

A Short History of the European Institute of Applied Buddhism

In September 2008, Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh (Thầy) sent a group of 20 monks and nuns from Plum Village, the Buddhist monastery he founded in southwest France, to the town of Waldbroël, about an hour from the city of Cologne, to set up a non-profit organization in Germany called the European Institute of Applied Buddhism (EIAB).

Since his time as a young monastic, Thầy's deep wish was to bring Buddhism into the modern world. He did not want Buddhism to remain an exotic philosophical ideal out of reach for most people. Rather, he wanted people from all walks of life to be able to apply it to help reduce and transform their suffering and that of their family members and wider community. This dream is shared by monks, nuns and lay friends of the International Plum Village Sangha.

The study program at EIAB includes annual retreats over Easter, summer, and New Year, as well as weekend mindfulness courses for those seeking ways to address the pressures and challenges of modern life. Among more than 100 courses we offer annually is a wide range of topics such as Buddhist psychology, transforming anger and depression, navigating psychological crises, helping to heal and nourish healthy communication between parents and children, family members, relatives and friends. We also offer courses designed for police officers, politicians, psychotherapists, educators, and businesspeople, among others (please visit our website at www.eiab.eu for more information about our courses, programs and related activities).

These, along with programs for young people, school students, interfaith exchanges and dialogue, public talks, concerts, and support for regional activities, have been organized both on the EIAB campus and in towns and cities across Germany, as well as other locations across Europe, plus teaching tours in Hong Kong and Thailand. Since its inception, the EIAB Sangha has reached hundreds of thousands of participants, introducing them to the practices of mindfulness, love, and understanding. In many cases, these practices have led to profound healing and transformation, bringing joy, happiness, and harmony to individuals and their families.

To find premises expansive enough to house his vision of an Applied Buddhist Institute serving the whole of Europe, Thầy and his assistants spent years searching in Germany until their attention was drawn to Waldbröl and a wooded estate with a large historical building. It was acquired from federal government authorities and on the 10th of September 2008, we moved into what Thầy named the Asoka Institute (Viện Vô Ưu). One year later, we were fortunate to acquire a second, smaller building very close by. In honour of the monastery Thầy entered in Vietnam to become a monk, this second building was named the Great Compassion Monastery. Reflecting also the town's name Waldbröl (which means “forest”; “Bröl,” is the name of a stream that rises there), its full title is the Great Compassion Monastery in the Land of Woods and Streams (Lâm Tuyền Địa Đại Bi Tự). A section of the Asoka Institute serves as the residence for monks at EIAB, while part of the Great Compassion Monastery is the nuns' residence.

The building now known as the Asoka Institute was constructed between 1895 and 1897ⁱ as a hospital for patients with mental and physical disabilities. Managed by the Protestant Congregation, the hospital was inaugurated on the 9th of June 1897ⁱⁱ. After the National Socialists came to power in 1933, individuals with mental or physical disabilitiesⁱⁱⁱ were among those who, under Nazism's racial purity ideology, were subjected to compulsory sterilization^{iv}, forced abortions, or euthanasia^v.

Once EIAB was established, we were able through further historical study and interactions with local residents to understand more about the traumatic experiences^{vi} associated with this site during the Nazi era. When asked why he chose Waldbröl for his institute, Thầy would often smile and say that it was Waldbröl that chose him and the Plum Village Sangha. It was Thầy's Great Compassion to help people reconcile and transform their suffering, not only in Vietnam but around the world, that drew him to this place. The spiritual energy of Thầy and the Plum Village Sangha continues to embrace all who suffered where EIAB now stands and to create a sanctuary for reconciliation, transformation and peace.

After the Second World War, the building again became a hospital. In 1969, the hospital relocated to a larger complex, and the building was used for border protection and related activities. From 1975 to 2006, it was operated by the German Federal Army (Deutsche Bundeswehr).

The main building measures 150 meters in length and between 12 to 16 meters in width, with six floors, including the basement, encompassing a total area of approximately 12,000 square meters. This is sufficient to accommodate up to 500 people for residential retreats and courses. There are also small rooms for meetings but no single facility for holding larger gatherings, which is why the Institute applied from the outset for permission to construct a purpose-built meditation hall.

In the 10th anniversary edition of EIAB's Magazine, published on our website in 2018, we describe in detail the regulatory and construction hurdles that had to be overcome before we could open EIAB to the public. We also provide a timeline of projects undertaken to upgrade accommodation and dining facilities for friends joining residential retreats and other programs, and to preserve this heritage building to highest conservation and environmental standards.

Thanks to the love, generosity and support of many friends around the world, we were able to renovate one-fifth of the Asoka Building by 2010 and complete the ground floor in 2012. We are privileged to have on permanent display there a beautiful collection of Thầy's treasured calligraphies.

To balance and heal the energy of this land from the suffering of those who lived here in earlier times, we have landscaped the Institute's extensive gardens with Buddhist statues and themes that create a calm, peaceful energy. There are paths designed for walking meditation, and architectural features to encourage contemplation on the development of Buddhist thought. A 21-meter-high stupa housing a great bronze bell incorporates in its structure essential Buddhist teachings.

We also constructed a colonnaded entrance into the Institute, adorned with the four flowers of the unlimited mind: loving-kindness, compassion, empathetic joy, and inclusiveness. These "flowers" rest upon a stone beam supported by four columns representing the Buddha's Fourfold Sangha of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen. At the top of this large structure are two calligraphies by Thầy carved in German, which translate as: "This is because that is" and "Peace in oneself, peace in the world."

From the fall of 2013 onwards, after four years of design and construction, everyone coming to practice at EIAB could enjoy a modern kitchen and a beautiful dining hall with wide open views. In front is a small lotus pond in the shape of a crescent moon or a young leaf. A ring-shaped road was built to embrace the lotus pond and the dining hall, harmonizing and connecting EIAB's two main sections: the Asoka Institute and the Great Compassion Monastery.

With the continued support of friends with green fingers, gardening projects around the Institute keep enhancing EIAB, creating an even more beautiful environment for the whole Sangha to enjoy. In 2019, we renovated two more sections of the Asoka Building. By 2021, the entire Great Compassion Monastery, including its roof, had been fully renovated.

After 16 years, during which we have managed to overcome countless obstacles, 2025 will mark the beginning – at last – of construction for our meditation hall: The Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh Great Hall of Peace. We shall also continue renovating the remaining two parts of the Asoka Institute. Our hope is that by 2030, all of EIAB's buildings will have been completely renovated.

There is still much work to be done to realize Thầy's 100-year vision of an Applied Buddhist Institute for Europe and beyond. We are merely beginning to lay the foundations. Nevertheless, we have faith that we shall be able to fulfil Thầy's wish to contribute to the alleviation of suffering in the world and the cultivation of peace.

We are confident that within the next few years, construction of The Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh Great Hall of Peace and further renovations of the Asoka Institute building will be realized – thanks to the love and generosity of friends and Thầy's supporters around the world. This will allow an enduring institution, embodying Thầy's vision of Applied Buddhism, to manifest fully in Europe for the world.

Bhikshu Thích Chân Pháp Ấn,
and the Sisters and Brothers of the European Institute of Applied Buddhism

On the 22nd day of January in the year 2025

Endnotes:

ⁱ German Federal Army (Deutsche Bundeswehr) exhibition 1997, 100th Anniversary.

Baubeginn war 1895, Fertigstellung im Frühjahr 1897. Im Juni zogen die ersten Kranken ein. Die Anstalt verfügte über 350 Betten für Geistesranke und das angeschlossene Krankenhaus über 36 Betten.

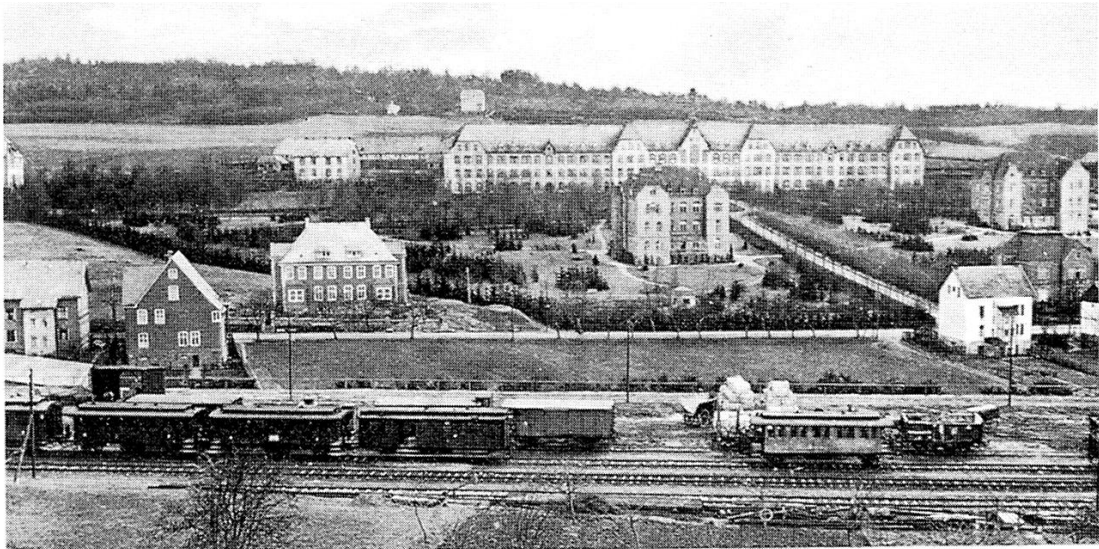
“Construction began in 1895; Completion was in spring 1897. The first patients arrived in June. The hospital had 350 beds available for the mentally ill and the adjacent hospital more than 36 beds.”

ⁱⁱ Birgit Rosendahl-Kraas: “Die Stadt der Volkstraktorenwerke. Eine Stadtutopie im „Dritten Reich“. Die Planungen und Großbauten der Deutschen Arbeitsfront für die Stadt Waldbröl. Martina Galunder-Verlag, Wiehl 1999, S. 34.

Am 27. Januar 1893 wurde aus diesem Anlaß die "Evangelisches Krankenhaus zu Waldbröl GmbH" gegründet. Das Baugelände für die Anstalt wurde von der evangelischen Kirchengemeinde zur Verfügung gestellt¹⁶. Die Heil- und Pflegeanstalt konnte am Mittwoch, dem 2. Juni 1897 eingeweiht werden, und die Eröffnungsfeier des Krankenhauses fand am 9. Juni 1897 statt¹⁷: *"Die ursprüngliche Anstalt umfaßt*

zunächst das Hauptgebäude, noch im Kasernenstil vergangener Jahrzehnte errichtet. Es ist ein mächtiger dreigeschossiger Bau von 150 Meter Länge, der allein 300 Patienten aufnehmen kann, und außerdem im Mittelbau die gesamten Räume für die Verwaltung, im 1. Stock die Schwesternstation und im 2. die geräumige Kapelle mit zwei seitlich sich anschließenden großen Festräumen enthält".¹⁸

"On 27 January, 1893, the 'Evangelical Hospital Waldbröl Ltd' was founded, with the land for the construction provided by the Evangelical Church Community. The sanatorium and nursing home was inaugurated on Wednesday 2 June, 1897, and the opening ceremony took place on 9 June, 1897: "The original sanatorium initially encompassed the main building, built in the barrack style typical of previous decades. It is an imposing, three-storey construction, 150 metres long, capable of housing 300 patients. The central section housed the administrative offices, with the nurses' station located on the first floor. The second floor featured a spacious chapel, flanked by two large adjoining rooms.""



Waldbröl — Heil- und Pflegeanstalt

Während des ersten Weltkrieges wurde in einigen Räumen der Anstalt und des Krankenhauses vom 31. August 1914 bis zum 23. September 1919 das unter militärischer Verwaltung stehende "Reservelazarett Waldbröl" eingerichtet²².

Abb. 22 - Heil- und Pflegeanstalt Waldbröl (um 1915)

"During the First World War the "Reservelazarett Waldbröl" under military command was housed in several rooms of the sanatorium and hospital from 31 August, 1914 to 23 September, 1919."

Fig. 22 - Waldbröl sanatorium and nursing home (around 1915)

Die Verdrängung der Heil- und Pflegeanstalt im Nationalsozialismus und die Übernahme der Anlage durch die Deutsche Arbeitsfront

Da Waldbröl schon sehr früh eine "Hochburg des Nationalsozialismus" war, ist es nicht verwunderlich, daß die Heil- und Pflegeanstalt den Hitler-Anhängern alsbald ein Dorn im Auge war.

Die NS-Rassenideologie, die im Dritten Reich den Rang einer Staatsdoktrin innehatte²⁶, bedingte eine Menschen-Auslese nach "Erbgesundheit" und vor allem "arischer Abstammung". Die eingesetzten Mittel reichten von gewaltsamer Geburtenverhütung bis zu "Euthanasie"-Aktionen²⁷. Auch die Waldbröler Anstalt sollte von dem "hygienischen Rassismus", der sich vor allem gegen psychisch Kranke, geistig Behinderte und gesellschaftliche Randgruppen richtete²⁸, nicht verschont bleiben.

"The eviction of the Sanatorium and Hospital during National Socialism and the takeover of the premises by the German Workers Front.

Given that Waldbröl was an early "stronghold of National Socialism," it is unsurprising that the sanatorium and hospital quickly became a target for Hitler's supporters.

Nazi racist ideology, which was enshrined as state doctrine during the Third Reich, demanded a process of selection based on "hereditary health" and, above all, "Aryan ancestry." The methods employed ranged from forced birth control to euthanasia. The imposition of this so-called 'racial hygiene', which was directed primarily against the mentally ill and disabled, and marginalised groups did not leave the patients of the Waldbröl clinic unscathed."

^{iv} Simon, Hans: Zur Geschichte der Heil- und Pflegeanstalt Waldbröl 1893-1938. In: Beiträge zur Oberbergischen Geschichte. Hg.: Bergischer Geschichtsverein Abteilung Oberberg. EV 1924, Bd. 2, Gummersbach 1989, S. 140.

In Hausen bei Waldbreitbach im Westerwald war das Kloster der Franziskanermönche durch die Provinzialverwaltung ersteigert worden. Am 14. November 1938 begann der Umzug der Waldbröler Heil- und Pflegeanstalt nach dort.

Letzter leitender Arzt der Anstalt in Waldbröl war Dr. Bersch. Mit dem Gesetz zur Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses, das die Nazis am 14. Juli 1933, schon kurz nach ihrer Machtübernahme, verkündeten und das im Januar 1934 in Kraft trat, hatten sie sich eine Legitimation geschaffen für die Zwangssterilisation von Geisteskranken. Von diesem Gesetz wurde in Waldbröl oft Gebrauch gemacht. Es kamen dann von Bonn Gerichtskommissionen, und bestimmten diejenigen, bei denen die Zwangssterilisation durchgeführt werden sollte. Zwangssterilisationen wurden auch bei politischen Gegnern der Nazis durchgeführt. So war in die Waldbröler Anstalt ein älterer Herr eingewiesen worden, der seinen Mund zu voll genommen hatte (sic). Er wurde vor die Wahl gestellt, sich sterilisieren zu lassen oder in ein KZ überführt zu werden.

“The Fransiscan monastery in Hausen near Waldbreitbach in the Westerwald was sold at auction by the local municipality. On 14 November, 1938, the Waldbröl sanatorium and hospital began to relocate there.

The last senior doctor in Waldbröl was Dr. Bursch. With the introduction of the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Offspring shortly after seizing power, which came into force in January 1934, the Nazis created the legitimation for the forced sterilization of the mentally ill. The law was frequently invoked in Waldbröl. It was imposed by the Bonn Judicial Commission and used to determine who should be subject to forced sterilization. Additionally, the law was also used to sterilize opponents of the Nazi regime. In one notable case, an elderly man who had criticized the regime was confronted with the choice of undergoing sterilization or deportation to a concentration camp.”

^v Birgit Rosendahl-Kraas, S. 35.

^{vi} Simon, Hans, S. 126.

Die fünfzigste Wiederkehr des Tages, an dem die Heil- und Pflegeanstalt Waldbröl mit rund 700 Geisteskranken und über 100 Mann Personal in das Franziskanerkloster des kleinen Ortes Hausen bei Waldbreitbach im Westerwald umzog, gab Veranlassung, einen Rückblick auf die Geschichte dieser Anstalt zu halten. Der Umzug begann am 14. November 1938 und endete mit Ablauf des Monats Januar 1939.

The fiftieth anniversary of the relocation of the Waldbröl sanatorium and hospital, which involved the transfer of approximately 700 mentally ill patients and over 100 staff members to the former Franciscan monastery in the small village of Hausen near Waldbreitbach in the Westerwald, served as an occasion to reflect on the institution's history. The relocation began on 14 November, 1938 and was completed by the end of January, 1939

Simon, Hans, S. 140. The numbers of patients in 1938:

	Frauen	Männer
Schizophrenie	253	105
Paralyse	16	21
Schwachsinn	74	52
Epilepsie	67	72
Cholera	2	1
Encephalitis	12	8
Alkoholismus	4	2
Psychopathie	2	4
	430	265