alone. At particularly striking points in the history of development (e.g. first life on earth), we paused and listened to the gift of evolution that we received at that time.

The walk can be done in different ways. For our retreat, we chose a format of 450 metres, which means that 45 cm corresponds to 4500 years. The last 2.5 metres were then the history of mankind.

Our route took us from the meadow next to the hospital, past the beautiful flowering orchards of the EIAB, and finally to the stupa and the large bell, which invites us to be mindful and reminds us that past, present and future are one.

‘This is because that is’ – we are because the earth is. When we protect the earth, we also protect ourselves. We can all be Earth Holders.

I (Lea) would like to make the Deep Time Walk possible for more visitors to the EIAB, because we cannot fully grasp the wonder of this planet and its history with our minds, we have to experience it!



We plant a tree

After the Deep Time Walk in the sun, I (Andrea) was very tired. I sat down on the grass in front of the wooden garden house (tea house) and played my Zen flute.

One by one, people from our group came out onto the lawn chatting happily with shovels, spades and wheelbarrows

First of all, we discussed where our beautiful plum tree, which Marco had lovingly selected and brought for us, should now stand. How much space does it need, how much sun and how far away should it be from the large birch tree? A gardener in the group was able to recommend the ideal location. Now the joyful digging began. The turf was carefully laid to one side, earthworms were cautiously



relocated and a deep hole was dug for the tree. Marco had brought dung from his llamas, which we placed at the bottom of the planting hole. A nice wooden post to give the young tree stability was also hammered deep into the planting hole with a large hammer.

Then the time had come: we gathered around the tree and each person lovingly placed a handful of soil in the planting hole. Lea, with her wonderful voice, sang the gatha for planting trees: 'I entrust myself to the earth, the earth entrusts itself to me. I entrust myself to Buddha, Buddha entrusts himself to me. I entrust myself to the Sangha, the Sangha entrusts itself to me.' It was a solemn moment.

Then the tree was secured with a lot of earth, the turf was spread upside down around the tree and a small dam was created to make sure the tree received the water. During this time, other participants had also dug smaller planting holes for shrubs and trees that the monastics had provided: Raspberries, blackberries, an ornamental cherry, a small plum tree, a sweet cherry. It was striking to see how much joy people took in touching the earth, digging in it and being in contact with the element earth.

Once everything was well watered, we formed a circle and ended with a song about the four elements. 'Earth my mother, sky my father. We are earth, water, fire and air.'

In the final round on Sunday, many shared that planting with the community was a particularly moving experience for them.

The Earth Holder guiding values

At the end of the retreat, we reminded ourselves of the Earth Holder values. The basis of our activism is our own practice of mindfulness and compassion. Mindfulness means noticing what is: in me and around me – and doing so lovingly, kindly and being inclusive.

1. our *focus* is justice for the earth, not (only) the climate crisis or CO2 reduction, and developing an appropriate response to the three disasters:
 - ecological
 - social
 - spiritual.

2. our main *motivation* is love and connection, not hate and despair; we act out of awareness: I am the earth. But we also do not repress our anger and despair, but practise embracing them lovingly.
3. our basic *attitude* is non-dualistic: we practise recognising that our consciousness contains the seeds of destruction just as much as those of care and preservation of the earth.
4. We have three main *tasks*:
 - 'Listening to the sound of the earth weeping', as Thay puts it, – i.e. feeling the pain in ourselves and in the world and giving it expression, for example in sharings or in certain exercises (e.g. beginning anew with Mother Earth). We (also) work with feelings, not (only) with information.
 - Thay has repeatedly emphasised that at this time sangha building is one of our most important tasks: to establish and accompany communities in which sisterhood and brotherhood are cultivated. That is why it is also important for us to be part of a worldwide network of earth protectors.
 - The third task is to bring spirituality, compassion and mindfulness to activism. It helps us to consciously cultivate three aspects in our lives: the meditator, the artist and the warrior, as Thay describes it in 'Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet'.
5. Our aim is to contribute to a collective awakening, i.e. a collective shift in consciousness towards a sustainable, life-friendly culture and civilization.
6. we *focus* on actions and use posters that express connection and love, not accusation and attack. We start with ourselves – but we don't end with ourselves. We also practice sensitivity to 'structural dukkha', i.e. we also address economic, political and social causes of the disaster.
7. in our activism we always take *loving care of ourselves*. We practise self-care and burnout prevention. We pay attention to the four types of nourishment, especially when consuming news, and consciously water positive seeds.

Singing together with Lea and her ukulele was very nourishing and healing throughout

the retreat! A great joy of the retreat was to see how the Earth Holder movement is also growing and flourishing in Germany and how new groups are emerging in different places.

This year the Earth Holders are visiting various sanghas, e.g. in Stuttgart, Göttingen and Würzburg, to organise Earth Holder Days. We would also be happy to come to your Sangha!

Current information on Earth Holder activities can be found on the homepage:

earthholderde.wordpress.com

You can subscribe to the newsletter at: earth_holder_berlin@posteo.de

Andrea Gerhardt
True Harmony
of the Ocean,
Earth Holder Hannover



Helmut Hallier
True Companion
of Great Compassion,
Earth Holder Berlin



Lea Willer
Leuchtende Geduld
des Herzens,
Earth Holder Berlin,



Manuela Peters
True Peace
and Great Compassion,
Earth Holder Berlin



Uli Pfeifer-Schaupp
True Deep Meaning,
Earth Holder Freiburg



Ani – tating

– meditating with animals as a lived practice of interbeing

As a small group within the international Buddhist animal rights organisation DVA, we are the German branch of this non-profit organisation. An important part of our work is looking at the human-animal relationship from a different perspective. We want to help to develop a different understanding of the human-animal relationship and transform the ‘speciesism’ or ‘carnism’ that is lived in the social context, characterised by the assumption that humans are superior to animals and therefore may use them for their own benefit. Our practice and the exercises we do with the help of the mindfulness trainings help us to develop this understanding, and to deepen our lived experience and understanding of the principle of interbeing.

DVA is very open to people who are interested in this topic. Last year, we at DVA Germany went through a wonderful and important process in which we gradually became clearer and clearer about how we want to position and align ourselves with the important topics of animal welfare, animal suffering and the consumption of animal products.

With our wonderful practice as a guide, it quickly became clear that a gentle approach is the only option for us. We want to motivate and accompany. We want to remain aware that we are all still in the process of reducing suffering!

We want to offer those interested an understanding of their lifestyle, and help





them find their own pace towards living more a more animal friendly life.

We want to create a connection that makes us feel on a deep level that animals, like us, are sentient, loving beings who are worthy of living a happy, pain-free life. We want to help others see that animals have their own personalities and that we have so many wonderful opportunities to lead a life that generates less animal suffering without feeling that we are missing something.

The idea quickly arose to organise the Ani-tating retreat, which had already taken place before the pandemic. In the wonderful month of May, we were able to experience a retreat with 17 people, which took place partly at the EIAB and on two days at the farm of Alex and Marco, together with the animals living there.

The farm, which is embedded in a beautiful forest and meadow landscape, with its resident animals, provided the ideal environment for us to practise together as a group and deepen our awareness of our connection to the animals.

The animals around and on the farm, the free-roaming birds, ducks, frogs, snakes and fish in the pond helped us to connect and feel this through their presence.

In particular, contact with the herd of llamas and sheep, which live there freely and autonomously, showed us what it means to meet animals at eye level without wanting to have a claim some benefit. To regard these animals as equal beings, to practice sitting and walking meditation with them, to experience and feel each other and to experience this interbeing directly was a very deep and formative experience for us as a group. It touched all our hearts deeply.

Together we created a warm, soft, benevolent, loving, mindful space, in which everyone was allowed to be as they were and are. At the beginning, we were all different in our attitudes, our positions, our thoughts and feelings. Our shared practice carried us and opened us up to new things within ourselves and to new things that we heard from others. Seeds of joy, connectedness, stillness, mindfulness, sadness and pain were able to





show themselves. In the space of a few days, strangers became friends. Connectedness was possible in our differences. Each of us was able to discover something new from our own perspective.

The knowledge of animal suffering touches all us in our pain. We are sentient beings and feel the pain of others, even if we do not perceive it directly. Mindful listening and speaking, to myself and in relation to others, contributes to the path of inner healing. The seed of compassion begins to germinate and paves the way to a connection with all beings. We all left this retreat as different people from when we arrived.

How wonderful, we thank each other and everyone who took part.



In Gratitude, the DVA Germany:

Marco Stromberg
(True Merit of virtue)

Alexandra Pelkonen
(Continuous path of the heart)

Olaf Streuber
(Joyful Letting Go of the Heart)

Klaus Hecker
(True Source of Community)

Ariane Mausolf
(Clear Direction of the Heart)



Reconciliation with the woman within

A retreat for women at the EIAB

Many people are familiar with the story of Princess Wisdom Moon, revered as Tara, especially in Tibetan Buddhism. Princess Wisdom Moon practised very devotedly, developing an open, compassionate heart and a clear mind. So, the monks urged her to pray to be reborn as a man in the next life in order to attain enlightenment. Many discussions ensued, until the princess finally spoke up and said: "There is no man, there is no woman, no self, no person and no consciousness. To call something male or female is without foundation and leads gullible fools astray." And she swore to always be reborn in a female body in order to work for the good of all sentient beings.

Ursula Richard and I usually begin our retreat "Reconciliation with the Woman Within" with this story, as a way to develop a non-discriminatory perspective right from the start. In this course, we want to come together as women to look deeply into what makes us suffer and what strengthens us – but not to exclude or separate ourselves from others. We want to learn to look at ourselves and others with eyes of understanding and love, to come more and more into an acceptance of everything that makes us who we are.

Go where your heart is breaking

The idea for this course came to me during a retreat when I was in deep contact with the pain of my mother, with the pain of the women who came before me. My mother was a child during the war, a fate shared by countless other children who experienced the horrors of war without any help or opportunity to somehow process their experiences. I allowed myself to sink deep into this pain and the resultant inability to

express emotions. I felt the collective pain of women caught up in the madness of war, and all the horrors they had to endure. This pain was almost unbearable, and I felt my heart would break. The Dharma teacher at that retreat said to me: "Go to precisely that place where your heart breaks." Right into the pain, the powerlessness, the feeling of being at the mercy of others, which often lurks behind anger. Into our history, which can offer so much understanding for the often inexplicable behaviour of our parents. Right into the primeval power and force of nature, into the Buddha nature and our ability to awaken and become free.

In April 2024, one of our women's retreats took place at the EIAB and for many of the participants it was their first encounter with the practice. That weekend, ours was the only retreat in this huge building, and it took a while for us to turn Freedom Hall into a place of refuge for us.

What happened then is, for me, the embodiment of a miracle. Women of different ages, with very different life stories, came together to meditate, sit in a circle and listen to each other, talk about their difficulties and strengths, and experience their deep connection and their very similar conditioning. That is why it is good for us to come together as women. Because many of us, for example, learned early on to serve and be there for others – but not for ourselves.

I am lovable

A magical moment came during a guided meditation when we were asked to visualise the beliefs we carry within us and which still often stand in our way today. "I'm not good enough" ... "I'm not lovable" ... "It's

my fault" ... All the women spoke them out loud with their eyes closed, and there was a musty scent in the air, as if whispers from our ancestors reached out from the past to help formulate the sentences that express the deep convictions that continue to work from generation to generation. The sentences were similar, no matter how young or old a woman was or what her history was.

In the second stage, we turned the sentences around into positive beliefs and said them aloud with our eyes closed. Shame and embarrassment were palpable, and it was almost more difficult to describe ourselves positively. But by the end, each of us said aloud, "I am lovable." One woman said she would stick this on a post-it note and put it in her wardrobe between sweaters and other clothes – so that she would be reminded of it again and again. "I am lovable."

We have many elements in our retreat toolbox: meditation and silence, self-care, creativity. But also touching the earth, which brings us into contact with our mothers and grandmothers, our spiritual ancestors and the women of this country who, for example, fought for equal rights.

I would like to mention one spiritual ancestor in particular: Sujata, who is probably not very well known. She shares this fate with many other historical women in Buddhism, who were systematically written out of the commentaries, which were written by monks for monks. When the Buddha ended his asceticism and descended from the mountain, he collapsed on the ground. In his book "Old Path, White Clouds", Thay writes: "...she saw a man lying unconscious on the road. She put down her platter and ran to him. He was barely breathing and his

eyes were tightly closed. His cheeks had the sunken look of someone who had not had food for a long time. From his long hair and tangled beard, and ragged garment, Sujata knew he as a mountain ascetic who must have fainted from hunger. Without hesitating, she poured a cup of milk and eased it against the man's lips, spilling a few drops on them. At first, he did not respond, but then his lips quivered and parted slightly. Sujata slowly poured milk into his mouth. He began to drink and before long the cup was empty." But for her actions, Siddhartha might have died. He would not have sat down under the bodhi tree and would not have stayed there until he attained enlightenment and discovered the path that ends all suffering. Our lives would probably be very different.

Trusting the process

Part of the retreat involves going out into nature and looking for symbols that reflect

our strengths and weaknesses. All these symbols are then laid out in the room to form a mandala, with each person explaining what they have brought with them – and everything together makes a beautiful whole. Once, I found a small red plastic ball the size of a large cherry. This ball was a symbol for me that I wanted to become more like a child again, more playful, with fewer obligations, more creative. The next year, I found another small red plastic ball during the retreat, this time the size of a tennis ball. There is no rational explanation for this (and they are the only two red plastic balls I have ever found), but the message was clear: the playful side of me had obviously grown during that year. I can trust in the process.

Ursula and I asked ourselves why women often travel long distances to attend such a retreat. Many, especially young women, are in therapy, already know themselves very well and have also learned not to hide

their difficulties, but to deal with them in the outside world. There are certainly many answers to the question of why. Our understanding was that Buddhist practice ultimately shows a way that frees the heart and, far beyond cognitive understanding, opens a path to healing. It opens the door to freedom in another dimension.

At the end of the retreat, we were like a family; despite all our differences, we didn't really want to leave each other. That is the magic of Plum Village, the magic of practice and sharing, which touches people in their hearts and leads them to a deep openness and acceptance. Thank you, Thay!

Sabine Jaenicke

is a member of the Order of Interbeing and active in the Munich Sangha. She works as a literary editor for spiritual books, including the books of Thich Nhat Hanh, and leads meditation evenings, mindfulness days and days of silence.



Steps to Peace Retreat

at the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp
memorial site in Alsace in May 2024

Many of us have practised with personal trauma resulting from the era of National Socialism and war. For years, the EIAB has been offering retreats on these topics. The generations of children and grandchildren who carry the guilt of their forefathers are supported by the course leaders in a wonderful way to find personal healing, and have experienced that this is healing not only for themselves and their own family, but also reverberates throughout our society.

For several years now, the idea of organising a retreat for peace and reconciliation at a concentration camp memorial site has been alive in the German-speaking Order of Interbeing. This is what They taught us: to take steps of peace to our very personal, but also collective places of pain, horror and guilt, and to connect with perpetrators and victims.

In May 2024, a German-French group of 20 practitioners from our tradition was able to put this idea into practice at the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp memorial site in Alsace under the spiritual guidance of our Dharma teachers Christian Michel from France, Uli Pfeifer-Schaupp from Germany

and with the experienced guidance of Helmut Wetzl, Mülheim.

All the participants were experienced practitioners, many of them aspirants or members of the Order of Interbeing. During the first round of sharing at the Naturfreundehaus in the sunny and inviting Hautes-Vosges, all the participants described their fears and even resistance to their decision to take part in the retreat. Some reported on their difficulty in telling outsiders about the project beforehand. Many were afraid of their first visit to a concentration camp, of their feelings, of being overwhelmed. My own greatest fear was that I would not be able to keep my heart open when confronted with terrible images and my own feelings of guilt as the daughter of a perpetrator. But it was also noticeable that something long overdue was happening: as an – albeit small – collective we were facing up to our German history and applying our practice of engaged Buddhism as a sangha, without knowing where it would lead.

Over two days, we had the opportunity to visit the concentration camp where resistance fighters from France and many

other European countries were imprisoned. Andrea from Hannover describes it as follows:

'During this retreat, I felt a great sense of gratitude for my ancestors, for the men and the few women in the Struthof concentration camp who stood up against the Nazi regime, fought in the Resistance and had to die for it. The suffering of these fighters was a major milestone on the road to the EU, to today's human rights constitution 'all people are equal...' and our democratic principles.

How can people be so cruel? Human greed is immeasurable. The Struthof concentration camp was built in 1941 to mine red granite for the construction of the new Berlin. The Nazis needed cheap labour to mine the granite. Struthof is located at an altitude of 1000 metres in a beautiful, remote mountain landscape where winters were extremely cold and snowy. The prisoners were exploited as labourers until their last breath. There was hardly any food and they had to do heavy labour to build the camp.

When the prisoners were no longer of any use as labourers, they were brutally killed, if they





had not already died of weakness. They were burned in the crematorium and the ashes and remains were collected in a pit, where they were used as fertiliser for the commandant's vegetables – exploitation to the last.

The retreat has strengthened my connection with the history and suffering of the victims and our ancestors. These people have not suffered and died in vain.'

As a sangha, we walked the steep paths – from the entrance gate to the prison cells and crematorium below that awaited at

the end of life. During walking meditation, we connected with the prisoners forced to trudge the final kilometre-long path to the gas chamber, in mortal fear and deprived of all dignity. 'Every step in peace, freedom, joy' This invitation from Helmut Wetzel initially seemed like an impossible task, but with every step the paths transformed. We were able to walk as free people in the here and now of a sunny spring day.

At the gas chamber, we returned the names of those who had had their names and stories taken from them, and who had been

administered as numbers, to them by reciting them aloud. A Jewish participant recited the names of her own relatives, who had been murdered in another concentration camp, and called them to mind.

None of us could have done this alone without falling into despair, but as a sangha, it was a powerful and positive experience. Walking, sitting and chanting together in these terrible places was a physical and very concrete experience of community, transformation and healing.

This became very clear once again when, on the final day, we recited the Requiem for the Victims and Perpetrators in a solemn ceremony – a text that Thay wrote for the victims of the war in Vietnam and which was recited there in large ceremonies. In this way, we were able to connect and honour the streams of our physical and spiritual life paths as German, French, Jewish descendants of victims and perpetrators.

The retreat has increased my gratitude for our ancient path of spiritual practice, which is so relevant to our present time. In deep gratitude to Thay and our Dharma teachers.

Regine Pfeifer

True Deep Looking, from Backnang / Stuttgart



Public talk

at the Church of San Sabino in Bari on 10 June 2024

This year, we were once again able to hold a public meeting at the San Sabino church in Bari, which was attended mainly by Christian practitioners who follow the teachings of Father Mariano and Don Angelo.

After a beautiful guided meditation that led us to connect with the blocks of pain within us, and heal them with the energy of love, Thay Phap An began his Dharma talk in which he used the symbol of the olive tree.

With its gnarled and twisted forms, and its ability to deeply root in the earth, to adapt to changes in climate and environment by changing the shape of its trunk and opening up to the sky with its canopy of leaves, it is a wonderful example of how to remain flexible, stable and joyful in these difficult times.

Thay Phap An reminded us that we often tend to focus our attention on the negative elements that are so insistently presented to us by the media, and in doing so we lose sight of all the positive and healthy elements around us. This is an expression of our survival instinct, which causes us to pay attention to possible threats in our environment, but if we sink into fear and terror, we lose our sense of reality and our ability to live in peace.

In complex times such as the ones we are experiencing now, characterised by war, violence and risks of all kinds, it is important to cultivate the ability to recognise and fully appreciate the positive aspects that are always present within and around us. And when we are tired and have no more energy, we can always return to our spiritual community and practice together, nourishing ourselves through the support we can offer each other.

The Dharma talk was greatly appreciated by Father Mariano and the many people present, and it was good to share a common aspiration to do good and for a life that unites people from very different religious and cultural traditions.

Pino Creanza
(Sangha Bari and Conservano)



Wanderretreat Tirol

AIMLESSLY

*I arrived.
Arriving.
Arrived.
Being at home.*

BEING.

FOUR DAYS

*A hiking retreat.
An invitation to BE.
The invitation reached me in the form
of a photo on the EIAB website.
The clear 'Yes' within me brought me
into contact with the sangha in Hall.
From this point, the time together is
lovingly organised.*

*A year later, the time has come.
I am travelling to Obernberg.
A bus takes me into the valley.
Along rocky ridges.
Through winding heights.
To sun-drenched meadows.
To where I we will be staying. Here we
will stay.*

*I observe the in and out of my
breathing.
Joy at the powerful beauty of nature
wells up.*



ARRIVED

*I get off at the penultimate stop.
At the foot of the mountain.
The house in sight.*

*Welcomed.
By green meadows.
Grazing cows.
Blue sky.
Clear air.*

*Cowbells ring.
Into the silence.*



TRANSFORMATION

*On the first day of the retreat, the house
is prepared.
Transformed.*

*The sangha from Hall is breathing in
there.
Is breathing out there.
The meditation room and the dining
room are being prepared.
Loving decorations are arranged
throughout the house:
labelled stones, flowers, pictures,
drawings.
Gathas and smiles radiate.*

*When I return from a hike at noon, I
notice the change from afar.
The gentle, peaceful murmur of the
sangha rings out to me.
A joyful greeting on the terrace.
We take a break together in the sun.
Breathe in.
Breathe out.
And smile.*

IS PEACE POSSIBLE?

*In response to the question posed by
Thay Phap An,
Two personal answers arise:*

Aimlessly

*Being without intention.
Brings me
from step to step
day by day
more into silence.*

It breathes me

*It breathes me,
while I sit.
In the green of the meadows, I find
freshness.*

*It breathes me,
while I lie.
In the vastness of the sky, I find space.*

*It breathes me,
while I walk.
In the mountains under my feet, I find
stability.*

*It breathes me,
while I stand.
In the water of the glacier stream, I find
clarity.*

*It breathes me.
In the name of the Sangha, I find joy
and happiness.*



FOUND

*Found in space.
A body.
With spirit.*

*Loved.
Appreciated.
Surprised.*

*A gentle appearance.
Moving gently.
With a delicate sound.*

*Compassionate smile.
Clear words.
Mindful accompaniment.*

*Transformed, in order to remain.
To be who you are.
To be in us.
I smile at you.
I smile for you.
Inhaling your gentle being.*

*Dear brother Troi Hai Thung.
Thank you for our encounters.
May you dwell in peace and love.*



COMING AND GOING

*The departure of the sisters and
brothers brings everyone together
again:
laughing, waiting, swirling.
Departure, hugs and waves.
Possibilities and contacts are
exchanged.
Deeply rooted seeds are touched.*

*Slowly it becomes quiet in the house.
The last bags are packed.
Decorations too.
Hugs.
Goodbye.*

*Peace and sunshine fill the house.
We leave.
With the sound of the gathas.
The sound of the cowbells remains.
In this moment.*



WITHOUT INTENTION.

*KI arrived.
Arriving.
Arrived.
Being at home.
I allow myself to be.*

BEING.

*I thank the sangha from Hall from the bottom
of my heart*

*In gratitude for the peaceful togetherness
and the shared practice*

Beatrix Schulte

Impressions from Weyarn

“Awakening to our Buddha nature”

In June 2024, Thay Phap An and Sister Song Nghiem once again held a retreat in Weyarn near Munich. I would like to share some personal impressions here.

Morning chant

After the introduction on the first evening, tired from the journey, I was just about to go to bed. Just at the moment when Sister Song Nghiem called my name. She wanted someone to sing the morning chant in German in the morning. She had already found four people from the GAL who could sing the song by heart, because there was neither a text nor printed notes, and certainly not the sheet for the bellmaster, which shows exactly when the bell should be rung. ‘Yes, yes – I’ll do it!’ I said sleepily and went to bed.

The next morning as I entered the meditation hall, I saw five mats arranged in a semicircle. The bell inviter, as well as a microphone, was lying on one of the mats, and I sat down there. I had assumed that we would only be singing and that someone else would lead the rest of the meditation, but when at 6 o’clock all the nuns and Thay Phap An were still sitting there in silence, I quietly asked Thay Phap An, who was sitting next to me: ‘Shall we begin?’ – ‘Yes!’

Fortunately, morning chanting had been part of my partner’s and my daily practice for some time, and we also accompany it with a (small) bell. In the beginning, I always had a sheet music printout for the bellmaster with me, but my partner thought it was better to sing it by heart. So, I was able to enjoy it now as the five of us started to sing. The final antiphony of ‘Namo Shakyamunaye Buddha’ in particular filled the entire meditation hall of the Domicilium in Weyarn with power.

Sr. Song Nghiem later advised us to sing and learn the practice songs by heart.



Letting go of exhaustion

Thay Phap An likes to start his lecture with a longer guided meditation that leads into the topic of the lecture. I was sitting there, still tired from the short night and from the relaxation that always makes itself felt during the first three days of a retreat. I was finding it increasingly difficult to follow the meditation and was on the verge of falling asleep – when suddenly I was wide awake! My slumped upper body straightened up as if by itself, and I sat there, awake and relaxed.

Later in the room, my partner told me that she had experienced something similar, but she had realised that the words were ‘Let go of your exhaustion!’. She had then consciously tried to let go of her exhaustion, and it worked! In my case, the words had apparently had also an effect on a subconscious level! I decided to share it later in the discussion group, and in fact a third participant had experienced the very same thing.

Dharma body

In the afternoon, I helped to arrange the mats for the discussion group. One participant

had noticed that 21 people had signed up for our group with Thay Phap An, someone put a beautiful bouquet of flowers in the middle and the chair for Thay Phap An was lovingly prepared with a bell on a pedestal.

Thay Phap An had not yet arrived, but everyone was already sitting in their places. We did not wait, but just sat there – breathing in silence. Normally, we take every opportunity to talk, as at such retreats you often meet people you have not seen for a long time, or get to know new ones. Only when the teacher enters do the conversations stop. But now everyone was silent! As if the Dharma body of Thay Phap An was already present and only his physical body was missing.

Arno Elfert

Breath of True Awakening, practices with the sangha in Augsburg and Munich as well as the online sangha of the GAL



(Photo: Monika Simonetti)

Poems from the Path

775, China

*“The Buddha left behind a clear teaching.
Practice it.
And you will free yourself of confusion.
What more do I have to say?”*

These were the last words of Chan-Master Nanyang Huizhong (南陽慧忠, ca.675–775, China), also known as ‘Master of the Nation Zhong’ (忠国师, Zhong Guoshi), a disciple of the 6th Chan-Ancestor Huineng (惠能, ca. 638–713,China), after 85 years of learning, living and teaching the Chan.

Remembering Ryōkan (良寛, 1758–1831, Japan)

*Innumerable buttercups, violets
soft eyes
accompany my path -
what joy
fragrantly pure
to offer them to the Buddha*

WAR AND PEACE

War and the warring parties, Escape and refugees, Peace and the peacemakers

–What we can contribute to peace with our mindfulness practice –

We – the fortunate, the blessed – enjoy the peace that reigns in our neighbourhood. But with war raging around the world as well as in Europe, it is time to ask ourselves how our mindfulness practice can contribute to peace.

Thay was a great peace activist. In his Dharma Talks, he shared how it felt to experience war for decades in his home country, long before what we know as the ‘Vietnam War’ broke out. He asked himself and the Buddhist teachings what he, as a person and Buddhist monk, could contribute to peace in his country. This is how he arrived at the beautiful Gatha: Peace in me – peace in the world. Or as today’s teachers in our tradition sometimes put it: ‘In times of war, we do not call for peace. We do not ask for peace. We are peace. We generate the energy of peace and we give this energy to the world.

Peace and peacemakers

In German we have the word *Friedfertigkeit* (willingness to work for peace). There are

people who have the ability to generate peace within themselves and in the world in which they live. Like all aspects of mindfulness, this skill can also be practised, or learned. In silent (sitting) meditation, I can recognise my feelings. Perhaps there are feelings of anger and rage. Breathing gently, I can feel deep inside myself where these feelings come from. I don’t act them out, but lovingly embrace them and then let them go. In Sangha life, I have the opportunity to interact peacefully with other people who are also practising mindfulness. In this way, we can learn to live peacefully with each other. This is possible in partnerships, in shared flats, in families and at work. There is friction everywhere for us to practise with. And our practice of peace can spread outwards in rings, for example when our Sangha actively participates in city life, offering walking meditations or taking part in demonstrations for peaceful coexistence. This year and next, we look forward to democratic elections where we can elect representatives who believe in peace. As a growing community following in the footsteps of Thay, who was a world-

famous peace activist, our voice carries weight in the world today and can contribute to peace.

War and warring parties

Nevertheless, there is war. War that is spreading and may continue to spread, in Ukraine, the Middle East, Sudan and many other places in the world. Why? In Europe, we thought we had left war behind us once and for all. Peace is so beautiful. Why should we fight? It’s probably because someone is always unhappy. This state of mind is often based on one of the three mental poisons: wanting to have (=greed, attachment), not wanting to have (=aversion, hatred), not seeing clearly (=ignorance, delusion). If you recognise these mental formations in yourself and deal with them carefully (see above), you may be able to let them go. However, if you cultivate these mental formations in your environment and reinforce them in others, you may act them out at some point. This is how war comes about. And once war has started, it can’t be stopped so easily.



The song *Where have all the Flowers Gone* also asks: 'Where have all the young men gone? – They're all in uniform.' Young men have to fight this war. Those who grew up in hatred and blindness do it with passion. For example, the generation of young men in Germany in 1914, our grandfathers or great-grandfathers. Others see clearly and don't want to fight, don't want to die for the ambitions and convictions of others. They try to flee. Many others also go on the run. They know that they are helpless and they do not want to die: old people, women, children.

Compassion for refugees

Refugees are losing their homes, and that is very bitter. Perhaps their homes have already been destroyed along with all their belongings. They are trying to get to safety. They are looking for protection and help, as we can see every evening on the news. They

need water, they need food to eat. In 1944, my mother's house remained standing under the hail of Allied bombs, but her mother died in the city, aged just 32. Aged five, my mother was with her, and, trapped in a bombed-out house, badly injured, survived.

Where were the two surviving children, the five-year-old girl and the two-year-old boy, whose father was fighting in the war, supposed to go? At first, they were able to stay with their grandmother. But then they lost that home too, because after the war, aged eight and five respectively, they were sent to the West to live with their father and his new wife, two strangers. Without a sense of belonging, they asked: Where do I belong? Am I allowed to belong? I also feel this in many situations in my life, as though it's in my DNA. Without a real home, having moved too often, not rooted anywhere, the question 'Can I belong too?' arises again and

again. (And few things are more painful than the feeling of not belonging. Knowing this helps us to be sensitive to others in the same situation). I can heal my homelessness by taking the first step: I have arrived. I am at home. Just like Thay.

Mindfulness practice helps me to recognise what is going on inside me and to look deeply. Then I can feel what I feel (= compassion for myself). Then I can feel what others are feeling (= compassion for others). Then I can understand why they feel that way and why they act that way (= understanding is love). Then, hopefully, we can live in peace with each other for a long time to come and move forward beautifully into the future.

Anne von der Lüh

True Inclusiveness of the Ocean,
Member of the Intersein Orden

Let me introduce you **the object of my craving: a chocolate**

“Many of us mistakenly believe that our happiness is made of objects of craving. And we run after these objects. Only when we have insight, we stop running after the objects of craving”.

No Craving, Nirvana & Letting Go/ Thich Nhat Hanh (short teaching video)/YouTube

Once I loved chocolate. Especially when I was tired, frustrated, angry, excited or lost, my mind would crave chocolate. The music of promised happiness began to play loudly in my ears as I approached the supermarket “Albert Heijn” at the station. And almost always I followed the urge to buy chocolate.

I remember buying a vegan chocolate bar almost every day. This would mostly happen when I walked to the train station on my way to work or from work to my home. Buying

chocolate was a ‘happy moment’ for me, which later on became a habit.

Nothing was better than living life while eating chocolate. It was as if I was taking a bubble bath in the middle of the forest while the birds were singing my favorite melody. At that exact moment, my body was having a conversation with a piece of chocolate. All of my problems, difficulties, frustration and tiredness disappeared for a moment. I believe that in this moment I was truly present, hoping that this moment would never end.

But in just a few moments the chocolate was swallowed but the feeling of guilt and

disappointment remained. Why was I doing this to myself? Why was I eating 100g of a melted combination which contained fat, sugar and cocoa? This is 3kg of chocolate a month, 36kg a year and 360kg in ten years! This was definitely not an act of self-love, but self-distraction. I am surprised that I have only gained 15 kilos in the last ten years.

I was addicted to chocolate. I remember eating chocolate, or other kinds of sweets, throughout my life. Especially in the moments when I felt unwell, pain or boredom. My addiction to chocolate started from a young age. The interesting thing is that sometimes I could eat more than 100 grams of sweets a day.



My mother used to buy sweets every now and then, usually in big packs. Once I knew that my mother had bought 1 kg of sweets, I would eat all of them in one or two days. Eventually my mother found out about my addiction and she tried to hide them. This was a wonderful challenge for me to 'trying to find the sweets'. I always found them.

This habit or craving for chocolate has been carried over into my adult life, and also passed on to my daughter. She has struggled a lot with sugary products. Because of this she has even decided to study nutrition and dietetics.

Interestingly, I often tried to stop eating chocolate. But after a few days the habit came back. I was never able to just eat a 'small piece' of chocolate. If I had the chance to eat chocolate, I would eat a whole bar down to the last bit.

To be honest, I felt no danger. Eating chocolate every day sounded very innocent to me.

Until recently, when I finally dared to look deeply into my habit. Then I discovered that

'I am addicted to chocolate'. The truth has finally been spoken. I also admitted that I had gained weight over the last years, more than 10 kilos. One realization that struck me is that because of this I am not a free person.

I decided to do something about it seriously. I decided to stop running after chocolate and sweets.

Recently I read a wonderful article "The path of meditation" written by Thay Phap An in the EIAB magazine of 2019. At the end of the article, he talked about how he helped a young man to stop smoking. It was very inspiring to me and I decided to use the same approach that Thay Phap An suggested to the young man: using the seven factors of enlightenment.

This is the approach:

- If I want to stop eating chocolate, I will take a chocolate and I will know that I am taking a chocolate and that I want to eat it. That is mindfulness.
- Then I will look at the chocolate and I will see what the result of eating chocolate

will be. I have researched the relationship between health and sugar. Eating too much sugar can lead to weight gain, tooth decay, higher blood pressure, inflammation, diabetes and fatty liver disease. I found a link between a high-sugar diet and a higher risk of dying from heart disease. The effects of added sugar are linked to an increased risk of heart attack and stroke.

- I will make the right effort: I will do my best not to eat chocolate.
- I need to realize that if I buy and eat chocolate, it will affect my daughter. She will have an example of what to do when you don't feel well. I should think about it before buying and/or eating chocolate.
- I should concentrate on my willpower and not eat chocolate.

Now it is time to practice. I vow that I will stop eating chocolate. I will be free from the craving for chocolate.

Olga Elisseeva
(English correction Angelika Elisseeva)



Living a **sustainable, fulfilled life** – mindfulness in universities and schools

Every breath connects us with our environment: we are in constant exchange with the plant world, which converts the carbon dioxide we exhale into oxygen. If we have a deep understanding of the basis for life, then caring for the world and acting sustainably is nothing other than caring for ourselves.

The project “Mindfulness in Education and University Culture” has been running at the University of Leipzig since 2021. It offers mindfulness formats for (teacher training) students, teachers and administrators at universities and teachers at schools. The aim is to take responsibility for one’s own

resources as well as the resources of one’s fellow human beings and the environment. The purely secular programmes seek to convey the real depth of mindfulness. All formats of ABiK, as the project is abbreviated, are characterised from the outset by an understanding of interdependence. In the first phase, we look at our own behaviour patterns, while in the second phase we examine the social narratives that shape them. In the third phase, we then translate these insights into sustainable, ethical action.

To ensure that this is not seen as an additional burden, but as a natural basis for our existence, we need to connect with

ourselves as a living, vital organism that exists in a permanent state of interaction with everything around us. If I see myself as part of my environment, I will integrate this systemic perspective into my everyday actions and act in a more value-oriented way.

We have a choice to make, mindfulness reminds us of this by sharpening our conscious awareness and giving us the ability to see clearly. And here another important component comes into play, the regulation of emotions. We need the ability to face crises and recognise the suffering and pain that they cause. In particular, the climate crisis, and the existential threat it poses, can often





only be addressed through the psychological strategy of cognitive problem-solving: denying or repressing the problem in order to avoid having to face the fear, grief and horror it entails. However, this avoidance also prevents an adequate response, namely its systematic inclusion in our everyday actions. If mindfulness-based emotion regulation gives us the capacity to recognise and hold difficult feelings, then we can also incorporate them in our everyday decisions about what to buy, how to work and how to live, as well as into our conversations and political activities.

It was a great pleasure for me that we were able to prove these effects.

The initial research results of a three-semester control group study speak for the effectiveness of the programme. Not only was mindfulness significantly increased and stress significantly reduced, but there was also a significant change in pro-ecological behaviour. This can also be read in the preprint: <https://osf.io/preprints/osf/f4ahq>.

Whether this is also confirmed for other target groups is being investigated in a further study led by Elisabeth Blanke. In cooperation with the State Office for Schools and Education, the Mindful Teachers Programme is being implemented and evaluated in 30 schools in Saxony. If you would like to get an impression of the project, there is a short documentary film <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODgyN34AzyE> that expresses the connection between science, mindfulness and action in the world.

Personal life design is always world design. This is also expressed by the many statements from students, one of whom I would like to quote. "It was a great realization that world-weariness and personal happiness and contentment do not have to be mutually exclusive. I am allowed to cry for the world and still I don't have to carry it all on my shoulders, I have the right to feel happy and to strive for it. (...). It was also extremely motivating to be confronted with my own values and to philosophize about how I want to live my life and what I want to fight for."

A university lecturer writes: "It was wonderful. I have changed and grown as a result of the course. I am taking courage and joy with me to try out many exercises and to tell family, friends, colleagues and students about my experiences with mindfulness training."

Through these many multipliers a more mindful educational culture can grow in schools and universities. I am delighted to be able to sow these seeds in the education system with my fantastic team of trainers and thus pass on what I have received in our practice community.

Susanne Krämer

is the project manager of "Mindfulness in Education and University Culture" (ABiK) at the Centre for Teacher Training and School Research at the University of Leipzig. She is the coordinator of the research network "Mindfulness in Education" and the author of *Wache Schule. Mit Achtsamkeit zu Ruhe und Präsenz* (2019) Junfermann. She founded the sangha in Leipzig in 2006 and is a member of the Order of Interbeing.

Morning Meditation Live: A weekend at the EIAB

The EIAB's online morning meditation was launched by Thay Phap Xa two years ago, on the occasion of the invasion of Ukraine. Since then, around 180–250 people have been meditating together every morning from 7:00–7:30 a.m., reading a text by Thay, singing and enjoying the company of the online sangha.

The morning meditation live weekend took place from 2–4 February 2024, led by Brother Phap Xa and Regine Pfeifer, one of the facilitators. Although it was only a short retreat from Friday to Sunday, participants came from all over – from southern Bavaria, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin and even the Netherlands.

The course officially began with a communal dinner at 6 p.m. and the excitement grew; after all, some of the faces looked very familiar from the Zoom tiles. But it wasn't easy to be sure, as three parallel courses were taking place that weekend. Finally, it was 7:30 p.m. and the "guesswork" could be resolved; Brother Phap Xa and Regine opened the introduction to the weekend and the opening sharing to get to know each other. To conclude, there was a meditation in silence, which then turned into noble silence. Even on this first evening, it was clear how much connection already existed between us, even though we only knew each other from the Zoom world. The sharings emphasising the importance of the morning meditation were

touching – because there is no live sangha nearby, or because people are not mobile due to illness, or simply because it is a good way to find a good direction for the day together with others in the early morning.

The second day: Those who wanted to get going in the morning could take part in Qigong with Sr. Song Nghiem at 6 a.m. Afterwards, at the usual time of 7 a.m., we went to morning meditation. What was special about this weekend was that the presence group came together with the online group – how wonderful that the hybrid format is possible. During the online morning meditation, the participants' microphones are always switched off, so the



participants can only listen to the chanting of the monastic community from Plum Village and the EIAB and their own voice. This weekend was different: the presence group, which was also enriched by other course participants from the EIAB, was able to chant Namó ‘Valokiteshvaraya together and thus bring the energy into the “virtual Zoom world” in a different way. The invocation of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, as a large group once again emphasised the strong sense of community that created a deep and moving energy, which we were able to take with us to breakfast. At 9 a.m., we continued with a silent meditation and a talk by Regine, who gave us some ideas on how to implement mindfulness practice in everyday life.

After lunch, all the participants in the course were looking forward to the deep relaxation. We met in the course room and prepared the mats. It was 2:00 p.m., 2:10 p.m. and everyone was still waiting anxiously for the deep relaxation to begin. No one appeared to guide us. Surprisingly, we all managed to enter a state of deep relaxation – each in our own way. I had to think briefly of Thay’s saying “Letting go is a source of happiness”, because I had been looking forward to the guided deep relaxation so much and at that moment, I knew that I could let go of the idea of being guided. For some of the other participants, letting go probably even led to a short deep sleep – you could hear snoring from various corners.

After the work meditation, we met in the late afternoon for a sharing session. We shared experiences about our own practice, about what moves us, and we had the opportunity to simply hold the space and practice deep listening in full presence. Between contributions, the bell invited us again and again to return to ourselves in order to bring body and mind back into harmony. A highlight of the weekend was the singing. As already happens at the online morning meditation, Regine accompanied us with her guitar and sang different songs from Plum Village for us. In the spirit of Thay, we sang in several languages in Swabian, Dutch, German and English. Brother Phap Xa sang “Breathing In Breathing Out” in Dutch (Inademen Uitademen) together with his Dutch friends. The joy that had arisen during the singing could then sink into us during the silent evening meditation and take us into the night’s rest.

On the last day, we had the great good fortune to take part in a ceremony with the brothers and sisters. We gathered around the pond in front of the dining hall to usher in Tet (Vietnamese New Year). The New Year flag was raised while the brothers and sisters of the EIAB chanted “Namó Avalokiteshvaraya” together with all the course participants. It was a very moving and powerful event to send peace and compassion to all beings and Mother Earth into the world with so many people. An energy field of deep gratitude and peace spread out. In addition to the many experiences that were shared, both sorrowful

and joyful, there was a lot of laughter, which made this weekend so unique.

In the final round, wishes were expressed about how the online morning meditation sangha could continue to grow. For example, the idea of a follow-up or a longer retreat was brought up. And we are curious to see what will develop from this journey together. For me personally, it was the first time at the EIAB and I felt very comfortable, safe and accepted right away. The mindful energy in the building, in the long corridors with Thay’s calligraphy and also outside in the park impressed me very much. I was particularly touched by the fact that I was able to come into contact with my Asian roots (Indonesia) as I watched the Vietnamese brothers and sisters preparing for Tet (the Vietnamese New Year festival). The sense of connection, the community, the shared laughter during work and the music in the background coming from the Bluetooth speaker awakened in me a sense of being part of this energy. In such moments, I feel at home, as if I am in my second home. How wonderful for me to have been able to experience this.

At this point, I would like to thank everyone who made this weekend possible – both online and in person. It was a thoroughly enjoyable weekend, where encounters took place at the heart level. As we said goodbye, a nun I met two years ago in Plum Village said, “Happy Continuation until we meet again,” and with these words I hope that we will remain “online connected” until we meet again.

Sanja Schulz
Sangha Source of
Compassion Berlin

The morning meditation will continue to take place every day from 7:00 to 7:30, including weekends. The Zoom link is on the EIAB homepage.



Growing Together for a Sustainable World

In 2021, I wrote about sustainability, which stands on shaky ground without mindfulness. Today, I want to tell you more about how we grew from an idea into a group.

A community is born

My sustainable story begins with an informal group that began meeting in 2019 in my hometown of Roßdorf (near Darmstadt), began to meet more and more often and organised its first events for “Plastic Adieu” – less plastic in everyday life, “Blühendes Roßdorf” (Blooming Roßdorf) and CleanUp Roßdorf – collecting rubbish in the town.

I would like to tell the story of what happened next, because a lot has happened in recent years.

After a good start, Corona set us back a lot and pushed the issue of sustainability into the background. Nevertheless, we wanted to see each other and connect, and organised regular online meetings. 15–18 people discussed how we could find an empty shop in our community as a place to make sustainable living and neighbourhood visible.

During the coronavirus period, we developed a vision of how and what we could “offer”:

who carried what topics close to their hearts, who would get involved responsibly and offer something binding. All of this became clear quite quickly.

A place, a space – from the ground up, together

Then we started looking for an empty space. Who would rent us an empty shop? To our surprise, we found the ideal small shop and the landlords agreed to rent it to us.

Now it was time for the group to get down to the nitty-gritty, because it was about





that we would raise it. 25 willing to pool their resources and stand behind the project came forward, each willing to contribute according to their means. I still remember how deeply moved I was by those moments. But before we could rent the space, we had to overcome another hurdle: we had to form an association in order to get the small shop, but, with a great sense of community, we managed that too.

Yes, we have had the space for two years now and it is still there. “Ida” – ideas that inspire – that’s what we called it. Ida became our base, our free space, our vision space, our community space, our ideas workshop...

Since then, even more amazing, joyful and magical things have happened...

money! How do we finance this space? I had heard about community-based economics. The principle: a group of people who want to bring something specific into the world invest some money to finance the idea for one year. This meant: disclosing the rent, utilities and room renovation for 1 year and motivating the group to pre-finance the costs for 1 year with a self-selected monthly contribution. We invited people to a meeting. That evening, many who were interested came along and were told about the costs,

were able to ask questions and, after a period of reflection, were asked to name an amount that was okay for 1 year.

I was sweating blood at the time, because it was here that we decided whether our idea would remain just an idea or whether we would be able to help our community flourish.

We needed 10,000 euros – and it was a magical feeling when after two weeks it became clear

**Ideas become reality:
like-minded people create
a sense of togetherness....**

At the beginning of 2023, we entered the “Ab in die Mitte” competition with the idea of manifesting the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals in our town. These goals represent the path to a more just, sustainable and resource-efficient world. Kathrin, a friend who was writing her thesis on the future of education and sustainability goals,





asked us, as an association, whether we could bring all 17 UN goals to life in Roßdorf.

So, we wrote an application with a film and lo and behold... we were selected as a prize winner and received prize money to implement our idea... what a joy!

However, the work was only just beginning. We sat down as an organising team and invited all sustainability-oriented groups, individuals and associations to a workshop to discuss how they could become involved with achieving the 17 goals. There were 30 participants and they had a wonderful sense of how their work was related to educating for the future.

The power of the various groups (SoLaWi, Europarad, Obstretter, CleanUp, Energieverein, Tanzverein, Foodsharing, Asylkreis, Kinder- und Jugendförderung, Weltladen, BHZ and many more...) developed into a creative community process culminating in a 2-week summer programme with over 50 events, in which large parts of the community participated and benefited.

Afterwards, we were totally exhausted, but still full of joy, and amazed at how one thing had developed into another and how everyone had been able to take something away with them.

The 17 goals and the desire for a future worth living is a large abstract goal and often has little to do with our everyday lives. How can the world really change by setting 17 goals? Even in academic circles, there is a growing

realisation that external targets are only one side of the coin.

How do Thay's ideas relate to practice?

In my view, the deep desire to change something arises when we are present, something moves us, and we feel ourselves to be an integral part of the world. A deep motivation to get involved arises from the "knowledge" of suffering in myself and others, the feeling of connection with all beings and gratitude for everything that is.

After the 17 sustainable goals, I discovered the 5 inner goals (inner developmental goals) and a lot of it reminds me of Thay. It is what he has been teaching for decades.

It's about being in the world with an open mind, looking inward and observing the process. We talk about complexity awareness. It's about realising that nothing is linear, but that everything is interwoven and complex. The categories provide perspectives through which we can view our actions in order to develop further. It's about listening more closely to our inner voice and letting it guide us.

Here are the five "inner development goals":

Being – Relationship to Self:

Inner Compass, Integrity and Authenticity, Openness and Learning mindset, Self-awareness, Presence

Thinking – Cognitive Skills:

Critical Thinking, Complexity awareness, Perspective skills, Sense-making, Long-term orientation and Visioning

Relating – Caring for Others and the World:

Appreciation, Connectedness, Humility, Empathy and Compassion

Collaborating – Social Skills:

Communication skills, Co-creation skills, Inclusive mindset and intercultural competence, Trust, Mobilization skills

Acting – Driving Change:

Courage, Creativity, Optimism, Perseverance

These goals are tangible in our sangha and in Thay's tradition, where they are even more deeply lived. I am so happy to have found this source of mindfulness and community and would like to develop myself and my environment even more in the direction of inner sustainability, connectedness and gratitude in the future.

I also drew a lot of strength from Thay's book "Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet". It immediately brings me back to myself and calms me when I suffer from what's going on in the world and don't know what to do.

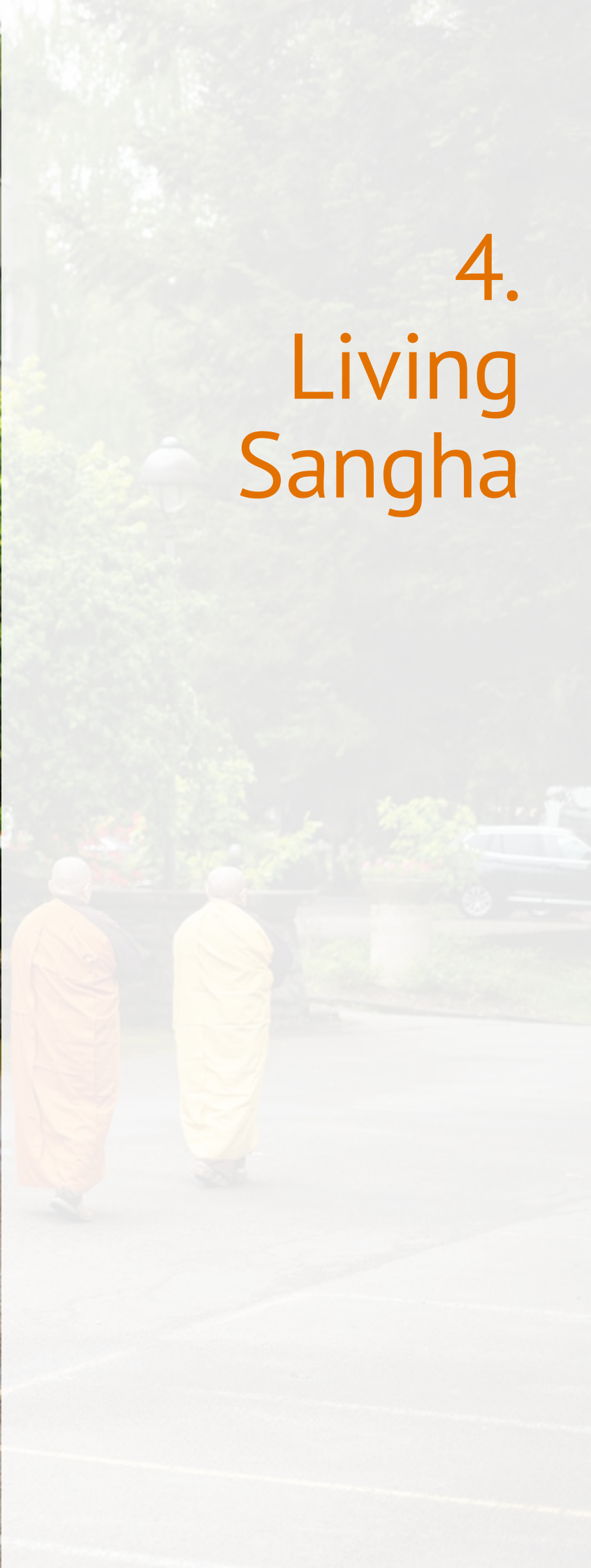
Thank you for that!!!

Ute Storch





4. Living Sangha



Sangha as a living organism

A look back at the Sangha Ruhrgebiet retreat

It was the last evening of the monastic tour 2023, in Essen at the Sangha Ruhrgebiet. Brother Thấy Pháp Xả said goodbye to us with warmth and ease as he left for the EIAB. And as is sometimes the case, the best ideas in life arise when we ourselves have blossomed and opened. This was also the case that evening. As we got talking to Thấy Pháp Xả shortly before his departure the idea to organise a retreat together next year grew.

Before the seed for our Sangha Ruhrgebiet retreat could sprout and blossom, we first needed good conditions to nurture it.

With the support of Brother Thấy Pháp Xả and Brother Thấy Tròi Khiết Tâm, we found a date in March 2024. Thanks to the help of the monastic sangha, we were allowed to use the premises of the EIAB. So now we had a place and a time for our sangha flower. But how do we create a plan for our retreat? What direction should our retreat take?

The next few months was a special time for our practice, which takes place in two different cities. It was a time to practise loving speech and deep listening. A time for each of us to listen to ourselves and each other as a community. Over one month, the Sangha

had the opportunity to come together five times to practise. Through this regularity, our sharings with each other began to flow.

Once we had agreed that the focus of the retreat would be sangha-building, we began to think about planning the retreat. With joy and excitement, we decided that Sangha members would offer many of the practice elements. In autumn 2023 we started to collect suggestions. There were Sangha meetings where we sat together and our creativity bubbled over. There was a great willingness in our hearts to get involved and contribute: preparations, organisation, updating our song texts, getting to know each other, morning meditation, deep relaxation, sound journeys, physical exercises, singing and music together, hiking, tea meditation, refreshing exercises/play, touching the earth, practising beginning anew, peace treaty...

But we also realised the challenge this presented:

We had collected so many ideas and had to keep reminding ourselves that we only had a limited time frame from Thursday to Sunday. If we had been given free rein, the retreat would have lasted several weeks.

It was up to us to find out what was most important for our first local Sangha retreat. Continually refocusing without losing sight of the bigger picture. Once we found a coherent selection, we were able to send Brother Thấy Pháp Xả and Brother Thấy Tròi Khiết Tâm a colourful bouquet of ideas.

At this point, we were so full of joy that we felt the desire to invite people from other sanghas and those interested who had not yet found a community to our retreat in March. We realised that this gathering should not be limited to our groups alone, but should be open to anyone who felt a connection to the Ruhrgebiet and the practice of mindfulness.

When March 2024 arrived, more than 30 participants had registered! In addition to members of the Dortmund and Essen sangha, members of the Wuppertal sangha also accepted our invitation. In the days that followed, we had many opportunities to get to know our neighbours from different parts of the Ruhrgebiet and to practise together.

Brother Thấy Pháp Xả and Brother Thấy Tròi Khiết Tâm had given us a generous amount of freedom to decide how to organize our retreat with the support of the brothers and

sisters of the EIAB. Thanks to the imaginative and committed Sangha brothers and sisters, a variety of practical elements unfolded. They had organised various activities together in advance in order to lead morning meditation, deep relaxation, physical exercises, group exercises or singing. The groups were well prepared and together created a powerful practice for Sangha Building. In this stable and relaxed atmosphere, we were able to get to know each other and had new opportunities and time to socialise with Sangha brothers and sisters. Thầy Pháp Xả and Brother Thầy Trời Khiết Tâm and Brother Trời Dao Quang supported us with their presence, Dharma talks, sharings, a musical evening, tea meditation and gave us support when we needed it. One evening, we created a family atmosphere and invited Thầy Trời Khiết Tâm's parents, who were visiting at the time, to play music and sing together.

*'There is a place for you
in the circle,
the circle can expand.
Come and join the circle,
all people hand in hand...'*

Some of you may recognise this first verse from the 'Circle Song'. We experienced the depth of these lines together in everything we did.

The Sangha can be a boat that carries us. Sometimes we sit in this boat and are carried. Other times we are the boat for someone else. The Sangha Building experience made us realise that we have both qualities within us:

*Being a passenger
and a boat.
Being carried
and giving support.*

We would like to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to everyone who was part of this enriching experience.

With this post we would like to invite you to look into the living organism of your sangha and nourish the idea of a sangha retreat. It is a gift that you can give yourselves in order to get to know each other and practise more deeply.

Finally, a joyful announcement and invitation: The Sangha Ruhrgebiet Retreat will take place for the second time in 2025. The exact date will follow.

Annika Seebach

Source of Complete Being

Sangha Ruhrgebiet

www.intersein-sangha-ruhrgebiet.de



Returning to our roots

Where is our true home? Is it a particular place with particular people within a particular culture?

What if we had to leave our 'home'? Or if we grew up in a culture that is very different from that of our parents?

Main Hương, Hồng Anh and Janny, three international core members of the Wake Up Sangha, explored these questions during a retreat for the young Asian diaspora in Plum Village, France in June 2023.

How is this retreat different from the others you have attended?

The recent retreat at Plum Village, 'Finding Our True Home', was the first retreat specifically for the young Vietnamese and Asian diaspora. We have never seen so many young Asian friends during a retreat at Plum Village. Although we very much appreciate meeting friends from all over the world at Plum Village, we also longed to connect with friends with whom we share a common background and experiences. In other retreats, it often felt like we had to search for

these safe spaces and people. This reflects an experience many of us had growing up: as marginalised minorities, there might have been only 1-2 friends at school or work who shared a similar background.

Attending the retreat was incredibly encouraging as we were surrounded by those who had a similar upbringing and shared the challenges of being alienated from our Vietnamese culture and our parents' experiences. There was such a deep understanding without the need to exchange many words. In her Dharma talk, Sister Lăng Nghiêm spoke about the four elements of true love, reminding us that Thầy taught us that love is understanding. "True love is limitless, as is understanding, and vice versa." We felt that during this retreat, we all touched a deep love that is difficult to

put into words: unconditional love from the monastic sisters, love for our parents and our ancestors, love for our roots that we had long considered buried, love for our cultural practices and love for ourselves.

During this one week, which provided us with a safe space, everyone practised with their whole hearts. Every activity, no matter how small, became meaningful and sacred: at a meeting before our working meditation, Sister Lộc Uyên ("Sister Deer Park") invited us to sing 'Happiness is here and now' and to dedicate this song to our parents. She reminded us that our parents may not have had the opportunity to 'let go of their worries' and that we can share our peace and freedom with them while singing this song. Many friends were moved to tears. We had never seen that before.



The collective energy and quality of practice also felt very special. Sister Lộc Uyển shared with us that our Asian ancestors have passed down the seeds of Buddhist practice to us over the centuries. Even if we have not practised for many generations, it only takes a drop of water for the seeds to sprout like mushrooms. The strong presence of the beginner's mind and the watered seeds within us, as well as a deep gratitude for the special space for our community, created a very unique atmosphere.

Sometimes we only realise that we are missing something when we have it right in front of us. This feeling of (finally) coming home and being able to connect with others was very unique. It reminded us that we are not alone on our path of healing and transformation and that we can find comfort and strength in the company of others who understand and share our experiences.

How did the retreat experience affect your understanding of your Vietnamese heritage and your sense of home and belonging?

Many of us grew up as children or descendants of Vietnamese refugees who were displaced by war and colonialism. Our families did the best they could, given the



difficult circumstances that the deep loss of their homeland entailed. At the same time, they had to try to find their way in a new society and culture. Our understanding and knowledge of our Vietnamese heritage was limited to the information our families provided and often took a back seat to the majority society in which we grew up. Separated from their homeland, our families taught us the language and culture as best

they could, while also taking care of our needs.

As we grew up in a Western society, we were often torn between the desire to conform to Western ideals and the ideals of our families, which often led us to reject our origins in order to belong. As adults, many of us feel this loss of culture, language and origin and, in order to heal, a deep desire to reconnect





with the part of ourselves that we have long rejected. During this week, we were able to allow ourselves to grieve and reconcile with our inner wounds through positive, nurturing experiences.

By coming together and sharing these experiences in this space of mutual understanding, we were able not only to heal, but also to develop a sense of community, even though we live in different countries and cities. We were able to cultivate a deeper sense of compassion for ourselves, our parents and our friends. This enables us to give space to ourselves, our pain and our joy, to heal the past, to celebrate our culture and to create a sense of home and belonging together and within ourselves.

As we ate lunch under the oak tree, Sister Định Nghiêm shared with us that Thầy gave his first Dharma talks right here. People of our parents' generation who came to Plum Village in the 1980s, just a few years after the end of the war, sat around him and listened to him. At that time, Vietnamese refugees



and people like Thầy who were living in exile came to Plum Village because it was a place of community where they could seek refuge not only spiritually but also culturally.

In this loving and nurturing environment, our parents were able to heal their open wounds and allow their children, us, to preserve our roots. Here, the children could learn how to sing and speak Vietnamese, Vietnamese food was cooked and the community could come together to experience a sense of belonging in this place that was a home away from home. They helped Thầy and the monks and nuns to build Plum Village as we know it today.

Now, 40 years later, we are sitting under the same oak tree. Thầy is still present all around us – when a breeze rustles the leaves and sends a warm welcome, or when we walk carefully through the forest in Lower Hamlet. We are so happy to continue this wonderful legacy of Thầy and our parents.

Seeing that Plum Village can also be a place where we, just like our parents, can continue to celebrate our culture and heal the wounds of our ancestors, was so meaningful.

Which aspect of this retreat was particularly transformative?

The strong presence of the Vietnamese language in all activities was very touching. For many of us, it was the first time we had heard the orientation of a Plum Village retreat in Vietnamese. When Sister Biện Nghiêm and Sister Thủy Nghiêm greeted us in their mother tongue, we immediately felt at home. Hearing some of the teachings in Vietnamese also added an extra level to the practice. The chanting in Vietnamese was particularly powerful and unforgettable.

It allowed us to experience Vietnamese culture on a deeper level. Many of us, who belong to the post-war generation, only came into contact with Vietnamese at home. Often,

this language conveyed a lot of suffering and violence to us. But here in Plum Village, we experience how this language is used with so much peace and love. It is so hard to put into words the sense of generosity, love and care that the sisters showed us. In Vietnamese, we say ‘thương’, which describes a very deep, unconditional love – and that is what we felt throughout the week.

What are your hopes and wishes for the future?

Our hope is that this retreat can continue and remain a place where the Vietnamese diaspora can return to and feel at home.

Dr. Main Hương Nguyễn

Due to the positive response, the retreat was held for a second time in May 2024 at the Lower Hamlet in Plum Village. From 24–27 October 2024, the EIAB will host the course ‘Coming Home to Our Roots’ for young Vietnamese people who were born and raised in the West.



Practising in the rush hour of life

Difficult and supportive experiences

The phase of life between 18 and 35 is characterised by many challenges. We have to make many ground-breaking decisions for our lives: What should my educational path look like? Is the first job offer good for my career? Where and how do I want to live? Do I want to start a family and have children? These are just a few of the questions that occupy us. Many also refer to this stressful phase of life as the rush hour of life. The almost limitless possibilities that present themselves can quickly feel overwhelming. The impression quickly arises that the happiness and satisfaction of our lives depend on whether or not we make the “right” decision today. This can lead to uncertainty and pressure. Although we all know that mindfulness practice is especially important in such difficult times, it can be difficult to find this important practice time.

In this article, some friends of the Wake Up Frankfurt Sangha share their experiences of practice during the rush hour of life. The Sangha meets every Thursday at the Tibet House in Frankfurt to practise mindfulness together.

What specific challenges do you experience in the “rush hour” of life as a wake-up practitioner?

In our society, being busy is seen as high value. If you have a lot to do, you are important and take on responsibility. I get things done, but I’m not really present. Sometimes I even do several things at the same time. Sometimes the thought creeps in that I’m only valuable if I’m also productive.

Then I say to myself: “Don’t just sit there – do something”. Through mindfulness practice, I have realised that I need the exact opposite in these moments. Then I recall the words of Thích: “Don’t just do anything – just sit there”.

(Ellen)



Do you have a regular practice routine? If so, what does it look like?

For me, practice means being consciously in the world. It is the experience of being connected with all living things. In everyday situations, I try to consciously organise contact with my environment, especially with my fellow human beings. Practice always takes place when I am in contact with others with an open, caring attitude, compassion and patience.

My work as a therapist involves a lot of contact with people. My working day is very demanding and to be honest I am often tired and stressed. Because I sometimes have hardly any time and energy for formal practice, I try to practise on the train on my way to work in the morning. I sit on the train anyway and even if it’s busy around me, I can spend some time consciously breathing and observing my thoughts. Especially when I am tired and listless in the morning, I connect with the qualities of joy, gratitude and loving kindness. This is how I generate strength and the right motivation for my working day. The practice on the train, in the middle of

rush hour, works amazingly well with a little practice!

(Clara)

What difficulties do you encounter in your practice and what helps you to overcome them?

I had read a lot about how valuable it is to consciously listen, to cultivate understanding and compassion and to help out of pure charity. And yet, time and time again, I find myself thinking something else during a conversation, getting upset about the selfishness of others, even though I sometimes help others when I am actually hoping for praise or something in return. The more stressed and exhausted I am, the harder it is for me.

Catching myself doing this is the first step towards improvement. Self-observation is easy for me at the EIAB. I practise a lot of mindfulness there, in an inspiring community. Small gestures, like holding doors open for each other, give me warmth and strength. I really notice how I refuel and how listening, compassion and love for

my neighbour come naturally. I notice how practising mindfulness puts my ego on the back burner and makes me a better person.

That's why I'm so grateful to have found a Wake Up sangha to practise with, share our worries and give each other courage. After every meeting, I feel more energised – and the next stressful moment is a little easier.

(Valentin)

Are there certain exercises that help you in stressful, difficult times?

In difficult moments, for example when worries about future decisions arise, it helps me to let what I am doing rest. To pause. To stop. This often also means taking a break from media consumption. With the constant availability of news feeds, YouTube videos, social media, series, films, music and podcasts, this is no easy task. By taking conscious breaks, we can find some peace and relaxation and our thoughts can calm down a little.

It is particularly difficult to start prioritising mindfulness only in unpleasant moments. It helps me to consciously create moments of pause in my daily routine. This can be regular sitting meditation in the morning, but also a mobile phone-free evening, a short deep relaxation session after the working day or mindful breathing during the train journey to work.

(Max)

What advice would you give to other young adults who find it difficult to practise regularly?

Taking all the instructions, tips and advice on mindfulness practice to heart can quickly become overwhelming. When I first started meditating, I had countless ideas of how to do it "properly": sitting in the lotus position, in silence, no movements, letting thoughts pass by, at least an hour, every morning, every evening. With such high expectations, frustration was inevitable and I felt like I was failing, which only stressed me out even more. Meditating became an obligation and I felt less and less like doing it.

It was only over the years that I learnt that a certain form is helpful, but not necessary. Instead, we can practise mindfulness in every moment: When brushing our teeth, on the way to work, even (or especially) in the most stressful situations. Developing routines is very valuable, but don't lose the playfulness and don't force anything. If sitting meditation is difficult, perhaps mindfulness can be achieved on a walk, while cooking or doing sport?

(Valentin)

A question for the Sangha gardener team: How do you deal with the fact that the number of participants sometimes fluctuates greatly?

We have a core team of sangha gardeners who take care of guiding the practice evenings and other organisational tasks. Even though the number of participants fluctuates greatly, it gives us security within the core team that we can trust each other. No matter what happens, I know that my gardener siblings will be there. This helps to keep the practice evenings going.

There were also phases in which we were in contact with sadness and disappointment,

for example when several cancellations came at short notice. As Sangha gardeners, we sat down together and thought about what the Sangha might need, what we could change and adapt. We then split up and sought dialogue with all Sangha friends to better understand this issue. In our "interviews", we were repeatedly told that everyone is very grateful that the Sangha exists and that there is no need for change. This feedback is a reminder of the words of Thầy: "You have enough". Maybe we don't need to become bigger and more "known". We already have enough conditions to be happy.

In the midst of the stormy challenges of this phase of life, we want to be a small island of continuity and consistency. It is important to us to maintain the shared practice, even if that means practising with ten people one week and two the next. Because we feel that even if participation in the mindfulness evenings doesn't work out for a few weeks or even months, it's nice to know that the sangha continues and that I can enjoy the reunion and joint practice again on my next visit.

In addition, retreats in Plum Village, at the EIAB or contact and dialogue with other sanghas in the Rhine-Main area (e.g. Sangha Wiesbaden or Sangha in Bornheim) also



give us strength and inspiration. At least once a year, the sanghas in the Rhine-Main area organise a joint mindfulness day, hikes

or walking meditations. These further opportunities for practice nourish our trust, our connectedness and our brotherhood. We

can draw on this strength and share it with our Wake Up group.

(Max und Main Huong)



Between all of life's tasks, commitments and important decisions, it can sometimes be difficult to make time for mindfulness practice. However, in the Sangha we experience time and time again that it is not only a place to practice mindfulness together, nourish joy and experience community, but also to share difficulties and concerns about our future and support each other through this challenging period. We can remember the teachings of Thầy:

*I have arrived,
I am at home,
in the here and now.*

We can happily stay in the present moment and realise that we are already shaping our future by mindfully taking care of the present.

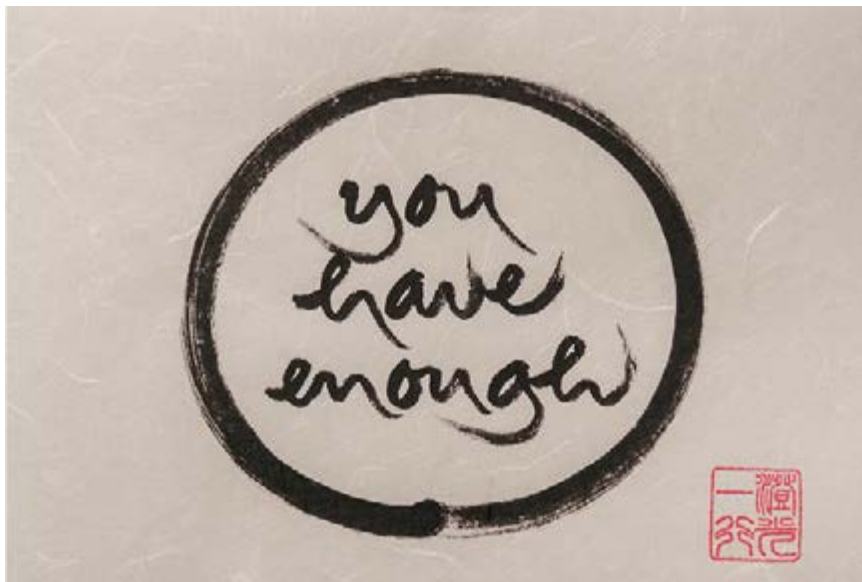
Dr. Main Huong Nguyễn

Wake Up Frankfurt

E-Mail: wakeup.frankfurt@gmail.com

We meet every Thursday at the Tibet House (Georg-Voigt-Straße 4, 60325 Frankfurt a.M.) from 19.00-20.45.

Please register in advance by e-mail.



Practice to live a peaceful and happy life

Vietnamese retreat in Munich

That was the feeling when the first meditation retreat in Munich, organised by the 'Blauer Himmel' (Blue Sky) Sangha, was over: the joy didn't just benefit the participants, but also the members of the Sangha, and the monks and nuns of the EIAB. Someone once told me that it is a blessing to be able to help others, and so the Sangha was very lucky to have the opportunity to help others and ourselves.

Until a year ago, I was always in the role of the recipient, taking part in retreats, enjoying the attentive care of nuns and monks from A to Z and not having to do much except an hour of work meditation a day. When I joined the Blue Sky Sangha I was also in the role of the joyful recipient Every mindfulness day,

everything was already prepared by other members of the sangha: the meditation room, the seats and the food. I enjoyed the caring support of the sangha, always felt very happy and relaxed.

However, as time went on, I grew and shared the responsibility in the sangha with my brothers and sisters. The happiness and light-heartedness of a child turned into the pride of an adult who now takes on responsibility and feels bigger and more mature. This is how I grew in the sangha.

More than a year ago, I heard that the sangha had decided to organise a retreat in Munich. I liked the idea and just thought

that I would do what I was told. Thanks to Father Liêm, the St. Anna youth centre in Thalhausen was chosen as the venue for the retreat. Time passed, the preparations for the retreat gradually took shape, purchases were made, and a few months before the retreat, we visited the youth centre twice to prepare. During the mindfulness days, plans were discussed, tasks were distributed and more detailed online meetings were held. Throughout the preparation process, there was an atmosphere of harmony and a high level of commitment to service. Everyone was happy to take on tasks according to their abilities. The meetings were always full of joy and laughter, everyone listened to each other, and opposing opinions were accepted



in a friendly way. Everything seemed to go so smoothly and easily. The number of participants exceeded expectations, and there was even a waiting list for those who wanted to attend but could not find a place. It really went like clockwork!

However, three weeks before the retreat, a disagreement arose that severely affected the group's unity and discouraged some members. It was as if a flowing river suddenly encountered a dam. But with love, open communication and the strong bond within the community, we overcame the difficulties together. The preparations were a series of ups and downs that helped the Sangha understand each other better and become stronger.

Two weeks before the retreat, there were several meetings, one week before: again a meeting and again more meetings. Two WhatsApp groups were created to facilitate the exchange of information between the working groups. Mr Hanh continuously sent information tables, organised discussion groups and so on. It seemed as if he was sitting in front of the computer all day. Mr Cuong constantly updated detailed task plans, programmes and procedures. Mr Khanh was everywhere, and Mr Dung took on the demanding task of being personal assistant to Brother Phap An, which suited his careful

and accurate nature. The young members, such as Long, Kim and Thuy Dung, took on other tasks without hesitation, with Thuy Dung particularly standing out with clever ideas. The women took care of the shopping, ordering food and preparing meals, which created a busy but happy atmosphere.

And finally, the moment had come.

More than half of the participants were new, over 30 % had never been to Plum Village before and were learning about mindfulness practice. As I watched them arrive with their suitcases, I remembered my first retreat at Plum Village in France: confused, curious and full of thoughts, looking for a way out of my problems. Now it was my turn, along with my friends from the Blue Sky Sangha, to be the bridge for these people, which made me happy and proud, because I knew that by coming to the retreat they had taken a step on the path to liberation. They would surely taste the flavour of wisdom and serenity, as I and many other people who have come into contact with the Dharma have. Old friends like Mrs Ngoc and Mrs Dung also turned up, and there were warm embraces and lively conversations.

The first gong sounded and we began the first Dharma talk of the evening. The new people learned how to practice silent eating

and listening to the bell, and although they did not fully understand it, they followed the instructions like little streams that flow into a big river and then to the sea. A new participant told me, 'I experienced silent eating and listening to the gong for the first time, and although it was strange, I went along with it. The next day I understood why we do it and found it very good.' In her words, I recognised myself seven years ago. She is me, and I am her. I too felt as happy at the first Dharma talk on Friday evening as I had on New Year's Day (Tet). The sound of the bells, the teachers and the shared practice filled me with a sense of home and family, and I resolved to keep that feeling for the next two days.

Mrs Mai Tram had carefully prepared the shrine and meditation room in her typically 'German' style. The heart-shaped painting that Father Liêm had painted especially for the retreat took pride of place in the meditation room, befitting his ever-loving support for the retreat and sangha. The meditation room was named the 'Meditation Room of Generosity'.

As the retreat only lasted about two days, Brother Phap An and other sisters wanted to provide as many opportunities for practice and wisdom as possible. Brother Phap An gave four long and profound talks explaining



meditation practice, deep contemplation and his own story of overcoming childhood trauma. Many new participants were inspired by his Dharma talks and wanted to apply the teachings immediately in their family lives. One sister, who had always been short-tempered with her husband and children, said, 'I realised that I need to love my family more and change my behaviour.' She immediately asked about the admission formalities to the Sangha so that she could continue practising. I was very happy because the collective energy of the teachers and the retreat had shown clear results. It was obvious that it wasn't just the retreatants who benefited, but also their families at home.

Brother Phap An spoke at length about the seven factors of enlightenment, closely following the main theme of the retreat, which was 'Practising to lead a peaceful and happy life'. Brother Phap An once again showed his great ability to get to the heart of any subject. What wisdom!

Another blessing of the retreat was that a bodhisattva took care of our meals: this was Mrs Thao from the restaurant Cô Bé. She took care of everyone, without regard for profit, just so that everyone had enough energy for practice. Her food was not only delicious, but also abundant. 'Eat Happy' also donated about 20 portions of sushi for each meal. Mrs Trang brought a wealth of fruit, and Mrs Van made vegetarian pâté for breakfast, ordered fresh bread and tried different types of oat milk until she found the best. The meals were

not only prepared with the hands, but with heart and soul, which we could taste. The food was so rich that many were worried that they might gain weight! When Brother Phap An led the meditation, he said that this time we should focus on the feet instead of lowering the energy to the lower dantian point as usual, because if the focus was on the lower abdomen, there would be no room left. Brother Phap An said that this is called 'flexibility'. The assembly laughed heartily. Meditation should be joyful, and this retreat was not only enlightening and joyful, but also very enjoyable.

The Dharma sharing was particularly moving and many participants shared their suffering with tears in their eyes – and I see again that there is a lot of suffering in our world. After a certain period of practice, I no longer have these sufferings and I secretly hope that others will find a way to solve their problems, as I did. And I have great faith in this.

'What I felt most was the sincere love and compassion of all the retreat participants, very different from outside, and I was able to talk openly about my problems,' said a friend who never talked about her family. What you give, you get back. The desire of Mai Tram and Sangha to bring people to Plum Village mindfulness practice has already borne fruit.

At the end of the retreat, the teachers and the community recited the Avalokiteshvara Sutra for those who needed support, in the

hope that this energy would give them the strength to overcome difficulties. This gift was priceless.

When it came to tidying up, Ms Thuy once again showed her organisational talent, clearly assigning tasks and energetically directing the work so that everything was done quickly and efficiently. Ms Hien, the quiet mother of the sangha, continued to work with a warm and compassionate heart despite her pain. The members of the sangha, many young people and others stayed until the end to clean and tidy everything. Everyone helped without hesitation, whether it was their job or not. We worked together like cogs in a gearbox. We were one, sometimes like an ant colony, sometimes like leaves giving off oxygen, or like a river reflecting the sky. We are a family, a spiritual family.

The retreat was a resounding success, and many new participants wanted to join the sangha. So, we will have a lot to do at the next mindfulness day and many changes to the programme. But like Sr Ông Thich Nhat Hanh's promise 'we vow to save all beings', we will continue his work of helping others with all our hearts and souls..

Han Kim Dung
vietnamesische Sangha
Blauer Himmel in München
(Chan Duc Tu Thien)



Deep sharing in the Sangha

We have the wonderful practice of “Dharma Sharing”, where we sit in a circle, listen to the bell and the silence together and finally to what is said and what remains unsaid behind what is shared. We focus all our attention on what comes from another’s heart, listening to the sound of the voice as we follow the sound of the bell: with an open heart, open senses and without judging or evaluating. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara is our role model for deep listening. This gives the person speaking the opportunity to communicate honestly. The rule that what is said remains in the circle makes it easier for the speaker to say things that, in other contexts, could lead to discussion or rejection. Here, however, the speaker can be sure that they will not be criticized, commented on, challenged or condemned. Here she is allowed to show herself as she is – perhaps for the first time in her life. Before she speaks, she listens to herself, to her joy, her pain, her doubts or questions, or remembers insights that have come to her in her practice and in her study of the Dharma. She senses when it is the right time to bow to the group and use this gesture to ask for space to speak. The words then usually follow spontaneously, they are not pre-formulated in thought, but often come as a surprise. They are a gift of the alert presence of the whole

group. This is also where we can feel what Thây taught us: that you and I are not two separate entities, but are deeply connected, that we are inter-connected. Where we share the space of trust and compassion, this connectedness becomes an experience.

*You are me and I am you.
It is obvious that we inter-are.
You cultivate the flower in
yourself so that I will be beautiful.
I transform the garbage in myself so
that you do not have to suffer.
I support you, you support me.
I am here to bring you peace
you are here to bring me joy.*

(Thich Nhat Hanh)

How could deep spiritual friendship be better expressed than in this poem by Thây. Brotherhood, sisterhood, siblinghood are what make our sanghas so joyful, even if, as in every family, including spiritual families, there are sometimes quarrels, disagreements and suffering. We have many tools to deal with them and to grow together, especially in the face of difficulties.

A study conducted by the Bertelsmann Foundation in March 2024 with 2532 people

between the ages of 16 and 30 showed that almost half of this group felt lonely, with 10% even feeling “very lonely”. We are familiar with this problem among older people. However, the fact that young people are also affected in this way is thought-provoking. Our practice, especially practicing with the Sangha, is certainly an effective measure. If we put Thây’s teachings into practice, we can gradually heal our fears, our feelings of loneliness and depression. We no longer experience ourselves as isolated beings, but experience more and more the connection we have with each other. And the natural world surrounding us is also our Sangha. We touch the earth and experience that we are part of this earth, and receive the gifts of the earth, the air, the sun and the water every day. We are in deep connection with the animals and plants, but also with our human ancestors and have a responsibility for those who come after us. We are by no means alone. We have a diverse Sangha, we have brothers and sisters on the path – these are infinitely valuable gifts that we too easily overlook. Let us practice noticing them, appreciating them and thus nurturing gratitude and happiness in ourselves and in the world.

Jan-Michael Erhardt

... from the Children's Programme Kinderprogramm



With the children, we often like to sing the song "You are a Buddha..."

But???

Who is this Buddha?

Why are YOU a Buddha?

What does it mean?

These are the questions that get the conversation going.



Many of the children already know a lot about the historical Buddha. "The Buddha was once a prince." "He had a wife and a son." "He is enlightened."...

The boys and girls have already heard a lot about Siddhartha Gautama, from their parents, from Werner Heidenreich's slide presentation and from the book "Old Path, White Clouds" and from the brothers and sisters.

..... and then there is Buddha nature. Inside each of us is Buddha nature. Something very beautiful. The good in us. In a brainstorming we discover many examples of Buddha nature in our friends and family, or in others.



“... and when we bow to the Buddha, we also bow to our own Buddha nature. Then the Buddha is a mirror that only reflects our wonderful sides and character traits.

So, we bow in deep gratitude to this – our mirror image.”

So that every child has just such a mirror or a Buddha at home, following on from this introduction each of them makes their own very individual Buddha.

And then the individual moulding begins...



The children receive a ball of modelling clay...



The trunk is then pushed towards the back, and you can already see an upper body and the legs in the lotos position.

I am always moved by the beautiful Buddhas and happy when the children (and even the odd teenager) tell me many years later about the Buddha they moulded themselves that still sits on their windowsill or altar.

Uli Lüttrighaus



We form the head, and the arms (a rolled sausage) are attached to the shoulders.



Press part of it with their fingers until a mushroom shape appears



Mindfulness, Concentration and Insight

Our journey together into the Order of Interbeing

1. Openness

Candida and Bea: When we started practising about nine years ago, we knew very little about the practice, the five mindfulness trainings or the fourteen mindfulness trainings of the Order of Interbeing. But we were like a dry sponge and absorbed everything offered by Thay and the sangha. We learned very quickly, the beginner's mind inspired us and still inspires us. There was no thought in us whether and how we could receive the 5 mindfulness trainings and we had no idea about the Order of Interbeing. The 5 mindfulness trainings seemed so logical and so clear and understandable to us that we simply started to follow them and stick to them. We were open to everything that came our way. Slowly, our lives began to change. What had seemed important before took a back seat, and some things that we had never even thought about became more important.

With the 14 mindfulness trainings, we had found our life project and a community that had travelled this path before us. We wanted to follow this community, to continue to grow and learn here, and we asked to be accepted into the Order of Interbeing.

Hinnerk: Our journey together began two years ago when Bea and Candida asked me if I could imagine being a mentor for them. Yes, I could well imagine it. On the one hand, my Dharma name, Refuge of True Awakening, seemed to me to be a calling to do just that.



On the other hand, I liked the idea of doing the mentoring in a small sangha and not just in a dialogue. I myself have been in a happy relationship for over 50 years, but with such different attitudes to life it can sometimes be a bit of a struggle to keep it alive. I was really curious to see how such a shared spiritual orientation shapes our everyday interactions and enables a collective, transformative development.

2. Our experiences

Candida and Bea: It was a very intense time for us and this intensity has not changed to this day. We met our mentor Hinnerk at the GAL in Munich over a year before we thought about asking to be accepted into the Order of Interbeing. The teacher seeks his student? Well, we found each other and it was so good for us to have a mentor who practised and learned with us and met us at eye level. Thay was always present at our meetings and became more and more present in our daily lives. In our local sangha and in our online international sangha, we became more and more connected. Our practice with Hinnerk was characterised by goodwill and deep listening, and so we learned to make our own experiences accessible to others. Meeting with a person every 14 days, exchanging ideas and discovering new things was so nourishing and insightful for us that the seeds of being-with-each-other developed quickly and powerfully. Words like mindfulness, sangha, concentration and insight took on meaning, became more tangible and, above all, more applicable.

Hinnerk: through detailed biographical accounts Bea and Candida had already given me a comprehensive insight into their eventful and difficult lives, which took a surprising and profound turn with the 'discovery' of Thay and his invitation to inter-be. This had encouraged them to go further in this direction further by joining the Order of Interbeing and making it the determining factor in their everyday lives.

This immediately brought us very close together: the omnipresence of Thay in our daily thoughts and actions – as an incorruptible compass that was not always easy to follow, but was and is challenging and deeply fulfilling.

3. Appropriateness

Candida and Bea: During the two years of our aspiration period, we learned patience and loving care for ourselves, for our mentor and thus also for each other and our environment. We realised that this path is our path, a new way of life that we are committed to following. We increasingly felt and developed a sense of care for ourselves and thus for others, learned not to overtax ourselves and to lovingly deal with our own mistakes and weaknesses as well as with the

mistakes and weaknesses of others. In our sanghas we had a broad field of practice and we felt how more and more doors opened. After a year of aspiration, we were allowed to join the morning meditation facilitator's sangha. Here we experienced the nourishing and healing power of a large sangha. Serving it watered the seeds of joy and happiness daily and they developed strongly.

Hinnerk: We understood our time together as a workshop in which we took individual texts and tried to find out how they could



support and promote our practice. First of all, the 14 mindfulness trainings, but then also various sutras and other texts that seemed suitable to us. Our intention was to examine how to implement and realise them in our everyday lives in order to find out what our respective stumbling blocks are and how we can overcome them.

In doing so, we explored our different energies and strengths together in order to make them effective for beneficial and healing changes, for ourselves, in our

partnership and towards other people. This made us very directly aware in our everyday lives of what interbeing offers in terms of possibilities for ensuring a peaceful and joyful coexistence.

4. Skilfulness

Candida and Bea: Our ability to respond gently and lovingly to ourselves and others grew constantly and we felt a great need to follow our sisters in the Order of Interbeing. It was clear to us that we were also entering

into an obligation to serve the world and to help reduce suffering. We are aware that we learn every day, even every hour, from every situation, and it is the unpleasant and difficult situations from which we learn the most. We are learning to listen more and more, to be simply still and fully present, to speak more and more attentively and lovingly, and we have experienced how healing these two skills are, for ourselves and for those we encounter. When we became members of the Order of Interbeing at the EIAB on 8 October 2023, our hearts were full of gratitude and love. We vowed to live our entire lives according to the 14 Mindfulness Trainings, to be there for our sangha and to accept and transform our suffering. We are happy to renew this vow again and again. We have been presented with a number of tasks, which we are happy to accept and fulfil to the best of our ability, in love and gratitude for our teacher Thay.

Hinnerk: Our encounters were always characterised by an atmosphere of *Kalyanamitra*, which repeatedly led us back to a friendly and amicable coexistence in the event of controversies and differences of opinion. Our different perceptions inspired us to make them meaningful for deepening our practice.

The fact that our hearts can touch the world in all ten directions, as Thay teaches us, will continue to be our common guiding principle beyond this time of preparation.

Candida and Bea: We still meet with our friend Hinnerk at regular intervals. We don't want to miss this fruitful, joint work and look forward to it every time.

Hinnerk Brockmann

- Refuge of true awakening

Candida Löslein

- True Source of Open-Hearted Connection

Bea Herrmann

- True Source of Active Interbeing



Online children's hour – 'Happy Children's Forest'

Children are a Wonder

Candida and Bea: For Thay – our teacher Thich Nhat Hanh – children were always very important. At each retreat he always talked with the children first, before he taught teenagers or adults. His way of communicating with children was exemplary; he neither overtaxed them with adult language nor underchallenged them by talking to them in a 'child-friendly' way. He touched their hearts and minds.

Mai: When I was little, I always wished that someone would show me what I could do when I was afraid or stressed or when I was sad.

Candida and Bea: What a blessing to be able to get to know the practice as a child. Children are so fragile, so delicate, but also strong and infinitely receptive. Many things that we, as adults or older people, have to painstakingly piece together, children learn quite freely. They ask direct questions and are full of curiosity, which is why being with children is always so nourishing and refreshing for us. Just looking at those pretty, clear and unspoilt faces makes our hearts sing.

Mai: I have long wanted to offer the children something like an online children's hour – the 'Happy Children's Forest'.

Candida and Bea: Since Zoom has been around, many opportunities have arisen to communicate with others, and that's how the idea for a children's hour was born. We – that's Bea, Mai, me and the 3 hand puppets Gregor the vulture, Willy the raccoon and Bine the bee – created the 'Happy Children's Forest', a children's hour on Saturday afternoons. It was actually intended for

children aged 6-12, but the youngest person to visit the children's forest was 4 years old and there were always adults there too.

Mai: I was very happy when Candida told me that she wanted to offer an online children's hour in winter. I was immediately willing to support her. Every 'Happy Children's Forest' was very special for me and I was able to learn a lot from it.

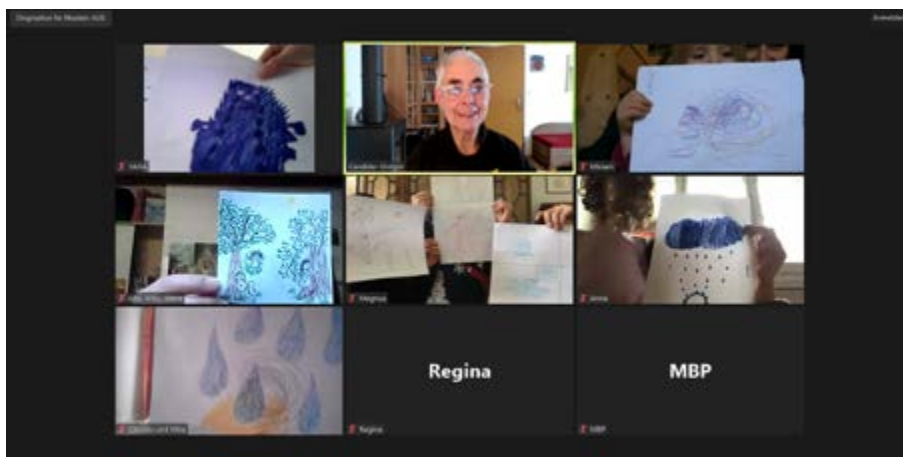
Preparing for the 'Happy Children's Forest' was a chance for me to delve deeper into my practice. I often wondered whether I was even practising what I wanted to share and why ideas about how to share with the children didn't just pop into my mind. I wanted to be honest and not try to talk too long and too much about the practice, about things I had not practised, just to make a good impression on the parents and children. I often said to

myself, jokingly, when I felt agitated during the online children's hour, 'You don't have to give a Dharma talk to the children. You just have to be honest and share from your heart. Then it will go down well with the children and the adults.'

Candida and Bea: For each of the ten afternoons, we had a different theme, for example: 'Are you sure?' was the story of the giant who wasn't one at all. Or 'Exactly the same, only different', the story of the rabbit who asks whether everyone is the same. There was a story about 'happiness' and a story about 'compassion and understanding'.

We combed the children's library for good picture books, bought a few books to go with them and made PowerPoint presentations out of them. The children were particularly fascinated by the story of the curtain rising.





The stories were made more understandable for the children by the questions of Gregor, Willy and Bine – the three hand puppets.

We started in the traditional way with the bell, a song that either went well with the topic or a song that the children particularly liked, and then a short meditation. After showing and reading the story, the hand puppets asked their questions. The pictures the children painted to match the theme were shown as soon as they were finished, and it was really amazing for us to see how deeply the children thought and felt. At the end, there was another song, accompanied by Mai on the guitar. Here, 'Epo I tai tai eh...' was the absolute favourite. After that, the children were also able to share how they had found the day in the children's forest.

All of this was framed by an opening and closing picture – beautifully painted by Mai – with music.

Mai: My heart was filled with joy every time I saw the children and adults in the 'Happy Children's Forest'. I felt happy and was very

surprised that the children were so attentive and participated with joy and enthusiasm. I am very grateful that we had this wonderful time together, practising together and being

there for each other. I hope that many good seeds were watered in the children and adults through the children's lessons and that one day, when the children have difficulties in their lives, they will know how to return to their inner island and take good care of themselves.

Candida and Bea: The children and parents, as well as the adults who visited us, were thrilled and sad that the children's forest was taking a break after 10 Saturdays. We had to promise to reopen it in autumn. Saturday – according to the parents – would be the ideal day and the time – 3 pm – is perfect.

Mai: I am very much looking forward to coming back to the 'Happy Children's Forest' in autumn/winter and seeing familiar faces again and getting to know new ones.

Candida and Bea: We would be very happy if other members of the OI or Sangha could support us in this important work. It is such a great gift to be able to be with the children and it is very enjoyable.

Candida Löslein
(True Source of Open-Hearted Connection)

Tran ThanhMai Nguyen
(Tam My Hanh – Beautiful Action of the Heart)

Bea Herrmann
(True Source of Active Interbeing)



Thay Life's stories and what we can learn from it

10.–14. April 2024

In April, we had the great fortune to be able to participate in this retreat with Sr. Chan Khong, Sr. Dinh Nghiem and Thay Phap An.

We have been Thay's students since 2015 and have read many books by and about him. We have seen films about him and read newspaper reports about him, but nothing could bring us closer to his life story than the experiences of Sr. Chan Khong, Sr. Dinh Nghiem and Thay Phap An. Thay led a simple, modest and often poor life, choosing to teach his students and share his wisdom and insights with us.

There were so many moving moments during this retreat that often brought tears to our eyes, such as the story that Sr. Dinh Nghiem shared with us: One day when Thay was still very young he was ill. He had a fever, but had to go to an important meeting by bike. On the way he realised that he was hungry and found that he only had very little money with him – enough to buy a small bowl of soup, which he thought would do him good. As he held the

bowl of soup in his hand, he wanted to add some pepper, because pepper is considered healthy, especially for fever. But the lid of the pepper shaker was only loosely on, so a large amount of pepper got into the soup and made it inedible. But he didn't have any money left for a second bowl of soup.

This story moved us just as much as the story of the EIAB, which Thay Phap An shared with us. At a time when Thay Phap An was also very ill, Thay told him that the EIAB would be built here and Thay Phap An trusted his teacher to such an extent that he accepted the task, even though he was ill.

It was said that Sr. Chan Khong wanted to go to Thay's shrine room shortly after she arrived at the EIAB. There, in front of Thay's picture, she cried and everyone thought it was tears of sadness and loss. Later she explained that she was not crying because she missed Thay – Thay is always with her – but because she was so happy that Thay had chosen the right man – Thay Phap An – to lead the EIAB.

On the Saturday of the retreat, as we were sitting in the lobby having a cup of tea, Sr. Chan Khong was wheeled past in her wheelchair. Suddenly she asked to stop. She looked at one of Thay's calligraphies for a long time and then began to sing one of her beautiful and heart-moving songs. What a wonderful moment!

We saw so many pictures of Thay, his family and also of his teacher, whom he loved very much, and it was a wonderful time in the presence of the nuns and monks of the EIAB, who always organise everything for us so quietly and discreetly. We have taken with us the firm intention to dedicate our strength and our lives, our love and our trust to the legacy of our teacher and thus to be worthy of being called his successors.

Candida Löslein

True Source of Open-Hearted Connection

Bea Herrmann

True Source of Active Interbeing



Everything in your life can be your practise

*Quote from Daya Mullins, founder of the Middle Way Association
and the Middle Way – Daya Mullins Foundation*

**Frank Jungjohann-Feltens in and on the “MIDDLE WAY”
Nümbrecht, 16.07.2024**

This quote from Daya Mullins has accompanied me for at least 20 years and has repeatedly provided me with a sense of direction for my life and work in the here and now, and I am infinitely grateful to her for that.

I can describe this in concrete terms using the example of the application for planning permission for the new ‘Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh Great Hall of Peace’, the planned new meditation hall for the EIAB.

Planning a meditation hall like this and accompanying the planning application process has always been a great challenge for me. This is where I start to see the tasks we are given as a spiritual exercise on the path. All our tasks are spiritual exercises. It is up to us to see an opportunity for further development in the task or not. What is the spiritual dimension of the task? A task and its fulfilment are never an individual achievement. Recognising this is the basis. The task is given to us by someone, who is the first or second in the process of task fulfilment. Then it is a matter of developing a roadmap for how to implement this task. This is our personal view of things. In addition to this personal view of how to approach it, there is a ‘higher authority’ within us that sees the bigger picture, recognises the side roads, the constraints, possible obstacles and support. This ‘higher authority’ is not separate from us, just as the person who gives us this task is not separate from us. Then there are other people involved in the

process who help to fulfil the task, and there are those who want to hinder or even prevent the task from being fulfilled. All these people are players in a great theatre, and ultimately, we have to recognise that we are all part of a whole. Part of the task is to recognise that interacting with others is also a spiritual exercise and a game. Playing can be a very high form of spiritual exercise.

Let’s move on to the obstacles to the planning application and the statics for the new ‘Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh Great Hall of Peace’. There were and still are enough obstacles, some of which have been overcome and some of which still need to be overcome. What should we do when we encounter obstacles in the fulfilment of our tasks? One option is to give up. Another option is to use these obstacles to grow, as part of our spiritual practice. When we are called upon to fulfil a task, we are also challenged to prove ourselves worthy of that task. We were chosen and deemed worthy of fulfilling this task. This alone can generate great strength in us, based in particular on the quality of gratitude. When we are given a task, we are ultimately never alone in fulfilling it. We are fed by forces within and around us, and at the same time we feed ourselves and our environment with our sincere endeavour to fulfil our task. This being fed and feeding others, who are never separate from us, is an essential aspect of spiritual practice, without which the fulfilment of the task is impossible. To understand this is essential, it is fundamental.

Sometimes we may believe we are alone, that nobody is there to support us. This assumption is clearly wrong. We are actually never alone. This is something that I can also feel and ultimately verify in the exploration and living of Daya Mullins’s saying. But now someone is standing in front of me on the path to fulfilling my task and says: No, that’s not how it works, that’s impossible. This person may even have great power. This happens again and again.

Should we then give in and say, ‘Okay, I give up now?’ That can happen. Then it is important to analyse the facts. Is the goal, the fulfilment of the task, correct and are the judgements of others, which hinder or even prevent the fulfilment of this task, substantially correct? At the latest here, we need a clear view of what is happening. This is meditation. I am free to see what is really there. If I then recognise that it is still my task to fulfil, a task that can heal something in us and thus also in everything that surrounds us, then we may continue to prove ourselves worthy of fulfilling this task and, above all, we may be very grateful to be allowed to help fulfil this task. It continues and does not stop because someone, who is not separate from us, says: No, that’s not possible, that’s impossible. Whenever I hear that something is impossible, I know deep down that we are never limited and that everything is possible. I was able to grasp this through the teachings of Daya Mullins at the Gerode Monastery many years ago through her vivid and active presence.

For me, this also means being free. I enjoy myself, my freedom, freedom in infinity, freedom in infinite possibilities, even if the circumstances are sometimes, or even often, unfavourable. The fact that I feel free also has a magnetic effect on people around me. In this way, we nourish each other on the path to fulfilling our common tasks. This too is part of the 'everything' in my life, which is my spiritual practice.

Then there is always the aspect of grace, which is important in the fulfilment of our tasks. Grace is something that we can invite into our lives again and again. We cannot demand it. We cannot make a deal

to receive grace. Grace is independent and that is precisely why it is so powerful. We can achieve a lot, but with grace, much more can happen than we think, with grace, the impossible can become possible. Grace gives our lives a new dimension outside or, rather, alongside space and time. Without grace, it is difficult to obtain the approval for the new 'Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh Great Hall of Peace'. Therefore, we are constantly challenged to humbly pause and to ask for support, including in the form of grace. Asking for grace also allows us to see ourselves in a new light. Asking for grace illuminates our process. For me, this light connects me with the infinite within and

around me, and it constantly generates the awareness of being in the here and now. I am never separate from anything, and this is precisely what gives me and everyone around me the strength to fulfil our task. Ultimately, it is an act of grace that we have been deemed worthy of this task. In its truest sense, this also means that we are never separated from grace. This is the spirituality we live in our lives: every moment should be lived with this quality, and I want to enjoy life with this quality, that is without beginning and without end; life is always in the moment, every moment. For me, it has become vital to remind myself of this quality again and again, and that is exactly what I practice in many



moments, including the moments in which I am allowed to fulfil my task.

I can look openly at the conditions surrounding this task. I move from reacting to acting, to freely shaping the path to reach a solution. Ultimately, I tap into the creative power, which exists in all of us. We are the ones who create the circumstances and solutions. Who else? To find myself in this creative power, to sense it and give it expression is a spiritual exercise, is living in the here and now, is eternal life in paradise.

I have repeatedly written about the 'fulfilment' of the task. Ultimately, the fulfilment of the task is also our fulfilment. Our potential wants to be expressed in our actions; it wants to be fulfilled. The task and its fulfilment are not separate from us. We are a whole and that also means that the task has already been fulfilled. In this sense, time does not matter and is in a sense also an illusion. At the same time, everything needs time to mature within us. Everything we eat needs time to be digested. Then what feeds us can also create fulfilment in and around us. When we fulfil our tasks, we feel fulfilled and recognise ourselves in that fulfilment. We struggle with our tasks. They polish and hone us, and ultimately the rough diamond that is inherent in us from birth becomes the polished and multifaceted diamond that is our destiny, that has always been our destiny, and always will be our destiny. This multifaceted diamond shines out from our fulfilled tasks. Fulfilled tasks are the illuminating power of our diamond.

On the way to fulfilling my tasks, I always gratefully remember all my teachers, the people who accompany me on my journey, and work with me. This has been noticeable throughout the planning and building application process. I always send these people silent blessings and express my gratitude to them. I regard this attitude as a great contributor to success. Without this attitude of gratitude, I would never be able to fulfil the tasks that I have been given. In addition, in gratitude I experience deep joy and bliss, coupled with inner peace. These are the fruits of love for the task and the people involved in the process. 'Everything in your life can be your practise'. Quote from Daya Mullins.

The attitude of Thay Phap An is and was very important in the planning process and also in the building application process. He is very clearly focused on realising Thay's vision for this European Institute of Applied Buddhism in Waldbröl with two large meditation halls. He never fails to impress with his inner calm, his perseverance, his love for Thay and his disciples, his love for his work and his love for the people who follow this work. He also has this boundless sense of gratitude that I mentioned earlier. It is precisely Thay Phap An's focused approach that repeatedly motivates me to guide the process towards its goal in a sustainable manner. I bow to his exemplary behaviour with deep gratitude.

Then there is Ganesha, the Hindu elephant god who clears obstacles from the path. I have a statue of this deity, about 30 cm high, on my desk and I often bow to the quality of Ganesha, which has evidently been imparted to me. With devotion, love for parents and teachers, healthy intelligence and perseverance, he clears away the obstacles on the path. These are obstacles in worldly life, but also obstacles on our spiritual path. Ultimately, the two paths are not separate from each other. When it comes to generating that extra effort to achieve a goal, the power of Ganesha within us is very useful. I felt this time and again during the planning and building application process for the new 'Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh Great Hall of Peace'. When the Office for the Preservation of Historical Monuments asked me to summarise all our arguments in writing and to provide photos and drawings to support them, I thought to myself, why this extra effort? When I did it, I came up with much stronger arguments and discovered new, very good bases for evaluating the meditation halls while studying the files and archives. Ganesha did a great job here, work that inspired me and others.

Everyone is talking about being overworked. They have too much work. For me, it is clear that my potential grows with the tasks I am given and the trust placed in me. I too could sometimes be tempted to say that I feel overburdened, that I have too many tasks, etc. etc. But that is exactly what I do not do. If I did, I would invest far too much of my strength and energy in the thought of being overburdened and thus have less

energy available to fulfil my tasks. So why waste energy by worrying about being overburdened? It is of no use, on the contrary, it even does harm. If the universe thinks I am suitable and worthy of fulfilling a particular task, then I should also show myself to be worthy and particularly grateful for the task. It is precisely this attitude that generates new energy in me and for the task. This means again:

*„Everything in your life
can be your practise“.*

Quote from Daya Mullins

Devotion and love are two qualities that are very useful for one's own spiritual development. Everything in my life can be used as a spiritual practice. Every encounter with another person, with nature, every task, every smile, every hug, every good conversation, every unpleasant situation, every illness, every moment can be experienced in a completely new way and used for our own and our common spiritual development. I am very grateful to be able to learn and apply this again and again. Particularly when faced with a challenge, I remember this quote from Daya Mullins:

*„Everything in your life
can be your practise“.*

With this in mind, I ask all those involved in the process of obtaining the building permit, all friends of the EIAB and all beings who are involved in any way, for sincere and compassionate help in obtaining the building permit. In turn, we will do everything we can to ensure that these aforementioned people and beings can be happy and free, and that all the people who will later be able to use the completed meditation halls can also be happy and free.

May the love that unites everything and is a whole bless and accompany you every second. We are a whole.

In this sense, 1 + 1 is more than 2. We are 'Love in Action'.

With respectful affection.

Frank Jungjohann-Feltens

Tasty, **easy** and vegan

four-day cooking course with enthusiastic participants

“Vegan food has to be so tasty that people can easily do without meat!” That was the task given to around a dozen cooking instructors and supporters. The result was a four-day cooking course (11-14 April) that focused on Vietnamese, Japanese, Thai and Chinese cuisine. Around 30 participants learnt how to prepare sushi, spring and summer rolls, kohlrabi and carrot salad, miso soup, fried wan tan and much more. In addition to the recipes themselves, many participants had the opportunity to get to know the herbs and ingredients of Asian cuisine, which they had not previously dared to try. There was even an introduction to the art of vegetable carving.

The organising team had put together an impressive programme of courses with great dedication and enthusiasm, and had provided a wide range of cooking utensils. After four days, the participants went home with full bellies and full heads, motivated

and inspired to put what they had learnt into practice at home.

In this article, we would like to summarise the wealth of positive experiences and inspiring moments that were experienced by both the course participants and the course leaders during our journey together.

Shared pleasures: experiences and discoveries in the world of vegan cuisine

As a course leader, I was deeply impressed by the curiosity, enthusiasm and willingness of the participants to learn. The commitment was palpable and made the course something special. Cooking and eating together was a source of joy for all of us. In these moments, we felt like a family, and sharing meals became a communal experience full of warmth and connection.

What I found particularly fascinating was the realisation that vegan cuisine offers a solid foundation for all culinary delights. On this basis, we can be creative and expand our culinary skills without compromising on taste and variety.

Through mindful cooking and eating, we have developed a deeper connection with food. We appreciate the food we eat and are grateful for its nutrients and its role in our lives.

The course was a great success for me. The participants were not only motivated, but also eager to cook. It was inspiring to see how some of them have already shared how they want to use their newly acquired skills to pamper their loved ones and serve them delicious vegan dishes.

Enthusiasm and connection: teaching a unique cooking course

Teaching this course was a real pleasure for me. Every single participant was full of motivation and zest for action, which gave our team at the EIAB an enormous boost of energy. This enthusiasm drove us to invest even more passion and commitment into the course. The special thing about this experience is that it is only possible at the EIAB – here, participants not only receive theoretical knowledge, but can also apply it in practice. The focus is on cooking and eating together, which we prepare with a lot of love and understanding, and that is exactly the goal of this cooking course. Within a very short time, we have grown together into a close-knit community. Perhaps even a sangha on the subject of ‘vegan food and cooking’ will emerge from this wonderful community. The generous donation from all the participants for the EIAB also touched and encouraged us deeply. This cookery course was a complete success and exceeded all expectations.





Creative discoveries: a culinary journey through vegan sushi and more

I never thought that vegan sushi could be so varied, creative and delicious. I have discovered dried mushrooms and other mushrooms for myself and will use them in the future in everything: sushi, miso soup, glass noodle salad and more. Until now, I had no recipe ideas except for mushroom cream sauce. Carrots and kohlrabi with a Vietnamese dressing will enrich my daily life in the future. Now I also know how carrots can taste apart from canteen salad. – Mindful eating starts with cooking. It sounds logical, but it wasn't part of my everyday life before. I have been inspired to create space for it. Love is the secret ingredient. The energy we put into food is just as important as the ingredients themselves.

Courage to change: a personal journey to mindful eating and self-acceptance at the EIAB

When a friend wished me a 'good rest' before the course at the EIAB, I couldn't manage more than a crooked smile. As much as I long for peace and connection with myself, meditation usually has little to do with it for me. In good meditations, I manage not to judge myself for my never-ending stream of thoughts, but in less good ones I get angry with the parts of myself that don't want to let me rest. When a friend invited me to a cooking course at the EIAB, I accepted immediately. The hope was: then we'll do a lot and I won't have to meditate so much. That should be easier to manage than a silent retreat. Besides, I still remember very well

the almost frightening presence with which my friend returned from his first retreat in Plum Village last year. I had never seen him so calm, clear and connected before – and of course I wanted that too. At least a little bit of it.

Then reality caught up with me.

Mindful eating – without reading the newspaper or watching TV at the same time: for one part of me, this was extremely threatening. At home, I hardly ever do this, although I keep promising myself I will. In the dining hall of the EIAB, however, the structure dictates that you should not be distracted. You should take time to chew, taste and digest. I am torn. Once I do it, I enjoy the relaxation and focus. When we slowly grate a carrot in the cooking class and then eat the salad in silence, I actually see the whole world in the orange fibres between my chopsticks: the rain, the sun, the farmer, the seller, our cooking teachers, who teach with all their hearts, there's no other way to put it. It tastes delicious. I feel pleasurable and alive.

And then there is this other side of me.

During the meal in the dining hall, I ask this part: Why is it so important to you that I do other things at the same time? The answer comes quickly and clearly: 'So that you don't realise when you are full.' This part cannot risk letting go of this survival strategy of mine. Eating has always been my refuge, just as the EIAB residents may find refuge in Buddha, the sangha or meditation. I have learned from my environment to eat my fear, powerlessness and loneliness. And I look

with gratitude at this part of me that keeps me emotionally afloat with food. Because it is so strong and effective, I have never had to face tragedies with cocaine, self-harm or suicidal thoughts, unlike many others in my environment. Food has saved me, my life-jackets of cake and chocolate have kept me afloat. But this strategy comes at a price: poor blood counts, a lack of autonomy and the disrespectful contempt of a society in which women still have to be thin above all else in order to have value.

No, it was not recuperation for me.

Nevertheless, I am glad to have been there. Because, as the EIAB residents also know, meditation and mindfulness are not soft blankets that are supposed to gently soothe the wounds in the self and wounds in society. No: those who look see all things. The beauty of life, condensed into three small carrot shreds, and the suffering that is part of life. The experience has strengthened my resolve to turn more to these wounded parts, to listen to them with patience and compassion. To hear the pain and heal it, and to do so with support. To show the young parts of me that I am there now, that they can let go, that I will take over. That they can seek refuge in me instead of in food. Because I want to enjoy eating all the wonderful dishes that I learned to prepare in the cooking course. It is a journey; I am not there yet.

And I am not alone.

When I told my friends after I returned about the pressure that parts of me felt with mindful eating, too many of them immediately knew what I was talking about. Some even said that they couldn't even imagine trying to take part in such a course, they were so afraid. Women in particular have learned to swallow their needs and to sweeten their powerlessness and loneliness with cakes and chocolate. Very few people talk about it on their own initiative, the shame of being judged as undisciplined and lazy is too great. Perhaps this tense relationship with food is something the EIAB would like to discuss in future events, with compassion and patience.

**Participants and chef
of the vegan cooking course**

'Life is beautiful when we are there for each other!'

Sangha LA BOI – the Vietnamese Sangha in Hamburg

*'Our sangha is the La Boi Sangha.
Our brothers and sisters come from all over.
We come here to study love and understanding.
We come here to learn, to breathe and to laugh.
Hey friend,
we invite you to come and have fun,
let go of sadness.
Suffering has an end.
Hey friend,
the pure land is here.
Do you hear the call to wake up?
The Buddha in us is shining.
Our sangha is the La Boi Sangha.
Once a month we invite you to come and have fun.
We meet and drink a cup of warm tea together and
be there for each other: life is so beautiful!'*

This is the song of the La Boi Sangha, a Vietnamese sangha in Hamburg for the last 24 years. Every month, we meet at the house of one of our sangha members for a day of mindfulness. The day is led by one of our members. We practice sitting and walking meditation, recite the mindfulness trainings and sutras. We enjoy life in the here and now

and being together during tea meditation and meals in mindfulness.

Due to the limited living space of each family, our sangha could not grow. Over more than 20 years, many people have come and gone, but we still have more than 20 members. The most precious thing is that brothers and

sisters in the sangha support each other and love each other like a family. The rotating house-to-house activities help us to connect with each other even more and to cultivate this brotherhood and sisterhood.

The La Boi Sangha was very fortunate to have Thay and the venerable monks and nuns of



Plum Village visit us once, when Thay and the venerable monks and nuns came to Hamburg in June 2001 to give a Dharma talk in the auditorium of the University of Hamburg.

Since then, the La Boi Sangha has organised regular retreats every year, which were initially led by the monastic teachers from Plum Village (France) and later by Thay Phap An, the director of the Institute, as well as the monks and nuns of the EIAB. In addition, many members of the La Boi Sangha often travel to Plum Village in France and take part in large retreats at the EIAB every year. Even though there are still a few months to go before the Vietnamese retreat, the sangha members are already meeting to discuss preparations and assign tasks – who will do what? When should it be done? Who should we work with? Calls and messages from the members are constantly going back and forth, as if we were preparing for a big festival!

During the time when the whole of Germany was in quarantine because of Covid, we in the La Boi Sangha were connected with Thay and the monks and nuns in many ways, because, as the song of the Sangha says, 'Life is beautiful when we are there for each other!'

La Boi: leaves on which the sutras were once written.



My first stay at the EIAB

I first came to Waldbröl in March 2023. A few years earlier, I had completed an MBSR (Mindfulness-based stress reduction) course, which gave me my first contact with the idea of mindfulness. At that time, however, I had no idea how extensive and powerful this concept actually is. I probably still only have a vague idea of the dimensions and breadth of mindfulness as a central element of Zen.

Every stay at the EIAB, every text I have read has been characterised by new insights and sometimes even more new questions, and I suspect that will continue for a while yet.

My first stay was indeed transformative. I have been struggling with pain of various kinds for decades. Often in my back, shoulder and neck, up to and including herniated discs,

which have been treated with everything that the medical profession has to offer. Most recently, it was mainly tension, up to and including cramp-like spasms in the shoulder area, that were causing me problems. I developed a daily routine of stretching, strengthening and relaxation exercises to get at least enough relief to manage everyday life with a job and family. However, I always





had the feeling that I was only working on the symptoms, and that the actual cause remained out of reach.

At the beginning of 2023, when the imminent arrival of our second child was announced, my wife reminded me of my desire to visit the EIAB to gather strength and peace for the challenges ahead with a newborn baby. So, I signed up for the upcoming retreat 'Healing the Inner Child'. Admittedly, it was not the easiest place to start, but it was worth it. As soon as I arrived at the EIAB, I noticed the power that emanates from this place.

I was deeply impressed by the monks and nuns, and especially by Brother Thay Phap An and Sister Song Nghiem. Despite her many duties, the sister took time for me and gave me some advice in two personal conversations on how I could deal with my pain on a physical and, above all, mental level. This mental level, which Western medicine largely ignores, now seems to me to be the real key to my problems. This does not mean

that the problems are solved in the long term, but at least the path to healing is recognisable.

On Sunday, the third and last day of the retreat, Brother Phap An gave a guided meditation that was the high point of my meditation practice to date. First of all, I was able to sit for an hour without any significant pain. This was previously unthinkable, as pain symptoms typically began after a few minutes, increasing continuously and making it impossible to meditate in a relaxed manner without interruptions or aids. I had previously thought this impossible. Furthermore, during meditation I experienced an abundance of happiness, love, compassion, warmth and energy that I had never felt before. I still draw on this deeply moving experience today.

After returning home, I was amazed to discover that all the tension in my shoulders had disappeared. Just soft muscles, no cracking, popping or pulling. No restrictions in mobility whatsoever. If I hadn't been there

myself, I wouldn't have believed it possible. Unfortunately, this state of affairs was not to last. The stresses and strains of everyday life ensured that the symptoms gradually returned. But I now know that healing is possible and I am convinced that at a certain point the path of mindfulness holds this healing in store for me in a sustainable way.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the monks and nuns at the EIAB for their fantastic and selfless work, led by Brother Thay Phap An and inspired and guided by the teachings of Thay. Without him and his work, the EIAB would not exist and I and many others would still be searching for direction. I have now found it and am curious to see what insights await me. I will be forever grateful to the EIAB and hope for many more encounters and shared insights. You have found a new friend and supporter.

David Greiwe

The Hidden Lamp

This is the title of an extensive and comprehensive book with 100 stories from awakened women over the last 2500 years, as seen by (ZEN) women today from Florence Caplow and the editor Susan Moon. I saw it in a book review in the Intersein magazine in autumn 2021 and received it as a gift from

a good friend for my birthday a few months later.

The book fascinated and inspired me. And from time to time at various artistic events I recited three texts from it. Above all, however, I felt them inside me, felt their effect

on me. Thus, they became the impulse for and the beginning of a new stage programme, which was to gradually develop. First of all, here are the three texts:

*With this and that I tried to hold the bucket together.
Then the bottom fell out. Where water does not collect, the moon does not linger.*

Chiyonos
Japan 13th century

*The supporting leg bends sideways; the void shows its claws and fangs.
Even if we understand deeply, there is still sand in the eye.*

Jiaoans
China 10th/11th century

*Sixty-six times have these eyes beheld the changing scene of autumn I have said enough about moonlight,
Ask no more. Only listen to the voice of pines and cedars when no wind stirs.*

Ryonen
Japan 17th Century

How many times in my life had I tried to 'hold the bucket together'. How often had I thought I understood something. And now for the sixty-third time my eyes have been able to experience autumn.

The koans and poems of the nuns from early China and Japan are a wonderful accompaniment to those of the mystics Meister Eckhart, Johannes Tauler and Rumi

from the 13th/14th century, whose simple words have accompanied me for many years.

*Examine yourself, and wherever you find yourself, take leave of yourself.
This is the best way of all.*

Meister Eckhart
13th century..

*When a person is engaged in inner contemplation, the human ego has nothing for itself.
The ego would like to have something.
And it would like to know something.
And it would like to want something.
Until this threefold something in him dies, Life even appears sour.
That doesn't happen in one day.
And not in a short time either.
You have to endure.
And in the end, it becomes light and joyful.*

Johannes Tauler

*I have travelled the whole world
in search of God
and found him nowhere.
When I returned home,
I saw him standing at the door of my heart.
And he said:
'I've been waiting here for you for eternities.'
So I went into my house with him.*

Rumi,
Persia 13th/14th century

The relevance of these old masters never ceases to amaze me. Four further poems by Heiner van Sandt, which have also accompanied me for several years, I could be offered here to provide a direct link to the present day, to the world of modern man. However, as his poems have not yet been published, they are not reproduced in this article. And I am always pleased to finish with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and to be able to pay tribute to him as well.

A new performance programme came about quite naturally, and took the title of the 'The Hidden Lamp' as its name:

'As if the lamp were hidden...'

Where could I perform it? An earlier contact that I had re-established led me to a very special performance venue in Cologne, the Baptistry behind the Dionysus Fountain between the main railway station and

Cologne Cathedral. The Baptistry with its eight-sided baptismal font (discovered in 1866) is the oldest archaeological evidence of early Christianity in Cologne. As part of the underground railway construction, the Archdiocese of Cologne created a special and simple event space, which was inaugurated in 2016. The walls are lined with bronze panels. A light installation by artist Mischa Kuball comes on at dusk and can be seen from the street.



»ALS OB DAS LICHT VERBORGEN SEI...«

Annette Schramm spricht Texte von MystikerInnen aus früheren Jahrhunderten sowie Gedichte aus der Neuzeit. Es geht um Sinn-Findung angesichts von Vergänglichkeit und Beschleunigung in einer dahineilenden Alltagswelt: »Wo befindet sich die Quelle für Vitalität und Lebensfreude?«

Die vorgetragene Lyrik geht Hand in Hand mit der ungewöhnlichen Musik von Jochen Fassbender auf neuartigen, von ihm selbst entwickelten Klangobjekten aus Glas, Stein und Metall. Sprache und Klänge kommen in Dialog miteinander, verweben sich und werden eins.

ReferentInnen:

Annette Schramm, SchauspielerIn
Jochen Fassbender, Klangkünstler

Veranstalter:

Katholisches Bildungswerk Köln, Melanchthon-Akademie Köln,
Dombauhütte Kölner Dom, Katholisch in Köln-Mitte

Fr 12.04.2024 | 19.00 Uhr

Ort: Baptisterium | Ostseite Kölner Dom, Treppe runter
Am Dionysosbrunnen | Durchgang zum Kurt-Hackenberg-Platz
Eintritt frei: Um eine Spende wird gebeten



Photo: Dombauhütte Kölner Dom

KultUrQuelle Baptisterium

»ALS OB DAS LICHT VERBORGEN SEI...«

Fr 12.04.2024 | 19.00 Uhr



I could well envisage a performance together with the sound artist Jochen Fassbender and his newly developed and self-built instruments made of glass, stone and metal; especially as we had already had the experience of a wonderful artistic collaboration on 'Five years of Fukushima'.

Jochen set up his instruments in the four corners of the room, which was very impressive in itself. The packed auditorium generated both a special stillness and an alertness. Language and spherical sounds filled the room, were interwoven and seemed to transcend material boundaries.

Just after I had said my final word, Mischa Kuball's ball of light was suddenly projected onto the ceiling in the centre of the room, as if it had been staged that way, and enveloped us all in its play of light. The ancient Greek letters alpha and omega appeared on the walls; soft, delicate tones of the metal harp accompanied the lightshow.

This event on 12 April 2024 had a special meaning for me in more ways than one. It had been 7 1/2 years since the last performance of my solo stage show. Previously, I had experienced an inner nervousness and the need to 'be good', but this time I had a completely different experience.

Since that time, the practice of Thich Nhat Hanh and the accompanying mind-training had become more deeply rooted in me – especially due to the two-year Corona period. I developed the treasured habit of stopping from time to time in my everyday life. I was also able to see myself in the lineage of my ancestors and my spiritual friends, which gave me a new perspective on my own life. This new perspective became an ever present with my husband, Ivo, the Cologne and Windeck meditation group and individual visitors; it became the basis of all my thoughts and actions. Perhaps this daily practice also had an effect on my art.

Entering the Baptistry for the first time, I was filled with a deep sense of awe. I felt what a gift it was to be allowed to play in this room. Inside I felt a deep trust that any difficulties and insecurities I was feeling beforehand would be overcome. Before the performance, I connected with all the friends who were thinking of me at the agreed time, with the authors of those wonderful texts and with my Christian roots and ancestors. I had the feeling that I was not doing this event alone, but that I was part of a larger context.

My heartfelt thanks to everyone who made this event possible.

Annette Schramm

Deep River of Great Compassion, June 2024

Meditation:

Fear and the courage to love

To my dear Dharma teacher, inspiring healing companion and compassionate friend,
With great gratitude to Georg Lolos

Singing bowl
10 deep breaths

Part I

- I. Breathing in, I am aware that I am in love and that I am now telling myself non-stop stories from my past.
Breathing out, I let them go.
In: Being in love and stories from the past
Out: Letting go
- II. Breathing in, I realise that all my old emotional pain is coming up.
Breathing out, I accept it and let it go.
In: Old emotional pain
Out: Accepting and letting go
- III. Breathing in, I realise that my old traumas are coming up.
Breathing out, I feel a lot of compassion for myself as a small child and for myself as a big child who suffered greatly from the violence and aggression between her parents, and in some of her relationships.
In: Suffering from old traumas
Out: Compassion for myself
- IV. Breathing in, I feel fear of new pain.
Breathing out, I accept my fear and thank her for wanting to protect me.
In: Fear of new pain
Out: Accepting and thanking
- V. Breathing in, I realise that this fear is my projection onto the future and my horror fantasy.
Breathing out, I let it go.
In: Future projection and horror fantasy
Out: Letting go
- VI. Breathing in, I realise that I am locking myself in a cage of pain (from the past) and fear (of the future).
Breathing out, I feel deep sadness, loneliness and a longing for true love.
In: Locking myself in a cage
Out: Sadness, loneliness and longing for true love
- VII. Breathing in, I return to the here and now and listen to my inner voice.
Breathing out, I trust my inner voice, which tells me: 'Everything is fine here and now.
Everything will be fine with this man, but not easy'.
In: Listening to the inner voice, here and now
Out: Trusting the inner voice

VIII. Breathing in, I consciously decide to open the door out of my cage.
Breathing out, I pluck up the courage to open myself to true love

In: Open my cage

Out: Courage for true love

IX. Breathing in, I feel lightness, joy of life and love.
Breathing out, I feel liberated and ready for a new beginning: with myself and the man I love.

In: Lightness, joy of life and love

Out: Liberation and the courage to begin anew

Part II

X. Breathing in, I realise with horror that my mind is once again cloudy and noisy, and my heart is once again full of pain and longing.

Breathing out, I feel restlessness, fear and deep sadness again.

In: Observe my noisy mind and my weeping heart

Out: restlessness, fear, deep sadness

XI. Breathing in, I come into the here and now and listen to my inner voice again.

Breathing out, I trust my inner voice, which now tells me more:

'Only if you stop telling yourself stories about this man and projecting your fears onto him while in direct contact with him will you experience him as he really is in this precious moment.

Only if you manage to create a free space between breaths and stop the film can something very beautiful and precious manifest in this free space'.

In: Listening to the inner voice, here and now

Out: Trusting the inner voice

XII. Breathing in, I visualise this man and ask myself: what do I really feel for him when my mind becomes still and my heart quiet?

Breathing out, I hear the answer: pure love, our deep connection and the happiness that I feel.

In: What do I really feel in silence and stillness?

Out: pure love, connection, happiness

XIII. Breathing in, I discover that I also feel this for other people who are important to me: only in the stillness of the mind and in the calmness of the heart.

Breathing out, I am happy that I am now one step closer to spiritual love.

In: Insight – objects of my love are interchangeable

Out: Joy of approaching spiritual love

XIV. Breathing in, I realise that self-love and spiritual love mirror each other.

Breathing out, I rejoice that my self-love and my spiritual love nourish each other.

In: Self-love and spiritual love like mirrors in a mirror

Out: Joy

10 deep breaths

Singing bowl

End

True Powerful Peace of Mind

Feedback for apulian Retreat

6–9 June 2024 (Italy)

I am so grateful for this new experience and I deeply thank the EIAB Monk and Nuns for coming back to Italy.

In particular, I am thankful for the Dharma Teachings which I found really relevant, really honest and useful to our real lives. I tried to embrace every precious Phap An's word, full of his experience, compassion and awareness; for instance, I appreciated as a great gift the teaching regarding our practice which is "to understand the process of productive Karma and take great care of it with our deep love and compassion, cultivating the firm aspiration to reduce and transform it for the relief of ourselves, of our ancestors and future generations".

I would also like to share that during the Retreat we carried out different activities together, according to a pleasant and varied program, with which I felt at ease and free to organize my needs without discomfort; I remember in those days I was completing a whole year of work in my job and I needed to stop for a few hours to calm down the agitation I felt in my mind and body. Even though I wasn't really centered, I'm confident that the gifts of the Retreat arrive little by little over the days after and I am so in trust and grateful.



At the moment, in my daily life, according to the Retreat teachings, I try to enjoy myself and be aware "of" something "in" something, even when an unpleasant experience arises. I try to be solid and confident in my breath and in the Life.

I also feel deep gratitude for the lovely smiling Nuns and for the warming embrace of Sister Song Nghiem's Heart for us. A joyful hug to every participant and to the Sanghas organization.

Respectfully, Thank You Thay Thich Nhat Hanh from my heart. Thank You so much precious EIAB.

A Lothus flower!

Angela Brigida, Italy

(Ps. I really apologize for the mistakes in English ... I'm learning :-)



Vietnamese retreat in the holiday resort of Salem-Rostock

from 25 to 28 April 2024

Impressions and feelings after the retreat:



We would like to sincerely thank the monks and nuns and the organisers, especially Ms Natascha Tessmann (Managing Director of Eathappy), Mr and Mrs Hà My and Thế Anh, who sowed the seeds of love and created conditions for everyone to have the opportunity to learn from the very meaningful and useful teachings. We hope that there will be more retreats of this kind in the future.

Coming home to yourself is always a significant moment, and arouses many emotions in those who have the opportunity to participate in retreats like this.

We heard and saw things at the retreat that we had also heard, seen, done or experienced in our everyday lives. But here at the retreat, these things are explained in detail, in a way that is easy to understand and in a systematic way. The retreat helped us to gain a deeper insight into people and animals and thus to better deal with our problems at home and at work. For me personally, the days of the retreat were days of peace in my soul and I learned many important and meaningful things.

(Anh Lê Hùng)



A wonderful retreat. The organisation was very good. Although it was the first time, the arrangements and planning were very well thought out and methodical. I was also impressed how the organisers always paid attention to the participants' reactions and reacted immediately to improve things and thus help everyone to have an even better experience. I was impressed by the powerful energy of the young people that fitted so perfectly. At this retreat, I experienced the practice of touching the earth for the first time. The monks and nuns explained the meaning of the three prostrations in a way that I had never learnt or felt before. I experienced a very scientific world full of spirituality and loving energy. I wonder what it would be like if everyone could encounter and understand the flow of spiritual energy.

After this retreat, I realised that I still have a lot more to learn and want to learn. I hope that I can help with the organisation so that I can learn more from my fellow human beings.

(Hoàng Long)

The retreat gave us so much joy and opened our hearts and minds. We received things we did not expect in a more relaxed and peaceful way. My daughter now understands that reconciliation, forgiveness, tolerance and love are the most wonderful things. And there is no denying that this course stirred up a lot of emotions, and that everyone came closer together. People opened up and shared their feelings and their lives with others. The programme was so rich. We learnt and experienced a lot for first-time practitioners.

(Nguyễn Thị Oanh)



I was very happy to take part in the retreat! It was a great honour and pleasure for me to get to know all the members of the group. Even though we only lived together for four days, I felt like a family! Ha My, The Anh, Hien... always radiated happiness and joy, even though they worked so hard to look after everyone! Especially on the day of the bonfire, I was so happy that it felt like I was reliving my youth!

It was my first time at a retreat with a lot of difficult practices, but listening to the teachings of the monks and nuns was wonderful! The nuns are as close as a gentle mother! 'Love given is love that lasts forever. Love remains forever and ever.'

(Chị Thái Thị Linh)



The retreat was very meaningful for me. It gave me the time and opportunity to come back to myself and reflect more deeply. The monks and nuns reminded me how to look deeper within myself! I also learned to think more deeply about causes and conditions and everything that happens, and to learn how to practice to eliminate bad karma, which I usually don't pay attention to or don't recognise. When I ate, I learnt to think about where the meal comes from. This makes me much more grateful to my wife for cooking for me and our children every day! There was much more useful advice. Practising in this way enables us to bring deep gratitude into our lives!!!

If I can attend the next retreat, it would be a very precious and a blessing for me!

If we had more time for Dharma teaching, Dharma sharing and meditation, people would experience transformation. They would realise that the adversities and difficulties in life are transitory and not permanent. Thanks to this, everyone would learn to think about cause and effect and learn how to change their mind and thus their life in order to live peacefully and happily with themselves and with others. These are very useful things! I would like to thank the monks and nuns, Ms Natascha Tessmann and Mr and Mrs The Anh and Ha My once again for giving me and the whole Eathappy group the opportunity to practice in this beneficial retreat!

(Nguyễn Hồng Thu)



During the retreat, I realised or learned that I can be more mindful in all aspects of daily life, even in the simplest activities. I learned to love myself more, to reduce the stress in my life and to have more compassion for myself and for the mistakes of others. In the sharing of experiences, I would have liked us to have shared more personal problems. Then the monks and nuns could have given us advice on how to solve our situations and problems.

(Chị Bùi Thị Thu Lý)



european institute
of applied buddhism

eiab

European Institute of
Applied Buddhism gGmbH
Schaumburgweg 3 | 51545 Waldbröl
+ 49 (0)2291 9071373
info@eiab.eu | registrar@eiab.eu
www.eiab.eu