

Happy Continuation, Thay!

Tặng thân Xóm Dừa
California 2011

Mục lục - Contents

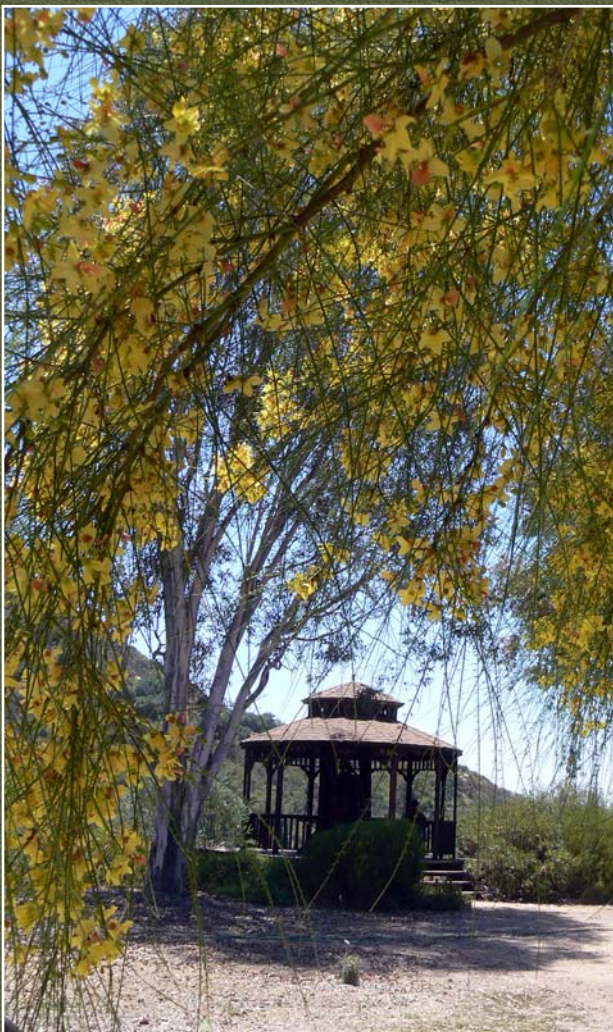
- 5. Happy Continuation, Thầy!
- 7. The Beauty of Brown – *Tiffany Lê*
- 11. I Have Waken Up From My Dream – *Loh Yit Phing*
- 16. Liberation by Modifying Perception – *Chân Đạo Hành*
- 21. From Roshi Joan Halifax – *Roshi Joan Halifax*
- 25. Early Days With Thầy – *Eileen Kiera*
- 29. Thầy in My Life – *Clare Fearnley*
- 43. The Source of Peace and Joy – *Tâm Hiền*
- 49. How Thích Nhất Hạnh and Plum Village Change My Life – *Fiona MacLeod*
- 53. Prior to Meeting Thầy – *Helga and Karl Riedl*
- 59. How Thầy Save My Life – *Arno Elfert*
- 65. Dear Thầy – *Baruch Shapiro*
- 69. Hermit to La Boi – *Châu Yoder*
- 73. Letter to Sư Ông – *Chân Bảo Thành*
- 77. Influence of Thích Nhất Hạnh on Me – *Cheri Maples*
- 86. Taking Action – *Joseph Emet*
- 95. Thơ Ở Làng Cây Phong – *Chân Văn*
- 97. Một Vị Thầy Sống Hạnh Nghèo Nàn – *Cổ San*
- 103. Nhớ Ổn Thầy – *Tâm Minh Cảnh*
- 109. Hạt Giống Đã Đơm Bông – *Tâm Từ Phúc*
- 113. Sức Mạnh Của Pháp Môn Làng Mai - *Thủy Đỗ*
- 122. Chốn Ấy Có Nụ Cười – *Tâm Minh Nguyệt*
- 126. Thích Nhất Hạnh, Zen, a Smile – *Juan Carlos del Rio*
- 129. The Joy of Practiced Cannot Be Contained – *Carl Dunlap and Leslie Rawls*
- 137. No Mud, No Questions, No Lotus... a Way to Being - *Chân Tăng Sơn*
- 141. Just One Half Breath – *Chân Huyền*

All rights reserved • Limited edition • Private collection • Design by Pun & Pnt

Cover photo by Chân Lạc • Published by Tăng thân Xóm Dừa • xomduacali@yahoo.com

Printed in the United States of America, 2011.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any other information storage and retrieval systems or technologies now known or later developed, without permission in writing from the authors.



Happy Continuation, Thầy!

Cũng như mùa thu năm ngoái, tăng thân Xóm Dừa chúng con lại có dịp thu góp bài vở của nhiều bạn đạo khắp nơi, thực hiện một cuốn sách nhỏ để gửi tới bậc Thầy thương kính của chúng con, như một lời tri ân từ đáy lòng.

Chúng con xin kính chúc Sư Ông tiếp tục biểu hiện uy nghi, khang kiện và an nhiên, trong sự kính ngưỡng. của toàn cầu.

Cầu mong chư Bụt, chư Bồ Tát và các Thánh hiền tăng gia hộ cho Thầy chúng con.

Tháng 10, 2011

Tăng thân Xóm Dừa kính bạch.



The Beauty of Brown

The biggest lesson I learned about Buddhism didn't occur to me at the "Big Meditation Hall" at Deer Park Monastery. It occurred to me in the monastery's bathroom.

There is a sign on every bathroom door that reads "*Neither defiled nor immaculate, neither increasing nor decreasing**." When I first read the sign, I couldn't understand the meaning of the words.

The accident

It was a Saturday night and my brother called me on the telephone. "I just got into a car accident," he said. My brother was okay but his wife was not.

They were on the way home from dinner in downtown Houston, when another driver slammed into the back of their car. The car was crushed like a soda can. My brother's wife was struck in the head by a piece of metal. She was 7-months pregnant and in critical condition.

Her brain swelled like a balloon, and doctors had to drill a hole in her skull. My brother's wife had a traumatic brain injury. Her baby was born prematurely.

My lesson

It would take six months for my brother's wife to be discharged from the hospital. She doesn't remember giving birth to a healthy 3-pound baby. She lost her ability to talk, walk, and control her bodily functions such as going to the bathroom.

I took time off my work at Nguoi Viet Daily news to support my brother. I thought I was going to be in Texas for three weeks. But three weeks stretched to three months. And during those three months, I lived at the hospital.

While my brother went to work I was at my sister-in-law's bedside talking to her, reading to her, making sure she was comfortable. I massaged her arms and legs, wiped her drool, and changed her diaper.

The first time I changed my sister-in-law's diaper, I was hesitant. But I remembered Thay's teachings on compassion and understanding. I asked myself, "If I was in her body, would I want to be lying in my soiled diaper all day?" I immediately put on a pair of latex gloves and grabbed a new diaper for my sister-in-law.

"Neither defiled nor immaculate, neither increasing nor decreasing."

The things on the diaper were simply objects.

"Neither defiled nor immaculate, neither increasing nor decreasing."

Our bodies are objects. The odor didn't bother me anymore.

And suddenly I felt a surge of happiness as I wiped my brother's wife. She felt clean, comfortable and could rest easier. Resting was part of her healing. I was happy to help her heal.

Tiffany Le

Tiffany Le (Compassion Dedication of the Heart), 27, is a former Marine and journalist. She is currently a nursing student in Houston. She recently quit her job as a journalist so that she can follow a path that helps people. The first time she saw Thay speak at a retreat was in 2005. Tiffany was hungover from partying, but was at the retreat because she drove her mom.

*The passage comes from the Heart of Perfect Understanding Sutra



I Have Waken-up from My Dream

When I was small, I was not very happy. Every New Year Eve, I see my mom cry. New Year for many people and children is a happy moment, but I kind of understand why my mom feels so sad about it. My dad is a loving father, but he likes to drink and gamble. Every New Year Eve, he will drink extensively and gamble. He is not good at drinking and gambling, so he gets drunk and loses all his savings before the New Year. My mom is a patient and wise woman. For many years she worked so hard for her six children, until one day she couldn't stand it anymore and thought of committing suicide. Luckily my dad found her before she jumped into the sea.

As the eldest child in my family, I am very mature despite my young age. I am doubtful about the meaning of this life. It is like a bad dream that I am in, and I want to wake up but I don't know how. I am searching for something that can save me from drowning in this life, so I can save my sisters and brothers. This is what really motivates me to not give up

in searching. Many relatives of mine are lured by money and involved in unethical activities like drugs and sex. Even when their parents don't know where the money comes from, they will praise their children for earning so much money. I told myself that this is not the path, but where is my path?

I insist on studying though my family refuses to pay for my tuition fees at college. As I am from small village in the north region (Kedah), I have to travel to the central region (Kuala Lumpur) for my studying and earn money to support myself. I am alone and completely on my own for my living. It is not easy for me, but I understand how difficult it is for my parents to support me as they have six children that rely on them. So I don't blame them. Thanks to my education, I am able to read. One of my college friends recommended me to read *Old Path White Cloud* by Thich Nhat Hanh. From that book, I started to read more books that were written by Thay. After reading Thay's book, I feel that there is another path that I can walk on in my life. One day, Merit Magazine wrote about Plum Village in France. I was delighted, but I never thought that I would have a chance to visit Plum Village.

In year 2004, I decided to get a loan and further study in United Kingdom. Before I flew to United Kingdom, my younger sister who is one year younger than me committed suicide. She jumped into the sea and died. It was few days before New Year. She suffered so much after her divorce and had to raise her daughter by herself. She was addicted to drugs before she committed suicide. I left my homeland with sadness after we settled her funeral. I didn't cry, though I was sad inside of me.

I visited Plum Village after my study in United Kingdom was

completed with the help of my friend, Min Tat. I was there for three weeks in the Winter Retreat. I felt that I was embraced by the sangha. I want to say that it was the first time in my life (ever since I could remember) that I felt so safe and secure. It was so beautiful in Plum Village, like my heaven on earth. When I entered the total relaxation session with sister Chan Kong, she sang for me. I felt released, I cried and cried until I fell asleep. Thank you for letting me cry.

Thay has proven that the path of liberation is possible. I stopped running in my life. I felt that I was home at Plum Village and with all my old sangha friends. I am cured and I see my path in this life. I knew that I was strong enough to walk on the path. The day I left Plum Village, I could see a little fear in me as I needed to leave the community for my journey. I had placed the community of Plum Village deep inside of my heart.

I vow to cherish my life, live simple and practise to walk on the path of liberation so that I can help myself and people around me. I will always be with the community that is practising. I hope that "my life is my message" as well.

Loh Yit Phing

***Loh Yit Phing**, a 35-year-old teacher, took the five mindfulness training in 2004 at Plum Village. Married with three daughters, Phing currently lives in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and practices with Fragrant Palm Sangha.*



Liberation by Modifying Perception

I first met Thay in 1986 when he was on his Australia Tour with Sister Chân Không, who then was Miss Cao Ngoc Phuong.

In the very first sitting meditation session in my life, I sat next to Thay at Phap Bao Pagoda, Sydney. Noting that I was clumsily trying to cross my legs, Thay helped show me how. I confessed: I can not yet dear Thay. He determined: Yes, you can, then used his left hand to help pushing my right knee down, causing me to lose balance as I tilted towards him! Thay could not hide his amusement as he turned away smiling. Since then I vowed to learn how to sit still.

After that “first lesson in meditation”, over time I had many chances to listen to Thay’s Dharma talks, observed the Monastic way of living and practiced the teachings of Thay. I then gradually realized that with his teachings, Thay has equipped us with a tool set full of directions for practitioners to overcome suffering in life.

Below is the sharing of some typical usage of these tools in my daily living.

Chan Dao Hanh

In Plum Village towards the end of the Winter Retreat, all Monastics and permanent lay residents are engaged in shining light sessions. One day during this period, at the Upper Hamlet, the Abbott of Phap Van Temple asked me to help conduct an evening meditation session for some 10 lay members and about 20 newly arrived guests. The Abbott added: “Do not forget the Evening Chant please”. In my lay practice life, I do conduct meditation sessions for the local sangha, but never in such an environment and situation before! On the way to the Meditation Hall, I calmed myself down by accepting “Just do it in mindfulness.” However, on opening the door to the Hall I could not help but think: “I’m in the shoes of an amateur, who is going to perform on Broadway!”

Still-Water Hall seemed to be bigger and more crowded than usual. When the sangha prepared their seats, I adjusted my cushion in front of the Bell, then I heard the door open. Looking at the entrance, in the twilight I could not see who was coming in. The Sun sets fairly early during winter in Southern France. Putting on my spectacles, I saw two Monks slowly coming through the door. My immediate reflection was relief and happiness, because in the presence of a Monastic, I could politely relinquish this position. However when the Monks came closer, I felt like I’d had an electric shock and started to sweat! Yes really, I was sweating in a very cold winter evening in France! Because the two arrivals were Su Ong and his attendant! Oh dear, I trembled! Someone had told the Master that I was conducting this session; therefore he came over to check on his student I thought! I sat there frozen, not knowing what to do and where to start! Suddenly the idea of changing the way of receiving the object of mind that Thay gave in that morning’s Dharma

talk came to my mind as a life saver! I turned my thinking around, to the opposite direction and told myself: “Thay knew that all the Monastic members were busy with the shining light sessions and no one could attend tonight’s meditation session, therefore he compassionately came over to support the practice and share his energy to the sangha, particularly the newly arrived guests.” Equipped with such a positive drive, I went on conducting the session with “Just do it in mindfulness” and found plenty of happiness during the session (and after) as I had never been able to. Since then, driven by self-realisation, I have had full confidence in the practice of transforming the perception to be liberated from suffering.

About one year later however, I faced an unhappy situation and I also tried to apply the same practice, but failed miserably. The occasion was on a late afternoon when a small wild bird, on her first lesson of learning how to fly, landed onto my feet while I stood in my backyard! To my utmost surprise, the bird ran round my feet and made a lot of panicking cries. I carefully picked her up and realised that she was too young to fly. I held her in my two palms, she seemed to calm down. The sky was getting dark, winter night was approaching. Worrying about cats from neighbours, I took a cardboard box, cut some leaves and arranged a “nest” for my little friend. Placing her in the box and putting it in the laundry, I told the bird: “It is getting dark now, try to have some sleep my dear, tomorrow we will go and look for your mum and dad, OK?” I did not forget to put some sesame seed in a small plate and some water in another, naively thinking just in case she needed it!

After dinner, I came out to check and found my friend standing

outside of the box, trembling! She's cold, I told myself. I looked for a towel, made another nest and placed her in the new spot. Before closing the door, I looked at her for a minute, then left.

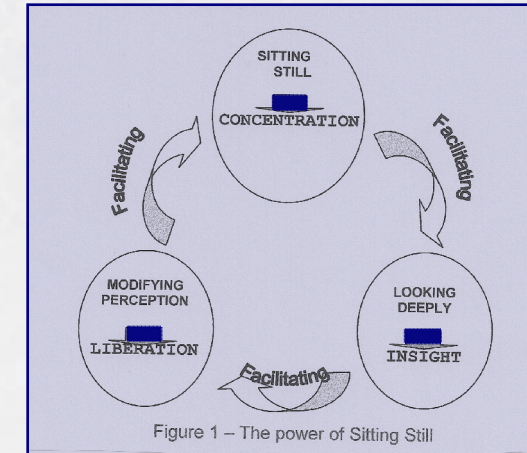
Next morning, before the meditation session, with a smiling face and happy spirit, I came out to visit my new friend. Opening the laundry door, I almost fainted because right next to the sesame seed plate, my little friend lay dead! She passed away in the cold while I was in a warm bed! I stood motionless in deep sadness, not knowing for how long. I breathed deeply and prayed for a while then slowly wrapped her in some tissue paper and buried her under the Azalea flower bed in my backyard.

The guilt followed me for a very long, long time! I tried to practice in many meditation sessions, looking deeply into the object, trying to modify my understanding of the death of the young bird, without success unfortunately! No matter what I tried, the sad feelings and guilt still weighed me down.

One day I realised that I was NOT doing the right thing in my practice. What was wrong I did not know! Therefore I vowed to go back to the basics, lighting my own torch and trying to realise the power of sitting still!

After months of initial thoughts (Vitarka), and investigations (Vicara) I completed my guiding path and called it "The Power of Sitting Still Cycle", where all of the steps came from Thầy's teachings (Figure 1).

What was new to me on this path was that I started using the concept of looking deeply not as an observer but recognising a mental formation as myself and not touching it as an outsider ... One day I came across a sense of gratefulness! That was the day I saw the little bird as a



Bodhisattva who came to this world to complete a teaching mission of "How to look deeply into an object of mind".

Since then, whenever I think of the bird, I do not feel painful any longer but a sense of gratitude fills my heart that makes me happy! I am liberated, and so is the Cosmos.

In gratitude to our Teacher who has shown us the way, I share.

Chân Đạo Hành

Chân Đạo Hành (Hoàng Khôi) - teaching Computer Integrated Manufacturing (CIM) at the School of Mechanical and Manufacturing Engineering, The University of New South Wales, Sydney 2052, Australia.
Lineage name: Tâm Vô Tướng - Ordained as an OI on the 7th Dec. 1995.
Received Lamp Transmission on 12 Jan. 2003 in Plum Village, France.



From Roshi Joan Halifax

I first learned about Thich Nhat Hanh when I was working in the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University in the mid 1960's. Many of us at this time were deeply involved with the Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-war Movement. The war in Vietnam was raging, and the young people at this time were not far behind.

We marched, we marched on the Pentagon, and we marched down Fifth Avenue. We demonstrated, we risked our lives, we wrote, we gave speeches, and we marched. One can never forget the march down Fifth Avenue in New York City with Thich Nhat Hanh, doing walking meditation, and sending the New York Police into a fit, trying to get us moving along, trying to reroute traffic, and finally rerouting the marchers. Here was someone who walked his talk, at his own velocity, and operated only with the authority of Buddha nature.

It was some twenty years later, that I found myself in Plum Village. I had spent my first ten years of Zen practice without a teacher; my second decade was with a powerful Korean teacher, but the social action element was not present. And now I was sitting in a small, humble

farmhouse in the Dordogne with a man I had held in my heart for twenty years but had never had face time with.

As I heard Thay talk, I realized that Buddhism could never be separate from social responsibility and social action. I knew that intuitively, but there were not so many Buddhist role models around who exemplified this perspective. But Thay had long been a role model for actualizing the two as one body, meditation and social action. I felt like I was coming home, that I had found a teacher who embodied the values that had been my North Star for twenty-five years, a person who was committed and brave, and who knew his sutras.

One person had described Thay as “a cloud with a machine in it.” I saw clearly that Thay had a tremendous source of power, as well as love and compassion. As I walked slowly with Thay’s good friend, Sister Phuong (Chan Khong), in the early spring meadows of the Upper Hamlet in 1985, I knew that I had found a dharma home.

In 1987, Thay came to my community, The Ojai Foundation, to lead a retreat called

Peaceful Cultures. It was a powerful gathering, a gathering of concerned optimists and of dedicated social activists. By this time, many of my associates had been to Plum Village, had taken the Five Precepts, and were finding their way into the Order of Interbeing. We entered a stream of wise experimental discourse, and a path of social relevance. We walked slowly, and with our slow walking, the numbers grew as did the hamlets. We walked the streets of New York at the same rate of speed as Thay had walked Fifth

Avenue decades before. We walked alongside the sunflowers of

the Dordogne and walked in our zendos at snail speed. Something in us slowed down so we could look deeply. And the velocity of the Thay’s message seemed to increase the slower we walked.

Then there was Rodney King and Thay proclaiming we were police and Rodney. We felt the blows of police batons around our heads and the anger of the police. We were being more and more brought into the non-dualistic realization of compassion by someone who had suffered at the hands of the North and the South, had held both accountable and had held both sides of the equation in compassion.

We endeavored to live this in the small details of our lives. I recall Thay saying to me one day that he could not write the kind of poetry he wrote without growing mustard greens. We saw that the mustard greens and the acts of compassion shared the same root. And the root was deep in the hearts of thousands of people as Thay’s message spread to many countries.

I feel very grateful for my years of practicing with Thay. He is one of the great people of our time. We need his brave and clear dharma to pervade the whole world. May it happen in his lifetime, in our lifetime.

Roshi Joan Halifax
Abbot, Upaya Zen Center

Joan Halifax is a Zen Buddhist priest who received inka from Tetsugen Bernard Glassman, and was given the Lamp Transmission as a Dharmacharya (Dharma teacher) by Thich Nhat Hanh. She has been practicing Zen Buddhism since 1965. She was ordained by the Korean Zen Master Seung Sahn and became a teacher in the Kwan Um Zen School. Joan is head abbess and founder of the Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, NM.



Early Days With Thầy

I first came to Plum Village in 1986, when it consisted of only two hamlets: Upper Hamlet at Thenac, where a few dozen westerners stayed and Lower Hamlet at Meyrac, largely populated by Vietnamese émigrés. We traveled constantly between the two hamlets, making close friends in both places. Thầy gave several Dharma talks each week at one of the hamlets, sometimes in English, sometimes in French and sometimes in Vietnamese. We walked back and forth between the hamlets to hear Thầy speak and to visit with our friends in the other hamlet.

One day, I was late for the Dharma talk at Upper Hamlet, and was hurrying along the road when I saw a small yellow Renault, clearly a Plum Village car, come trundling along. I waved at the car, somewhat frantically, and stood in the road in such a way that the driver couldn't miss seeing me. I really wanted a ride. I really didn't want to miss the Dharma talk, and my gestures made clear that I needed the car to stop and pick me up. The car came to a halt and I saw it was Sr. Chan Khong

(Chi Phuong in those days) driving Thay up for the Dharma talk. Embarrassed by the demanding and impatient demeanor I had shown in flagging them down, I nevertheless crawled into the back seat, and offered apologies. Sr. Chan Khong gently admonished me, saying something to the effect that of course they would stop and pick me up, and then she turned around to drive us up the hill. The ride was short, maybe 15 minutes, and we passed the time in silence. But it was a silence that was infused with a feeling of love. It was palpable. The air of love was thick enough to touch, and I was humbled by it. I knew this love wasn't about me, particularly, but that I was included in it. Eventually, after many more years of practice, I came to realize that I and all beings were always embraced by this love. As I sat in the back seat, quiet and at peace, I rested in the warmth of love. The Dharma talk had touched me with no words at all.

I carried Thay's teaching with me whenever I left Plum Village and came back to my home in western Washington. Once again I entered the life of a householder, with a job, husband, daughter, and many friends. Sometimes I would long for the love, and ease I felt when I was at Plum Village. I knew it was in me, as well as at Plum Village, so my practice became to create within my family and community the peace and love Thay had shown me. And what a sweet practice it was. It began with being aware of what I was thinking and feeling throughout the day. When my mind was distracted, I would let go and come back to my breathing, particularly when I saw that my thoughts and feelings were creating harm or suffering within me. I knew that if

I held onto these thoughts I would believe them true, and from them I would create suffering around me. I saw all of this clearly, over and over again.

One time, when my two-year old daughter fell from a counter top onto the floor, I was flooded with anger. I had frequently lifted her down from high places and told her of the dangers of climbing on things, but she persisted when my back was turned. After she fell, she was scared and crying, but initially my anger prevented me from going to her. When I felt the heat of my anger, I turned my awareness to my breath, and took a few conscious breaths to see her with fresh eyes, remembering how I had felt when I saw her for the first time. Instantly my anger melted. I was filled with love for her. Instinctively I went to her and cradled her in my lap. After a few more sobs, she jumped out of my lap, smiled, and said in her baby-talk way "That why no climb, Mama." I never had to rescue her again from high places.

In 1990, Thay transmitted the lamp to me and asked me to begin teaching. In spite of feeling unworthy, I felt honored to accept the transmission and to carry the light of Buddha's lamp forward in North America. But in my mind, I wasn't a teacher unless I had students. So when I came home from Plum Village that summer, I waited to see if people would invite me to teach. And they did. So along with students, came the new practice of sharing the Dharma by words and activity. My model was Thay, and through the many years of teaching, I still look to him whenever there is a difficulty in Sangha, or with Sangha members. I always ask myself, "What would Thay do here?" And I pull

up all of his patience, his love, his gentle spirit and rest there for a while. Then, when I am solid, I step forth with the Thay who lives within me, in honor of Thay, who continues to show me the way in this life.

Eileen Kiera
True Lamp (Chân Đăng)

Eileen Kiera (True Lamp/Chân Đăng) - A Dharmateacher from August 1990 at Plum Village, Eileen Kiera has been teaching mindfulness locally, as well as in Canada, Mexico, Australia and other places in the United States, for 21 years; She lives at Mountain Lamp Community, a lay practice center in foothills of the north Cascade mountains in Washington state. In addition to leading retreats at our practice home at Mountain Lamp, she teaches in Seattle with the Mindfulness Community of Puget Sound, and several other Sanghas in the Pacific Northwest.



Thay in My Life

There is no way to peace. Peace is the way.

I found Thay's teachings, his sangha practices and Buddhism all at once at a residential Mindfulness Weekend in England a friend invited me to eight years ago. The practitioners she knew were like us, she told me, they were socially engaged. This was at a time when I was experiencing stress and bullying at work; and was wanting to continue to contribute to the non-violent peace movement with clarity and care.

The smile and the authentic welcome I received from Vivien on arriving opened the door to me coming home. I recognised the heartfulness of everyone throughout the weekend and that excited me. This meant I wanted to express my joy and that meant talking! A habit energy that I became aware of, for example when I was gently guided towards mindfulness during my first working meditation. Cleaning carrots, I know I am cleaning carrots. I still cherish excitement and joy and now have choices about how I respond to them arising.

I generally feel more free and fresh in responding to feelings that

arise, pleasant and unpleasant, these days. There is a lightness, even when the feelings are painful, as I recognise that they will come and go and that they do not define me.

The silence while eating was friendly. That was new. To experience silence with others as calm, respectful and integrated has healed childhood wounds. I realise this is so in writing it and feel gratitude for Chan Huyen asking me to reflect on how Thay's teachings and practices have changed my life. In asking me to contribute she has helped me to grow my understanding.

It was a rich weekend. To be conscious of transformation and possibilities is to be fully alive. What a gift my friend and the other practitioners were giving me! I now greet open-hearted gratitude as a familiar friend. This friendship is nourished by Thay's teachings and practices. For example, during mindfulness weekends, retreats and sangha gatherings – even when I am not physically present; and in communications with my teacher here in New Zealand and with my sangha, and in connecting with Thay's teachings and practices. This friend travels everywhere with me now. I also know that I can consciously plant, water and nourish the seeds of gratitude.

One of the teachers for the weekend had come from an intense and busy life and expressed his intense gratitude for the opportunity to stop. I heard him and although I did not understand what he meant, I understood how important it was. Every time, every day that I can stop and be with what is it is an ordinary miracle. Stop. Look. Listen. The present moment is always truly a wonderful moment simply because we are aware that we are alive in it. Not the past nor the future. Just here and now.

My previous traditions were Catholic (inherited) and pagan (chosen) so I had taken part in ceremonies. However, I was not prepared for the Interbeing ceremonies of Three Touchings of the Earth, Beginning Anew, Tea Ceremony and walking meditation. I experienced the power and authenticity both of individuals and of respectful, connecting community growing.

I have not practiced the Touchings of the Earth many times since then but I value the connections across space and time it makes possible. In the sangha I was leading in Hamilton (New Zealand) sangha member Marion asked us to do this practice. I share this because I deeply appreciate the co-creation of sangha (practice) made possible in this tradition which emphasises contributions coming from mindfulness rather than hierarchy.

My partner and I have practiced Beginning Anew when there was no other way forward. (I would like it to be a regular practice.) It has involved some unlearning and re-learning and it actually feels as if this practice re-wires the brain. I feel validated and empowered that we make the path by walking it. I also experience a strong connection between Beginning Anew, the practice of looking deeply and Marshall Rosenberg's non-violent communication. I have shared these practices with many friends within and outside the Buddhist community.

Ah, the Tea Ceremony! What a refreshing stopping, being, listening, accepting. I've had the good fortune to participate in many different tea ceremonies. From silence to dharma sharing. From ritual to homely. The Tea Ceremony at that first Mindfulness Weekend included sharing words and songs. The relief of including and integrating who we are, where we



come from and where we are at. The space to be, to be myself, for us to be together. Nowhere to go, nothing to do.

Walking meditation. Alone in Brighton, in Nepal and in the Lake District, weekly with sangha friends in a New Zealand garden, monthly at our mindfulness centre, for weeks with 40 peace pilgrims, and with Thay among the hundreds at Plum Village. This walking with my breathing has many times calmed my breaking heart, has reconnected me to my actual experience.

What I am learning with my walking is that we make the path by walking it. There is no way to peace. Peace is the way. I am always in community, even when alone, as I know the sangha is there for me and I am there for the sangha. I now know how to walk with my anger, with my sorrow, with my fear as with dear friends. We are learning how to plant seeds as we walk, seeds of peace, of joy, of connection, of integrity.

Just as Thay re-minds us that the earth holds our feet and is there for us with every step, he and his teachings and his practices encourage us to rest in and grow with the sangha. My first two years of sangha were fortnightly gatherings in a community room in a church: guided meditations, indoor walking, listening to Thay's teachings, sitting meditation, dharma sharing. These meetings developed my stability, inner silence and sense of peace. I was most fortunate in learning two lasting practices. Firstly, one of the women shared with me her practice of meditating at home with the guided meditations from *The Blooming of a Lotus*. These come from the core teachings, the teachings are right there. The meditations allow us to access complex teachings in a concentrated, direct way – to take refuge in the dharma. Secondly, the

dharma sharing was held by Barry and Vivien in an exemplary way that meant we shared from the heart without getting lost in our feelings, stories or commentaries. Also, when they were away, leadership of the sangha gatherings was shared out between us and that worked well. This was a group I wanted to be a part of. Also, This gave me the confidence to lead sangha later on.

During these two years, I was most fortunate to join a (mainly Buddhist) peace pilgrimage. I joined the dharma yatra for eight days and nights of its three-week journey walking along the south coast of England from west to east. At this time, my country's government was militarily engaged as an ally of the USA. Personally, I was stuck and fearful. Walking in nature and in silence for most of each day (sometimes singing), camping, and actively growing a changing community of practitioners was deeply nourishing. (I would love to be part of organising such a walk.) I learned about the benefits of regular practice and the power of loving kindness meditation; also that I have valuable offerings to bring to community, as well as how to trust my open heart.

Only eight days and so much changed for me, from when and how I awoke in the mornings to my experience at work and in intimate relationship. I moved on and have not looked back. Since then, I have been aware of the strength I gain from daily mindfulness practice and have enjoyed creating these possibilities in many different ways of living. The two guided loving kindness meditations around the campfire dissolved my fear of and anger towards my bosses and they picked up on that. I was different, I saw things differently, and daily reality changed. To this day I live knowing I have the power to transform my

enemy images of those I am in conflict with into a sincere wish for their wellbeing. And hey, you know what? Their wellbeing is good for them and me and all others! No separation.

Contributing to community has always been important for me. Sometimes figuring out the best ways to contribute can be painful and frustrating. It is, however, always a worthwhile question – pushing me beyond what is. Both our emphasis on sangha and the engaged nature of the Interbeing community practices support me and my growth with this. The synthesis of reflection and action is as oxygen for my blood. Do you know the feeling in your body when you drink fresh carrot juice? One of the many times I have had this sensation of recognition, of affirmation, of coming home, from connecting with Thay is when absorbing his words “My actions are my true belongings”.

Trusting my open heart more in these years since beginning this practice fosters vulnerability, groundless and unlimited trust, and curiosity. It has brought me the love of and for a goodly man, life in another continent, setting sail from the shores of same old, beyond hope and into confidence (I guess the root meaning is *with faith*), a surefooted stepping out. The confident humbleness, the humble confidence of making it up as I, as we, go along. No path. Only walking. Of course, sometimes fear visits or anger gets in touch – I can now hear better what they are trying to tell me. Support abounds. Choice. Letting go. Space. Responsibility. Freedom. Seeing both sides. Meeting both sets of needs. Both ... and...

Living in a new country (far from my roots) with someone who did not know whether he wanted to be with me, at first unemployed and

then in brand-new work – all of these happening together had me taking deep, conscious refuge in the dharma, in the practices of mindfulness, in the wider sangha. Thanks to the simple welcome of the Interbeing tradition and Shalom's strength of practice, I took refuge formally in a Precepts Ceremony at our New Zealand retreat centre, Dharma Gaia, five and a half years ago. Breathing in, aspiring, breathing out, prostrating. I am given the name of Sangha Jewel of the Heart. An aspiration in itself. A *taonga*, an inheritance, a treasure.

Monthly Mindfulness Weekends at Dharma Gaia take precedence gently, easily. They are a backbone of giving and receiving, without discrimination. I step into leadership joyfully. I begin a weekly sangha in my hometown. I am learning as I lead. I am learning more about and from the practices of guided meditation, dharma talks, sitting meditation, walking meditation indoors and outside, working meditation, eating meditation. I discover the nourishment of dharma sharing and its connection with the fourth wonderful mindfulness training – loving speech and deep listening. I slowly over the years settle into the rhythms of Noble Silence and of working meditation and I consciously learn to explain joyfully and lightly the fruits of these practices to new practitioners. Me the chatterbox, nourished by silence. Choosing. Delighting in speech and silence at different times. Singing, listening or in silence my heart opens, my mind expands.

I am also learning and leading practice with the mindfulness bells. The many mindfulness bells include the silent ones of our presence, our practice, our breathing, our posture, our smiling as well as the dharmakaya of wind, birdsong, children. The bells we invite to re-call

each and all of us, to re-mind us of our essential Buddha nature are a precious invitation to life. Learning to be present and in harmony before inviting the bell is a potent mindfulness practice for me. I also have noticed the impact hearing the mindfulness bell has on non-practitioners. It seems they understand the invitation.

The strongest connections I experience are with those who practice in any tradition, including non-Buddhist traditions. Many of my friends are practitioners.

This is one of many examples where Thay's principles (here it is the principle of openness) strengthen and articulate mine. Of course, coming into teachings and practices in my forties meant I had already developed a set of values to live by and, above all, many questions. The joy and wonder for me has been how much the three jewels of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha have affirmed, deepened and enriched my understanding and my choices about myself and the world.

Dharma sister Chan Chuyen asks us how have Thay's teachings and practice changed our lives and our relationships? Some of the changes in my life that I notice may also be due to the influence of living with my partner who is a practitioner of more than two decades (including in two non-Zen Buddhist traditions). Certainly, Nityajyoti has given me many examples of not sweating the small stuff ie not letting the anxious imagination take over. Breathe, he reminds me when I am suffering. Also, we are both very honest about what we see – indeed our names reflect this. This relationship has been a singular opportunity for me to contribute to the life of another and to be challenged to be aware of my sticking points, my laziness and my negativity. As we and

our connections with each other and our practices have grown, we are increasingly able to give and ask each other for supportive conditions. More opportunities to unlearn and begin anew. Our intimacy and partnership help us to understand where our deep attitudes and habitual behaviours have come from and this understanding waters the seeds of transformation. For example, we now know that sadness often lies behind anger. Our mutuality co-exists with our autonomy. We met on the peace pilgrimage and on our continuing journey we learn to trust that open heartedness brings the possibility of peace and joy blooming at every step.

The only changes I notice with my family of origin are that there is more peace and less pain. I respect their and my autonomy more and have let go of much of the commentaries of my analytical, judgmental brain, thus creating some space for what is.

Retreats bring you to places where you cannot avoid yourself. Interbeing retreats provide a wonderful space to profoundly check in and carry that forward into daily life. I am particularly aware and grateful for the understanding they have brought me of how so often I share the very flaws I criticise in others!

Retreats also support me in developing awareness and in growing nourishing alternatives to some of my damaging habit energies. For example, what I am going through right now would have been stressful for me in the past: four weeks ago I was asked to step into a very demanding (and unadvertised) job to start two days later (after six months' unemployment) and I have not received any further news. I don't mind. I am not caught up in analysing or blaming myself nor the

person who made the request. I am enjoying the space of not knowing. No dramas. No worries. What does matter is practising, continuing to live with a peaceful mind. What matters is what is. Breathing is of paramount importance. The reality is that I now have more time and energy to write this article. What happens later is just that, what happens later.

I am becoming more trusting, less fearful of not knowing, more able to appreciate myself and others, as well as more able to concentrate. I am now, after 35 years smoking, free of addiction to nicotine. I no longer drink alcohol, initially in support of those who struggle to limit their drinking and now celebrating the possibilities for clear thinking I am increasing by this practice. I can change. I can make changes. I can be the change I seek. And on the way it is possible to support others' changes within and outside sangha. And that supports me.

Work has been more productive as my concentration has improved. Mindfulness and returning home, with conscious breathing, help me to only do what I am doing – relaxed and aware. And with the support of non-violent communication practice and Thay's practical examples and guidance about relationships and conflict in daily life, I have had increasingly harmonious working relationships. My response to coming from a family dominated by addiction and (self-)criticism has been a keenness to resolve conflict. All other aspects of the practice have also supported my ability to let go, see more clearly, let go some more, and act more often with kindness and integrity. Of course, there are regular chances to deepen my practice!

Of course, the work to transform (past) suffering continues all the

time. And each of us has particular changes that need our focused and regular work. In my case, I need to pay attention when I feel sorry for myself; when I feel there is somehow *not enough*; when I eat more than I need; when I feel anxious or critical and my analytical brain goes for a spin and my body goes rigid and my heart contracts and hardens. The healing work is to pay attention, to look more deeply, to bring to mind, to shine the light. Thay's teachings and practices may be simple but they are not easy.

Other Buddhist and non-Buddhist teachers have also sometimes supported my practice. I enjoy the bigger picture that comes from a diversity of learning and of practising. Yet I return to the deep well of Thay's teachings consciously and freely as I find his speech to be consistently skilful, clear, nourishing and creating harmony with mind and body. I am aware that, in answer to the questions posed by Chan Huyen, I may not have mentioned Thay (Thich Nhat Hanh) much by name and yet I would like the reader to know that every word here, every experience has been made possible by his practice and the practice of his sangha, of my sangha, of our sangha. Many of the doors opened to me by Thay have been via my Aotearoa-New Zealand teacher and mentor, Sister Shalom (Pho Nghiem), to whom this writing is dedicated. Thank you Thay, thank you Sister, thank you sangha, for showing us how the heart and the mind are not separate.

One of Thay's guided meditation practices made possible a meaningful and supportive connection between me and my ten year old niece with whom I have very restricted opportunities for direct relationship. In deep sadness about her life and my limited ability

to contribute to it, I took refuge and as a result sent her the Pebble Meditation. "Breathing in, I am solid, Breathing out, I feel like a mountain" it begins. (When feeling lonely, sad, scared or adrift I take regular refuge in this practice.) She replied, delighted that I understood her and what she needed so well. Thank you Thay, thank you sangha.

Clare Fearnley

Clare Fearnley (Sangha Jewel of the Heart) is an aspirant to join the lay community's Order of Interbeing. She was the founding member of the Hamilton (NZ) sangha and is an active participant at the Dharma Gaia Centre of Mindful Living, Aotearoa, New Zealand. She enjoys supporting adults to make positive changes and to resolve conflict. She currently lives in a Quaker settlement with her partner and fellow dharma-practitioner, Nityajyoti.





The Source of Peace and Joy

Many among us have had a chance to enjoy a peaceful, quiet autumn, perhaps afternoon, soaking in the warmth among a few dear friends while leisurely enjoying a cup of tea in the passing breeze. Metaphorically, such moment is as wonderful as the 50 years that I have had the privilege to come into contact with “Thầy”, whether in close proximity or an ocean apart. Such moments are those that one could only experience and are indescribable by any available speech.

I was born into a traditional Buddhist family in Hue, Vietnam. As a little child, I chanted sutras and said prayers. I was actively involved in the Buddhist Youth movements in Hue and eventually the Buddhist students organizations in Saigon during the 60’s. Nevertheless, I never asked myself why I followed Buddhism nor wondered where the Pure Land of Amitabha Buddha was or whether it was really full of precious gold and gemstones as indicated in the Buddhist texts I often read. My religious activities were very much confined in the dharma classes or the ritual masses for the peace of the sick or the deceased, where all sutras were chanted in an indigestible Chinese-Vietnamese style of pronunciation.

In that setting, Thầy came to us (The Saigon Buddhist Students

Association) like a breeze of fresh air, a melody of a new song, soft yet so energetically attracting. Thầy lead us into a new path, the path of Engaged Buddhism, through simple and cozy group activities, through Dharma study sessions where we could immediately apply what we learned to our daily life, through his many inspirational books such as “A Conversation with Today’s Youths”, “A Rose for Your Pocket”, “Fragrant Palm Leaves”... and through intimate sharing of ideas and plans to apply Engaged Buddhism to rebuild a society so traumatized and ravaged by war. Thầy lead us with an earnest, sensible, modest, and tranquil persona befitted for a zen monk, but without doubt there was no lack of poetic artistry and idealism in all of his activities. We immersed ourselves during the many heartfelt musical performances of “A Rose for Your Pocket” and journeyed in complete silence through the magnificent natural landscape to Phường Bối Am (Fragrant Palm Leaves Hermitage). All of these activities helped us slowly realize that happiness is available right now in this life.

The thought of Phường Bối Am brings back tender memories of the time when I was young and carefree. The noble and imposing silence of the mountains of Bảo Lộc during a trip with Thầy suddenly turned into a Dharma talk, commandingly like the voice of the Buddha, telling us, 13 brothers and sisters, to stop, be still, and enjoy the present moment. Another happy memory was how our male members use “con vắt” (a forest leech) to scare our female companions, breaking the silence of our meditation walks around Phường Bối Am. Since then, we have been apart for many years. Thanks to Sister Phượng, in her book “Learning True Love”¹, I was able to recall the names of the 13 brothers and sisters,

the first members of the Order of Interbeing², even at the point when our hair has taken on the color of the floating clouds. Back in those days, I also wrote a short article called “Huy Hoàng Trường Cửu”³ (Wonderful Moment Forever) for the magazine “Giữ Thơm Quê Mẹ”⁴ (Enriching Our Motherland) to express my feelings and gratitude toward Thầy. Thầy kindly reminded me to practice enjoying the wonderful moment in the here and now, and to not dream about something that’s permanent.

“Giữ Thơm Quê Mẹ” is a monthly magazine that Thầy created to propagate his ideas of Engaged Buddhism, or Buddhist meditation practice applied to daily life. Through the magazine, Thầy wanted to bring this new practice to the Vietnamese youths, to express his view about the Vietnam War and his vision for peace. Thầy’s teaching of “Present Moment, Wonderful Moment” was profusely embedded in many of the seemingly ordinary articles and poems written by him and his followers. After following Thầy for only a few years before he left Vietnam, I was able to realize that behind this small framed monk was the existence of an immense treasure of knowledge and understanding of not only religions and philosophy, but also of literature, arts and education. At the same time, I also recognized the possible future hostile oppositions to his bold and daring ideology to renovate Vietnamese Buddhism and society, an ideology so advanced and ahead of his time.

While on an airplane together with Thầy from Hue to Saigon in 1961, I noticed Thầy was tired and did not eat or talk much. At that time I could never realize that, 50 years later, Thầy would travel around the world in airplanes to spread the Dharma. Still with a slim figure, but armed with inexhaustible energy and a determination to change what

needs to be changed for the better, Thầy has created a sense of trust and confidence in the world that the practice of mindfulness could bring about happiness and liberate humans from ignorance and hatred. Thầy always smiles whenever he encounters difficulties along his path, and views them as zen koans necessary to advance himself.

Perhaps every one of us sometimes has an urge to become a child again, to come back to the time when we lived in the safe and loving embrace of our parents. On the day that I participated in a Dharma Lamp Transmission Ceremony at Deer Park Monastery, a light flashed in my head while I sat in meditation with the Sangha. Arriving with the light was this poem:

*“This moment happens once and only
But the transmission light shines forever – I live in peace”⁵*

The flash was an experience of illumination, but the forever living in peace was still a wish in this world. One day recently when my hair was completely gray, I had a chance to sit next to Thầy at Lăng Cô Beach in Hue, Vietnam. I have lived many years and drifted to many parts of the world. Suddenly, Thầy gently rubbed my hair for a moment, smiling and without words. I immediately saw myself coming back to my youthful time, the time of “A Conversation with Today’s Youths”. Within me arose a stream of peace and joy. This experience could only be felt by me. Only Thầy and I knew it. No words can describe it. I knew, at that moment, even “con vắt” of the mountains of Phường Bối could not take me out of this source of peace and joy.

Tâm Hiền Tôn Thất Chiếu
(Translated by Chân Đại Dũng)

1. *Learning True Love, Chân Không (Sister True Emptiness), Chapter IV, p. 30.*
 2. *The initial 13 members of the Order of Interbeing to whom Thầy entrusted his message of Engaged Buddhism: Nguyễn Ngọc Bích, Lê Kim Chi, Tôn Thất Chiếu, Đặng Ngọc Cường, Huỳnh Bá Dương, Huỳnh Bá Huệ Dương, Nguyễn Ngọc Diệp, Nguyễn Thu Hà, Đỗ Tuấn Khanh, Phạm Ngọc Liên, Trương Thị Nhiên, Cao Ngọc Phượng, Cao Ngọc Thanh.*
 3. *Giữ Thơm Quê Mẹ, Hừng Hà Sa, Vol. 6, December 1965, pp. 20-25.*
 4. *Giữ Thơm Quê Mẹ was a literature and art magazine first published by Lá Bối in July 1965. It was guided by Thầy with contributions from contemporary writers, artists and academic circle.*
 5. *Excerpt from the poem “Truyền Đăng Trên Đỉnh Non Cao”, from a collection of poems “Bên Kia Bối”, Hừng Hà Sa, 2008.*
- (*) Tôn Thất Chiếu is a practicing physician, currently living in Bethesda, Maryland

Tôn Thất Chiếu, M.D. (Tam Hien) - Former Teaching Staff, Hue Medical School, Hue, Viet Nam. Former President, Saigon Buddhist Students Association 1961-1963. Currently in private practice, State of Maryland, USA.



Tam Hien and his wife, in Bat Nha monastery - 2007



*Water flows from high in the mountains.
Water runs deep in the Earth.
Miraculously, water comes to us,
and sustains all life.*

Gatha by Thich Nhat Hanh

How Did Thich Nhat Hanh and Plum Village Change My Life?

I remember the first book I read. It was in 1997 in Paris. “The Miracle of Mindfulness” by Thich Nhat Hanh was so simply written that I was immediately able to put into practice the two exercises it described: washing dishes, and walking in mindfulness. It was so simple. It still is. And the fruit it brought and still brings is precious: peace and happiness.

Eighteen months after that first book, I remember going for the first time to New Hamlet, Plum Village in France, and when Thich Nhat Hanh gave a teaching it was like all the rain clouds blew away, the sky opened, the sun came out and I suddenly felt that I was home and that I had always been here.

Now, many years later, I see that these teachings have given me stability and a higher quality of life. They have given me methods to use in difficult life situations, and I have used them and found them efficient time and time again.

Here, in my own home, I use the little “gatha poems” regularly. As I switch on the light in the morning, for example, I often hear an inner voice saying, “Forgetfulness is the darkness, mindfulness is the light. I bring mindfulness to shine on all my actions.” The teachings have helped me be fully conscious of so many small and seemingly insignificant daily acts, and my appreciation of living, of being alive, of being present has changed dramatically.

I was fortunate to follow Thich Nhat Hanh and the community to Vietnam for three months in 2007, and to live in Plum Village for four months in 2006, and to go regularly on retreats. All these times have also given me great memories which I treasure deeply. They also helped me see weaknesses and strengths within myself and find ways to gently transform the former and build on the latter.

On retreats I have heard many stories about horrendous life situations. Firstly this put much more perspective on my own life. Secondly I witnessed that no one is ever stuck in their life story: that even the seemingly worst stories have the potential of transformation and change for the better. Now when my storytelling children or students have some difficulty in their life, I can bring the balm of compassion and understanding to them. Or I can just breathe gently with them. What a shared joy that is.

Plum Village brought meditation into my life. I still love those moments when I can put all aside and sit down to meditate in my own home. Plum Village taught me to put a vase of fresh flowers in my restroom at home! It was at Plum Village that I learned to do total relaxation in order to heal my body and my soul. Indeed I can say that

Plum Village has often been my best healing medicine!

Finally in my work as a performing artist, I have been inspired by all the times we have shared on retreats singing together, or creating skits, or setting up story evenings so that others can creatively participate in a moment of a shared story. Working on the children’s program has also been so beneficial to me. I now have come to the realization that there is a spiritual approach to all art, and this is the one that inspires me.

There is truly not a day in my life when I do not breathe gratitude to Plum Village, to Thich Nhat Hanh, to the monks and nuns, and to the teachings. The simplicity of these teachings and their transportability is one of my deep abiding joys. And of course, there is our own small sangha here in Brittany, and together we sit, walk, eat, breathe and share our joys and difficulties on the path. Plum Village took me out of my aloneness and brought along good friends!

In fact, writing this all down, it is like there is no end to the benefits I have received from Plum Village, from these teachings, from the practices, from Thich Nhat Hanh!

Fiona MacLeod



Fiona MacLeod (Land of Peace of the Heart, True Understanding with Compassion) - came to Plum Village 1999. She lives in Bretagne and practice with Sangha LES VAGUES DE L’OCEAN (The Waves of Ocean). OI member 2008.



I have arrived, I am home



Prior to Meeting Thay

We (Helga and her husband Karl Riedl), started our spiritual journey in 1978 in India where we met our first teacher, Bhagwan Shri Rajneesh, who inspired us in such a way that we never left our spiritual search. After that we met other teachers of traditions such as Zen, Vipassana, and Advaita. We spent time in monasteries and ashramas, and finally in 1990 we moved to Tuscany, Italy to study and practice the Tibetan tradition at the Lama Zong Khappa Institute.

In the spring of 1992, Thay and Sister Chan Khong came to that institute in order to lead a retreat. Listening to Thay, I cried almost during his whole Dharma talk. After the third day we had an interview with Sister Chan Khong and told her that we both felt such a great familiarity with Thay and her. It was as if we had known each other for a long, long time and that we had a feeling of coming home after a long journey. We feel the way Thay teaches is simple and profound. He, as a teacher, is a monk of integrity, simplicity, humility, unbiased and wisdom...

We went to Plum Village for the whole winter retreat of 1992-1993, and at the end Thay invited us to stay there, we did...We exchanged the

comfort and beautiful environment of our home for a small, dark room with a window view of a rotten washing machine in the Lower Hamlet. For three days I questioned whether I had made the right decision. However, after listening to Thay's Dharma talks, practicing mindfulness, and observing my mind, I knew that I had not come to Plum Village to follow my likes and avoid my dislikes. I came for the sole purpose of understanding the functioning of my mind and of cultivating bodhicitta. Within weeks, it was easy to accept Plum Village as my home.

There are some aspects that attract and inspire us to Thay's teaching, which I would now like to mention.

* The first is the aspect of joy. In the teachings of Thay I discovered that he teaches us joy with an element of peace in it. I definitely could feel the difference between ecstatic joy and a joy that is more endowed with peace and silence...

Being mindful and completely present in whatever I am doing, starting with brushing my teeth, peeling the carrots, washing the bathroom, etc., is giving me a sense of satisfaction and joy for that simple reason...The many teachings I have received help me find practices and attitudes that attract joy, like the practice of loving kindness and remembering to be grateful to myself and others even for every small things and difficulties.

More important is the practice of noticing and monitoring my thoughts when they create painful inner states. I use the mental and creative strength of my own mind to create inner states that are conducive to joy. Furthermore, when I see that people are happy, my happiness is redoubled. In that time, Thay transmitted to us a new

mantra, "This moment is a moment of happiness." By cultivating joy and collecting moments of happiness, I try to keep my mind in a healthy and wholesome state as much as possible.

* Another aspect is that of living in a Sangha. Thay's great capacity as a Sangha builder helped us understand what it means to live with other people of different walks of life, cultures, and backgrounds in harmony and the challenges that go along with it. I learned to understand myself better, not to run away when it seemed to be too difficult. Listening to Thay's teachings and observing how he responds to many difficult situations in a non-discriminative and unbiased way, has slowly seeped in my whole being, giving me a great sense of freedom... Having learned to live all day long with many different people in harmony and seeing the beauty and richness of sharing our mutual interests to go in the direction of emancipation in a collective way, has natured in me the seed of Sangha building.

* Another very important aspect which changed my way of looking at things and people tremendously, is that of feeling being at home wherever I am. Again, Thay provides evidence that this is possible. Already thirty-five years ago, we felt not at ease in our culture, and that made us move East. For more than twenty years we have travelled and lived in Asian countries, and didn't have the intention to return to Germany. The country we cherished most was India, our spiritual homeland...Living in Plum Village all these years gave us the feeling of living in an Asian country again, in Vietnam. Thay, knowing quite well that a few Westerners had this nostalgia for India, pointed his finger towards his heart and uttered in a Dharma talk, "India is here."

In 1999, a Dharma friend asked us if we would agree to establish a practice center of the Plum Village tradition in Germany. Me and my husband, Karl Riedl, we very reluctantly agreed under the condition of spending two months each year in India. Only after my second travel to India, where I stayed in an ashram of Ramana Maharshi, and after having spent longer periods in meditation did I ask myself, “How come, Thay’s home is wherever he is, what is it that hinders me from experiencing this for myself?” In the stillness it dawned upon me, that it is my mind that is drawing the whole picture that corresponds exclusively to my ideas, likes, attachments, and expectations, thereby causing me to miss total reality. After gaining this insight, I never returned to India for those reasons. I realized that I was able to see Germany under a totally different perspective. I rediscovered the profoundness and depth of the German philosophers and poets, the qualities of German people, and last but not least the long and cold winter periods that were ideal for introspection and meditation...

The last aspect I wish to mention is Thay’s way of transmitting to us the idea of being mindful in whatever we do, walking, sitting, eating, working, etc., practicing deep relaxation, and knowing the art of resting. Practicing in Plum Village for some years, I slowly felt less stressed. Especially during the long summer opening periods, I learned to do one thing at a time and the energy of mindfulness prevented me of getting exhausted.

However, in Germany I had a lot of responsibilities, which I did not have in Plum Village. With the years, an undercurrent feeling of tension and stress crept in my body and mind, which I did not realize until I ran

completely out of energy and had to consult a physician. Her simple diagnosis was, “You are doing a lot for others without taking good care of yourself.” This habit energy I could observe a lot in other people who I counseled... I wasted my energy looking on the outside more than on looking inside myself. Now my life is solely directed on the practice and in the sense of knowing the art to rest, not only during sitting, eating and walking meditation... Hopes and fears slowly are creeping out. The outcome is a deep trust in myself and functioning of the practice, and is an immense gratitude towards Thay and all those who inspired me to follow the footsteps of the awakened ones.

To finish my sharing I want to mention a situation that took place at the very beginning of our stay in Plum Village when we had a celebration to inaugurate a bell tower. While offering Thay a plant, he asked me, “Helga can you see the sunshine, rain and earth in that plant? That this plant can only inter-is with non-plant elements?” I often heard these questions, contemplations, and the word “Interbeing” in Thay’s teachings. Intellectually, it made great sense to me, and it seemed to be that I understood. Only after years of hearing these teachings again and again, imbibing the mindfulness practice, did my understanding deepen in such a way that slowly the “I, me, my, mine” attitude has given way to the “you, we and all” attitude. My heart is opening more and more, my mind is getting clearer, the judgements, the discriminations, and the complexes of feeling “greater, less than or equal” are considerably lessened. In a recent retreat we gave in Israel, a Palestinian at the end of the retreat simply shared, “We are all one body.” However, when I walked along the checkpoint, a huge wall that divides Jerusalem from

Bethlehem, I realized with deep sadness that this vision is still far from becoming a reality and not shared by many. Therefore the fights, wars, conflicts and so on are going on not only in Israel.

Thay's great message is that every one of us has to take the responsibility of nurturing and cultivating mindfulness, understanding, compassion and wisdom ceaselessly in order to make a collective awakening possible so that we can look at each other as brothers and sisters. Thay is constantly transmitting these qualities to us.

Finally I would like to conclude that due to Thay and his teaching, my life has changed in such a way that I now dedicate my life wholeheartedly to the practice. That makes it simple and allows me to have time to enjoy the beauty that is inside and around me while relating to people and the world in an adequate, friendly, comprehensive and compassionate way.

From the very beginning I took Thay's teachings into my heart, received his transmission in many ways and I am now determined not only to continue but also to realize and actualize what I have received.

May she or he is reading this book get inspired and motivated to follow all of those who have taken that noble path that leads to liberation.

Helga and Karl Rield

Helga and Karl Rield (Scientist and Interpreter) met Thich Nhat Hanh on 1992, moved to Plumvillage and stayed there to practice till 1999. OI members: 1992, Dharma teachers: 1994.

Co founders with Karl Schmid the Intersein-Zentrum in Germany, a residential lay practice center where the couple now live and teach.

How Thay Saved My Life

She just took everything I had: our son, the BMW, the freehold apartment and my heart! *She* - that was my true love, and when she left me, the whole world collapsed. That was in 1990, and my life suddenly lost all joy and sense...She moved away from Munich with our son, at first into a suburb, then to the other end of Germany, so I could hardly see my son any more.

I tried to suppress the pain with a lot of work and alcohol. This worked temporarily, but repeatedly the suffering broke through and grief and despair overwhelmed me. Friday after work was worst, I really fell in a deep black hole. At that time also my knees started to make trouble, so that even walking was painful. Later also my lower back stroke me regularly with pain, especially after long working sessions in front of the computer.

Slowly I realized that work and alcohol would not help me to solve my problems. I became a regular customer at a large Munich book store in the department of self-helping books. One book closed with the good

advice: “Seek for the state of *serenity*!” But how I could gain this state?

Finally I discovered the book, *The Five Pillars of Wisdom* of Thich Nhat Hanh. The *five mindfulness trainings* offered a concrete direction for my life, that seemed plausible and possible to implement. They gave me the orientation I had searched for so long.

According to the first exercise, *respect for life*, I stopped eating meat again. Additionally I practiced the fourth practice *attentive listening and loving speech* in the factory canteen. I started no more debate, and I stopped to convince others with my views.

Particularly helpful was the fifth practice *mindful dealing with consumer goods*. The recommendation with respect to alcohol helped me a lot: “I am determined not to take any alcohol.” Whenever on the edge to drink or not, I remembered the recommendation of Thay. I trusted him so much that I volunteered to follow his call - not always, but more often!

Thus encouraged, I was searching especially for books of Thich Nhat Hanh, and found the book *Enjoying Every Moment*. In this book I read for the first time the term ***Interbeing***. I realized that my ex-wife was not my *enemy* but the mother of my son, and thus being closely associated with me. With this insight finally the bible quotation from Jesus about *love without limits* became plausible and feasible. *But the decisive factor was the mindfulness in everyday life.*

Since then also the relationship with my son significantly improved. I could adapt to his rhythm and did not feel his slowness an obstacle anymore, but looked at him as a teacher. I learned patience from him, and to do things one by another. I booked the first day



of mindfulness with Thich Nhat Hanh in the *Centre Of Interbeing* in Hohenau (June 16, 2007). I learned there for the first time to appreciate walking meditation.

Then I was very impressed as 700 people silently sat together in a tent and began to eat all at once! We eat every bite in silence and enjoyed the interbeing of the sun and cloud with the carrots in our lasagne - eating meditation!

Shortly thereafter the GAL (e.V.) organized a full moon celebration in the Nepal Pagoda in Munich *West Park*. And yet again there was this great experience of being together with other like-minded people... Again, the Dharma talk and the Dharma discussion within my sangha had brought healing to me.

And step by step also the relationship with my ex-wife improved! Since then we exchange ourselves in difficult situations, and help each other...We meet on birthday celebrations in the family (including her partner), and even have co-written a song (*Seize the day!*). When my son wanted to study in Munich, I invited him to stay with me - since then we share an apartment together!

I can consciously perceive emerging feelings, positive and negative, and don't let them carry me away as before. And if they do, then mindfulness brings me back again soon. And thanks to the wonderful Sangha I feel more and more the inside *serenity* that I had so long sought for. I am eternally grateful for Thay and all of his ancestors and spiritual descendants!

Arno Elfert

Arno Elfert was born in 1962 in Moosinning, a village in Germany. Since 2000 he has practiced Zen in the tradition of Thay, since 2007 with the community of mindful living (GAL) in Munich, Germany. In 2010 Arno joined the Order Of Interbeing and his dharma name is "Breath of True Awakening". (Chan Giac Tuc)

He enjoys singing, playing the guitar and writing songs about the practice. Some of them are on his homepage (<http://www.arno-elfert.name/>).





Dear Thầy,

It is now such a wondrous moment to contemplate our interconnection. Each mindful step that led to this moment nourished by the steps of our teachers who walked this way before. I think now of all the ways that you have nourished my heart quietly and intensely. How was I so fortunate to meet you in this life? You, who have been ever busy living as the Manifestation of Compassion, helping all Beings in the ocean of suffering realize instantaneously that Peace is surely possible in this life. Last year you wrote us in “A Young Monastic’s Dream” and it touched my heart so deeply realizing the multitude of ways that this compassion is now expressed in our Sangha.

When we met around 1990 I was looking into Zen and beginning the development of Concentration and Mindfulness. Being with you turned the practice into a Living Laboratory. Something you said completely turned my view from smug student to wonder child. You encouraged me saying that I would need to practice by myself for a long time to

realize what the Buddha is in Real time. I guess you were looking into my heart as my path has been very much independent. Realizing that I had met my root teacher in you gave me the ground to carry on and establish the Wild Flower Hermitage in a small hut behind the home where my family lives. Daily sitting and walking meditation and the five and 14 Mindfulness Training's are my guides as I move through the fairly volatile environment that surrounds us outside the hermitage. And now there is a small Sangha emerging here that has roots in Tiep Hien.

Your inspiration in the creation of the Youth for Social Service and the Boat People Program gave me the courage to stand up during a time of unrest in my country and do Peaceful social disobedience, eventually being jailed for 49 days for helping people from the "other side" to find work. During this time in jail I practiced devotedly what you had taught us and used the Sutra on the 4 Foundations of Mindfulness as my guide. I realized that no wall could contain a heart of Love and that practice was possible anywhere, anytime one recognizes one's breath, one's foot step, one's words, and the silence underlying all this. This has been the inspiration to now work in the World to create a Pure Land for all Beings. Of course this is the work of Lifetimes and is exactly our vow. I find you everywhere now as your writings have been absorbed, the retreats have been incorporated, and the regular sittings and walking meditation wash through the hardness of my soil nourishing the seed of Bhodichita in me. It is growing. It is live and well. I am not content with myself though, as I see how vast the sea of suffering is. But I see the shore and walk contentedly, with sure steps every time I remember to actually breathe

with the breath and see with the seeing, to be with the Being and stay with whatever is really there.

And so here we are together, dear Master Thay, you as the Great mountain and I as a humble stream. I flow from you and am nourished by you. You have given me the shining example of a True Hero that every young man needs. I thank you now and find us looking at each other knowingly.

*Sweet Potatoes and Plums
Have become Dharma Fields
No Island is alone anymore
As we walk together smiling
To the Farther Shore.*

Baruch Shapiro
Pure Compassion of the Heart
Wild Flower Hermitage, Israel

***Baruch Shapiro (Pure Compassion of the Heart)** established the Wild Flower Hermitage in the Middle East in 1998, did time in prison for civil disobedience related to Peace work, is an Herbalist by profession, and teaches children and adults Mindfulness in Nature and Healing with Plants. He runs a 4-month program in Israel and Palestine which combines Mindfulness, Botanical Medicine, and Internal Peace work inspired by Thay. He is happy to meet people around the globe who are interested in Mindfulness with Plants and People. Connect at wildflowersangha@gmail.com*



Hermit to La Boi

The image of a book-shack up in the mountain at the Kim Son Monastery is still vivid in my mind. What a happy day for me! That was the beginning of my path to learn and practice the Dharma. Thanks to the books *The Miracle of Mindfulness* and *Being Peace* of Thay Nhat Hanh, I stepped into the “Right” Path, the path of joy and happiness and less suffering. Later I recognized that the book-shack was my hermit.

After going to Thay’s retreat every other year since 1991, I went to France and stayed at Plum Village for 3 weeks in 1997. I went into silence for almost the whole time. This experience helped me understand myself better. I felt as if I was an onion; I kept peeling layer and layer of myself to see the deeper parts inside of me. I understood more about my habits, my seeds in me, my anger, my jealousy, my judgment, etc. I also learned to listen a little better.

Another joy in my heart was that in 1991 and 1993 my mom came with me to Thay’s retreats. This was a great blessing because later when she died of cancer, our meditation practices enabled us to

communicate and allow her to be calm; therefore the decease caused much less suffering for her. Daily she was able to be calm and listened to the meditation and chanting tapes for 3 months. A couple of times she was fortunate to have Thay Tu Luc visit in person to further instruct her how to practice being in the moment. She died in the chanting of the Amidtabha sutra; when my father, brother, sister and I chanted to the words “Nam Mo A Di Da Phat” toward the end of the sutra, she took her last breath and passed away peacefully and calmly in our love. She lived her last hours, last days in peace and loving kindness. Also another important thing was that I was at peace with it because I know that she “did not die”, she is still with me... I see her in my face, my skin and my actions.

My second trip to Plum Village was November 1999. I was so lucky to have my husband, Jim, go with me. While we were there, Su co Chan Khong asked us to help La Boi to assist bac Tam Thuong, now Sister Thong Nghiem. Jim and I have been participating in La Boi since then. We are working with about 20 people who volunteer to help La Boi. La Boi is an organization that prints and sells Thay’s Vietnamese books, tapes and Cds. This fulfills my wish of taking early retirement to do more mindful living activities.

One of the tasks in La Boi I really like is to edit Thay’s new book. I get to learn his teaching while doing the “good” work of editing and formatting it to the right book size. I feel so lucky to have the opportunity to read Thay’s book before we publish them.

Through this work we get to meet more friends, Jim and I are practicing in two sanghas: La Boi and Peaceful Heart Sangha.

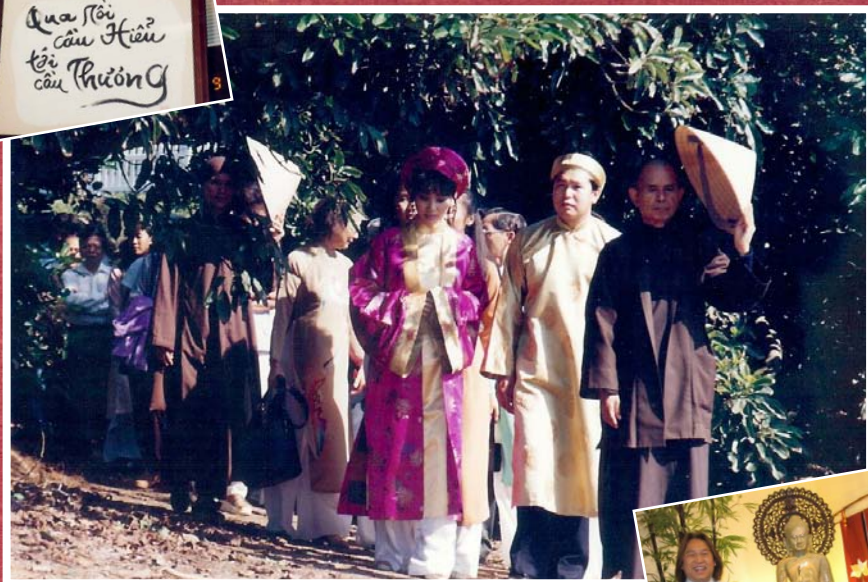
I think that we all know from Thay’s teaching that it is crucial to practice with a sangha regularly. I am so thankful that my husband (Jim) and I get to participate weekly with our friends to share our difficulties and success in practicing mindful living and to learn from our friends theirs.

As members of La Boi, Jim and I are also fortunate to be in close contact with members of the Parallax Publisher who publish Thay’s work in English. This is another great group of people, who live the Mindful Living philosophy, to be around with.

Thank you Thay and Plum Village Sangha for offering your lives and your teaching to us. I sincerely pray for a successful Unified Buddhist Church of the monks and nuns of Plum Village, Blue Cliff, Magnolia and Deer Park to help mankind understand the Dharma and learn to live life with more love and compassion, to bring more joy and less suffering in the world.

Chau Yoder

Chau Yoder (Tam Luu Ly, Chan Tham Tue) - born in Hanoi, Vietnam, has a deep aspiration to share specific methods of mindful living, emphasizing self awareness in body and mind.. An engineer by profession, Chau retired after 25 years as a manager of Information Technology and as an Applied Behavioral Science consultant. Chau received mindful training from Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. She is a Dharma Teacher, ordained by Thay in 2003. Since 1989 she has been offering workshops and classes on Mindful Leadership, Mindful Living and Chi Gung, to promote healthy and happy living. Chau has presented her programs in youth, corporate, retreat environments and the Cancer Support Group (in Walnut Creek, CA.). In 2009, Chau received the training from Master Ce Hang Truong to be an Integral Taichi Trainer. Chau also coordinates La Boi Press, publishing Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh’s books in Vietnamese language, and gives mindful tours to Vietnam with her husband. Chau lives in Walnut Creek, California with her husband Jim. They have two adult daughters.



Dear Sư Ông,

Seventeen years ago, I came to your retreat because I was at the end of the road and did not know where to turn. I was going through difficult times with my parents.

I am a Buddhist like my parents and grandparents, whereas my friend is a Catholic as his parents and ancestors. My parents did not approve of our relationship since they thought that, according to their life experiences, different religions would not make a solid marriage and would eventually end in divorce. This had caused a great deal of suffering in me since I was torn between the love from both sides, my parents and my friend. I knew that my parents loved me and I also loved them, but we did not understand each other very well. I asked myself and my parents this question: "Both Buddhism and Christianity teach love and oppose war, then why because of this love, do we have this war?" I received no answer.

On a beautiful day in Kim Son Monastery, my life had changed dramatically. I came to Thay and asked the same question. And you answered it very simply: "Jesus and Buddha always teach about Love. If

one only knows the top superficial layer, then he will see there is a big difference. **But if one understands the religions on a deeper level, then he will see there is no difference.** They are the same, they are One.”

When I asked if this interreligious marriage would last, Thay smiled gently and said, “It is better to marry an open-minded Christian than to marry a closed-minded Buddhist.” Then I asked you if my parents were afraid that I would be forced to convert to Catholicism and no longer be a Buddhist. So Thay had opened my mind with this great wisdom: **”By having two religions, you will become richer, not poorer.”** No one had ever told me that before. Right at that instance, a dharma door had opened. After listening to your guidance, I felt liberated; I felt free. I felt this great wave of love inside and all around me. And I saw the different rivers all flow to one big ocean - the ocean of love and compassion. I knew what I needed to do; I knew the way. Su Ong, I can still hear your voice and feel that you are present for me. Seventeen years have passed, but I can still remember that day vividly, as if it happened yesterday. What you said is still deeply engraved in my mind.

Four years later, we got married. You are right; I did become richer. We had two wedding ceremonies – one was in church with priests performing a Christian ceremony, and the second was celebrated in the Buddhist tradition with Su Ong and the Plum Village Sangha. I was baptized in church, and my husband received the five mindfulness trainings from Su Ong at the retreat. So each of us now has one more name.

At our wedding ceremony, Thay had given us a mini dharma talk about the poem “Needles and threads to sew” (Kim Chỉ vá may). Thay

had taught us to be the needles and threads of life, to sew the torn and separated pieces of a garment back together into one piece, and to reconnect the differences in religions back into the same true love and compassion. After being sewn back together, this garment will keep us warm and provide protection from the pitfalls of life. I would like to also thank Thay for giving us the calligraphy “Qua rồi cầu Hiểu tới cầu thương,” (meaning After the bridge of Understanding comes the bridge of Love).

Since then, I have been trying to practice this Understanding and Love in all aspects of my life - marriage, family, work, and society. It is quite strange that my husband and I never argue about religions, but we do argue about all other issues of life. When I am angry, my husband would often remind me to go back to my breathing or to sit down and meditate. When both of us are calmer, we would sit down and talk about our internal formations and sufferings. Then we would do beginning anew by forgiving each other and start fresh again. Our love has become more and more solid each day as we understand each other more and more each moment.

Dear Su Ong, you have taught me so many beautiful ways to live mindfully. You have shown me how to plant a seed and cultivate the ground so that the seed will grow into a plant with beautiful flowers blooming from it. I had planted a seed and I have found my fresh flower – my daughter. She has listened to your voice since she was in the womb. The name “Su Ong” was one of the first words that she could say. She recognized your face even when you were surrounded by other monks, as if she had known Su Ong a long time ago.

When she was 4 years old I asked her who was in her heart, thinking that she would say “mommy, daddy, grandpa and grandma.” But she smiled and answered, “Buddha.” When I asked who else was in there, she smiled and answered, “Jesus.” Then I asked again what other person is in her heart, still smiling, she quickly replied, “Avalokiteshvara and Maria (Phật Bà and Đức Mẹ).” Finally, when I asked her why she had so many people in her heart, she gave me a big smile and said, “Because I have a lot of room in my heart.” That had brought me to tears of joy and happiness. It was a dharma rain. Su Ong is right; I have become richer, not poorer and so has my child. Buddha and Jesus always sit at the same place, on the altar, in my heart, in my husband’s heart and in my child’s heart. They are different, yet they are one. My life has been deeply enriched by this interreligious relationship. I have found over the years that the more I learn about Buddhism, the more I understand Christianity. Just as Thay has said that Buddhism is made of non-Buddhist elements, my Buddhist tradition is made of the Catholic tradition.

With deep gratitude, I would like to thank Thay for showing me the way of peace and for opening the door of Love and Understanding. I vow to continue practicing transforming compost into flowers so that anger and suffering will become peace and happiness. Knowing Thay is the greatest gift of my life. You are a true living dharma and I am very happy to be your continuation.

Happy CONTINUATION Day!

A lotus for you,

A Buddha to be

Mộng Lan – Chân Bảo Thành

Influence of Thich Nhat Hanh on Me

When I became a police officer in 1984, my deepest aspiration was to work for peace and to end violence and injustice. I quickly became intimately familiar, on a nightly basis, with the suffering caused by poverty, racism, social injustice etc...

I deeply craved peace but I did not understand that peace began in my own heart. I felt overwhelmed by the suffering I witnessed, the misplaced anger of others fanned my own impatience and anger. I began to do my job in a mechanical way. I consumed too much alcohol, and I became angry and depressed. As a result, I brought suffering into my relationships with my family and others.

I attended my first retreat with my teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh (Thay), in 1991. At that first week-long retreat, for the first time in my life, I was able to get a taste of what it meant to slow down enough to find joy in the present moment... At that first retreat, Thay and Sister Chan Kong convinced me that it was possible to carry a gun mindfully. I left the retreat believing I could integrate my public service and mindfulness.



Something significant happened because when I came home, at least for a short period of time, everybody had changed, even the people I was arresting — for some reason they became more kind and precious in my absence. It was like somebody had turned on the color in my black-and-white life. Later, I realized that it was the newenergy of my presence, not my absence, that made the difference.

Of course, once I got back to the old routine, it didn't last, but that initial taste was enough to create a deep desire to keep coming back...

One of Thay's greatest lessons has been *constancy* - the inspiration to REALLY PRACTICE Mindfulness. ..So that's what I did, even if it was just for a few minutes each day. I was so busy that I could often find only small gaps in my day to try meditating or just coming back to my breath..

Thay made the practice so simple, effortless, and accessible. The first morning of that first retreat, I watched Thay walk into the room, and the way he walked was the equivalent of an entire Dharma talk for me.

He introduced us to sitting meditation and some gathas, which are just short and simple poems that facilitate Mindfulness practice, and then to eating meditation before breakfast. He said we should chew our food 25-50 times before we swallowed. Now, I can't tell you how foreign this concept was for me as a cop, used to having to respond to calls with red light, siren and speed!

So, I was used to inhaling rather than eating my food. Eating in silence and actually tasting my food for an entire week on retreat was a very rich Mindfulness experience for me.

Since that very first retreat, the sound of any bell causes me to pause and produces an immediate feeling of gratitude. Before we left, he

told us that we should substitute ringing telephones as wake-up-bells-of-mindfulness and using the opportunity to simply return to our breathing.

So, in the beginning, although I couldn't stay with my breath for even seconds at a time during meditation, I picked up these other little tricks to use to return myself to the present moment...The only Buddhist accessories I had in my house were a small bell and a meditation cushion.

In the beginning I simply practiced. I realize that the simplicity of Thay's approach gave me great confidence that I could simply do it. And I was determined I was going to do it...

Another thing I did that really helped is *I continued going to Thay's retreats*, which kept reinforcing for me that I could only touch life deeply when I slowed down. I used just about every vacation I had, when I could afford it, to go to a retreat...

Attending retreats also accelerated my meditation practice. Over time, I found myself slowly developing the ability to stay with my breath for longer periods of time...

Looking back, I realize both the hyper-vigilance created by my job as a cop, and the frantic pace at which I was living my life, produced a biological roller coaster that was a set-up for constant crashes. I'd feel these adrenaline surges at work and then crash after I got off work... Go to work, be up here; come home, be down here. "Down here" mimicked a lot of the symptoms of depression.

And when you don't have the insight to help understand what's happening, you begin to mistakenly project the reasons for the down cycle onto your family...

I certainly experienced all of these things. It was stumbling across

Thay and this path of Mindfulness that provided me with the tools to navigate my way out of it.

Mindfulness continues to provide refuge and freedom from that tornado of habit energy that used to violently toss me around. Mindfulness provides protection in the form of an awakened heart, a commitment to set my life up to cultivate equanimity and water the seeds of joy, faith in my ability to make friends with whatever happens, and the confidence and inner integrity that come with leading a more ethical life and being more present to myself and others.

As my practice evolved, I began to get more creative about how to align my outer and inner worlds, especially during the last years of a 20-year career as a cop, then as the Head of Probation and Parole in Wisconsin, and then as an Assistant Attorney General for the Wisconsin Justice Department. Eventually, my practice began to show up more and more in how I related to my loved ones, to people on the street, to others in my workplace, and how I viewed my job.

In my career as a police officer, I eventually found myself as a top manager, in the position of Captain of Personnel & Training. I was in charge of a team of people responsible for the hiring and firing of recruit officers, their training, and all the on-going training for all 500 officers in my department. I realized we were pretty good at teaching people how to keep themselves physically safe but we were losing them emotionally, and I managed to convince others around me that Mindfulness training was important. I used my own transformation as the blueprint for training other police officers. I started to enjoy both going to work and coming home from work.

What Thay inspired in me over time was the strong belief that even something like carrying a gun for a living can be an act of love if one is also armed with Mindfulness and a compassionate intention. I've learned compassion can be fierce as well as gentle. Wisdom enables us to understand when the gentle Bodhisattva is required and when the fierce Bodhisattva is required in any given situation.

Whether an act is violent or compassionate in nature is determined by the intention behind the action. The action itself can be smooth and gentle but if the motivation behind it is negative, it is still a manipulative or violent action. Likewise, fierce actions done with a positive, compassionate intention are nonviolent in nature.

Sometimes fierce compassion is required to protect ourselves, others, and our relationships.

Compassion also flows from a deep understanding of impermanence and interdependence - another fruit of Mindfulness practice. Impermanence teaches us that thoughts and feelings, like everything else, are impermanent. And, as we understand the nature of interdependence more deeply, we begin to notice how intricately connected everybody and everything is, how we inter-are with each other - and a deep sense of compassion develops as we understand more about causes and conditions.

An understanding of causes and conditions helps us deeply understand that this is this because that is that... Compassion flows from this understanding because I begin to understand on a deep level that when I take care of myself, I take care of you; and that when I take care of you, I take care of myself.

I started to experience the incredible healing power of non-aggression as I found deeper levels to practice not causing harm to myself or others. Right speech is connected to this - an incredibly rich area of practice for me personally... I grew up in a family where everybody vented the anger and it was taken for granted that the hurtful things that were said would be forgotten. This venting certainly provided some temporary relief but in the long term by continually expressing anger, we were not getting rid of it. In fact, we were feeding it, watering its seeds, and strengthening its roots.

Right speech requires understanding the power that words create for ourselves and others, that language opens our tender wounds in very powerful ways. Because language is so powerful, it all begins with right speech, which means conscious speech. We spend a lot of time talking but most of it is done on automatic pilot... Right speech is probably one of the most important place in our life which allows us to be in authentic communication and a respectful relationship with other. Blame is simply another barrier we erect that prevents us from uncovering the tenderness of our hearts. When we hold on to our opinions with aggression - no matter how valid our cause - we are simply adding more aggression to the planet, and violence and pain increase. Organizationally, I have found ethical communication to be the most important ingredient of a healthy climate. When we deeply realize that we are all 100% responsible for our own experiences - not for blame - then we can create a new type of dialogue, one that only requires each of us to take responsibility for our own experiences... A tremendous way to accelerate our practice at

those times is to simply recognize and give our vulnerability a bath of Mindfulness rather than acting out...

Thanks to Thich Nhat Hanh and the practice, I have been able to deepen my practice of Mindfulness, letting go of cynicism and opening my heart. I found the compassion that comes with being willing to be vulnerable and touched by the world. I am still unskillful at times, but this experience of opening up to my sad and tender heart produced a fearlessness that enables me to continue the process of transforming myself.

Cheri Maples

Cheri Maples J.D., MSSW, is an American dharma teacher, ordained by Thich Nhat Hanh in January 2008. She has been a lay member of Hanh's Order of Interbeing since 2002. Maples is also the co-founder of the Center for Mindfulness & Justice, a keynote speaker, and an organizational consultant and trainer.

A police officer for 20 years with the Madison Police Department (Wisconsin), she organized a first-of-its-kind non-sectarian retreat in 2003 with Thich Nhat Hanh and criminal justice professionals, which received considerable national attention.

Cheri Maples is focusing her efforts on teaching mindfulness and meditation - including to people in prison - keynote speaking, training and Time Banking. She speaks from personal experience about topics such as the effects of secondary trauma on those working in helping professions. She is a member of SnowFlower Sangha in Madison, WI, where she resides.



Taking Action

*Meditation is not always enough.
Sometimes we need to take action: Right Action.*

Thich Nhat Hanh's life and practice has underscored this truth all along, from his founding of the Order of Interbeing in 1966, to his active involvement in ending the Vietnam War, to his recent founding of the Institute of Applied Buddhism in Cologne, Germany. Not surprising for a man whose name in Vietnamese means Right Action.

We in the West have often separated out and taken bits and pieces of Eastern wisdom out of context. Thus, just as Yoga has come to mean a set of physical exercises for us, Buddhism has come to mean meditation.

The description of the Right Action in positive terms can lead some to think that the message of Buddhism can be summed up as, "Just don't do bad things, just sit and meditate." This passive attitude sometimes creates its own problems. The message of Buddhism about the

importance of action is not coming through as strongly as its message about meditation.

Consider a person who is in an abusive relationship. Meditation alone will not be enough to bring her peace. Or if it does, that peace will have been bought at a very expensive price. She needs to take action, and take positive and firm steps to change the situation. If that does not work, she needs to figure out a way to get out of that relationship with her life and health intact. And the potential for abuse is everywhere, from the schoolyard, to the workplace, to the cycling club...

Meditation does play an important role, because the path to Right Action passes through Right Meditation. Meditation is central: it clears the mind, and makes possible a kind of action that is not emotional, or ultimately destructive. It clears the way for 'appropriate action' that is not based on habit or conditioning. This action may in effect be non-action...

Thich Nhat Hanh's asks us not to turn the mind into a battlefield, and to treat all parts of the personality gently, as friends. He also makes clear that the process of meditation has at least two components: calming the mind or stopping, and looking deeply. Beginners usually start with calming the mind, but sometimes do not get much further. As stress and an over-active mind full of regrets and worries is a big issue for all, meditation instruction can get bogged down at that first stage. In addition, some participants come for this one purpose: to get relief from stress. And as soon as some relief is obtained, they drop out. They leave with only half the picture.

Yet, both Calming the Mind and Deep Looking are important on the way to Right Action: calming the mind enables us to act with equanimity, but deep looking gives us direction, because it lets us consider the big picture. As we shine the light of awareness onto our motives, our mental states, and our habits, we stop acting compulsively. As we become aware of our deepest wishes, we can take care that our actions are taking us closer to our goals. As we become aware of our nature of interbeing, we act not only for our personal well-being, but for the well-being of society and the environment. And as we become aware of how we and others create our own suffering, we are filled with the desire to bring some light into our own life, and into the lives of others.

The instructions for deep looking need to be a little different from the initial instructions for calming the mind. There, instead of turning our attention away from the ‘monkey mind,’ we need to listen to the monkey to find out what kind of an animal it is. ‘The radio in the background’ metaphor for thoughts also needs modification: indeed, we pay attention to the radio when it plays a nice and inspiring song, but we do not immediately drop what we are doing and rush out the door when it tells us to go out and buy a certain brand of car. ‘Right Effort’ means doing a similar kind of triage with our thoughts, hanging on to positive thoughts and letting go of negative ones. And turning our attention away from the ‘chattering mind’ needs to be restated as listening to learn who is chattering, without getting caught up in the chatter.

As a result of this kind of attention and observation, one could discover for example that whenever one thinks of a certain person, unkind feelings are also present. Some insight as to where the unkind

feelings come from may also be present. One might wish that one could think of that person without this negativity. This wish, however, remains just a wish. At the next meditation, one will have the same experience: when one thinks of this person, the same unkind feelings will also arise. To make a change, one needs to practice thinking of this person with kindness. After doing this several times, the positive feelings will stick to the image of that person, and will accompany it. Thus, the practice of deep looking not only brings self-knowledge, it also makes transformation possible.

This is one way that deep looking differs from daydreaming. In daydreaming we think of people and situations without much awareness of our states of mind. If an unkind thought is coming up in relation to a certain person, it will keep on happening the same way — we are actually strengthening this association by performing it over and over. Thus, no self knowledge is gained, and no transformation occurs. Of course, another difference is that when we daydream, we allow the waves of thought to take us away from where our bodies are, and away from the task at hand. One group member reported driving home while absorbed in her thoughts. Only after she had parked her car did she realize that she was sitting in the driveway of the home she had sold six months ago!

Thich Nhat Hanh teaches Calming the Mind, or Samatha, much like other Vipassana teachers, by quoting from the appropriate sutras, and explaining their meaning. His injunction to Stop Running is particularly significant to me. It makes me think of our favorite sports such as football or hockey, in which the players are forever chasing a ball or a puck. In fact, it is a collective chase where many players rush after the ball or the

puck, and the ones who are a little behind rush after the ones in front. This is like a metaphor for our lives where happiness is always in front of us somewhere, but never under our feet, where we are. ‘Stop Running’ is an invitation to find happiness here and now, instead of in the future. This meaning is further enhanced in the practice gatha:

*I have arrived, I am home, in the here and the now.
I am solid, I am free, in the ultimate I dwell.*

Slowly, we have entered the Deep Looking phase of meditation. It is in this area that Thich Nhat Hanh’s teaching is incomparably rich and meaningful. He is a master of the Mahayana Sutras where the beauty and magic of our Earth and our life are often described in exalted terms:

*Here is the Pure Land, the Pure Land is here
I smile in mindfulness and dwell in the present moment
The Buddha is seen in an autumn leaf,
The Dharma in a floating cloud
The Sangha body is everywhere
My true home is right here.
Breathing in, flowers are blooming
Breathing out, I am aware that bamboos are swaying
My mind is free and I enjoy every moment.*

Contemplating our nature of interbeing gives us the gift of knowing that this beauty is not only around us, but inside us as well:

*The Cosmos is filled with precious gems.
I want to offer you a handful of them this morning.
Each moment you are alive is a gem,
Shining through and containing Earth and sky,
water and clouds.*

*It needs you to breathe gently
for the miracles to be displayed.
Suddenly you hear the birds singing,
the pines chanting,
see the flowers blooming,
the blue sky,
the white clouds,
the smile and the marvelous look
of your beloved.*

*You, the richest person on Earth,
who have been going around begging for a living,
stop being the destitute child.
Come back, and claim your heritage.
We should enjoy our happiness
and offer it to everyone.
Cherish this very moment.
Let go of the stream of distress
and embrace life fully in your arms.
(Our True Heritage)*

Decidedly, life, as Thich Nhat Hanh sees it, is not a humdrum affair. Surprisingly similar sentiments appear in these verses by Rumi:

*Don't look for it outside yourself
You are the source of milk. Don't milk others.
There is a fountain inside you
Don't walk around with an empty bucket.
There is a basket of fresh bread on your head,
Yet you go door to door asking for crusts.
Mad with thirst, you can't drink from the stream
Running close by your face. You are like a pearl
on the deep bottom, wondering inside the shell,
'Where's the ocean?'
Those mental questionings
form the barrier.*

Indeed, Thich Nhat Hanh often speaks with the ecstasy of Rumi as when Rumi says:

*Every object, every being,
is a jar full of delight.*

Thich Nhat Hanh's vision of an inspired life opens the doors of the heart towards song and poetry. It continues on from where many Vipassana and Zen teachers stop, bringing home the preciousness and fullness of our life on this planet. For me, this is his most cherished gift to his students.

Now we are better prepared to understand the path of action, for the experience of meditation defines what Right Action is. In meditation we discover our true nature, and right action is how our true nature functions in the world. In his book on the Lotus Sutra, *Opening the Heart of the Cosmos*, Thich Nhat Hanh gives the example of a bell. "The pleasant sound created by the bell is its function." "This is its action." And in the same way, "Practicing the path and liberating beings from suffering is the function of the bodhisattvas." Function, the dimension of action, cannot be separated from who we are. The two inter-are. And let not the lofty example of the bodhisattvas hold us back: this is as true of baking bread and dealing with an abusive Cycling Club president as it is for organizing a peace march. The door of the meditation room is open. It has never been closed. There is a whole world outside it, where we can manifest our true nature through Right Action.

Joseph Emet



*Joseph Emet is the founding teacher of the Mindfulness Meditation Centre in Montreal, Canada (mindfulnessmeditationcentre.org). His Dharma songs have been enriching the practice of Plum Village, and other communities of Mindful Living around the world. They are published by Parallax Press as *Basket of Plums*, a boxed set of two CD's and the sheet music. He lives with his partner Suzanne Forest.*

Đỗ Quý Toàn - Chân Văn

Poet, teacher and journalist. Pen Names: Chân Văn, Vương Hữu Bột, Ngô Nhân Dụng. Studied with Thầy in Saigon University 1964 – Ex Chief of Training Committee in School of Youth for Social Services (trường Thanh Niên Phụng Sự Xã Hội) Saigon, Việt Nam 1972-1975. OI member: 1986.

Co-founder of Maple Village (Làng Cây Phong) Canada 1987. Dharmateacher from 2003, guiding Palm Tree Sangha (Xóm Dừa), Orange County, California.



Thơ ở Làng Cây Phong

Chuyện Con Suối

Trên núi mưa đổ nước ngọt ngào
Nước thấm qua nhiều tầng lá mục
Dưới đất sâu nước vẫn xôn xao
Len lối rẽ đá mạch ẩn khuất

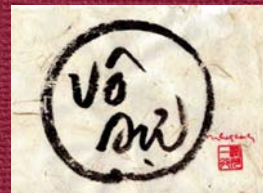
Dưới lòng đất nước chảy không nghỉ
Như những dòng người đi hồi hải
Từ đồi cao chảy xuống lưng xa
Như đoàn di dân thuở sơ cổ

Ở chỗ nào đó ngang sườn núi
Nước sẽ trào ta, sẽ tụt lại
Lách qua kẽ đá, quanh gốc cây
Nước tung tăng thành dòng suối chảy

Nhưng mặt đất vốn không có suối
Nếu không có mưa thấm vào núi
Mưa cũng chẳng có, nếu trên trời
Không có mây cùng sấm chớp nổi

Cho nên, nếu em sinh làm suối
Em hãy nhón nhơ cùng mây trôi
Hãy mong manh như tia điện chớp
Hãy thanh thang như mưa giữa trời

Chân Văn - Đỗ Quý Toàn



Một Vị Thầy Sống Hạnh Nghèo Nàn

Có thể nói thiền sư Nhất Hạnh là một trong vài vị tăng sĩ làm ra tài sản lớn nhất trong giới tu sĩ Phật Giáo Việt Nam, nếu tính về lợi tức do bản quyền các cuốn sách mà ông trước tác. Trên 50 cuốn đã được dịch ra nhiều thứ ngoại ngữ như Anh, Pháp, Đức, Ý, Tây ban nha, Nga, Trung hoa, Ấn Độ, Nhật, Đại hàn, Thái Lan v.v... Các tu viện do thiền sư thành lập tu tập theo pháp môn Làng Mai, dù tại Pháp, Mỹ hay Đức quốc, nơi nào cũng có những thiền đường vĩ đại chứa hàng ngàn người. Nhưng trên mặt khác, những ai từng thăm viếng thiền sư tại các thất (căn nhà rất nhỏ) mà ông cư trú, dù là tại Làng Mai, hay tại các tu viện tại nước Mỹ như Rừng Phong, Lộc Uyển, Bích Nham, Mộc Lan, đều thấy rõ lối sống vô cùng giản dị và đơn sơ của ông.

Trong phòng khách ở căn nhà tiền chế (mobile home) của Thiền sư tại Tu viện Lộc Uyển, ngoài bàn thờ Phật nho nhỏ, chỉ có một cái bàn thấp cùng dăm tóa cụ, một vài chậu hoa tươi, bộ chén uống trà. Trong phòng ngủ chỉ có một cái giường rất thấp, đúng ra là tấm đệm đặt ngay

gần sát mặt đất, vài cuốn sách báo và một bàn viết có cây đèn, cùng hai cái ghế, một để ngồi viết, một để nghỉ ngơi.

Cô Phương, một Phật tử từ Los Angeles tình cờ đi tới tu viện Lộc Uyển (Deer Park monastery) vùng Escondido (California) đưa một cô em gái từ Việt Nam qua chơi, đã được vô thăm chỗ thất của thiền sư Nhất Hạnh. Cả hai cô đều tỏ ra kinh ngạc khi thấy “vị Thiền Sư nổi tiếng như vậy, mà sống trong căn phòng đơn giản quá sức!” Người dẫn cô tới thăm thất của thiền sư Nhất Hạnh cho biết: “Bao nhiêu lợi nhuận thầy kiếm được đều dùng để hỗ trợ các trung tâm tu học của thầy tại Pháp, Mỹ, Đức, Thái Lan và Việt Nam. Ngoài ra tăng đoàn Làng Mai còn hỗ trợ các công tác xã hội liên tục từ thập niên 1960 tới nay, như mở trường mẫu giáo cho trẻ quê nghèo, cấp học bổng v.v...”

Lối sống thanh bạch đó, người ta đã thấy nơi thiền sư Nhất Hạnh từ lâu. Khoảng năm 2003, trong một lần qua Pháp, chúng tôi có may mắn được phỏng vấn anh Thanh Hương, hiện nay cùng gia đình đang sinh sống tại ngoại ô Paris.

Anh Thanh Hương nguyên là một tu sĩ xuất gia từ nhỏ, nhưng sau khi qua Nhật du học năm 1970, anh đã chọn sống cuộc đời của một Phật tử tại gia. Khi còn là học tăng trong Phật Học Viện ở Việt Nam trước năm 1966, anh đã dự nhiều lớp do thầy Nhất Hạnh giảng dạy, nên anh rất cảm mến và khâm phục thầy.

Nhận biết khó khăn khi học tại Nhật, phải dùng ngôn ngữ của họ, anh Thanh Hương viết thư cho thầy Nhất Hạnh và anh được thầy bảo trợ



qua Pháp. Do đó, anh Thanh Hương đã có dịp sống bên cạnh ông thầy mình trong những năm đầu thập niên 1970, chung một căn phòng. Gần 40 năm sau, anh kể lại cuộc sống bên cạnh vị thầy cũ mà không kiềm chế được xúc động: “Tôi là người duy nhất sống bên cạnh thầy, ở cùng một phòng, ăn cùng một mâm, vì căn ấp (appartement) thầy thuê được rất nhỏ. Tôi được thầy nuôi nhưng thầy để cho tôi rất tự do, hầu như không bao giờ bắt tôi theo ý ông hết... Mỗi ngày, Thầy và tất cả chúng tôi, có chị Cao Ngọc Phượng, tức là sư cô Chân Không bây giờ, cùng anh Steve, mấy người Pháp, người Mỹ mà tôi đã quên tên, làm việc chung với nhau trong căn hộ nhỏ đó.

“Các anh các chị chắc cũng biết thầy không chịu được mùi thuốc lá, thầy ghét khói thuốc lắm. Trong mấy năm tôi ở bên thầy, tôi vẫn không bỏ được thói quen hút thuốc đã nhiễm từ khi còn ở Việt Nam. Chúng tôi ở chung một phòng, hai người hai cái giường, lắm khi trời lạnh tôi hút thuốc trong phòng. Nhưng trong những năm đó tôi không bao giờ nghe thầy than trách tôi một câu nào về mùi khói thuốc. Thầy rất nhẫn nại, có lúc tôi nghĩ mình hãy thử xem thầy nhẫn được đến đâu, nhưng tôi không bao giờ thấy thầy nổi nóng.

“Mỗi ngày, các người Việt và người ngoại quốc đến làm việc, viết văn thư, viết các lời kêu gọi cứu giúp các nạn nhân chiến tranh ở trong nước, mọi người đều quỳ bô viết trên nền nhà, vì văn phòng chỉ có một cái bàn thấp. Thời đó, thầy nhận được rất nhiều tiền hỗ trợ từ bốn phương gửi tới để thầy làm các công tác xã hội tại Việt Nam. Các tổ chức quốc tế từ Hoà Lan, từ Anh quốc, từ Đức ký những ngân phiếu hàng trăm ngàn mỹ kim để giúp công tác xã hội của Trường Thanh niên Phụng sự Xã hội. Có lúc tôi đã hỏi tại sao thầy không trích một số tiền “viện trợ”

đó mua sắm bàn ghế để văn phòng có vẻ khang trang hơn, nhất là khi cần tiếp khách ngoại quốc. Nhưng, thầy nhất định không bao giờ dùng tới một đồng nào trong số tiền người ta giúp. Phần thầy, ông chỉ sống bằng lương dạy học ít ỏi của một giảng viên bán thời gian trong Institut de France và ở đại học Sorbone, Paris...

“Thầy trò chúng tôi thường phải mua thực phẩm nuôi chim để lựa gạo, đúng hơn là lựa gạo tấm ra mà nấu cơm, vì đa phần trong đó là thóc và trấu... Mà cơm thì không một bữa nào đáng gọi là bữa cơm cả!”

Anh Thanh Hương ôm mặt, bật khóc thành tiếng, khi nhớ lại cuộc sống hàn vi bên ông thầy khổ hạnh. Sau cơn xúc động, anh kể tiếp: “Nếu phải tôi là Thầy thời đó, thì ít nhất tôi cũng tự cho phép trích ra một phần tiền người ta gửi tôi – coi như “công tác phí” để mua thực phẩm hay mua vé xe buýt chứ? Tôi không thể sống quá khổ hạnh như thầy! Nhưng mình là học trò thì phải tu theo ông thầy thôi... Sau khi đã quen đường xá và ngôn ngữ thủ đô Pháp, tôi mới bắt đầu kiếm việc làm để thêm chút phương tiện mua rau đậu phụ cho thầy...”

Anh Thanh Hương cũng nói về chiếc áo lạnh mới duy nhất mà thiền sư Nhất Hạnh đã mua ở chợ trời vào một mùa đông, khoảng năm 1971. Hai thầy trò đi chợ trời mua mấy thứ cần thiết, anh ráng lắm mới thuyết phục được ông thầy mua một chiếc áo lạnh, vì tấm áo của thầy đã cũ và sờn rách trông thảm thương quá rồi. Ngần ngại mãi, thầy mới mua. Mua áo về rồi, mỗi lần xỏ tay vô là thầy lại cởi áo ra treo lên mắc. Ông nói với anh Thanh Hương: “Mặc áo mới trông kỳ lắm!” Cái áo mới đó được để yên trong tủ cho tới lúc có phái đoàn của Giáo hội Phật giáo Việt Nam Thống Nhất qua Paris trong thời gian đang họp bàn hiệp định ngưng bắn (1972), thầy Nhất Hạnh đem ra tặng thầy Huyền Quang. Anh

Thanh Hương lấy làm thú vị về câu chuyện này, nên đã đứng chụp hình chung với thầy Huyền Quang khi thầy mặc cái áo mới của thầy Nhất Hạnh tặng. Anh nói, “Chắc chiếc áo lạnh đó bây giờ vẫn còn ở trong ngôi chùa nào đó, một trong những nơi mà thầy Huyền Quang đã bị quản thúc trong các năm qua.”

Khi anh Thanh Hương nhắc tới vị thầy cũ, anh nhớ tới người tu sĩ trung niên đã cùng anh làm những công việc tay chân khi sửa sang căn nhà ở miền quê gần Paris (Phương Vân Am), là nơi thầy trở về ở, sau tháng 4/1975. Thầy cũng làm những công việc của một người thợ hoặc đẩy chiếc xe cút kít, hay quét gịon sau khi làm xong việc, như tất cả các đệ tử đến làm giúp. Anh mỉm cười khi nhắc lại: “Tôi từ bé được mẹ nuôi, vào chùa thì có bá tánh nuôi, cả đời tôi không biết nấu cơm bao giờ. Trong những ngày tôi mới sang Pháp, chính thầy lo nấu cơm, canh, rồi gọi tôi ra ăn. Tôi ngượng quá, sau cũng phải tập nấu nướng chút đỉnh để phụ giúp thầy.”

Anh Thanh Hương được thầy Nhất Hạnh khuyến khích học tiếng Pháp. Thầy bảo anh mỗi lần thầy đi dạy học, anh hãy theo thầy đi học luôn. Nhưng có nhiều bữa anh ngủ quên, nghỉ học, thầy cũng không mắng. Đến cuối khóa anh bị thầy đánh rớt vì không học đủ, anh cũng chịu, mà thầy cũng không nói một lời la trách. Hình ảnh thầy trong trí nhớ của anh là một vị tăng sĩ sống trong cảnh bần hàn, đạo hạnh và rất từ bi.

Sống đúng thân phận một “bần tăng,” dù ngày nay thiền sư Nhất Hạnh có khi ông được các nhà xuất bản Mỹ trả hàng mấy trăm ngàn mỹ kim tác quyền cho những cuốn sách bán chạy. Ông thầy hỗ trợ phương tiện cho gần 1000 tăng ni tu học tại Pháp, Mỹ, Đức, Thái Lan và Việt Nam;

ngoài ra ông thầy còn nuôi rất nhiều trẻ em nghèo đói để chúng được tới trường học chữ.

Trong các tự viện, thiền sư Nhất Hạnh bắt buộc các tăng ni theo đúng thanh quy giới luật nhà chùa, không nói lỏng mặc dù đã được “hiện đại hóa” theo cuộc sống của thế kỷ 21. Hai cuốn Giới bản tân tu của khất sĩ và nữ khất sĩ, do tăng đoàn Làng Mai ấn hành năm 2004, đề cập tới những sinh hoạt hiện đại như Internet, lái xe hơi v.v... Cũng có thêm các quy tắc mới như không được có điện thoại riêng, không xe gắn máy hay xe hơi riêng, và khi vào Internet phải có một bạn tu cùng vào để khỏi bị đi lạc.

Mỗi tăng ni sinh khi xuất gia theo thiền sư Nhất Hạnh đều phải từ bỏ hết của cải riêng, và “sống nghèo hành đạo” theo ông thầy. Cô Chân Diệu Nghiêm (Jina), trụ trì chùa Cam Lộ Xóm Hạ - Làng Mai, nguyên trước kia là một nữ giáo thọ tu theo truyền thống Nhật Bản, vẫn giữ tài sản riêng, dù cô đã đi hoằng pháp khắp nơi. Từ cuối năm 1990, cô tới Làng Mai thực tập với thiền sư Nhất Hạnh. Vài năm sau, cô Jina đã theo luật Làng Mai, từ bỏ hết của cải riêng, bỏ chiếc áo tu màu đen của thiền Nhật Bản để mặc nâu sồng đặc biệt Việt Nam và sống cuộc đời giản dị, không có chút tài sản nào nữa. Ni sư Jina cũng nguyện sống hạnh nghèo nàn như ông thầy, như tất cả các tỷ muội của cô tu theo pháp môn Làng Mai.

Cổ San
(báo Thế kỷ 21 số tháng 6.2007)

Nhớ Ông Thầy

Con sanh ra trong một gia đình không được êm ấm vì phải di cư hai lần: từ Bắc vô Nam, rồi từ Nam Việt Nam qua Mỹ. Cha mẹ con thường hay lo lắng, nóng giận và cãi vã nhau. Bà nội và mẹ con thường trút sự tức giận lên con vì con là con gái không đáng quý như ba người anh trai trong nhà, và anh trai của con cũng gây cho con nhiều khổ đau nội kết. Lúc còn bé con phải tưởng tượng ra những cánh đồng đầy hoa thơm cỏ lạ để thay thế cho những lời mắng nhiếc, đe dọa, đánh đập không công bằng trút lên con. Con hay lo lắng, nhút nhát, sợ sệt, và con học được cách tránh né người lớn rất lẹ làng. Con cũng biết cách làm sao cho ngoan để làm vừa lòng mọi người chung quanh, nhưng trong lòng con không có hạnh phúc. Hồi đó, đối với con, đời sống gia đình như vậy là bình thường. Cho đến khi con lớn khôn, con mới nhìn thấy gia đình bạn bè chung quanh sống khác gia đình mình nhiều lắm. Con thêm được cha mẹ để ý đến mình và thương yêu, nhưng con đâu biết cách chuyển hóa người lớn. May mà sau này con gặp được Thầy và học được bao nhiêu điều hay đẹp để chuyển hóa nội tâm mình.



Ngày xưa bên Việt Nam lúc còn ở trung học, con đọc được hai cuốn sách của Thầy mà con rất thích. Cuốn Bông Hồng Cài Áo rất tình cảm, ngọt ngào và nhẹ nhàng như một bài thơ. Cuốn Nẻo Về Cửa Ý diễn tả cuộc sống giản dị và thanh thoát của Thầy và một nhóm người trẻ. Cho đến một hôm vào tháng 7 năm 1987, con đọc được tin thầy từ bên Pháp sẽ đến tu viện Kim Sơn để hướng dẫn khóa tu. Con vô cùng mừng rỡ và mong muốn được gặp thầy.

Lần đầu tiên tham dự khóa tu con chưa có khái niệm gì về thiền. Chính thầy đã ra hướng dẫn thiền sinh cách ngồi, cách thở, cách mỉm cười, cách chấp tay búp sen, cách đi kinh hành trong chánh điện và cách thiền hành trong rừng cây Đan Mộc. Tất cả các hành động Thầy làm đều chậm rãi và khoan thai. Thầy cũng dạy cách đối xử tử tế và lễ phép với mọi người, biết thương yêu mọi người và mọi loài cùng cỏ cây và đất đá. Những lời dạy hay đẹp ấy đã thấm vào con như sương mai nuôi dưỡng con, làm nẩy mầm trong con những hạt giống an lành và hạnh phúc.

Mấy ngày đầu con ngồi thiền thật khổ sở, cảm giác đau chân rất khó chịu nên cứ mỗi năm phút con lại phải xoay chân đi hướng khác cho đỡ đau. Tuy nhiên lời Thầy giảng rất lôi cuốn làm con chăm chú lắng nghe, nhiều lúc con quên cả đau chân. Con nghĩ con có thể ngồi nghe Thầy giảng bao lâu cũng được. Lúc Thầy dắt mọi người đi thiền hành con cố gắng đi sau Thầy để có thể chú tâm và bắt chước theo nhịp chân của Thầy.

Con đã lắng nghe lời Thầy giảng từ ngày này qua ngày khác và chú tâm làm theo lời dạy: luôn luôn theo dõi hơi thở, từ khi thức giấc cho đến khi đi ngủ. Và rồi sau ba ngày chú tâm miệt mài, con đã được một phần thưởng thật bất ngờ: sang ngày thứ tư khi thức giấc con cảm thấy mình

quá là nhẹ nhàng, hạnh phúc. Con nhìn ai cũng thấy họ dễ thương và hiền hậu như một vị Bụt. Con nhìn thấy cảnh vật sao cảnh vật sáng rực, đẹp đẽ như chưa bao giờ từng thấy. Thật nhiệm màu!

Nhìn lại mình thấy bao nhiêu buồn bã lo âu mình mang theo lúc mới lên đây, đã rụng rơi đi mất tự hồi nào không hay. Con đâu có ngờ chỉ cần làm một điều rất giản dị là theo dõi hơi thở cho miên mật và khi tâm đã lắng đọng thì mình sẽ được khinh an hỷ lạc tuyệt vời như vậy. Con sung sướng và tự nguyện sẽ dành phần lớn cuộc đời còn lại của con để thực tập pháp môn màu nhiệm này và cũng tự hứa sẽ chia sẻ với bất cứ ai muốn thực tập pháp môn này để vượt thoát khổ đau.

Cảm giác an lạc từ Kim Sơn chỉ kéo dài được hơn một tháng, nhưng nhờ đã nếm được hương vị thiền rồi con rất chăm chỉ tìm cơ hội để được ngồi thành thói, nhất là cơ hội được ngồi chung với tăng thân. Đó là lý do ra đời của nhóm Nụ Hồng ở quận Cam, sau đó là Khóm Hồng ở San Diego và sau này có thêm tăng thân Xóm Dừa.

Kinh nghiệm bản thân cho con biết nếu con không chánh niệm thì con dễ bị cuốn vào những gì xảy ra chung quanh con. Nhưng nếu con chế tác được chánh niệm thì tất cả những gì xảy ra trước kia có thể làm con khổ, nay con có thể nhìn ngắm nó như một vở kịch, nó không cuốn được con nữa. Mà nếu như con có bị cuốn vào khổ đau thì con cũng biết cách thoát ra lạ làng hơn xưa.

Con có cơ hội được ở gần và săn sóc cho ba mẹ con khi về già. Nhiều lúc vì mệt mỏi đau nhức, mẹ con đã nói những lời không dễ thương với con, nhưng cứ nhìn thấy mẹ con càng ngày càng già yếu, con chỉ thấy xót thương mà không thấy giận mẹ. Con thường hỏi mẹ con: Trong đời mẹ chuyện gì làm mẹ vui nhất? Hỏi để gợi ý cho mẹ nhớ đến

những ngày vui trong đời và quên đi nhọc nhằn của thân thể.

Nhờ công việc ở sở, con có dịp tiếp xúc với những người già. Con đã chia sẻ được với các cụ, có khi cả con cháu trong gia đình và người chăm sóc cụ, cách theo dõi hơi thở để thư giãn, cho bớt đau, cho dễ ngủ và cũng để giảm bớt được nỗi lo lắng bồn chồn với cái chết gần kề.

Con nhớ mãi bài pháp Thầy giảng: “Có một hôm Thầy vào rừng làm việc cho yên. Đến chiều về không ngờ bóng tối đến rất mau, gió lạnh thổi ào ạt. Vì buổi sáng khi ra đi Thầy để cửa sổ mở cho ánh sáng mặt trời rọi vào cốc, bây giờ cốc tối om, gió lạnh thổi giấy tờ bay tứ tung. Thầy bèn đi thắp đèn lên, đóng hết cửa lại, xếp lại giấy tờ, đốt lò sưởi lên. Cốc lại trở nên sáng sủa, ngăn nắp và ấm cúng.” Cũng như thế, khi đời con gặp những cơn lốc, con cũng đóng hết cửa lại, ngồi yên để thắp sáng dần ngọn đèn tâm linh. Con đã biết cách chuyển rác thành hoa. Con đã có hướng đi trong cuộc đời.

Con xin cảm ơn Bụt, cảm ơn Thầy đã giúp cho con tìm được đường về. Cầu xin chư Bụt và chư vị Bồ Tát gia hộ cho Thầy được thân tâm an lạc đặng cứu độ muôn loài chúng sanh. Cầu xin cho những chúng sanh đã từng đau khổ gặp được Thầy và những vị nối tiếp Thầy để được thấm nhuần Giáo Pháp Từ Bi, biết cách chuyển hóa khổ đau thành an lạc và góp phần vào công trình độ đời của Thầy và của chư Tổ.

Nay kính,
Tâm Minh Cảnh

Tâm Minh Cảnh (Chân Mật Ngộ) – Thọ ngũ giới với Sư Ông năm 1987, giới Tiếp Hiện năm 2004, đã thực tập với tăng thân Nụ Hồng, Khóm Hồng và hiện nay với tăng thân Xóm Dừa.



Hạt Giống Đã Đơm Bông

Bạch Thầy,

Từ ngày bé Châu và bé Thảo nghỉ hè, con lại có thêm một chức vụ mới nữa đó là làm nghề “Taxi Mom”. Mỗi ngày con đi làm sớm, đến giờ ăn trưa rồi về nhà đón bé Thảo đi làm việc thiện nguyện tại Community Center của thành phố, ghé qua đón bé Châu đang dạy kèm miễn phí cho các em ở cấp tiểu học về nhà, trở lại làm việc tiếp cho đến năm giờ, lái xe ngược lại đón bé Thảo. Tính ra con phải lái xe chạy vòng vòng ít nhất là 50 miles mỗi ngày trước khi bước vào nhà.

Có những hôm người con mệt rã rời và thực sự muốn bỏ nghề làm taxi xế, nhưng khi nhìn những bông hoa đẹp đang bắt đầu đâm chồi trên mảnh đất tâm của hai bé, con không nỡ nào dập tắt mầm sống của chúng được.

Đây là hoa trái của những hạt giống tốt mà các cháu đã được tiếp nhận khi hồi còn bé. Con còn nhớ thời gian trước khi mấy cháu bước vào tuổi cứng đầu, mỗi năm chúng con đều ghi danh cho cả nhà tham dự khóa tu gia đình tại tu viện Lộc Uyển. Trong một tuần lễ hai cô bé được sống trong không khí lành mạnh của núi rừng và được ôm ấp trong tình

thương vô điều kiện của quý thầy cô. Lên tu viện, hai cô bé như nai được thả vào rừng, tự do tung tăng vui chơi trong môi trường an toàn, không bị người lớn bắt nạt, la rầy. Lại thật, lên Lộc Uyển, không ti vi, không máy vi tính, không chơi video games, vậy mà mấy cháu rất vui vẻ, không phàn nàn, chẳng đòi về nhà. Không nói ra nhưng con cũng biết hai cô bé rất hạnh phúc khi được quý thầy cô lắng nghe, được tôn trọng, được đối xử như người lớn. Liên tục bốn mùa hè như vậy, hai cô bé đã được quý thầy cô gieo trồng những hạt giống thương yêu, hiểu biết vào đất tâm.

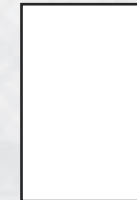
Khi hai cô bé bắt đầu vào tuổi dậy thì, thì chuyện cả gia đình đi dự khóa tu ở Lộc Uyển trở thành khó khăn hơn. Hai cháu bắt đầu bướng bỉnh và có khuynh hướng làm ngược lại tất cả điều ba mẹ thích. Dù khuyên lớn cách mấy, hai cô bé vẫn không chịu đi dự khóa tu. Hỏi lý do tại sao thì hai bé cho biết nguyên nhân và con đã chấp nhận và tôn trọng ý kiến của hai cháu. Bé Châu trong giai đoạn đó đang bước vào lứa tuổi lung chùng, không thích chơi với các em nhỏ tuổi hơn nhưng lại quá nhỏ để sinh hoạt với các anh chị trong nhóm teen, và bé Thảo không chịu đi nếu không có Châu đi theo. Con rất buồn vì đã mất cơ hội cho cả gia đình được đi dự khóa tu chung, nhưng biết khả năng mình đang làm tròn bổn phận của bậc cha mẹ đó là đã tuổi tằm và tiếp tục tuổi tằm những hạt giống tốt vào đất tâm của con.

Qua những khóa tu gia đình tại Lộc Uyển, con đã học được cách dạy dỗ các cháu không dùng bạo động. Thay vì dùng roi vọt, lời to tiếng lớn để dọa nạt các cháu, con bắt chước các thầy cô dùng ái ngữ, lắng nghe thật nhiều và điều quan trọng hơn hết là tôn trọng nhân phẩm của các cháu. Trong giai đoạn đi qua tuổi dậy thì, con biết các cháu muốn có không gian để định đoạt đường hướng riêng và con đã cho các cháu khoản cách đó. Thay vì là người giải quyết hết mọi chuyện của các cháu,

con cho hai bé cơ hội tự quyết định lấy, và chỉ can thiệp vào khi nào cảm thấy cần. Đối với con, cách hay nhất để chuyển đạt những hạt giống tốt cho các cháu là qua thân giáo. Sinh hoạt với Xóm Dừa và vốn liếng tu học đã giúp cho con cơ hội làm chuyện này. Những buổi cơm gây quỹ cho các em bé nghèo bên Việt Nam được đi học, bé Châu và Thảo hầu hết kỳ nào cũng có mặt để phụ giúp mẹ. Khi bé Châu phụ làm những lon đồng bình bỏ tiền bạc các, con dùng phương tiện giải thích cho bé biết về việc làm hữu ích này. Con biết những hạt giống tốt đã được gieo trong tâm của hai bé, và bổn phận của con là kiên nhẫn, tiếp tục vun xới, tưới tắm hai mảnh đất tâm đó để những hạt giống tốt không bị héo mòn và có cơ hội nảy mầm khi duyên đầy đủ.

Mùa hè năm nay, bé Thảo tự động ghi tên đi làm việc thiện nguyện thay vì ở nhà chơi video games và coi ti vi, bé Châu ghi tên đi dạy kèm lớp học hè. Cuối tuần này, bé Thảo dậy con thức dậy sớm để đưa cháu đi phát thực phẩm cho người nghèo. Bé Châu ghi tên đi tham dự trại hè huấn luyện Leadership của hội Hồng Thập Tự. Nhìn hai cháu, con không thể nào che đậy được nỗi cảm động trong lòng. Con cảm ơn Thầy đã trao truyền những hạt giống tốt cho con và cho quý thầy cô và những hạt giống đó đã được chuyển tiếp đến thế hệ kế tiếp và giờ đây đã đơm bông.

Con của Thầy,
Tâm Từ Phúc



*Tâm Từ Phúc, Chân Mật Thiện - Thọ ngũ giới năm 1999.
Thọ giới Tiếp Hiện năm 2004. Hiện sinh hoạt với tăng thân
Xóm Dừa, Orange County, California.*

Khơ?
Ti con



Sức Mạnh Của Pháp Môn Làng Mai

Đang ngủ ngon tôi được đánh thức bởi tiếng kêu nhẹ của bé Cam. “Bà đây! Bà đây! Thương”. Nghe tiếng tôi, bé nằm im chờ tôi lấy sữa. Ngoài trời từ từ sáng, ánh nắng xuyên qua lá cành bên mé rừng vườn sau nhà. Bé cười tươi, reo vui. Tôi hát nhẹ bài kệ.

*Thức dậy miệng mỉm cười
Hăm bốn giờ tinh khôi
Xin nguyện sống trọn vẹn
Mắt thương nhìn cuộc đời*

Tiếng chim hót hòa với lời kệ đã đưa bé vào bữa ăn sáng thật ngon. Bà cháu tôi bắt đầu một ngày mới.

Bé sinh thiếu tháng do tai nạn xe hơi của bố mẹ cháu, xảy ra vào tháng 11 năm 2010 ở Houston. Lúc đó tôi đang đi chơi ở Việt Nam.

Sinh con xong, mẹ bé hoàn toàn kiệt lực, phải ở lại nhà thương và trung tâm Phục hồi (rehabilitation center) hơn sáu tháng. Tôi đã nuôi bé từ đó đến nay. Phong, bố của bé mới giải ngũ sau 11 năm phục vụ trong

Hải Quân Hoa Kỳ, lần đầu tiên đi làm cho một hãng tư. Bố cháu chỉ dưới ba mươi tuổi và mới lập gia đình được hơn hai năm.

Khi về California dưỡng sức, tôi được gia đình tâm linh Xóm Dừa đã sẵn sóc tôi như người em đi xa về nhà. Hôm chia tay về lại Houston, tôi đã ôm anh chị Sáu khóc như trẻ thơ. Tôi cảm nhận được sự ấm áp nương tựa. Chị dặn dò “nhớ thực tập kỹ nhé em, các con em cần em lắm. Có thì giờ em hãy viết để chia sẻ sự thực tập của em cho tăng thân nhé.”

Tôi về lại Houston đã hơn một tháng. Khí hậu bắt đầu nóng, chỉ có buổi sáng là mát và dễ chịu. Tôi thích ra vườn sau ngồi yên nhìn rừng và ngắm các loại chim, sóc rủ nhau đi ăn sáng. Tôi rất quý giờ tĩnh khôi này nên dùng để ghi lại vài hàng về sự thực tập khi tai họa đã xảy ra thật bất ngờ, “không thể nào mặc cả”. Nếu sự chia sẻ này còn những vướng mắc là do tôi còn yếu kém, cần “thở vào, thở ra” nhiều hơn.

Chánh niệm giúp tôi được gì?

Khi viết những dòng này, tôi phải nhớ đến Tiffany- con gái tôi. Cháu là người đầu tiên nhắc tôi có chánh niệm - Thở; ngay trong cú phone gọi về Việt Nam báo tin ngày 11/14/2010. Câu đầu tiên Tif nói là “Mẹ thở đi, mẹ thở rồi con sẽ nói chuyện”. Nhờ vậy, sau khi nghe tin dữ, tôi bình tĩnh dặn cháu những điều cần thiết như khóa cửa ngõ; bay đi Houston ngay. Sau đó, Phong, anh cháu gọi về VN năm phút sau. Giọng cháu nhỏ và lạc đi. Phong rời nhà đi lính từ năm 18 tuổi. Cháu rất trưởng thành và sống tự lập và chùng mực. Tôi nhắc Phong: “Vợ con đang được sẵn sóc chu đáo, Tif sắp bay qua với con, mẹ sẽ có mặt ở Houston mai mốt, nhớ uống nước và thở.”

Cháu có làm điều tôi nhắc không thì tôi không biết. Phần tôi, điều này đã giúp cho tôi rất nhiều trong thời gian qua. Tôi cũng đã trấn an

được được đại gia đình ở VN, xin mọi người đừng bàn tán hay hỏi về chi tiết của tai nạn, vì chính tôi cũng không biết rõ, nên chỉ xin họ gửi năng lượng tốt lành về cho vợ Phong đang bị giải phẫu đầu, với bào thai gần 7 tháng. Tôi đốt hương cầu nguyện bố mẹ tôi ở chùa Vĩnh Nghiêm và đáp chuyển bay về Mỹ ngày hôm sau.

Từ ngày theo pháp môn Làng Mai (2005), tôi có thói quen đem bên mình vài cuốn sách của Thầy Nhất Hạnh như bạn đồng hành, nhất là trong những chuyến đi xa. Sách cũng là tăng thân của tôi. Lần này, tôi có sẵn cuốn “An Lạc từng bước chân” và “Kinh Kệ toàn bằng tiếng Việt” do tăng thân Xóm Dừa in trong dịp Tu viện Bát Nhã lâm nạn. Hai sách này đã gắn bó với tôi từ 8 tháng nay. Bé Cam đã được nghe thi kệ từ ngày lọt lòng. Sống trong phòng chăm sóc đặc biệt (NICU), mẹ cháu cũng được nghe kinh kệ trong những đêm tôi trực bên con, khi sự sống của cháu như chỉ mảnh treo chuông. Tôi thích nhất là bài lá và cây nuôi lá trong An Lạc Từng Bước Chân. Hai cuốn sách bé nhỏ này đã nuôi dưỡng tôi rất nhiều.

Tôi vào pháp môn Làng Mai thật tình cờ, sau khi tôi ngắt ngậy với những bài Thầy bình thơ Nguyễn Bính, Thế Lữ vào một đêm giao thừa. Sau đó tôi tìm đọc và nghe và đọc các bài Pháp Thoại của thầy. Lời văn nhẹ, dí dỏm, trẻ trung đã dẫn dắt tôi vào đạo Bụt thật tự nhiên, tôi thuộc và hiểu được phần nào các bài kinh xưa vốn rất khô khan khó hiểu, nay đã được chuyển đổi ra tiếng Việt. Lời Pháp đã thấm vào trái tim tôi dễ dàng, tự nhiên như

Mưa xuân nhẹ hạt

Đất tâm ướt

Hạt đậu năm xưa

Hé miệng cười

Những ngày mưa đầu năm ở Woodland, (thành phố nơi con tôi ở, xa Houston 45 phút lái xe) với rừng cây xanh được no nê nước mưa thì bà cháu tôi cũng được no nê nghe lời kinh kệ vang nhà như uống trà, ớn đất.

Nhân có chị bạn gọi cho mấy CD hò ru con ba miền. Tôi nghe thấy buồn quá, nên chế biến các bài kệ yêu thương của Làng Mai để nuôi dưỡng hạt mầm ngọt bùi cho cháu. Bà cháu tôi tràn đầy hạnh phúc, vì cả hai đều hết lòng ngâm và nghe (cháu ngủ 90%). Tôi mong sao có vị nào phổ biến các bài kệ này thì quý lắm cho thế hệ trẻ mai sau.

Cũng nhờ có chánh niệm để sống sâu sắc với giây phút hiện tại nên nhiều đêm Phong và tôi ở lại bệnh viện, chúng tôi thực sự có mặt cho nhau. Ngồi yên bên nhau để ý thức từng hơi thở như thể là cùng thở cho vợ cháu và bé Cam. Không khí ban đêm ở nhà thương rất nặng nề dù yên lặng hơn ban ngày. Thỉnh thoảng lại ồn ào vì nhân viên tới tập chạy đi cấp cứu một bệnh nhân đang lâm nguy. Con dâu tôi đôi lần cũng ở trong hoàn cảnh này. Tôi chỉ biết khuyên Phong hãy hết lòng tin tưởng vào Ông Trên và sự săn sóc của bác sĩ để chấp nhận hiện tại. Nhiều lần con trai tôi muốn mang vợ đi nhà thương khác, lúc đó tôi nhớ lời Thầy hay khuyên “hãy thực tập hết lòng và tin tưởng thì tình tấn sẽ đến”.

Chánh niệm đã giúp tôi như ngọn đèn soi đường trong đêm tối. Tôi chỉ tu tập part time thôi, nhưng nhờ những bài pháp thoại rất “thật” và âu yếm ân cần như mẹ khuyên con của Thầy cũng như những mệnh lệnh đầy tình thương gọi gấm cho đệ tử. “Làm người tu thì phải biết chế tác, chứ không ngồi đó mà chịu trận.” Tất cả đã giúp mẹ con tôi ra khỏi đường hầm đen tối.

Hơn hai tháng sau tai nạn, tưởng sự bình phục của con dâu tôi sẽ suông sẻ, chỉ cần rehab nhiều lắm là sáu tháng sẽ hoàn toàn bình phục. Tôi về lại Cali nghỉ chờ hai tuần sau qua để đón bé Cam về vì bé đã tự thở được và tự bú bình sau 45 ngày ở NICU. Lòng tôi không yên, tôi “bí mật” sang sớm hơn để làm quà cho mọi người. Vì khi tôi rời Houston, liên hệ giữa các cháu với mọi người không được tươi mát.

Ngờ đâu con dâu tôi phải vào lại Emergency đêm trước vì yếu và mất hết trí nhớ. Tôi đến phi trường mới biết tin này. Tôi đến thẳng nhà thương, mẹ con tôi ôm nhau khóc trong phòng bé Cam. Chúng tôi thật sự xuống tinh thần. Phong phải trở lại sở, bé Cam sẽ về nhà vì đã tự lập nên không được hãng bảo hiểm cho ở lại bệnh viện thêm.

Đêm đó tôi ngủ lại với con dâu, khuyên Phong về nghỉ vì hôm sau họ sẽ giải phẫu đầu cho vợ cháu lần thứ hai. Phong cần tỉnh táo. Tôi ngồi đó nhìn con, hai mắt mở to nhìn vào khoảng không lác lõng và vô hồn. Tôi đọc Sức mạnh Quan Âm cho cả tôi và con. Sau đó, tôi gọi về CA kêu Tiffany thu xếp việc sở, khóa nhà mang hai con chó Bucky, Limo, lái xe sang đây gấp. Rất may Tiffany nhờ được một bạn lái đi chung. Tôi không yên tâm vì thời tiết đầu mùa gió bão và rất lạnh. Khi mẹ con chúng tôi gặp nhau tại bệnh viện, tôi ôm con và Bucky, thầm cảm ơn Bụt đã cho Tif lái an toàn đến nơi. Hôm sau, mẹ con tôi đón bé Cam về nhà. Thú thật tôi run lắm dù đã học ở NICU cẩn thận. Chúng tôi chia việc, tôi ở nhà lo cho bé, Phong, Tif, và mẹ con dâu tôi ở nhà thương. Tif là tai, mắt, là cánh tay phải của Phong vì cháu phải đi làm và đêm khuya về ngủ nhà cho có sức. Thời gian Tif ở nhà thương lo cho chị dâu, tôi chỉ lo cháu đau ốm nhưng trong lòng rất sung sướng vì tấm lòng cháu thật dễ thương. Cháu cũng là một tấm gương cho tôi học về tình thương. Thời

gian này, tôi cầu cứu đến chánh niệm nhiều nhất. Hoàn cảnh đã bắt tôi phải thực tập “thiệt lòng”. Mỗi cú phone các con gọi từ nhà thương thể hiện ra nhiều lo âu, sợ hãi trước tình trạng của bệnh nhân, cùng những “nóng bức” của liên hệ gia đình. Phần tôi cứ rình rập đêm ngày xem bé Cam có thở được không.(điều lo sợ nhất của các bé sinh thiếu tháng). Tôi chỉ biết khuyên các con nên “thờ” và đi thiền hành trong nhà thương. Trong hoàn cảnh này tôi cũng tìm được hạnh phúc như ngồi nhìn mưa rừng, ngâm nga kệ, ôm bé thật sâu sắc mỗi khi cho ăn và mang ơn những gì đang có. Sự nhớ ơn cũng mang lại hạnh phúc nhiều lắm.

Chánh niệm giúp tôi chuyển hóa được nội kết. Tai nạn xảy ra đã đảo lộn đời sống của ít nhất bốn gia đình. Tôi cũng bị lao đao nhiều như thay đổi đời sống hàng ngày, xa của nhà, xa Lộc Uyển, xa tăng thân, đình chỉ những ngày về hưu rong chơi không mục đích.

Nhưng nhìn kỹ lại sự mất mát không quan trọng so với hạnh phúc tôi thu nhận được. Như mẹ con có dịp sống chung dưới mái nhà với sự hân hoan của con dâu. Liên hệ mẹ chồng con dâu trở nên tốt đẹp mà từ xưa các bậc tiền bối đã chỉ dạy “kính nhi viễn chi” cho chắc ăn. Vả lại, đời sống ở xa chúng tôi chỉ hưởng hoa xuân thu nhị kỳ gặp nhau thôi. Tôi lại được sống với sự tươi mát của bé Cam. Rất may cháu cười nhiều hơn khóc với lại nuôi cháu vừa vui vừa thông thả hơn nuôi con ngày xưa.

Tôi được đi thiền hành trong rừng mỗi ngày, nếu mưa thì tôi ngồi trong cửa sổ ngắm mưa. Mùa thu vừa qua tôi được lái xe đi thăm tu viện Mộc Lan. Những lợi lạc đáng kể nhất là tôi thực tập “thật” hơn chứ không giải đãi. Nhiều lúc nội kết tủi hờn, trách móc nổi lên quấy phá làm khổ tôi rất nhiều. Tôi ngồi yên, ôm bé Cam trong lòng và hiện tại nhắc nhở tôi là tôi đang nuôi bé thay mẹ bé. Cũng như khi nhìn con dâu trước mắt

tôi chỉ là một người đàn bà trẻ đáng thương, chưa bế được con đầu lòng của mình từ lúc lọt lòng mà sự bình phục còn mơ hồ và mù mịt. Nhìn lại đời mình, tuy đã ngoài 60 tuổi, lên xuống trong đời nhưng không thấm thía vào đâu so với cô bé này. Nghĩ vậy lòng tôi chỉ biết thương thôi. Tình thương ứa ra thật dễ dàng, tự nhiên như nước từ cao chảy xuống thấp. Tôi cầu mong chánh niệm này ở mãi trong tôi. Tôi cũng nhận được một điều rất giản dị là đi làm việc từ thiện cứu tế dễ hơn vì...không có nội kết.

Nhiều lần tôi cầu cứu tăng thân để đổ rác, để nhận được “thuốc” chuyển rác thành hoa. Tôi biết nội kết trong tôi đang từ từ tan rã. Hoa thì đang là nộ và rác không còn là tác yếu tác quái trong tôi nữa. Sự liên hệ của chúng tôi “thật” hơn, vui nhất là sự thân thiết của Tif và chị dâu cô bé. Chánh niệm giúp tôi hòa tan được sự khác biệt giữa mọi người trong gia đình, như hòa sữa và nước; khác với hoàn cảnh đổ vỡ liên hệ của gia đình mấy người bệnh khác. Trong một thời gian ngắn, chính gia đình tôi cũng không thoát khỏi “tai nạn” thứ hai này. Tai nạn xe đã xảy ra không thể tránh. Một nạn nhân chính thức đang còn nằm điều trị. Đáng tiếc là “tai nạn 2” do tất cả mọi người đóng góp và phí phạm nhiều năng lượng của nhau. Tôi thực tập còn yếu kém nên cũng “đóng góp” chút đỉnh.

May mắn thay, tôi có tăng thân, có pháp môn nên biết dừng lại nên ra khỏi được “vũng lầy của chúng ta”. Tôi cũng giúp được Phong bớt đi phần nào sự “nóng nực” để dồn năng lượng cho vợ, con, việc làm cũng như giữ gìn sức khỏe. Tôi nhớ lời Thầy hãy cầu cứu trẻ thơ, thiên nhiên để mang lại sự tươi mát cho mình. Mẹ con tôi có được hai điều này vậy mà có lúc tôi cũng quên đi để “làm thân cùng tử”.

Tai nạn này cho tôi bài học yêu thương đích thực là cho thì cứ cho, đừng đếm mặc cả thì hai bên đều sẽ bị trục trặc. Nhờ những bài pháp

thoại rất “thật” và “sâu” của Thầy mà tôi được ôm con dâu thật lâu, thờ đều như thể cảm ơn con đã cho tôi cơ hội thực tập cũng như để nói “I am here for you”. Hạnh phúc đến thật dễ dàng giữa chúng tôi. Không có sự khác biệt giữa người cho và người nhận.

Tôi cũng từ từ biết khai triển những tương đồng giữa tôi và liên hệ chung quanh để vẫn có những trao đổi vui vẻ, những cảm thông cho nhau. Còn những điều dị biệt thì thôi...để dành cất đi và tôi cũng luôn giữ chánh niệm để đừng bị lôi cuốn vào.

Tai nạn trong đời đến và đi, không ai mặc cả, 8 tháng trôi qua thật nhanh. Có điều bây giờ thì nhà vui hơn, bé Cam đã được hơn bảy tháng, dù sinh thiếu tháng nhưng bé rất khỏe. Bé cười reo và là niềm vui cho cả nhà. Mẹ bé tuy chưa sẵn sóc được bé nhiều, nhưng hai mẹ con đều đang “học nói” với nhau. Mỗi tối gia đình, kể cả hai con chó, quây quần bên giường mẹ cháu để ngồi yên và cảm ơn Bụt, Chúa đã cho chúng tôi sống bình yên bên nhau.

Riêng tôi luôn tự nhủ “nhớ ơn Thầy thì thực tập cho hết lòng”. Thừa Thầy, con xin thầy hỏi con “Are you Sure?” Cảm ơn Tăng thân đã lắng nghe và cho tôi cơ hội chia sẻ này. Viết đến đây tôi nhớ đến Lộc Uyển và tăng thân nhiều, hình ảnh này như đang hiện ra trước mắt tôi

Woodland, June 10, 2011
Thủy Đỗ, Chân Lạc Tuệ

Thủy Đỗ (Chân Lạc Tuệ) - Thọ ngũ giới năm 2005, sau khóa tu đầu tiên ở Lộc Uyển. Thọ giới Tiếp Hiện năm 2007. Hiện sinh hoạt với tăng thân Xóm Dừa, Orange County, California.



Chốn Ấy Có Nụ Cười

Mỗi khi nghĩ tới, nhắc đến, ghé thăm chốn ấy, lòng tôi lại ấm lên, nhẹ nhàng và thanh thản hơn.

Nghĩ tới, làm tôi thấy trước mặt mình hiển hiện lần lượt những nụ cười của tăng chúng trong giờ sinh hoạt, trong giờ hát ca, giờ thiền hành.

Nhắc đến, tôi nghe gió núi lướt nhẹ qua vầng trán, mây trắng giăng giăng trên đầu và mùi sage dại thơm phảng phất lan vào không gian những bụi dứa gai nơi chân núi.

Ghé thăm, tôi thêm được năng lực để bước những bước vững chãi trên đời sống mình mà trước kia tôi từng nghĩ mình sẽ bỏ cuộc.

Chốn ấy là một nơi rất quen thuộc, nhưng mỗi lần ghé tôi lại phát giác ra nó mới. Mới trong một vẻ đẹp xưa của một tàng cổ thụ. Lại ở nét cứng cỏi dũng cảm của những khối đá núi. Thú vị trong vẻ nhu mì óng ả của con suối băng ngang. Tôi cũng có thể gặp gỡ nhiều người tốt và xấu nhưng đều mang những ưu và khuyết điểm như nhau. Nơi đó, tôi không thấy sự lạc lõng bơ vơ. Nơi ngồi xuống, tôi thấy an tâm và dễ chịu. Nơi

đứng lên, tôi có thể tiếp nhận lời khen bằng lòng thanh thản, nhẹ nhàng mà cái ngã thôi lơ lửng ở trên mây. Nghe tiếng chê, tôi có thể mỉm một nụ cười dịu nhẹ, không lao xao, không phản ứng. Tôi được học những phương pháp đánh gục sự sợ hãi, tôi được yêu thương để đem thương yêu mình san sẻ với mọi người. Tôi tập tin tưởng để xoá đi nghi ngại bấy lâu đầy đầy thành tường, thành vách, nơi van tim. Tôi cảm, tôi thương, tôi hoà mình, tôi đem hồn mình dựa nương êm ả vào chốn ấy.

Chốn ấy là một tụ điểm hoà tan, không phân biệt ngôn ngữ, giới tính, màu da. Những ngày mùa đông, có các khuôn mặt rám nắng trên màu da vàng xếp nếp dấu chân chim ở đuôi mắt lặng ngẫm vầng thái dương lên. Những buổi mùa thu, những mái tóc vàng, vàng trán phẳng da trắng rục rờ trong nét mũi cao thông thả chạy bộ lên xuống vài con dốc nhỏ. Những đêm mùa hạ, giọng hát chơi vơi của nhiều ngôn ngữ nghe xôn xao trong gió và làn lửa ấm bừng sáng trong khu cắm trại. Những trưa mùa xuân, tiếng cười trẻ thơ nô đùa tíu tít trong manh áo mới, phong bao đỏ, và các miếng mít ngọt ngào. Và cả bốn mùa vạn vật chan hoà âm ba từ ái của tiếng đại hồng chung.

Chốn ấy có những con đường và những khoảng lặng.

Những con đường mà các chiếc nón lá xinh xắn đơm chữ “thở”, mang tín hiệu của một nụ cười mỉm đi lững thững hành thiền trong im ắng buổi ban mai hồng. Nó có nhiều màu áo nâu thanh thản với cánh tay rộng mở, với ánh mắt long lanh sáng. Nó mang nhiều tiếng tim đập nhịp nhàng trong hiện tại, trong bình an. Nó không có hoa hồng, hoa tu-líp, hoa cẩm chướng rục rờ những thoảng man mác hương hoa tím, hoa sage, hoa cúc nở.

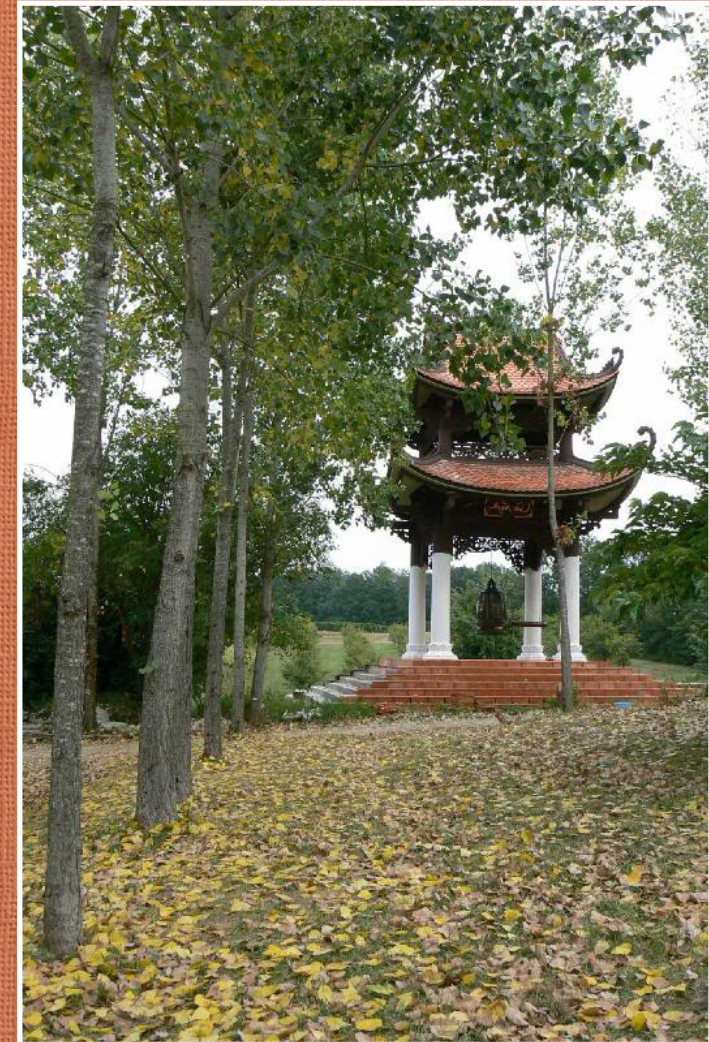
Và những khoảng lặng, không tranh đua, phê phán, tị hiềm được

gói ghém trong những tấm khăn vuông, manh áo ấm đơn sơ của các sư cô, sư thầy, sư chú, sư bác. Những khoảng lặng không hoang mang, thao thức, ồn ã, tối ám, mờ mịt của vô minh. Chốn đó sự sống có mặt và ý nghĩa hơn bao giờ hết.

Chị ơi, ngày mai chúng ta lên Lộc Uyển nhé, chúng ta cùng đến chốn ấy.

Tâm Minh Nguyệt

Trịnh Thanh Thủy (Tâm Minh Nguyệt) - Bút hiệu: *Trịnh Thanh Thủy, Tóc Dài. Định cư tại Nam California, Hoa Kỳ. Cộng tác với: Tiền Vệ, Talawas, Hợp Lưu, Văn, Chủ Đề, Việt Báo, Viễn Đông, Người Việt Hải Ngoại, Trẻ, Người Việt Boston, Khoa Học.Net, Quán Văn...v.v..)*



Thich Nhat Hanh, Zen, a Smile

I spent ten years of my life in the Soto Zen school, attending sesshins (intensive meditation retreat) and studying Buddhism. These ten years have been great because I have been learning and meeting wonderful and great people.

Although my heart felt that sesshins were good practice, I saw many people refrain from it because it was a bit harsh. I decided to seek a more flexible way, as they say in the teachings of the Buddha, I searched for the middle path.

I had read several books of Thay, and then joined a Sangha in Spain and later in Plum Village. I validated the freedom that exists on my path. Maybe I am a bit traditional from my previous experience, that is why I keep practicing Zen meditation in a consistent and committed way, but with a smile.

In the Soto Zen school, I took the Bodhisattva Vows. It was a wonderful commitment to all beings and also to myself. At Plum Village the Five Mindfulness Trainings required full consciousness to help me

pursue happiness in the Via de la Liberation. I understand that I have great respect for my two teachers, Dokushô Villalba and Thich Nhat Hanh, to whom I owe all my respect and admiration.

Thanks to them and their teachings, I organized a Sangha in my city where people come to meditate, practice walking meditation through the park, share Dharma and put into practice the teachings of Buddha.

I'm a photographer, and Zen inspired me to take photographs from the heart. Nature is my favorite subject, and each shooting almost becomes a ceremony, a oneness with the universe. My wife also practiced Buddhism in the Kagyu school of Tibetan tradition, and my daughter also took refuge in the Three Precepts.

Thich Nhat Hanh has created a form of Buddhism that teaches to live freely and also to have a strong commitment to all beings. The sacredness of the practice is any moment of our life, each breath becomes the only important thing, because everything always happens at the present moment.

Veneration the Buddha,
Veneration the Dharma,
Veneration of the Sangha.

Juan Carlos del Rio
Zaragoza, Spain



The Joy of Practice Cannot Be Contained

*To our respected and beloved teacher, Thầy Nhat Hanh,
and to the stream of ancestral teachers who have preserved and
transmitted the teachings, we offer an ocean of gratitude.*

From Carl:

December 5, 1998 was the coldest, darkest day of my entire life. I committed the vile act of murder and was eventually sentenced to life in prison. Taking a life never resonated well in my heart at all. Because I was raised a Baptist Christian, I knew that for forgiveness, I had to sincerely repent and draw closer to God. However during my Christian experience, something didn't feel complete. I began asking questions. "Why are we the only ones that will be saved when this God comes back and destroys the entire earth? You mean to tell me that this great loving Creator gave us life and is now saying if you don't believe in a certain

way, he is going to destroy us and torture us in a burning hell forever?” It sounded absurd. So I found the confidence to explore other ways of life and tried to find peace in my heart, while being someone who could make a positive effect on life.

That’s when I met a guy named Daniel, sitting outside, meditating. He looked so peaceful and serene. Several days went by, and I could not forget that look or the feeling I experienced when I encountered Daniel. I eventually approached Daniel and asked him what he studied and what his way of life was. He said Buddhism, and that he was in the process of trying to get a Sangha started here at Piedmont Correctional. I didn’t know what in the world he was talking about and asked if he had any information that would explain. He said, “I have a book that I want you to read. Read it and get back with me.”

Well, the name of that book was *Being Peace* by Thich Nhat Hanh. The book was incredible. Thầy offered so many precious jewels of wisdom that were simple and liberating. I knew this was what I wanted to do. What really sold me is the fact that Thich Nhat Hanh stated that his teachings were not to fight, kill, or die for. They are only a way to develop understanding and compassion. Thich Nhat Hanh said if his teachings are for you, then use them, and if they are not, then abandon them. Man, what humility, style, and grace.

After reading *Being Peace*, I asked Daniel how could I be a part of this Sangha and be filled with the teachings of liberation. Daniel said next week we will be starting a Sangha here and Leslie would be coming in to teach. I went to the meeting and was absolutely amazed at Leslie’s composure and sincere compassion about humanity. I wanted to cultivate

that in my life and be a solution to suffering and be helpful as well as compassionate to every being I encountered. After attending meetings for a little over a year, I received the Five Mindfulness Trainings in a beautiful transmission ceremony. The transmission was very important to me. My family, friends, and peers noticed a very big change in my life and I owe it all to the practice. Being in the practice has taught me to be mindful in all my actions, to be aware in each living moment. Because I practice, people see me as someone who strives to relieve suffering in myself and others.

Never in my wildest dreams could I imagine the effects of being mindful of how I ate, breathed, walked, sat, or lay down. It is an awe-inspiring experience. Now my daily life as I practice is filled with being aware and staying in the present moment, never worrying, just trying to be present, and taking care of each moment as situations arise. In this dog-eat-dog world, people are motivated by many different things, which leads them to be suspicious of true kindness.

For example, my job assignment here was commissary clerk in the kitchen. The job only requires for me to pass out food, to be prepared for that day, and keep inventory on the stock. Well, one day, I noticed a big pile of pots and pans piled around the sink. My mind immediately went back to something Thich Nhat Hanh had said, “When we wash dishes, we are aware that we are washing dishes.” I said to myself, “What a perfect time to practice being in the present moment and be aware that I am washing dishes.” I poured myself into it and experienced the beauty of being there and taking my time to wash every pot and pan there, and the ones that continued to come. About an hour-and-a half went by and the

guy assigned to washing dishes came back, expecting to walk into a big load of work. To his surprise, everything was caught up and clean. He asked, “Which supervisor told you to do that?” I told him nobody asked me to do it and I did it on my own. He then asked, “Well how much do I owe you, because nobody does anything around here for free.” I smiled at him and said, “You don’t owe me anything” as I walked away. Because for me, as I was there in present moment, I imagined myself at Plum Village, serving with my brothers and sisters, washing dishes with a big smile on my face.

Aware that words are just labels and they don’t depict who we truly are, I don’t go around with a big sign around my neck saying that I am Buddhist. Therefore, it was quite refreshing to encounter my next experience. One afternoon, an officer approached me and asked me to sit in the infirmary with a man who was dying of cancer. The nurses were understaffed and they needed someone to just sit in the room with him, just in case he tried to get up out of bed because he was so weak and he could not walk on his own strength without falling down. While sitting in the infirmary with him, I thought of impermanence. Old age, sickness, and death are certain to come for everyone. Also, I knew it was not a time for words so I just simply sat with him and occasionally, he would smile. When he spoke, I just listened and let him know that I was there for him.

My daily life consists of practicing the principle of dwelling in the present moment and staying mindful of my breath. Throughout the day, I smile and try to handle everything with the correct attitude. I’m not always successful, but just being aware of the process of unwholesome

seeds when they are present helps out greatly. My appreciation for the practice is boundless. My teacher, Leslie, is a beautiful person who takes the time to teach me with compassion. I am truly honored, with much humility to be her student and dear brother.

Unconditionally yours,
**Boundless Compassionate Heart
 of the Source**
 Carl Dunlap, Jr.

From Leslie Rawls

Our Sangha has supported various inmate North Carolina Sanghas for years. For over a decade, the distances kept me from participating more than a few times each year. A few years ago that changed. Daniel, an inmate I knew from a mountain prison, transferred to Piedmont Correctional, about an hour away from me. And Daniel began to build a Sangha. I came only a few times before going to Plum Village to receive Lamp Transmission. When I returned, I was surprised to learn that Daniel had transferred out. But Daniel had started the wheel of practice. Our tiny inmate Sangha now meets every Monday, thanks to Daniel’s initial push, the energy of our practice, and the ongoing support of Chaplain Michael Haynes.

Thirty-nine-year-old Carl has been a Sangha regular since we began. Because he is serving a life sentence and North Carolina has abolished parole, we can expect that he may never be on the outside. Carl has told me that sometimes he wishes he could be outside, so he could

visit Plum Village and practice with the Sangha. He also recognizes that his practice is very helpful to those right where he is.

In the years since the Sangha began, Carl's practice has blossomed. I have seen tension lessen in his face, seen him walking mindfully and peacefully, and heard from those he lives with about how his practice affects others in the prison. One Monday when Chaplain Haynes was out, another staff member oversaw our small group. As we packed away our blankets and inflatable cushions, the staff member commented on how peaceful it had been sit with us. (He had been across the room, behind a desk, trying to keep his chair from squeaking.) Then, he spoke about Carl, telling me that Carl is a source of peace to other inmate, guards, and staff. He too had seen the strength of Carl's practice. Other times, I've seen Carl listen to Sangha members with a tender heart and respond with words of compassion and understanding. His practice offers a rare and sorely needed balm for troubled hearts.

A regular in our Piedmont Correctional Sangha has asked, more than once, why I come. I have no words to answer, and sometimes tell him, truthfully, that I don't know. But my heart knows that it's something like this: I come to the prison every Monday because transformation is possible through these teachings, because everyone matters, and because transformation, like happiness, is not an individual matter.

I bow with deep gratitude and respect to my brother Carl, to the Piedmont Correctional Sangha, and to my venerable teacher, Thầy Nhat Hanh, whose gifts to us are beyond measure.

Leslie Rawls,
True Realm of Awakening



Carl D. Dunlap, Jr. (Boundless Compassionate Heart of the Source) practices with the Extended Charlotte (NC) Community of Mindfulness, an inmate Sangha. He has two daughters who are young adults now. His father visits him regularly.



Leslie Rawls (True Realm of Awakening) practices with the Charlotte (NC) Community of Mindfulness and enjoys other North Carolina Sanghas from time to time. She also practices with Carl's inmate Sangha every week.



No Mud, No Questions, No Lotus ... a Way to Being

Dear Thay, why is walking the path so difficult? It is so muddy!
I want to be without judgment, craving, praise for good works, need of support.
I go to Sangha. I meditate. I read sutras and discourses. I do good things for others.
I think I'm getting it... and then... Whoosh!
I am ill, I mis-speak, I misplace my integrity, I scream at a family member, I skip meditation.
Right now, holding my head in my hands, I agonize: "*This is so difficult? It is not what I signed up for!*" Slowly my head lifts. My eyes focus on a tree near the window. It is full of apples rotting on the branch. I feel like a rotten apple. I look questioningly at the tree.
Why hasn't the garden's owner cared for the tree, provided water,

nutrients, trimmed its branches? How can it survive without care?

My thoughts shift from critical despair to **caring** about the tree. I wonder, “how am I like this tree? Am I rotting or taking care of myself? Am I truly following the 5 and the 14 Mindfulness Trainings? **How** am I practicing – particularly, ‘mindful speech’? Do I think before I speak? How often do I ask myself what the Buddha suggested to Rahula: is what I am about to say or do in my own and another’s best interest?”

More thoughts whiz past each other as two small birds dash screeching from branch to branch, one in pursuit of the other. Now I focus on the birds, not the apple; yet the questions arising are similar:

Am I one of the birds? Chasing after something? Have I created an enemy because I’m defending something I consider mine? What am I thinking about the other? Is what I believe true? How do I know it is true? What am I thinking about myself? How do my thoughts shape my reality?

My thoughts become mirrors. I see myself in every reflection. I begin questioning everything.

Why am I writing to you? Do I want recognition? Is it my ego shouting: “See me! Hear me! Love me!” Do I want you to know that your teachings have touched me in a profound way? That the practice is my dearest friend and anchor?

I continue watching my thoughts. They are incessant.

What if I didn’t believe them? What if I just noticed them without judging, without expectation of some result? What if it didn’t matter why I am writing this?

Then *Whoosh!* This time, a different “Whoosh”— *Insight!*

No, it really doesn’t matter why. I am writing simply because I am writing.

No expectation. No judgment.

I am in **a present moment**. It is a moment of being. A *precious moment*.

I feel connected to the rotting apples and the screeching birds. They are not ugly. They are not bad. They just are.

The path no longer seems so daunting or difficult. I can stay the path. I can become the path. I have a new perspective of Mud: I welcome it. Its presence reminds me to observe and to question. Questioning frees me from wrong thinking, so I can see reality. I accept the impermanence of a crisp or rotting apple, the screeching or cooing of birds. And my questioned thoughts? They are like my finger pointing to the Moon.

Your calligraphy, “No Mud, No Lotus”, hangs in my living room, a constant reminder of **a way to “being”**.

I bow with deep gratitude for the challenge and the JOY of being your student,

Chân Tăng Sơn/True Sangha Mountain



Victoria Emerson (Chân Tăng Sơn/True Sangha Mountain) - Practicing with Palm Tree Sangha in Orange County, California; Still Ripening Sangha at Deer Park, Escondido, CA; Empty Wave Sangha in Laguna Beach, CA; and Community of Mindful Living/Thich Nhat Hanh in Salt Lake City, UT. Ordained as a member of OI at Deer Park in September 2009. Traveled to Vietnam as part of Thay’s International Delegation in March 2007.



Just One Half-Breath

It was in July 2011 during a meeting with Palm Tree sangha, that I enjoyed the experience of a strange headache. During the sitting session, I breathed “in” and “out,” “in and “out.” After 15 minutes during the “in-breath,” I was aware of a piercing pain on the right side of my brain. During the “out-breath,” the pain was gone. Three, four, five breaths passed. There was no more pain. Then suddenly, this peaceful rhythmic breathing was punctured by pain again during my 5th or 6th “out-breath.”

I noticed a random pattern. Some “in-breaths” had pain, other “in-breaths” had no pain. There were several seconds of calmness and relief. But it was interrupted by pain on each “out-breath.” I meditated, “*Sitting, breathing in, breathing out, pain arriving, pain departing. In. Out. The pain will come and go...*” The pain was unsteady and irregular. This happened during the entire session of sitting meditation, but I felt so calm and happy. I recognized the feeling of pain did not bother me all the time. Finally, the pain only lasted for just one half-breath!

After sitting meditation, there was sutra chanting followed by Dharma talk and discussion. My headache returned. This time the pain was continuous, and there was less calmness and relief. I wondered, is it because my mind focused on the dharma discussion and it wasn't fully "being" with my body? I tried to be mindful of my breathing. I became more aware of the temporary pain - then I noticed there was calmness and relief in the pain. It was not continuous anymore! I had just experienced the "miracle of mindfulness!"

In 2009, I heard a talk given by Sister Dang Nghiem at Deer Park monastery. She mentioned that our feelings' duration lasts 20 seconds or less. "We always feel they last longer, sometimes lasting the whole day or whole week...because our body reacts and our mind is caught in that feeling..." During my sitting meditation that day, the feeling of pain was much less than 20 seconds. It was just one half-breath! It lasted only 5 seconds!

Many people including myself, fear pain. My body has been quite sensitive about pain, especially since I am getting older. If my throbbing headache lasted for just one half-breath, why should I worry about it? It's not about having "pain or no pain." It's about "practice more or practice less!"

Thầy has spent much time teaching us about "the Miracle of Mindfulness," and the wholesomeness of our mind and body. Every time I think of Thầy, I want to bow deeply with all my respect and gratitude. Without his teachings, I might have become just a "*bag of medicine*," like so many others in our world.

Since I was very young, I knew my body was not well-built and

my mind was neither calm nor clear enough to lead a happy life. How fortunate I am to have the chance to meet Thầy on one beautiful spring morning in 1983. I was at the Zen Art Center in Mt. Tremper, New York. My life has changed, my family has changed. I continue knowing happiness and sharing my happiness.

I wish I could present you a basket filled with fresh lotus from Lake Tinh Tam near the Viet Nam Imperial Palace. Instead dear Thầy, I bow deeply with my hands forming a lotus bud – my gift of gratitude for your Happy Continuation.

Chan Huyen

Green Valley, August 2011

Quyen Do Ha Duong (True Wonder/Chan Huyen) has followed Thầy since the 1960s. She has been an OI member since 1986 and received the Lamp Transmission in January 2003. She is the co-founder of Maple Village Mindfulness Practice Center of Quebec, Canada. She lives with her husband, Chân Văn, in Southern California. Both practice with Palm Tree/Xóm Dừa sangha, Orange County, California.