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The Monastic Path

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Welcome Letter

Thầy put forth a radical idea: to root a renewed form of Buddhist monasticism in the West, with a body of precepts adapted to modern times. He anticipated it would take at least one hundred years for that root to take hold and become established. As each of us tends to our own practice, and builds the Beloved Community, we are aware that the full flowering of a monastic community in the West is yet to come. As good gardeners we know that the soil must be well prepared; we must take pains to nurture this small seedling of monastic culture in a careful mixture of soil enriched with compost before it can adapt to survive and thrive on depleted and water-starved terrain.

It is a great joy to contribute to this process: the Dharma is deep and lovely—in the beginning, in the middle, and in the end. On these pages please enjoy a representative sample of *what is going on* in the lives of our monastic community—from the most senior members to many of the young *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs*. What are their deep aspirations? How are they practicing as a part of Thầy's continuation body? How can we do our best to tend the garden of the monastic wing of the Beloved Community so that future generations will have a solid and reliable place to go to for refuge when the going gets rough?

Let these voices into your heart.

Brother Pháp Lưu
Advisor and Editor



Ordained in 2003, Brother Pháp Lưu (Brother Stream), seated bottom left, received the Transmission of the Lamp from Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh in 2011. He leads mindful backpacking retreats in nature around Deer Park Monastery and initiated The Buddha the Scientist retreat and symposium series. He is currently working with Brother Pháp Xả on a book about their experiences walking mindfully in nature.

Are Buddhist Monasteries in the West Relevant in the 21st Century?

Sister Chân Trì Nghiêm explains how Plum Village practice centers provide much-needed refuge and hope in today's troubled times.

At a time when the world seems to be racing at breakneck speed toward planetary destruction, when we know what to do to protect conditions for life on Earth but fail to do it, when sources of reliable information are increasingly difficult to find, when governments favor the wealthy and powerful over the poor and disenfranchised, what role can Buddhist monasteries—specifically in the West—possibly play?

In an age of increasing generative artificial intelligence (AI) and disinformation, when the boundaries between real and fabricated are increasingly blurred—a post-truth era—Western Buddhist monasticism may appear anachronistic, a romanticized relic of a more optimistic and spiritually inclined age.

But against this backdrop, practicing in a meditation and mindfulness practice center may be the *most* sane and meaningful thing to do. Practicing mindfulness with others can counter the growing anxiety, helplessness, and despair we feel within us as we look at a world literally and figuratively on fire. For an increasing number of

young people looking to the future and dissatisfied with the prospects on offer, turning inward to find solutions to our global problems has become a matter of urgency.

Growing interest among young, well-educated, and talented people in practicing in one of our community's many practice centers as well as in ordaining as monks and nuns is perhaps both a symptom of the times and a hopeful sign for the future.

For those who have lost faith in modern political, economic, and social systems, practicing mindfulness is a revolutionary act. Dedicating one's life to the cause of mindful healing requires determination and a warrior spirit.

Life in a monastery, whether for a retreat or for a lifetime, provides an alternative to the pull of instant gratification, relief from the quest for a stream of never-ending dopamine hits, an invitation to choose a life with awareness and presence over one of virtual reality, and an opportunity to heal our addiction to digital devices and social media. In the still, contemplative environment of



Sister Tri Nghiêp at Power of Silence Retreat
2024, Magnolia Grove Monastery

a Zen community, lay and monastic practitioners learn to see their sources of suffering with clear eyes and develop the capacity to transform discrimination, injustice, and inequity, in themselves and in the world.

If you ask people who come to practice in one of our meditation and mindfulness practice centers around the world why they come and what they appreciate most about it, their answers are surprisingly similar.

They mention finding a place of refuge here, a peaceful oasis where they can resource themselves and recharge their batteries. They come to have a break from the stress of their daily lives, from their families or high-powered jobs and draining responsibilities. They come to immerse themselves in an environment where everyone is practicing the same thing, where everyone is trying to strengthen their mindfulness and touch more peace and happiness within themselves.

Being surrounded by like-minded practitioners is supportive for practice. Activists, business leaders, therapists, health professionals, and teachers

come to heal their burnout, to regain strength, hope, and the energy to keep doing what they do.

They come looking for support on their own path of healing and transformation. They say it's important to know there is a place where they can take refuge, where they can experience community, kindness, and care, where they can experience the joy of being together, the joy of stopping, and the healing and liberation that comes from being rather than constantly doing.

One young man, a recent retreatant at Magnolia Grove Monastery in Mississippi, US, said this about his experience at the practice center: "My resting heart rate dropped ten bpm on the day I arrived. Just being in this environment is beneficial. It's hard to put it into words; we have to experience it in the body to know what it feels like to be in such a place."

Some visitors find it difficult to express how their experience has affected them, though they'll say it has something to do with a sense of community, with connection, and with a feeling of belonging. They say they not only discover

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more about themselves, but find a spiritual family and forge deep connections—not only human connections, but connections with trees, birds, woods, sun, and moon.

By going inward, they touch the earth, their animal, vegetal, and mineral ancestors, their blood and adopted human ancestors, and their cultural and spiritual ancestors. A residential monastery provides a framework and refuge where lay practitioners can experience essential connections that give their lives meaning. Getting in touch with their spiritual and cultural roots enables deep healing and transformation to take place.

The monastics who live and practice twenty-four hours a day, every day of the week, year after year, decade after decade, are the glue that holds it all together and makes it all possible. Monastics safeguard the transmission of the teachings and practices in an unbroken stream from teacher to disciple going back more than two millennia to the time of the Buddha and before. In the tradition of context- and kinship-rich societies, transmission of wisdom in Buddhist monasticism is both oral and nonverbal. We listen to Dharma talks and classes about the precepts and Mindfulness Trainings given by senior monastics. We share about the teachings and our practice in sharing circles. We chant the sutras. But we also learn by observing the way others walk, talk, eat, drink, stand up and sit down, come in and go out.

Our teacher taught by walking the talk. To watch Thầy walk, open a door, or drink tea was to witness a Dharma talk. This is how we learn: by observing and doing our best to emulate and embody the teachings.

Transmission of Buddhist wisdom is not an intellectual or literary pursuit. It has always been an *embodied* practice, modeled and handed down to the next generation. The mindfulness and concentration generated in this practice is what leads to insight, to liberation from our wrong views and ways of thinking, which are the cause of so much of our suffering. It is in the monastery that we learn how to apply the teachings in all aspects of our daily life and in our manifold relationships.

The most important thing about our practice

centers, practitioners say, is Sangha. Community. The collective energy of mindfulness generated in a community that lives in harmony and awareness is palpable, and this is what nourishes and sustains those who come.

The embracing support of the community helps practitioners maintain and deepen their practice. Over the years—or even in a one-week retreat—they experience healing, transformation, and an increasing capacity for joy, peace, and happiness. Visitors lean on the monastics to do this—nuns and monks are the custodians of both the practice and the tradition.

Monastic practitioners learn the art of living simply and happily in community with few possessions and desires. They observe the Mindfulness Trainings and hundreds of precepts and fine manners. They practice stopping and looking deeply to understand their own mind. They practice impulse control and mindful consumption. They illustrate that joy and happiness in the here and now are possible. They demonstrate the art of cultivating joy and letting go of unhelpful states of mind, the art of releasing attachment to ideas and things. They learn to bring the wandering mind home to the body and to dwell happily in the present moment. They learn to take care of strong emotions and to recognize their wrong perceptions. They learn to heal themselves and their inner child. In short, they model the teachings to the best of their ability, and this is what practitioners who visit find so helpful.

The individual consciousness of each practitioner contributes to the collective consciousness of the whole community. And this is perhaps the biggest reason why our monasteries are not just an interesting alternative lifestyle but an imperative in today's world.

If we are to have a future, let alone a hopeful future, our young people must not succumb to despair. We desperately need islands of peace where we all can take refuge in something good and true and beautiful.

To bring about change in the world, we must first change our way of thinking and being in the world. We must transform our consciousness. We

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must go within and do the hard work of healing and transformation.

This work takes the courage and fearlessness of a warrior, and we need an army of spiritual warriors all around the world to generate a collective awakening capable of effecting the only truly hopeful change that might support continued life on our planet.

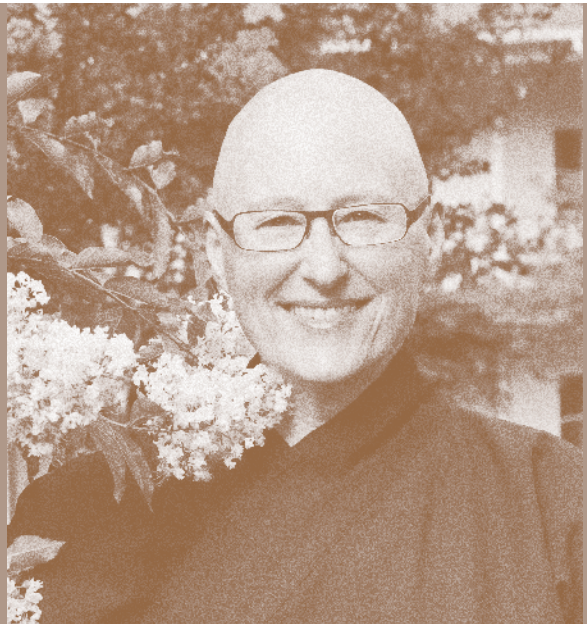
When we awaken to the holiness of all life, when we transcend notions of good and bad, of friend and foe, when we truly grasp the reality of interbeing and stop our violent and exploitative ways and recognize the oneness of all creation, then we have hope for the future.

We hope our practice centers, with your generous and continuing support, can contribute to this global spiritual awakening for decades to come.

30 September 2024

The Thích Nhất Hạnh Foundation is grateful to Sister Chân Trì Nghiêm for writing this beautiful article. To learn more about the foundation, and to support our precious monasteries, please visit thichnhathanhfoundation.org/ways-to-give.

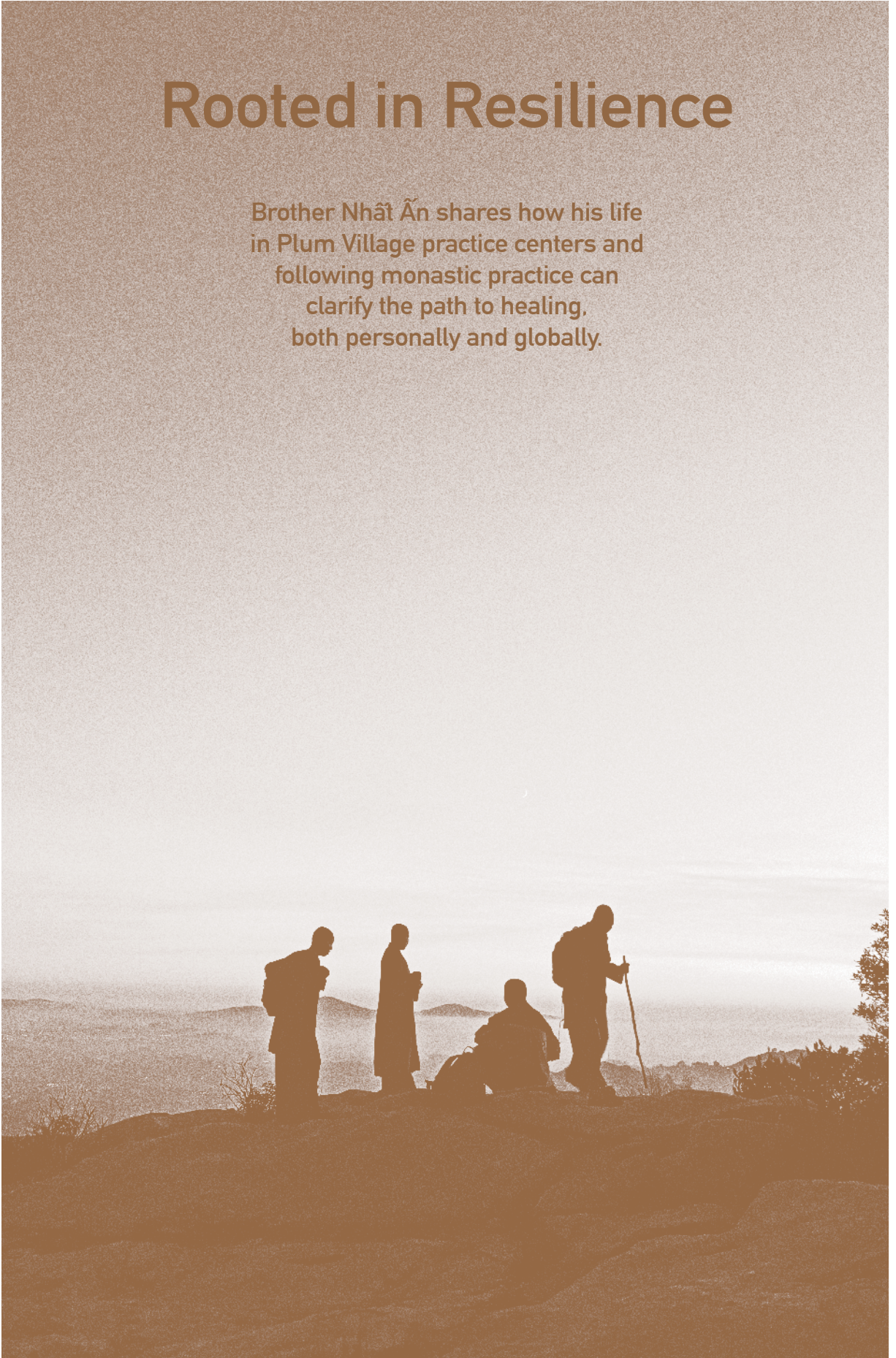
Sister Chân Trì Nghiêm/True Holding (pronouns she/her) is a Plum Village Dharma teacher who has been living and practicing in Magnolia Grove Monastery, Mississippi, US, since 2019. Ordained by Thầy in Plum Village, France in 2009, she received Lamp Transmission in 2018. Born and raised in Australia, she lived almost thirty years in Switzerland before moving to Plum Village to ordain with Thích Nhất Hạnh and his Community of Engaged Buddhism. Sister Trì Nghiêm has been editing Thầy's books with Parallax Press since 2011.



Rooted in Resilience

Brother Nhât Ân shares how his life
in Plum Village practice centers and
following monastic practice can
clarify the path to healing,
both personally and globally.

Escondido Rock photos courtesy of the Deer Park monastic Sangha



At twenty-one years old I came into the monastery, leaving behind a life marked by anxiety and depression. I had dropped out of college because I was drowning. Waves of pain, sorrow, and hopelessness kept pulling me under, and I couldn't find my way out. The weight of climate change, ethical concerns about career choices, economic uncertainty, conflict and violence, widespread environmental destruction, and the plethora of suffering in the world was constantly overwhelming me, and I didn't know how to deal with it all.

Questions about how to engage with the world without running away were always on my mind. Could I help without feeling trapped by the suffering around me? I felt powerless. The sky felt perpetually gray and the grass was no longer green. The beauty of the world had faded. I had lost my longing for life.

Lost in a cycle of overthinking and worrying about the future, I had forgotten my body. It became weak, thin, and fragile. Some days, I seldom ate and lost the physical and mental strength to get out of bed. I had lost all faith in society. It felt like the world didn't care. The desire to blame someone was strong. I believed that if people just opened their eyes, we could solve these problems quite easily. I was naïve.

It wasn't until I hit rock bottom that I realized I needed help. I was afraid of my own mind. I knew a part of me still wanted to live, but I didn't know

how. I wanted to help others, but every effort felt pointless. The challenges were too big, and I felt too small. Out of despair, I had admitted myself to a psychiatric hospital at nineteen years old.

That's when I learned something that changed everything. I had to take care of myself first. I had let fear and despair take over my life. My psychiatrist gave me a simple yet profound suggestion: walk, pay attention to my breath, and reconnect with my body. He said, "You don't know how to be happy. A dog can see anyone, eat anything, and be joyful. You are not a dog." That became my mantra in a way. How could I go out into the world, no matter what was happening, and find joy and happiness? That was my task.

I began to understand that if I wanted to help end suffering in the world, I first needed to find peace within myself. How could I fight greed, ignorance, and intolerance in society if I couldn't subdue them in my own mind? The battles inside and outside are connected. If I wanted real change, I had to confront my suffering, my feelings that I had stuffed down since I was a little boy. The emotions that I never learned to tame, to befriend, to listen to. If I didn't learn to do this, my efforts would crumble under the weight of power, fame, sex, and greed, just as it happened to so many others.

Slowly I learned to *be* again. Lightness found its way back into my steps and with it came a firm determination to help others. But above all else, I

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joy and happiness?

learned to help myself, to prioritize my well-being. I knew my situation wasn't unique and I knew I couldn't navigate this path alone. It was necessary to find a community of people who understood this suffering, who had felt it and were committed to finding peace. That's how the monastic path and Deer Park Monastery came into my life.

Just discovering the existence of the monastic path brought hope and light to guide me forward. The walls of my despair and anxiety began to crumble. The unendurable pain and mental anguish I felt softened up until their grip was gone. There were times when it seemed like these feelings would last forever, that my depression could never get better. But in time I learned about the nature of impermanence. Our happiness and joy, as well as our sorrow and despair, are not eternal. I was taught that if we want to be happy, we have to cultivate happiness every day, in every moment of our lives. The monastic path, it seemed, was a life dedicated to that practice.

After the pandemic travel restrictions were lifted, I spent a ninety-day retreat at Deer Park. It was a profound opportunity for self-discovery. I began to see clearly my shortcomings, my strengths, my areas of focus, and some blind spots I had overlooked for so long. Being in a community of like-minded spiritual practitioners was something I had never experienced before. The intensity of the monastery setting created the conditions for

me to start unraveling the knots that had bound my mind for years. I was eager to continue this practice, so I pursued novice ordination.

The monastic path has served not only as my source of inspiration but also the means to produce meaningful action in response to the suffering in the world. I have felt that the spiritual path of Buddhism, and within it the practice of monasticism, is the direct antidote to the poisons of ignorance, greed, and hatred that fuel the struggles of humanity and society.

I began to discover that the world's problems stem from our inability to face our internal suffering. We pass our pain to others through our actions, thoughts, and words. I had seen this firsthand in my relationship with my father. As a teenager, I resented his anger and swore I would never be like him. But through the practice of looking deeply, I realized that I am my father. His anger lived within me. It was passed down from many generations before, from our ancestors. I was blind to his suffering and the hurts that weren't really his but were passed down from generation to generation, just as so many other traits were. There is still a hurt child in him that I had to acknowledge and befriend. One evening during sitting meditation, an image of my father and me as children appeared in my mind. I reached out my arms and gave him a hug as tears rolled down my face. I am forever grateful to my father now and for everything he has

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THE SECOND OF THE FIVE MINDFULNESS TRAININGS: TRUE HAPPINESS

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I am committed to practicing generosity in my thinking, speaking, and acting. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others; and I will share my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need. I will practice looking deeply to see that the happiness and suffering of others are not separate from my own happiness and suffering; that true happiness is not possible without understanding and compassion; and that running after wealth, fame, power and sensual pleasures can bring much suffering and despair. I am aware that happiness depends on my mental attitude and not on external conditions, and that I can live happily in the present moment simply by remembering that I already have more than enough conditions to be happy. I am committed to practicing Right Livelihood so that I can help reduce the suffering of living beings on Earth and stop contributing to climate change.

given me. I inherited his smile, his hardworking spirit, his playfulness, and his love for others. I vow to transform our unwholesome qualities not only for myself but for us.

If there is generational trauma, there must also be generational healing. When I heal, my family heals—my direct family, my ancestors, and my spiritual relatives. This is the nature of interbeing. We are interconnected, not separate from anyone or anything, even if at times we feel at odds.

We inter-are not just with our own families, but with all phenomena. The suffering of starving children, war-torn nations, drought-stricken farmlands, and bulldozed rainforests is all part of us. So are the cool breeze, the gentle rain, and the white

clouds. Without them, we might not live, because they each play a part in our daily life. Politicians, military generals, and CEOs are human beings, their lives shaped by causes and conditions, just like us. If the seeds of suffering are watered within us, we too can become like them. Though the effects of their suffering may be magnified by their roles in society, at its core it is the same suffering we all endure: loneliness, anxiety, fear, and despair, which give rise to craving, hatred, ignorance, greed, violence, arrogance, and fanaticism.

Too often, we don't know how to care for our own suffering. We are prone to react. We want to prove our strength, so we don't become victims. But our real strength comes when we stop, pay

The intensity of the monastery setting created the conditions for me to start unraveling the knots that had bound my mind for years.

attention to what's happening inside, and transform our pain instead of passing it on. If we don't, we become the oppressor, even if we feel like the victim. And of course, we need support. We need communities where we can come together to share our problems and our suffering, and to receive and share support, guidance, and space.

When I found The Five Mindfulness Trainings given to us by Thây, they gave me clear, concrete guidelines while still acknowledging the suffering that existed in myself and in the world. I began to feel that this was a path I could follow, as The Five Mindfulness Trainings were not rigid rules but guiding principles. They acted like a compass, pointing me in the right direction. The Second Training, True Happiness, in particular struck me because it dealt with the exact circumstances that brought me to the practice. It is a reminder for me that happiness is the path itself, not the destination. That the suffering in the world can only be soothed, embraced, and transformed step by step, breath by breath. Living as a spiritual practitioner and a monk has shown me that the suffering in the world and the suffering we carry within us personally are not separate from each other.

In Buddhism, there is a teaching called the Six Pāramitās, or Six Perfections. If we wish to journey from the land of sorrow and despair to the land of joy and happiness, we must put forth effort

every day to get there. We can't just go online, buy a plane ticket, and arrive there. This effort is the practice of these Pāramitās. I want to focus on the third Pāramitā, which has been of great importance in my life, called Kshanti Pāramitā, which can mean inclusiveness, the ability to receive, accept, embrace, and transform the pain inflicted upon us.

Each of us has a certain capacity to endure injustice, but if we are forced to bear more than we can handle, we may break. Whether we suffer depends on our capacity to understand and accept. Some people can hear the same harsh words or face the same mistreatment we do, yet remain unaffected. Their hearts are vast like an ocean, capable of receiving and embracing without anger or frustration. This is why the practice of expanding our ability to embrace and include is so important. Through practice and training, the capacity of our heart will grow, and we can suffer much less. There are still moments in the monastery when suffering arises. Even as I write this article, I notice the seeds of depression and despair within me coming up, echoes of a struggle I continue to navigate. I am still learning to fully understand and accept myself, to make peace with my past, and to approach my mind without fear. I am aware that certain triggers can still stir up deep sadness, but part of my practice is learning to accept my mind exactly as it is, without judgment. I've come to realize that trying to repress or push away my suffering only

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Peace
in oneself
Peace
in the
World



intensifies it. Now, I understand that healing begins with embracing my pain, not avoiding it.

Kshanti can be easily misunderstood or mispracticed as running away from the world, becoming numb or complacent. Although it wasn't intentional on my part, I adopted those unwholesome habits in the past to avoid being constantly overwhelmed. To develop this capacity, we must be able to look directly at the world, see it for what it is, and understand its true nature. If we have this capacity, we can smile and remain at peace instead of reacting when we are faced with adversity. We call someone with these qualities a *bodhisattva* or an awakened person. They are not driven by their own benefit or gain, but live with a deep commitment to help relieve the suffering in themselves and in the world by bringing harmony and improving the well-being of others.

Although these teachings are called perfection, we should remember that human beings are inherently imperfect, and the trap of unhealthy and unnecessary self-criticism is easy to fall into. I've experienced this firsthand, as many in the world are often raised with the expectation to excel constantly, both from family and societal pressures. I grew up feeling like I always had to be at the top; failure or ineptitude simply wasn't an option. But this relentless pursuit of perfection can lead to burnout, causing us to inevitably tumble

from the tower of hubris we've constructed over a lifetime. My previous notions of success were just ideas fed to me, but I didn't really want them for myself. I was just constantly trying to prove that I was enough. I didn't feel I was worthy of love, kindness, rest, or relaxation. I didn't know how to give myself that approval. If we don't have the ability to cultivate self-compassion, we easily risk succumbing to feelings of inadequacy.

Just as with the practice of cultivating happiness, compassion is not a destination; it is the path itself. With every action of body, speech, and mind, we must learn to love, understand, and care for ourselves. As we do, this energy will naturally grow within us. Only when we have nurtured compassion for ourselves can we truly extend it to others. For much of my life, I didn't know how to be compassionate toward myself, and no one had taught me its importance. But now, I've learned to be that teacher for myself, to be the adult I once needed, the guide I had been searching for. Once I was able to generate compassion within, finding a way forward became much clearer.

Now, as I celebrate my second year as a monk, I see that the questions that weighed on me—such as how to engage with the world's suffering, and how to find meaning in the face of overwhelming despair—are the same questions I still hold today. But there is a stark difference now. Whereas before

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I felt powerless, overwhelmed by the enormity of the world's pain, I now understand that meaningful change begins inward. Monastic life has shown me that the path to healing, both personally and globally, is not about grand gestures or solving everything at once, it's about cultivating peace in each moment of our daily lives, in each breath and each step. The problems I once feared haven't disappeared, but I'm beginning to understand that true happiness doesn't depend on external conditions. Ultimately, the monastic path is not a retreat from the world but a powerful call to engage with it more deeply. It reminds us that through inner work, we inspire meaningful change in our communities and beyond. As one of Thầy's famous calligraphies reads: "Peace in oneself, peace in the world." By tending to our own suffering, we begin to heal the suffering around us. And as we heal, we become more capable of helping others do the same.

Slowly, I see myself becoming like a well-rooted tree, unshaken by heavy rain or strong winds. Though I may sway under pressure, storms will pass and the sun always rises. The work is never finished, but the path is clear. With every breath and in every step, I remember that healing the world starts with healing myself.

Brother Nhất Ấn (Brother Seal or Brother Mudrā) resides at Deer Park Monastery, California, US, where he was ordained in 2022 as part of the Manzanita Family. He grew up in Montreal, Canada and became drawn to the practice at age nineteen. He enjoys spending his time doing photography, gardening, and fixing broken things.





We Have Seen the Path, Do Not Fear Anymore

Brother Đạo Hành answers:
What does it truly mean
to be a monastic?

A month and a half ago, I was invited to reflect and write on the following questions: *How does the monastic path inspire you to respond to the suffering in the world? How do you see the monastic path becoming rooted in the West?*

Now, with less than four days to go before the article deadline, I think I've given enough time for insight to ripen. No, no, this isn't procrastinating—the longer I wait, the longer it can simmer and the deeper the insight ... right? The core question most alive in me has boiled down to: *What does it truly mean to be a monastic?* I ought to know this one after nearly nine years as a monk.

SUFFERING AND THE MONASTIC RESPONSE

Before sharing how the monastic path inspires me to respond to the suffering in the world, let's first have a look at what our response actually is. It's surprisingly straightforward and simple. Many of us, both individually and globally, find ourselves in a less-than-ideal situation caused largely by our inability to deal with suffering in a healthy way, our inability to be in touch with the conditions for happiness that are all around us at all times, and our inability to see the interbeing nature of all that is. This is the monastic response to suffering: by learning to be in touch with life, we transform, and in doing so, we transform the world.

The suffering in the world is manyfold. On a global scale we've got environmental degradation, social injustice, and wars raging, for starters. On a personal

level we've got depression, burnout, trauma, a lack of direction, etc. Responding to these big, collective issues seems like a daunting task.

When we don't know how to suffer on a personal level, we can react to suffering in unhealthy ways. I see this root problem on a global scale: we run away, we suppress, we consume, and we lash out in order to try and suffer less. Global issues like the climate crisis or the armed conflicts we face are often larger reflections of coping mechanisms we employ in our daily lives: running away, suppressing emotions, reacting in anger, and consuming unmindfully.

When we learn to take care of our personal emotions and ill-being in a healthy way, some major causes for global suffering are taken care of at the same time. In my years as a monk, I've seen how simple practices like mindful breathing and walking help people transform their relationship with their emotions. Their inner world improves, the relationships within their family improve, and the ripple effect radiates outward. Teaching people how to take care of their suffering is part of our monastic response.

CULTIVATING HAPPINESS AS A PATH TO HEALING

Once we learn to face suffering, we discover cultivating joy is an essential part of healing. Happiness isn't merely the absence of pain, it is an active practice that enables us to handle difficulties with greater grace.

When we've had a great day at work and our partner says, "You forgot to put out the trash this morning" when we come home, we might simply smile and take





out the trash. When we've had a bad day at work, our partner saying this might be the drop that overflows our bucket and makes us explode.

The exact same words from our partner might elicit two very different reactions. When we are in a tense and challenging period of our life, every little thing may cause us more suffering. However, when we are in a happy and content period of our life, the small daily difficulties have space around them and don't cause us to suffer.

The cultivation of our happiness is a direct way to respond to our suffering. When there's a healthy balance of peace, ease, spaciousness, and joy in our life, we have the space and patience to deal with suffering. Teaching people how to touch the miracle of life, how to cultivate happiness, is part of our response.

UNDERSTANDING INTERBEING: OUR COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

The way we treat Mother Earth, how we treat each other, and how we treat ourselves shows we aren't quite aware of the interbeing nature of all that is. We don't recognize that every morsel of food we eat comes from the land we are defiling, that every breath we take comes from the air we are polluting, that the blood in our veins comes from the rivers we are contaminating. If we truly understood this, we wouldn't be in the climate crisis we find ourselves in. We'd recognize that you are in me and I am in you, that your happiness and suffering is deeply connected to my happiness and suffering, and we wouldn't find ourselves at war. We'd recognize the deep connection between our ill-being and our well-being and wouldn't struggle so much when we're in a muddy patch in our lives.

Interbeing is the insight that all things are deeply interconnected: our actions, thoughts, and the well-being of others are intrinsically linked. This understanding is crucial for healing ourselves and the planet. It naturally leads to more compassionate choices—not just for ourselves, but for all beings. Teaching people how to touch the insight of interbeing is part of our response.

THE ROLE OF MONASTIC LIFE IN THE MODERN WORLD

The monastic path can be regarded as a lifestyle. It's a lifestyle that, for me, is conducive to living life in awareness and compassionate service to others. It's a way to learn to take care of our ill-being, to learn to nourish our well-being, and to touch the insight of interbeing and the miracle of being alive. Once I have a lived experience of how to balance and take care of my own inner world, the path of service enables me to teach others to do the same.

We live a very healthy lifestyle in the monastery. Our schedule and way of living meet very basic needs for our well-being: healthy food, enough sleep, exercise, and spirituality. Our monastic life, rooted in the balance of practice, play, service, and study, becomes a model for how to live in harmony with ourselves, each other, and the world.

As our Plum Village tradition emphasizes, communal practice and living is very important and instrumental to the monastic lifestyle. We learn a lot from each other through the siblinghood we develop. We support each other to navigate our own paths; as a collective, the impact we can have on others is



manifold. On my own I wouldn't be able to fulfill the life of service and help as many people walk the path nearly as well as we can as a community. Thousands of people every year find healing in our monasteries and practice centers. When my battery is low, my siblings can step in, and vice versa. Together, we can support many people without getting overwhelmed.

We operate as a family: harmony, friendship, and siblinghood are the highest aims. This makes the whole path joyful, meaningful, and sustainable. With only a handful of monastics, we can cook for hundreds during a retreat. We only need a few tools, vehicles, and buildings when we live in community. Living a simple communal life saves many resources so we can devote all our time and energy to spiritual growth and to service for others.

The monastic precepts have been fundamental for the survival of our monastic tradition for over 2,600 years. The precepts, which include living a celibate life, give us the freedom to live the life we aspire to live. They protect us from wasting our precious time and energy and direct us to what is important in our lives. They form the basis for our ethical conduct, which helps to keep the community healthy and monastic culture alive.

ROOTING THE MONASTIC PATH IN THE WEST

It's exactly because the monastic path offers a practical and pragmatic way to respond to the suffering within ourselves and in the world that it has a chance to become rooted in the West.

If the monastic path only helped ourselves without serving others, it would not be as fulfilling. Thousands of people come to our monasteries every year. It's a great nourishment for monastics to see everyone find the benefit, healing, and transformation they need so much and that are so very needed in society and in the world.

We live in a time when many people feel lost in life. They can't tell right from wrong, and they don't know what makes their heart sing or why they get up in the morning. This is a big source of suffering. Buddhism is fairly new in the West, so we have to be patient as it takes root. Zen provides a framework for reconnecting with ourselves, our communities, and the planet. As more people experience the fruits of this practice, I believe it will naturally take root in the West, offering a way forward in a world in need of healing.

Before I was a monk, I was rather lost in life. I didn't know what I wanted to do, didn't know how to take care of myself, really, and didn't know how to help my loved ones. What do we do when we see family suffer from burnout, friends suffer from depression, or when we struggle in our communication with our partner? I felt stuck and stagnant for a decade, just going through the motions of life, living from weekend to weekend and vacation to vacation without really getting anywhere. Sure, I had fun along the way, but was this why I was here on Mother Earth?

Ever since living in Plum Village, I feel I'm blooming as a human being again. This community reveals the best in me through developing healthy habits and healthy ways of being. If you're anything like me, developing a stable sitting

practice, abstaining from smoking or alcohol, eating a healthy diet, etc., may be challenging to do by yourself, but as a collective it's so very easy. Everyone is going in the same direction, and I just have to flow with this river.

Nowadays I'm a rather content guy most of the time, and I have a deep gratitude for Thầy and the Sangha. Having experienced the fruits of the practice, the only thing that really makes sense to me is to try and share them with others. The monastic path has transformed my life, and in sharing it, I hope it may inspire you as well. Whether you walk it fully or incorporate its wisdom into your daily life, it offers a way to navigate modern challenges with compassion, purpose, and joy. Will you join us in being part of collective transformation?



Brother Đạo Hành/Brother Spiritual Action (pronouns he/him) was born in the sunny South of the Netherlands in a small town called Panningen. He ordained as a monk in 2015 and spent four and a half years living in Plum Village, France and four and a half years in Magnolia Grove Monastery in Mississippi, US. He is currently back in France.

River in Me

Selected verses of transformation from
Sister **Đặng Nghiê**̣**m**'s collected poems

What Does a Nun Do All Day?

All day long, I have only myself to be with,
Coming back to be aware of
Each step I take,
Each breath I inhale,
Each thought passing by.

All day long, I have only myself to look at,
When the wall of anger rises,
When hurt fills my chest,
When tears are shedding,
I tell myself, it's okay, it's okay.
I am here.

All day long, I have only my
"Self" to let go.

As It Is

I can be engrossed
In learning French, reading sutras,
But this heavy feeling inside me is still there.

Wherever I go, there it is.
Whatever I do, there it is.

This IT gnaws at me.

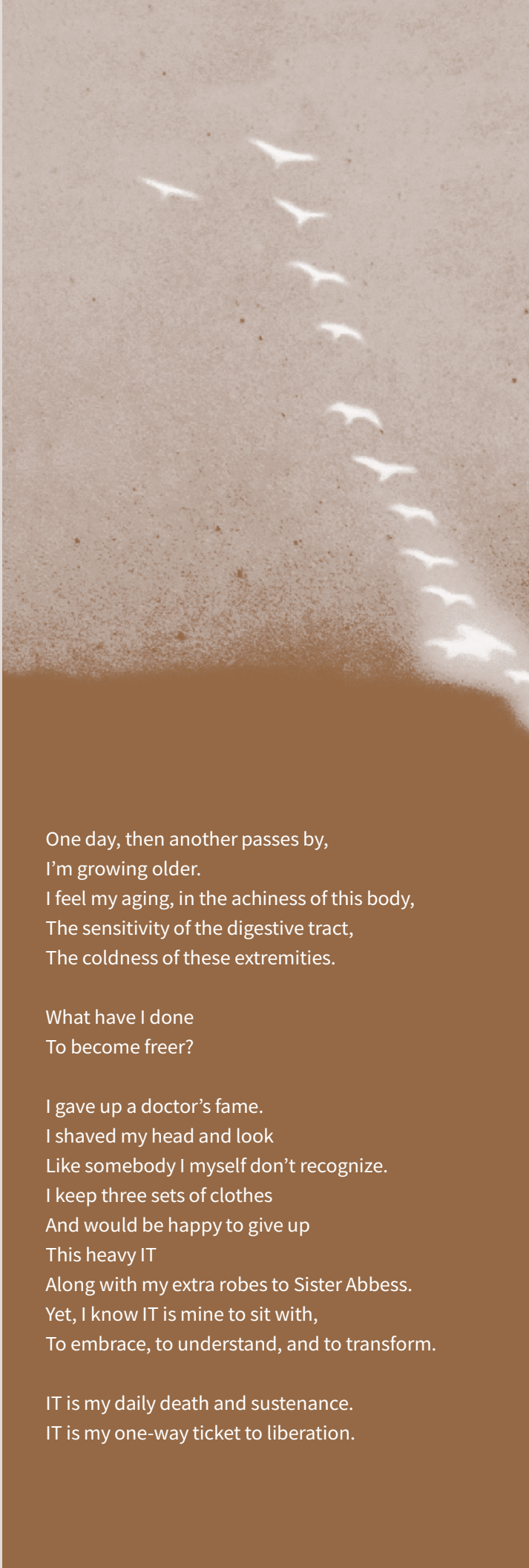
I wish to lie down and expire,
But IT will not deteriorate with my body,
Just as a tree may collapse,
But from its roots, it is continued.

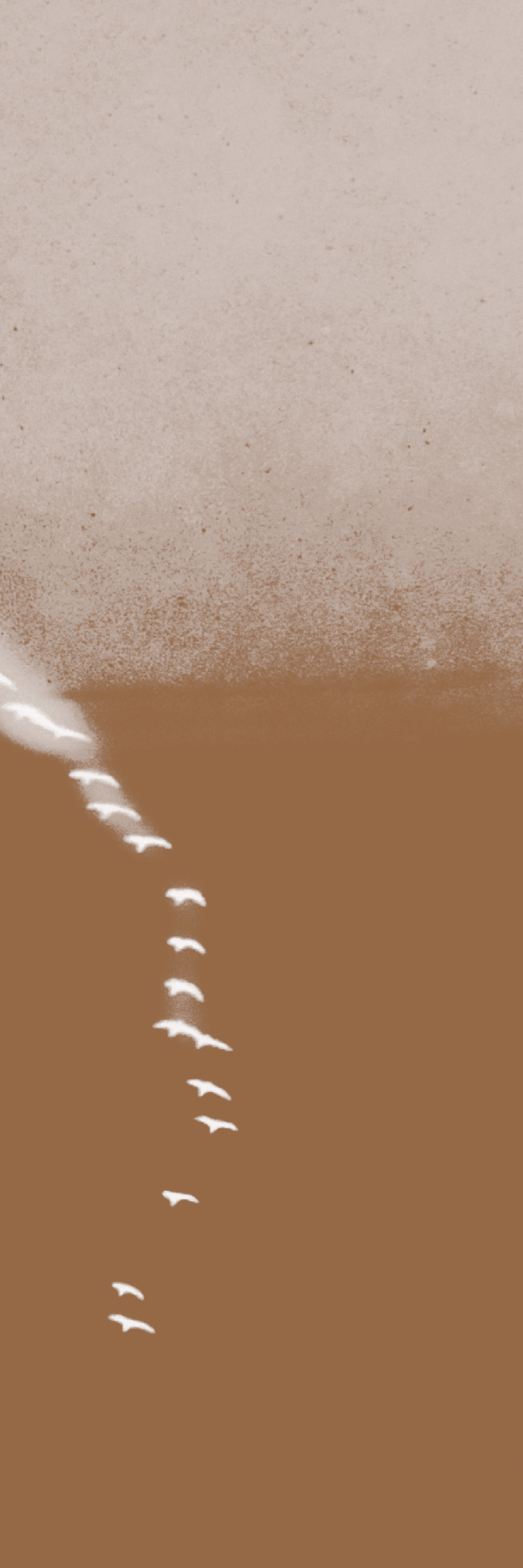
One day, then another passes by,
I'm growing older.
I feel my aging, in the achiness of this body,
The sensitivity of the digestive tract,
The coldness of these extremities.

What have I done
To become freer?

I gave up a doctor's fame.
I shaved my head and look
Like somebody I myself don't recognize.
I keep three sets of clothes
And would be happy to give up
This heavy IT
Along with my extra robes to Sister Abbess.
Yet, I know IT is mine to sit with,
To embrace, to understand, and to transform.

IT is my daily death and sustenance.
IT is my one-way ticket to liberation.





Breathe, My Child

Breathe, breathe my child.
Let's breathe, breathe my child,
Thay teaches his children.
His words are sincere and dear,
Echoing in my deep slumber.
I wake up and come home.
Being near Thay, Sisters, and Brothers,
Each second, I breathe in their love.
Each small step, I let go of sadness.

Look at that tree,
Windstorms split in two,
Roots shredded and pulled,
Still holding on to brown earth.

Dear tree, I am like your trunk,
Battered by wind and rain, in birth and death.
This spring, the earth's calm, the sky's clear.
On the fresh branches, birds summon and sing.
Purple flowers dress this trunk with life.

Stepping into Freedom

And like that I live joyfully each day,
And like that I let go each day,
And like that I see myself each day,
Happiness as well as sadness.

And like that I embrace myself each day,
And like that I take refuge in my Sisters each day,
And like that I join in each day,
With the rhythm of life, the sutras, the poems.

And like that I understand others more each day,
And like that the distance between us shortens,
And like that I come back to each day,
The breath, the smiles continue to radiate.



Wave and the Ocean

I will tell you a story
About a wave and the ocean:
Since an unknown time
The wave feels all alone.
She searches for the ocean
In endless outward directions.

The wave is full of desires,
And the ocean is vast.
The wave keeps on looking,
But the ocean is still far, far away.

There are nights by the gentle moon
The wave holds herself in stillness.
Suddenly she feels immense.
The ocean whispers inside her.

Sometimes she also howls.
Raging in rapid successions,
She indulges in self-destruction,
Because ignorance from infinite time
Would not want to rest.

Only the wave understands
How vast the ocean is.
Only the ocean knows
Where the wave goes and returns to.

Those days when the wave vagabonds,
The ocean patiently awaits.
Those days when the wave plunges into despair,
The ocean continues to embrace.

If the wave sees the ocean
She would no longer need to search.

If you know that we are in one another
You will fear no more.

These are excerpts from The River in Me: Verses of Transformation by Sister Đăng Nghiêm, published by Parallax Press. Images courtesy of Parallax Press. Photo on opposite page by Andrew Kelley.

Sister Đăng Nghiêm, MD (“Sister D”), was born in 1968 in Vietnam during the Tet Offensive, the daughter of a Vietnamese mother and an American soldier. She lost her mother at the age of twelve and immigrated to the United States at the age of seventeen with her brother. Living in various foster homes, she learned English and went on to earn a medical degree from the University of California–San Francisco. After suffering further tragedy and loss, she quit her practice as a doctor to travel to Plum Village, France, where she was ordained a nun in 2000, and given the name Đăng Nghiêm, which means “adornment with nondiscrimination.” She is the author of a memoir, *Healing* (2010), *Mindfulness as Medicine* (2015), *Flowers in the Dark* (2021), and a collection of her poems, *The River in Me* (2024).





Is Peace in Ourselves Healing the Planet?

Brother Trời Đức Niệm reflects on his monastic journey
and on the important role of Plum Village
in supporting the climate movement.

MY JOURNEY TO ORDAINING IN PLUM VILLAGE

In 2013, my job at a solar energy company in Germany ended, and I began to seriously consider ordaining as a monk in Plum Village. I attended a conference in Berlin on renewable energies in developing countries, and on my way back, I read one of Thầy's books on the train. Thầy wrote that in order to be more effective as activists, we must be able to write a love letter to our politicians. I had a deep aspiration to help protect the planet and support the people of the Global South, but I realized that something was missing in my work and life: a spiritual dimension and peace within my heart and body. In the summer I was staying in Plum Village, France for six weeks. I was going through the pains of burnout and a breakup, and the time in Plum Village helped me tremendously to heal. Thầy's talks, the deep peace during the collective walking meditations, and witnessing the transformations and healing of the friends in my Dharma sharing circles nurtured my monastic aspiration.

One moment stood out for me. Thầy shared in a question and answer session: "Maybe in one hundred years there will be no more humans on this planet if we continue to live as we do now." I was deeply impressed—not only by the clarity with which he described this reality, but especially by the way he said it. Thầy radiated such peace, lightness, and calmness when he spoke this heavy truth, and it had a deep and lasting impact on me. One big question and kōan for me is: How can we have deep peace inside while not closing our eyes to the unprecedented suffering caused by the unfolding climate crisis? And, on the grand scale, does my cultivation of peace actually make a difference?

I found that living in a practice community—cultivating and offering peace and healing—could align my aspirations to protect the planet and reduce the suffering in myself and in the world. After one year of training as an aspirant, I was ordained in 2016 with the Plum Tree ordination family. In Plum Village, France, seventeen new novices from ten different countries and four continents were ordained together, reflecting beautifully the international diverse nature of Thầy's Beloved Community.



EMBRACING STOPPING AND SIMPLICITY

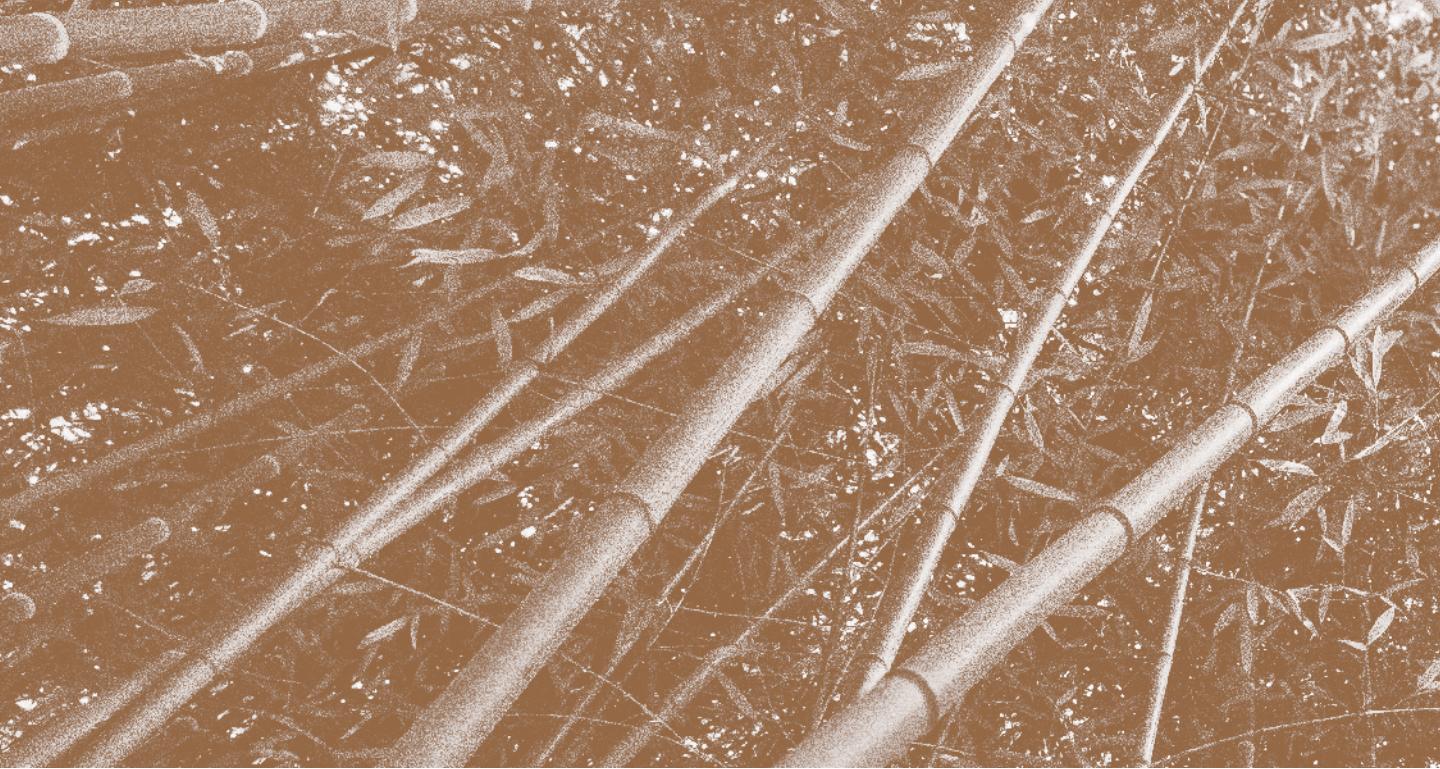
During the years of my novice training, the practices of stopping, coming back to myself and the present moment, and enjoying the beauty around me have helped me immensely. The energy of thinking and planning for the future—even when it is only thinking about the next few hours ahead—used to be quite strong in me and prevented me from being deeply in touch with Mother Earth. But the simple lifestyle as a monastic, with a regular schedule of sitting and walking meditations and with limited use of electronic devices and other distractions, supported me to transform much of the pain, stress, and restlessness in my heart. This allowed me to dwell more deeply in the present moment. Drinking tea with my elder brothers in the early morning, sitting on Thầy’s deck savoring the magical spectacle of colors during a sunrise, and touching the beauty of the trees, moss, and nature during walking meditations—these moments helped me feel more deeply connected with Mother Earth and grateful for the gift of being alive on this beautiful planet.

In recent years, the wish in my heart to help protect Mother Earth has manifested in very concrete and meaningful ways: we have co-organized Earth Holder retreats, like the 2021 Action from the Heart online retreat for over nine hundred activists, and the Love is Freedom Global Earth retreat in 2023. Since 2022, Plum Village has offered the Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet (ZASP) online course and climate retreats on a regular basis.

In this article, I would like to share my experience joining these retreats. I will also reflect on the role and contribution of Plum Village and the monastics in the climate movement. To expand on some of these questions, I had a chance to interview Sister Hiến Nghiêm and Jo Confino.

TRANSFORMING FEAR

In 2022, I spent a year in Thai Plum Village. While there, I watched a video about tipping points with powerful images, which stirred a deep fear in me because I could sense how



quickly things might unravel. The practice that helped me embrace and be with that fear was slow walking meditation: Breathing in, I take one step, breathing out, I take another step. If thinking arises, I stop, recognise it, smile to it, and only when it subsides, I continue. Sometimes I had to stop many times, but this practice helped my mind become calmer, more concentrated, and peaceful. Walking there among the fragrant plumeria trees near Thầy's hut, with the beautiful mountains of nearby Khao Yai National Park in view, brought me much happiness and peace.

In the second week of the ZASP course, I experienced another transformation happening in regard to fear. I watched a video in which Thầy taught that in order to overcome fear, we must be courageous to face the potential end of our civilization. I found this video to be extremely powerful and I was happy that I could pause it at certain moments and watch the video in my own time to really allow the tough truth to sink in.

I have been practicing the Five Remembrances regularly and this practice has helped me to be more at peace with this unsettling prospect of a potential breakdown of our societies and ecosystems. It feels less scary, and I am now less overwhelmed by the thought of it and the underlying fear. I feel a new sense of freedom and clarity emerging.

THE FIVE REMEMBRANCES

I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape growing old.

I am of the nature to have ill-health. There is no way to escape having ill-health.

I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.

All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change.

There is no way to escape being separated from them.

I inherit the results of my actions of body, speech, and mind.

My actions are my continuation.



I asked Sister Hiên Nghiễm, who was part of the team that created the ZASP course and edited the book with the same title, and Order of Interbeing member Jo Confino:

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION OF PLUM VILLAGE IN THE CLIMATE MOVEMENT AND IN HELPING TO SAVE THE PLANET?

“I remember one time when Christiana Figueres was here, and I asked her, ‘How can we support you?’ And she said: ‘You just need to keep Plum Village going. Because the climate movement needs a place of spiritual refuge; we lack a place where we can take care of ourselves and take care of each other and touch deep healing and peace.’ So primarily, what we offer as Plum Village is spiritual sanctuary, a sort of wide-eyed, brave, fearless, deep-seeing spiritual sanctuary. And that means that as a community, we also need to stay well informed about the climate to understand the situation. So when we are with the activists, researchers, and policymakers, we can offer real, deep understanding of their pain and struggle, and bring the Dharma to embrace that suffering. I think that’s really our primary role.”

—Sister Hiên Nghiễm

“I see that many, many people in the environmental sustainability movement are burning out, they are feeling powerless, they are feeling an urgency of time. They are experiencing so much grief and a feeling that they can’t win. And now Thây and Plum Village is coming along and offering balm to all those wounds and showing that actually the best way to be effective in the world is to slow down, and offering simple practical practices that allow people to embrace their suffering and to find a pathway through.”

—Jo Confino

What they share resonates with me very much. When climate activists come to Plum Village's climate retreats, I also sense that there is so much pressure and stress on the people in the climate community who are on the front line of saving the planet. A number of them have shared that it has made all the difference to be part of the Sangha they had at COP (the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), and to know that they are part of a bigger global Sangha. For the young activists in particular, I feel a great deal of sympathy and admiration for their courage to speak truth to power and to not give up on helping the world to wake up.

"It turns out that some of the people leading the exclusion of fossil fuels in the last COP28 text had been to one of our climate retreats at Plum Village. So all the courage to persist and to endure and that faith and idealism to do that new thing came from people who've been in Plum Village, who then help each other. Some of them said it has really helped shift the landscape at the COP because there's basically now a body of people who know how to breathe together, and touch their idealism, presence, and solidarity."

—Sister Hiên Nghiêm

BEAUTY AND HOPE AT THE CLIMATE RETREAT IN COSTA RICA

I was fortunate to go with a group of monastics from Plum Village, France, and the United States to offer a retreat for climate leaders from Latin America in Costa Rica earlier this year. Even though Buddhism was very new for many of them, they were so open and curious about Plum Village and monastic life, and they put their whole heart into learning and practicing Thầy's Dharma. This really touched me. The retreat was held in a place that just thirty-five years ago was a cattle farm with almost no trees, but now has regrown into a full-blown, colorful, and splendid rain forest. It was very moving and uplifting to see how nature can bounce back so marvelously within this short time. Monkeys were jumping from tree to tree, and the most colorful and beautiful butterflies were flying around us while we practiced Dharma sharing, sitting, and walking together. One of the most powerful and moving moments of the retreat was at the very joyful be-in, when a group of young activists sang the song "Latino America" by Calle 13. The song is an ode to the beauty, re-



silence, and strength of the people of South America. Seeing these young friends singing full of joy, determination, and siblinghood despite the many struggles and obstacles they face moved me to tears and fills my heart with a lot of hope every time I recall it. There are many divisions within and between countries, but witnessing this display of unity and solidarity, I could see that a more beautiful future for our world is possible indeed.

In 2008 and 2009, Thầy would regularly touch the earth three times after sitting meditation and pray that we may be able to contribute to a global spirituality and ethics. This touches me very deeply, because it feels very close to my aspiration. So I asked:

HOW CAN WE AS A SANGHA CONTINUE TO REALIZE THẦY'S DREAM OF HELPING A GLOBAL SPIRITUALITY AND ETHICS TO MANIFEST?

“An important part of Thầy’s legacy was that not only did Thầy embrace all other kinds of religions and cultures, but Thầy was even ready to kind of transcend Buddhism. And especially in Thầy’s later teachings about the Earth, he said our love for the Earth has the capacity to unite us and help us transcend all our division, hatred, and discrimination. As Thầy’s spiritual children, this is such an important heritage and legacy that we have, which is to create a more universal spirituality and ethics.”

—Sister Hiến Nghiêm

GLOBAL EARTH RETREAT “LOVE IS FREEDOM”

For me, the Global Earth Retreat in June 2023 was a wonderful expression of this spirit of unity, togetherness, and solidarity across traditions and continents. It was the first hybrid retreat we offered in Plum Village—seven hundred retreatants joined in person in Plum Village, and eight hundred friends participated online from around the world. It emerged as a real co-creation of the global multifold Sangha of the international Earth Holder communities and Plum Village. A number of local Sanghas also met to follow the retreat together in Berlin, at MorningSun Retreat Center in Vermont, US, in Singapore, and Santiago, Chile. It was very touching to see so many people from different corners of the planet



practicing together and sharing the same aspiration to protect Mother Earth.

One highlight of the retreat for me was the inter-spirituality solstice celebration, where indigenous leaders from the Amazon, Mexico, and Africa led the community in a very deep, serene, and also joyful ceremony around a big bonfire under the bright shining stars in the Upper Hamlet in Plum Village. In this moment, I could really feel the deep connection we share with all humans, our Mother Earth, and the cosmos. Another great joy was the wonderful and joyful team spirit and siblinghood in the organizing team (consisting of monastics and lay Earth Holders); we all supported each other wholeheartedly and cheered each other up during long days and nights while responding to many emails and requests. A few of us have been practicing together with the Wake Up Earth Holder online Sangha since 2021. But even though some of us on the organizing team have never met in person, working together like this with joy, determination, and solidarity made us feel very close to each other. I am grateful that we can experience this kind of siblinghood in our multifold Sangha across different countries and cultures.

TRUE SIBLINGHOOD CAN HEAL THE WORLD

Whenever Thây shares about siblinghood, it resonates strongly with me. He says that nothing, no ideology or religion, is more important than brotherhood and sisterhood. From my own experience in the Sangha, I feel the same. The care, love, and spiritual friendships with my monastic brothers and sisters, and some long-term friends, have helped me through many ups and downs in my monastic life. Whether I have some happy or sad news, I know there are always siblings I can go to and share with. I have developed a strong bond of trust, love, and siblinghood with many brothers and sisters.

I believe that one of the secrets of the success and strength of the monastic community is that we all share the aspiration to transform our suffering and find peace, and help others to do the same. We try to care for each other and support each other with our difficulties and our dreams. I believe that true siblinghood can heal the world and is what our societies and planet so urgently need. In Plum Village, we are doing our best to cultivate true siblinghood and share this with the world. We are offering a place of spiritual refuge to many people around the world. I feel very aligned with this vision of Thây, and that is why I feel very nourished and grateful to be a monastic in this beautiful community. It also makes me very happy and nourishes my *bodhicitta* and monastic path that we have found ways to help the climate movement to build a Plum Village-inspired Sangha within the wider climate community. I believe that this will have far-reaching positive impacts and will help to change the world.

FREE AS A BIRD

In recent days, many flocks of wild geese have passed by Plum Village on their way from Northern Europe to Africa. It is one of the happiest and most joyful moments of the year for me when I hear the cries and honks of the geese for the first time in the season; it touches something very deep in me. When I look up at the sky and see these beautiful birds flying so elegantly and harmoniously together, I feel very connected and at peace. I sense that this is because, a long time ago, we may have been wild geese as well, flying freely from

continent to continent. Contemplating this in the light of impermanence makes my heart feel lighter and more peaceful, as I am able to touch in the present moment the deep and long stream of life that has come before us and will continue after us. In the future, will we manifest again, free as birds, flying harmoniously as one Sangha body through the blue sky and white clouds?

TOUCHING PEACE AND ACCEPTANCE

I still keep the question and kōan in my heart about how we can have deep peace inside while not closing our eyes to and being overwhelmed by the suffering of the planet and its many crises. By engaging with this topic through Thầy's teachings and the climate retreats, I have learned that I can touch peace and acceptance by taking care of my body, feelings, and mind in this present moment, being aware of the impermanent nature of myself and our civilization, and embracing the suffering in myself and in the world with love and compassion in my heart. Being in touch with the beauty of Mother Earth and hearing the birds still singing nourishes my heart. However, if I do not act, I will experience what scientists call "cognitive dissonance," a feeling of unease because there is a big gap between what we know and what we do—or, as Thầy says, insight needs to be followed by action. So only when I am able to contribute something concretely to protecting Mother Earth—for example, by supporting the climate movement by offering the ZASP course and climate retreats—can I be fully at peace, because I know in my heart that we have done our part. I am convinced that the peace we cultivate individually and collectively is one of the greatest contributions we can make to bring more balance back to our societies and the planet and to the healing of our dear Mother Earth.

Brother Trời Đức Niệm, translated in English as "mindfulness of virtue" (pronouns he/him), ordained as a monk in 2016 in Plum Village, France. The son of two Lutheran ministers, he spent most of his life in Germany but also lived in Princeton, New Jersey, US, during his childhood, and in Taiwan and Beijing, China, during his studies. He graduated in Chinese and Religious Studies at the University of Tübingen. An active member of the Wake Up and Earth Holder communities, he has co-organized numerous retreats, as both a lay practitioner and a monk. He enjoys sharing mindfulness practices with children and families and has a passion for music, hiking, and nature. His aspirations include supporting interfaith dialogue, community building, and preserving the beauty of Mother Earth. Since 2015, he has lived in Upper Hamlet, Plum Village, France, with a one-year stay at Thai Plum Village in 2022. He feels very nourished by the cultural diversity, strong siblinghood, and collective energy of the Sangha.



Walking with Ancestors

Brother Pháp Xả shares how his aspiration to end suffering is a continuation of his family's work to save onderduikers, people hiding from the Nazi German army, in World War II.

I grew up on a dairy farm in the Eastern Netherlands, not far from the German border. My father had inherited the farm from his father—I was part of the sixth generation of our family to live there. As far back as I can remember, my parents hoped I would continue to run the farm, since I did show some interest and had no idea what I wanted to study. My elder brother, they knew, had no interest, and my two sisters studied sociology and psychology. Throughout my childhood, my mother often said what a great pity it would be if none of her children took on the farm she and my father had worked so hard to keep going.

Instead of developing an interest in running the farm, though, I decided to pursue a master's degree in mathematics in a city called Enschede. When my parents least expected it, though, my elder sister, Alma, became interested in the farm. She and her partner, both social workers, decided to study agriculture to prepare themselves for work on the farm. In 1999, they moved in.

I had heard stories about my paternal grandparents, but they both died before I was born. My grandfather was shot during the World War II Nazi occupation of the Netherlands from 1940-45, and my grandmother passed away soon after my parents got married.



During the occupation, our farm was a refuge for *onderduikers*—people hiding from the Nazi German army. *Onderduikers* literally means “under diver” and describes people who went into hiding, especially to escape persecution or forced labor by the Nazi regime, during World War II. During this time, I’d been told, families and some single men stayed on our farm—among them a Nazi deserter.

Times were dangerous, and my grandparents were anxious about our family’s safety. Though I never heard much of this from my father, a young man named Simon who stayed at the farm later wrote a detailed narrative about his war experiences. From his story, I learned that one morning, a Dutch *onderduiker* decided to try his luck and move on. He disguised himself in a Nazi Wehrmacht uniform, grabbed a rifle and some hand grenades, and headed down the road. Later that day, he was arrested. Right away his mother rushed to the farm and warned all the men to flee; she felt sure her son would talk under the pressure of interrogation. Simon advised my grandfather to hide—any men present when the Gestapo arrived would surely be detained. My grandfather, standing out on the field beside the farm when he heard the news, followed his first thought: to return to the house to protect his family. His noble action had dire consequences, though. On Christmas Eve, 1944, he was arrested.



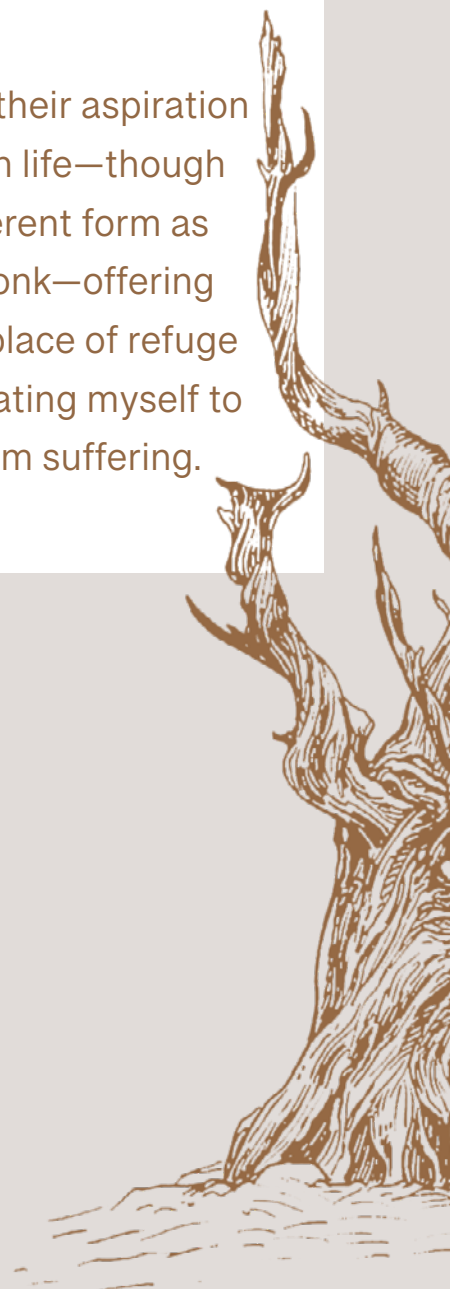
A few months later, on the night of March 6, 1945, some members of the Dutch resistance disguised themselves in German uniforms to ambush a Nazi truck. The BMW motorcar they ended up stopping, though, was driving the highest German SS-officer in the Netherlands, Hanns Rauters. The resistance fighters shot all the Germans in the motorcar, but Rauters feigned death and survived. As a reprisal for this attack, the occupying German forces executed 117 political prisoners in Eerbeek on the “Woeste Hoeve” on March 8, 1945. My grandfather was one of these prisoners. He was forty-eight at the time, my father only eleven.

In his narrative account of the war, Simon described my grandparents as “such good people, who never thought of themselves and were always ready to help others.” When I read this sentence, it made me so happy. Despite my lack of interest in taking over what had been their farm, I saw that my grandparents and I had remarkably similar aspirations. In vastly different circumstances, we turned and turn toward helping others. I continue their aspiration in my own life—though in a different form as a Zen monk—offering people a place of refuge and dedicating myself to transform suffering.

Contemplating the lives and aspirations of my ancestors has been a core part of my meditation practice. My paternal grandmother passed away in 1967, seven years before I was born, so, until I discovered Simon’s writing, I only knew the bits of their story passed down by my father.

Our long hiking retreat on the Appalachian Trail, from the Shawangunks in upstate New York to Washington, D.C., had begun at Blue Cliff Monastery. Setting foot on the grounds there when I arrived brought back many memories. In August 2007, I traveled with Thầy to the US on a one-way ticket. As a monk, I am committed to doing what is

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transform suffering.





determined to be best for the community—I have let go of deciding for myself, based purely on my own interests, what I want to do. In this case, that meant I would be staying on as a resident at Blue Cliff after the mindfulness retreat Thầy had organized there.

The monastery is ensconced in a forest of hemlock fir and beech, with wild rhododendrons clustered in small, scattered bogs. The monks and nuns discovered deer paths crisscrossing the landscape when they moved in and quickly set to widening and establishing them, using mindful steps and minimal clearing, as walking meditation trails. Once I settled in at Blue Cliff, I came to enjoy walking the “loop”—a four-mile walk around the neighborhood. At first, I walked it often, sometimes jogging it. I enjoyed walking it with other brothers and sisters, but if no one was available, I went by myself. I also recall many hours spent in the forest with a chainsaw, searching for downed wood to cut up and leave to cure so we could later burn it to heat the monks’ residence in winter.

These happy memories of the time I spent outside at Blue Cliff build on what I loved most as a child. It has always been a joy for me to be active outside. Growing up on a farm, I was accustomed to outdoor work, to breathing fresh air charged with the scent of turned soil. I often worked on the tractor, sometimes spending the whole day riding around mowing or removing cut grass to compress and save for the winter to feed the milk cows.

Since everything was so far away from our farm—school, friends, soccer practice—I often traveled from place to place on my bike. High school in the city of Arnhem, about ten miles away, meant one hour of riding on the flat Dutch bicycle paths that flanked the main road. After my sister Alma took over the farm, my father, newly released from his daily rounds caring for the cows, discovered a

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hobby he would keep well into his old age: hiking. Wonderfully, we share this joy of walking; even as a monk, I was able to join my father in walking some sections of the famous Pieterpad together.

The day I returned to Blue Cliff for our mindful hiking retreat (I hadn’t lived there for eight years by that time), I took a walk in the forest by myself. It was early morning, and I noticed the imperfection of my memories. The shape and length of the paths I had traversed so often in my mind didn’t match with what was on the ground beneath me. The exact location and shape of Moonlake was so different from how I had remembered it.

Walking on the land again, I visualized my long-dead grandfather and the two grandmothers I had never known walking alongside me. The little bits I knew of them and the pictures I had seen surfaced in my mind, and I smiled to them and saw them smiling back at me. We walked together. Saying “These grandparents have passed away” is part of the truth. Yet Zen has shown me it is also true that my grandparents are still alive in me, in every cell of my body—their DNA, their experiences, their joy, and their suffering continue in me. This is also true. There is an everyday reality, and there is a reality that transcends the boundaries of birth and death. It does not have to be one or the other.

Walking with my grandparents in the forest of Blue Cliff, I was aware I was also walking *for* them. My grandparents, like everyone who has ever lived,

had their difficulties and their suffering; as I walk with them in mindfulness and care, their lives, joys, and hardships have a continuation in me. My practice is to cultivate happiness and transform my suffering, which is connected to, not different from, their suffering.

In Zen, it is thought that becoming a monk or a nun and having the chance to deeply transform the roots of suffering is a great fortune, a fortune you receive thanks to the work of your ancestors. As monks, we are reminded that we will never be able to repay this gratitude we owe. In fact, the Buddhist sutras say you would not be able to repay this debt of ancestral gratitude even if you carried your father on one shoulder and your mother on the other for the whole of your life!

Some may think to be happy or to cultivate happiness is selfish when there is so much suffering in the world. But to me it is clear: If you are not happy, how can you contribute to the happiness of others? Thầy liked to use the analogy of swimming: only if you know how to swim can you save yourself and others from drowning. Likewise, only if you know how to transform your own suffering—which includes the suffering of your ancestors—into happiness and peace can you help others not to drown in their own misery. This insight inspires me to be happy for myself, my parents, my grandparents, and the world.



**The details that follow are found in Simon Plugge's narrative, *Recollections*, which was given to my father by Simon Plugge. It is not yet publicly available.*

*This is an excerpt from *Hiking Zen: Train Your Mind in Nature* by Brother Pháp Xả and Brother Pháp Lưu, to be released by Parallax Press in summer 2025, and currently available for pre-order at parallax.org. Artwork by Dave Yasenchak.*



Brother Pháp Xả (Xả means equanimity) entered the tradition of Zen master Thích Nhất Hạnh as a monk in February 2003 at the Plum Village, France. In January 2010, he became a Dharma teacher and moved to the EIAB (European Institute of Applied Buddhism) in Waldbröl, Germany. At the EIAB, he leads tea meditations as well as retreats and courses on various themes, such as Buddhist psychology, emotional healing, and mindful walking.



Gāthās for the Practice of Mindful Living

A selection of short verses to recite during daily activities to help us return to our practice of mindfulness, offered by Thích Nhất Hạnh

In order to practice the gāthās correctly in daily life, we need to memorize them. As you recite them to yourself, every line of the verse is accompanied by an in-breath or an out-breath: the first line by an in-breath, the second line by an out-breath.

The aim of the practice is to maintain mindfulness so that we can dwell in the present moment. For example, when we brush our teeth, we need to practice during the whole time we brush our teeth:

*Brushing my teeth and rinsing my mouth,
I purify the way I speak.
Through Right Speech my mouth becomes
fragrant,
and a flower blooms in the garden of
my heart.*

We stand still in one place to practice this gāthā, not walking back and forth, not talking or thinking about something else. In this way, we practice both fine manners and Right Mindfulness.

When we drive, road signs help us find our way. We go in the direction pointed by the first road sign until the next one shows us how to continue, and so on. Practicing with gāthās is the same. When we practice, the gāthās can be with us throughout the whole day, and we can live our day in awareness.



Waking Up

Waking up this morning, I smile.
Twenty-four brand new hours are before me.
I vow to live fully in each moment
and to look at beings with eyes of compassion.



Placing Your Shoes

I place my shoes tidily.
May everyone always walk mindfully,
coming in and going out in freedom.



Turning on the Water

Water comes from high mountain sources.
Water runs deep in the Earth.
Miraculously, water comes to us and
sustains all life.
My gratitude is filled to the brim.



Listening to the Bell

I listen, I listen,
this wonderful sound
brings me back
to my true home.



Using the Toilet

Defiled or immaculate,
increasing or decreasing—
these concepts exist only in our mind.
The reality of interbeing is unsurpassed.



Sitting

Sitting here is like sitting under a
Bodhi tree.
My body is mindfulness itself,
free from all distraction.



Looking in the Mirror

Awareness is a mirror
reflecting the four elements.
Beauty is a heart that generates love
and a mind that is open.



Changing Your Posture

Feelings come and go
like clouds in a windy sky.
Conscious breathing
is my anchor.



On the Stairs

Going up or down the stairs,
I let my steps be gentle.
If I hear them make a noise,
My mind is not at peace.



Harmonizing the Breath

Breathing in, I calm my body.
Breathing out, I smile.
Dwelling in the present moment,
I know this is a wonderful moment!



Walking Meditation

The mind can go in a thousand directions,
but on this lovely path, I walk in peace.
With each step, a gentle breeze blows.
With each step, a flower blooms.



Turning on the Computer

Turning on the computer,^{*}
Mind connects with store consciousness.
I vow to transform habit energies
to help love and understanding grow.

** You may substitute "Looking at my smartphone"
or "Turning on my device."*



Before Eating

Beings all over the Earth
are struggling to live.
I aspire to practice deeply
so all may have enough to eat.



Before Starting the Car

Before starting the car,
I know where I am going.
The car and I are one.
If the car goes fast, I go fast.



Washing the Dishes

Washing dishes in the historical dimension,
when the stack is piled up high,
I look at the ultimate dimension.
The stack presents no obstacle.



Taking Care of Anger

Angry with each other in the historical
dimension,
I close my eyes and look deeply.
Three hundred years from now,
where shall you and I be?



Picking a Flower

May I cut you, little flower,
gift of earth and sky?
Thank you, dear bodhisattva,
for making life so beautiful.



Impermanence

The day is now ended; our lives are shorter.
Let us look carefully. What have we done?
Noble Sangha, with all our heart,
let us be diligent in the practice.
Let us live deeply, free from our afflictions,
aware of impermanence
so that life does not drift away
without meaning.



Taking out the Garbage

In the garbage, I see a rose.
In the rose, I see compost.
Everything is in transformation.
Impermanence is life.



*These are excerpts from **Stepping into Freedom: An Introduction to Buddhist Monastic Training** by Thích Nhất Hạnh, published by Parallax Press. Photo courtesy of the monastic Sangha.*

Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh is one of the most revered and influential teachers in the world today. Born in Vietnam in 1926, he became a Zen Buddhist monk at the age of sixteen. Over seven decades of teaching, he published more than one hundred titles on meditation, mindfulness, and Engaged Buddhism, as well as poems, children's stories, and commentaries on ancient Buddhist texts. After his exile from Vietnam in 1966, he became a pioneer in bringing Buddhism to the West. He founded the Plum Village tradition of meditation practice, which today has ten monasteries and dozens of practice centers in the United States, Asia, Australia, and Europe, as well as more than 1,500 local mindfulness practice communities. He built a thriving community of over seven hundred monks and nuns worldwide, who, together with his tens of thousands of lay students, apply his teachings on mindfulness, peacemaking, and community-building in schools, workplaces, prisons, politics, and businesses throughout the world. Our beloved teacher passed away peacefully on January 22, 2022, at Từ Hiếu Temple in Huế, Vietnam, at the age of ninety-five.



Falling Skillfully

Brother Minh Niệm shares how the Plum Village monastic community helped him to better care for his own suffering and that of others.



Last August, the monastics of Deer Park Monastery had the good fortune to offer a six-day retreat at the YMCA of the Rockies. It was a lovely retreat in a stunning location in the Rocky Mountains, Colorado, US. We hope conditions will be favorable for us to return in the future.

After a retreat, monastics like to enjoy a handful of lazy days to rest and play. During our lazy days in the Rockies, we practiced mindful roller skating. Imagine for a moment twenty monks and nuns on roller skates. Twenty monks and nuns, some very skilled and some with no clue what they are doing, all skating around a little roller rink high in the Colorado Rockies. Twenty monks and nuns, some flying forward and backward, some on one leg, and some never straying far from the safety of the wall. We laugh, we yell, and we fall. We do a lot of falling.

Now, I am not a skilled skater. When I put on roller skates, I do my best to just keep my balance and breathe. I did watch my more experienced

monastic siblings handling themselves on skates and tried to imitate them as best as I could. I asked questions, listened to the answers, and tried my best to put everything into practice. Bit by bit I improved, but I still fell many times.

Something I have observed: everybody falls in their own way. One of my brothers falls like a cartoon character, his legs flying back and forth looking for traction on his way to the ground. His arms windmill, he goes, “Oh oh oh!” and then he collapses straight down. Then, there is a group of sisters clinging to each other as they tentatively skate around the rink. When they fall, it’s in one great big laughing heap that makes everybody smile. I don’t know what happens to me when I fall, but I don’t fall like that. I don’t even know how I fall. One moment I’m moving fine, the next, I hit the floor with a loud BOOM. I fall in such a way that everybody looks over and goes, “Whoa, are you okay?” I get up, bruised but smiling.

One brother is very skilled, very smooth; he



Imagine for a moment
twenty monks and nuns
on roller skates.



even falls gracefully. He makes falling an art form. He goes down slowly, in total control of his body, rolls in one motion, and straight up again into skating. He tries all sorts of things without fear, because he knows how to fall without getting hurt. He practices the art of *falling skillfully*. I think we would all be wise to learn from this.

known how. Looking back, one thing is clear to me: my efforts to help others were complicated by my struggles to take care of my own suffering. Many times, my intentions were good, but because I didn't understand myself and struggled to take good care of myself, I wasn't able to really improve a situation.



Recently, I was asked what in my monastic life nourishes my aspiration to serve. Honestly, I think I have aspired to do something about suffering in the world for most of my life. I just haven't always

Our roller skating reminded me of this. Sometimes, roller skating with my brothers and sisters, watching someone struggle or fall, I felt so much compassion. I know what it is like to fall, be-

cause I also fall. When I see someone else fall, I feel almost as if I fell myself. When someone is afraid of coming away from the wall, I know that fear very well, and compassion arises in me right away. I want to help so much, but I have learned I can't help someone roller skate if I don't know how to skate myself. Offering a helping hand might result in two people going down instead of just one. The same is true in other situations; first, I must learn to help myself.

The wonderful thing about being a monastic in the Plum Village tradition is that we do almost everything together. We get to learn from each other all the time. If we are going to roller skate, we do it as a group, and there are always other monastics who can show you a better way. I know I might fall, but I also know that some brothers and sisters know how to skate very well and how to fall skillfully. If I pay attention, I can learn from them.

So, what nourishes my aspiration to serve? Honestly, the answer has a lot to do with learning how to fall skillfully. I still fall into old habits, I still fall into suffering. But I am learning how to suffer less and how to suffer more skillfully. Living in the Sangha, I get to learn every day how to understand myself better, take care of myself better, and love myself better. Learning to better understand and take care of myself, I also learn how to better understand and help relieve suffering in others. I understand anger in others because I practice with anger in myself. I understand craving in others because I practice with craving in myself. I understand fear in others because I practice with fear in myself.



One brother is very
skilled, very smooth;
he even falls gracefully.
He makes falling
an art form.



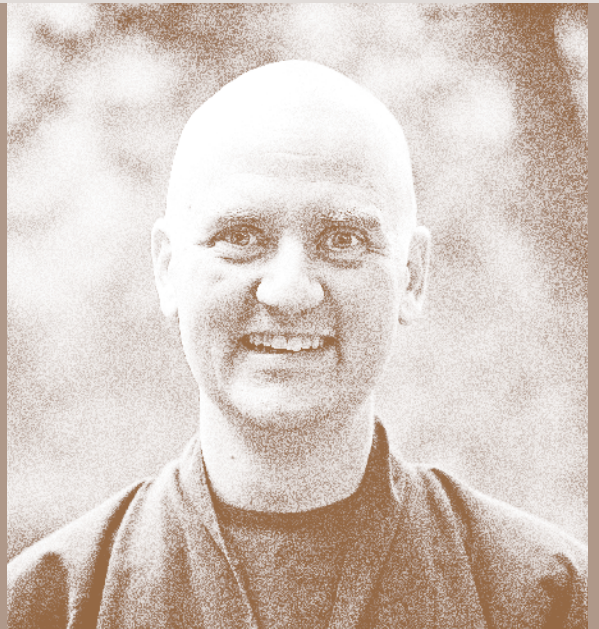


I know I might fall, but
I also know that some
brothers and sisters know
how to skate very well
and how to fall skillfully.
If I pay attention, I can
learn from them.

Right now, my aspiration is to simply be a refuge—first, a refuge for myself, because I know this will strengthen my capacity to be a refuge for others. When I see how well my brothers and sisters practice, I know I can learn to be as solid as they are. Every time I fall into an old habit, I know I can learn something new. When I see others suffer, lessons from my own struggles show me the way to help. I want to help others, which means I need to help myself. Taking good care of myself, I can't help but learn to care for and serve others. This knowledge nourishes my aspiration to serve.



Brother Minh Niệm (Brother Mindfulness) resides in Deer Park Monastery, where he was ordained in 2020. He grew up in Southern California and had the good fortune to start visiting the monastery as a teenager. He enjoys spending his time baking bread, drinking tea with his monastic siblings, and walking in mountains.



Opening the Joyful Path

Brother Pháp Dung teaches us to cultivate
our good seeds, community, and freedom.



BEING THE FARMER

Our mind has evolved many levels of consciousness; we can imagine, fantasize, and do things with our mind. The secret is right here: the cultivation of mindfulness. Our teacher said mindfulness is like the farmer who cultivates the land and is very discriminative about what to plant and how to take care of the land. We have fruit that is more wholesome, more healthy, and more conducive to well-being and then plants and fruits that cause suffering and ill-being. We want to cultivate healthy things. Those unhealthy things can remain dormant, and more healthy things can arise from our store consciousness into our lives, into our mind consciousness.

society, our families, our workplace. This watchful habit formed during our childhood, from the ways our parents, siblings, relatives, and schoolmates treated us. So a lot of these habits were triggered as we were growing up as a young person.

These events fortified seeds in our store consciousness. So, some of us are more fearful, some of us are more anxious. Perhaps we worry we won't have enough food. I have that. When I was growing up in Vietnam, my family had to hide our food. Back then, if your family was discovered to have food, then people came and harassed you. They made you pay the government. So our family always hid food. I remember going shopping and hiding a chicken under the vegetables. We had

Suffering and healing from suffering are related to two things: notions and habits.

Suffering and healing from suffering are related to two things: notions and habits. We suffer because we have ideas and won't let them go—ideas about our father, our mother, about ourselves. And it's hard to let go. We call those internal knots; they can be very hard to untie. The knots are the things we hang on to, and that clinging causes a lot of suffering.

We also have habits, and these are more behavioral. Some habits are helpful and some are not. For example, many people struggle with sleep, because thoughts and worries come up after midnight. This restlessness has biological roots; we're meant to survive. An animal in the jungle is alert for danger. We are alert for danger in our

to eat the chicken in the back, not letting people know we had enough food. I remember later, just practicing with that—purposely being last in the meal line to help me deal with my anxiety of maybe not getting enough.

Some seeds transmitted to us are helpful and some are not so helpful. Begin to identify the quality of seeds now. As a practitioner you're a scientist, you're a researcher. You still have suffering, but you're going to look into it. You're not just a victim of your suffering anymore. That is what Thầy gave me. I began to really look at all my luggage, my stuff; take it out, open it, have time for it. You've got to make time for it. Now is a good time to have a spiritual dimension. Having a spiritual

dimension does not mean you're Buddhist or an incense-lighting person; it means you're looking deeply at the nature of things—in yourself, in your parents, in your society.

When you see wholesome things arise in your mind, then you are the farmer. Remember the farmer? You have good habits, good ideas that are helpful. Identify those. Make a list. You have good habits—you exercise, you run. And you have thoughts, notions—you're kind, you're compassionate, you take care of your friend, you take care of your mom. You want to continue to cultivate these positive things. You keep those. You love to fold your clothes. This morning I was folding my clothes: oh the joy! No phone, just folding clothes. Folding clothes is my joy. Don't underestimate the

THE POWER OF MEDITATION

In meditation, first we stop, like we're learning. You slow everything down and you're just aware. So awareness is a kind of stopping. Stopping means you are present, you recognize what is. Is this helpful? Is this skillful? You can help better the world if you look at it.

So you're not judging, and you're not jumping to react. Of course you'll do that once in a while because of your habit, and then you do *Beginning Anew*. You learn, right? You stop, you recognize, you calm, and then you hold. So when uncomfortable feelings arise, we can calm them.

I first experienced this when I felt anger toward my father. I heard his voice and became very angry, but I had committed to sitting until the incense finished burning. It was a pivotal moment for me—for

Remember, a feeling is just a feeling;
it will not last.

little things! I love making my bed when I wake up; it's such a joy. These things nourish your little kindness, a little appreciation for your bed. Keep doing those things that nourish your kindness in mindfulness. If you lose your track, bring your awareness back. If you haven't been taking care of things that are good about you, try to bring them back up. Like the farmer, cultivate fruits that nourish your life. We all have habits that are not so helpful; we have ideas about ourselves—the way we look, the way we behave, the way we are. These ideas may not be helpful. Look into that, but not just to repress it.

the first time, I witnessed the anger in me subside. I felt grateful I hadn't gotten up and slammed the door to let my dad know I didn't like him. For the first time, I didn't flash back at my dad. It may sound silly, but for me it was everything. That was the beginning of looking at myself. I found if I stayed with anger a while, it went away.

When you have a strong feeling, please change your environment. Go outside, walk. If you are caught sitting like I was, just sit and breathe. But sometimes now, when a negative seed is overwhelming me, I go for a walk or go for a hike. I go

outdoors and I water all the other, positive seeds. Remember, a feeling is just a feeling; it will not last. Look into it. The practice is not to repress our notions and feelings. But when your mind is calm, it's clear. When you are not swept up by the emotion, you'll see more clearly. So you don't repress a strong emotion. You hold it and look deeply into it. And understanding arises; that is the power of meditation.

Many of you have a lot of insights. You don't have to go online, to a book, to a therapist. *You* have the insight. You *have* it. It is just a matter of making time, calming yourself, being in a good environment, and having the right schedule for yourself so it's all conducive to understanding and insight. When a negative emotion, a negative thought comes up, we will learn ways to bring it

down, take care of it. Some will take longer than others.

CARING FOR STRONG EMOTIONS

Recently in Japan, I was overwhelmed by an emotion around behaving properly in public.

Their cultural behavior is so considerate that you have to be considerate, too. And I blew up at my brother, because I would do something—I'm just California, you know—and he kept apologizing to the other Japanese for my behavior. I was like, "You don't need to do that, man." I got really upset. So even after practicing over twenty years, I still have that energy: "Arrrrg! Don't tell me what to do!" But then afterward, I said, "Brother, you know where that came from, right?" "Yeah." We hugged



each other and, dude, it's done! Nothing personal, it was just that a seed was touched. I kept following my breath, and I recognized this energy in me. When this energy came up, I immediately took care of it. I began anew and I looked into it. I shared with the brothers that the environment was intense for

a lot of suffering, for ourselves and for others. This practice helps us unravel a lot of our notions of happiness. Look at powerful people, look at wealth, and see the toxicity of wealth and power and what that does to a country, a group, and an individual. Use meditation to look at it. All the

In Buddhism, freedom is not political freedom or freedom to do whatever I want, but freedom in Buddhism is to be free from our notions and habits.

me—being in the subway, no one is talking to you, it's completely silent and then everybody's looking at everybody. It was very hard for me, but I began to adapt, to reframe my notions, my ideas. I was bringing American culture to another culture, trying to say, "You should be more like Americans," which is not appropriate.

Anything that confronts you, that challenges you, you do this: calm it down, look into it. This is the power of mindfulness. Mindfulness is not just being present in joy. But when you're calm, you're clear-minded, you're fresh, it is a good moment to look at your suffering, your notions about who you are, your identity, and so on. In that moment, your mind is very clear and nonjudgmental, not caught in a notion.

TRUE LOVE, FREEDOM, AND COMMUNITY

Many experiences woke me up to see that the way our mind works is very important. What we call a cultivated mind in Buddhism can be a lot of benefit; an uncultivated mind can create

wealthy, powerful people were falling like wilted fruit during the #MeToo movement. They were at the pinnacle of their fame and power, and the next week, bloop! Because power and fame and money come with exploitation, sex, and perversion.

So this is something we have to look at in terms of our lives and what we do to help better the world. And of course love: to find a relationship not just with human beings but with other elements, like nature, and relationship with the planet. These are some things I hope that you can continue to cultivate in your lives.

And of course the last is my favorite: freedom. That is related to letting go. We have a lot of ideas that we're holding on to, whether resentment or a kind of knot. In Buddhism, freedom is not political freedom or freedom to do whatever I want, but freedom in Buddhism is to be free from our notions and habits. We need courage to recognize that, because it's kind of hard to really let go. By cultivating mindfulness energy, you have more strength, more courage to confront some of the things about yourself or others.

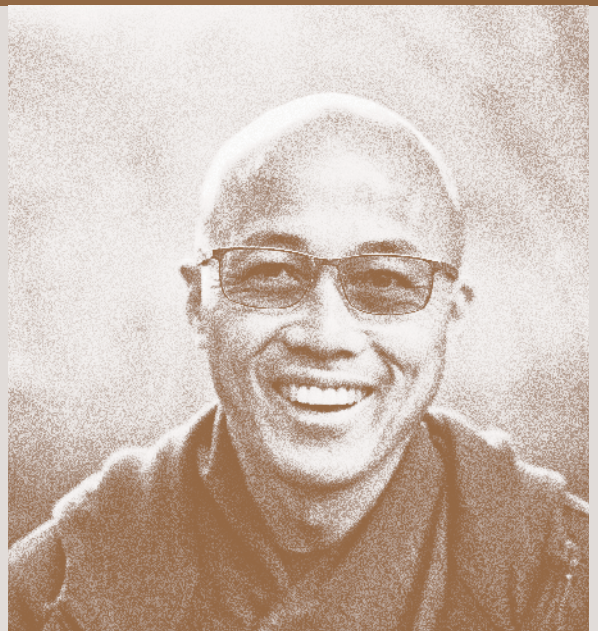
Please help us create more community, so we can support each other and can touch all these seeds without fear. We are very fortunate to have this place [Deer Park Monastery], and this place is for you; this is your home. If you ever feel like your battery is low or you're overloaded, your luggage is too full, please do not hesitate to come here immediately and take refuge in nature, just being here. Please find community so that you can continue to help each other.

Thank you for being open and helping our world, helping by helping yourself as well. Some of us engage through some social action. That's great, but some of us can help more by being a better person, less disgruntled. There are many ways to contribute, so we don't all have to become social/racial/environmental activists. We can be one less disgruntled person on the planet and slowly gather many others to do the same. This is a way, our model of influencing the world and affecting change. Thank you.

Photos are courtesy of the Deer Park monastic Sangha.

This is an excerpt from "Opening the Joyful Path," a Dharma talk given by Brother Pháp Dung on April 8, 2024 at Deer Park Monastery during the Wake Up retreat. It has been edited for clarity. The full Dharma talk is available on the Deer Park Monastery YouTube channel.

Brother Pháp Dung/Dharma Embrace, is a Vietnamese American monk, ordained by Thầy in 1998. He received a professional BA in architecture from the University of Southern California and worked as an architect and designer for four years before becoming a monk. He helped establish Deer Park Monastery and many other US centers, creating meditation programs and retreats for children, teens, families, and young adults, as well as planning halls and infrastructure. He was the abbot of Deer Park Monastery from 2001 until 2010. He received the Lamp Transmission from Thích Nhất Hạnh and became a Dharma teacher in 2004. He is most inspired by meditation as a method of examining and cultivating the mind of the individual and of the collective and by community building as a method to heal and develop society.



WAKE UP

The Path of Compassion Is Endless, but Together Is a Lot of Fun!



Brother Chân Trời Đạo Bì reflects on the importance
of being yourself, play as a Dharma door,
and understanding your roots.



With spiritual friends on the path in front of Hué Imperial City;
photos are courtesy of the monastic Sangha.



With spiritual friends supporting one another and having fun!

During the Wake Up Retreat in August 2024 at Plum Village, France, I found myself lying awake every night. Every time I listened to enormous suffering, I wouldn't be able to fall asleep. When this happened, I reminded myself of what Thầy used to do when he experienced that. Sometimes Thầy would lie awake at night and not be able to fall asleep. All Thầy did was just return to his breathing and embrace himself with his mindful breath. Thầy embraced himself, his people, and the whole planet with his mindful breath. One night, I realized that a mindful breath is an act of Earth holding. "Earth Holder" has been my koan since I've been involved in the Wake Up Earth Holder Community. I asked myself, "Why is this mindful Earth justice initiative called 'Earth Holder?'" Since then, I have never underestimated a single act of mindful breathing, especially in difficult moments.

STORING THE WOOD FOR THE WINTER

The monastic path enables me to cultivate mindfulness through mindful breathing and mindful steps. Sometimes a feeling of boredom comes up when I find the schedule in Plum Village quite monotonous. Now I see that the schedule helps me to "store the wood for the winter." If we did not store the wood before the winter, then we would not have enough time to dry the wood. When the winter comes, if we have stored enough wood, then the wood will be ready to keep us warm. And it's more fun to chop and store the wood together! It's the beauty of our community that we do everything together. It was my dream to live in a community. Now I'm living my dream, and I don't take for granted each moment in this community. Breathing and walking mindfully together

as a community strengthens my own practice, and I know that I'm storing the wood for the difficult moments.

One time, I was sitting by myself when I was facing strong emotions. Instead of numbing myself through distraction, I decided to sit with all the emotions and allowed myself to cry. It was my first time ever allowing myself to cry. I used to hold back my tears. Then I realized that crying is not a sign of weakness. It takes courage to tell myself that it's okay to cry. I followed my breathing, and then I practiced mindful crying. Slowly, I felt better, and then I shared this experience with some of my spiritual friends on the path.

I started to see that I could benefit from collective listening. My own capacity to listen to myself is not as strong as the capacity to listen as a group. I feel fortunate that I have spiritual friends and brothers living together in Upper Hamlet; some of them are closer to me than my blood brother. We are sharing not only our joys but also our challenges. There is a saying in Indonesia: "A good friend is there for you when you experience joy (*sukha* in Sanskrit and Indonesian) and when you experience difficulty (*dukkha* in Sanskrit and Indonesian)." Nowadays, it's easy to numb ourselves through distraction. When the suffering is overwhelming, we may consume things that are not necessary. In the community, we can resist these distractions together. I see that some monastic siblings have the same experience and aspiration, and we have become spiritual friends supporting each other.

BE A MONASTIC, BE YOURSELF

One day, when I was sitting and facilitating a Dharma sharing under the linden tree in Upper Hamlet, I was contemplating the linden tree. I realized that a linden tree is just being a linden tree. It gives shade and offers a refuge in the midst of the summer heat to many beings. When Thầy shared that a tree is just a tree, and if a tree is less than a tree, we'll all be in trouble, I had not understood what Thầy meant. Then I came to realize that sitting under a linden tree, I just have to be a monastic. If I'm less than a monastic, then I will be in trouble! I'm still learning how to be a true monastic. When I facilitate Dharma sharing, all I have to do is sit and listen deeply. Then I can just be myself and feel "I am enough." My aspiration is to be a monk, and as long as I know how to nourish this aspiration, then I can be a true monk. A robe is just an outer form. We need to know how to nourish the inner aspiration, our *bodhicitta* that makes us true practitioners. I have met many lay and monastic disciples of Thầy, and they keep inspiring me with the depth of their practice in their way of being and their mind of love.

FINDING MY ROOTS, FINDING MY TRUE HOME

When I first heard the song "A Prayer for Land," a poem by Thầy that has been put to music, it touched something very deep in me. For the first time, I was able to be in touch with the suffering of my great-grandparents, who migrated from China to Indonesia. They may have been in the situation Thầy wrote about in the poem. I have sung this song every day since then to be able to cultivate peace and healing within myself. Healing myself is also healing my ancestors in myself.

All my life, I was looking for roots. I never knew what my roots were. In Indonesia, where I was born and grew up, I never felt that my roots were in Indonesia. I experienced a lot of discrimination, and still some native Indonesian people don't think that I'm Indonesian. I

also think that the Chinese people would not see me as Chinese. In Plum Village, I learned to see that I'm made of many different ancestors: land ancestors of Indonesia, blood ancestors, and spiritual ancestors from China and Vietnam. They are all part of me. Once I was able to see this, I stopped searching for my roots. Roots are not something that we can find outside. When we can see our roots inside, we stop yearning and we can arrive in our true home. Thầy has shown us that a true home is not necessarily a physical home. Thầy found his true home regardless of physical space and taught us that we can find our true home in the present moment.

RENEWING BUDDHISM IN MY HOMELAND

I've been taking root in Plum Village, France, for more than nine years. Thầy's Buddhism and the Plum Village monasteries are taking root in the West to respond to suffering in the West. I've been able to see that our tradition is not only responding to suffering in the West; people living in big cities like Jakarta, Indonesia, and other cities in Asia are experiencing the same, since the West and the East are deeply intertwined. Growing up in the countryside, I could see the difference in the suffering that people experienced in Indonesia and Europe. However, when I was living in Jakarta for some years, I could see that more and more people were experiencing suffering similar to the people in the West.

My deepest aspiration and dream is to bring Plum Village roots to Indonesia, my homeland. I can only do that when I have the roots in myself. I deeply treasure each moment of taking root and deepening my arriving here in Plum Village. My dream is coming true. We are starting to build a Plum Village monastery for monks and nuns in Bali.

Once, Thầy told his disciples that if we have an aspiration to renew Buddhism in our homeland, we need to renew ourselves first. I've been able to see that my body and mind have been renewed continuously since I came here. I often remind myself that there are many things I still need to renew and learn as a young monk, and I need to continue renewing and learning at every moment.

I had the opportunity to visit the new land in Bali in February 2023 with Sister Chân Không and some monastics. We did the land blessing and it was a deeply moving experience to see that my dream is slowly coming true. The aspiration to build a Plum Village practice center has been there since Thầy visited Indonesia in 2010, when I first met Thầy and the Sangha. There were some obstacles to building a center in Java, near Borobudur, as Thầy had wished, until we finally let go of this idea since we were not able to get the permission to build the center there.

I was deeply in touch with the spiritual ancestors in Bali and finally I could see that my spiritual ancestors are not only from Vietnam and China but also from Bali. When I went to visit some Hindu temples in Bali, I could experience that and accept them as my spiritual and land ancestors.

TAKING ROOTS IN WAKE UP COMMUNITIES AND DEEPLY UNDERSTANDING THẦY'S BUDDHISM

Before ordaining, I was practicing in Wake Up Sanghas in Indonesia. Some of my Wake Up friends helped me to feel at home in the Sangha, and then slowly I was able to feel



Land Blessing in Bali

more at home in my family and bring reconciliation and healing to my family. I’ve been serving on the European Wake Up Care-Taking Council (or as we call it, Oomph: Organism for Optimizing Many People’s Happiness) for six years. I see some friends in the Oomph family as my true brothers and sisters on the path and they help me to feel at home in Europe.

When I participated in the Wake Up Retreat in Thailand with some Sangha friends from Wake Up Indonesia in 2013, we offered the Wake Up song to Thầy, thanks to some Wake Up practitioners in the United States who composed this song and created the *mudras* (hand movements). Ten years later, at the “Love in Action” Wake Up Retreat, my Dharma sharing family offered this song and invited everybody to offer this song to Thầy in our hearts and everywhere around the Buddha Hill, where we had scattered Thầy’s ashes.

I used to sing this song with my Wake Up Sangha in Indonesia. After I ordained, it took me years to realize that I could also rap as a monk! Thanks to Brother Pháp Hữu for inspiring me and some other young monastics to rap and for showing us that this is Thầy’s Buddhism. He shared that some monastics were not happy about him rapping, but Thầy encouraged him to rap and said to him that this is Thầy’s Buddhism. When I heard this story, it helped me to see more clearly the renewed Buddhism Thầy has offered and let go of some ideas I had about monastics.

Thầy has offered us a lot of skillful means in the renewed Buddhism. I see rap as a skillful means and a Dharma door to attract young people. Some people who have certain ideas about monastics may not be able to see this as a skillful means and not accept this. Thầy has immense courage in offering relevant Dharma doors to respond to suffering, inspire more young people to ordain, and continue Thầy beautifully into the future.

PLAY AS A DHARMA DOOR IN THE WEST

The word “chơi,” as one of the four pillars in the Plum Village tradition (study, practice, work, and play), is often translated as “play.” Some monastics interpret it as joy, relaxation, or “let’s go with enjoyment.” In my article about play, “Let’s Play, Let’s Go with Enjoyment” for *The Mindfulness Bell* in 2019, I wrote about the story when Thầy was asked, “How can Western sisters and brothers become closer to each other like the Vietnamese sisters and brothers?” Thầy answered, “It’s not about Western sisters and brothers, but also I think that people can become closer to each other if they play together. So I suggest that Western brothers and sisters need to play a bit more, and be more relaxed. Because you think that playing like that is not a practice physically.”

I heard this story when the Sangha went canoeing for the first time, and how it helped change the atmosphere in the Sangha tremendously. When we see each other play, it changes our perception of each other. We cultivate joy and become closer to each other. During the monastic retreat in 2024, we watched the movie *Cabrini*, one of the fun things

With the Oomph family at the
Wake Up Ambassadors Retreat





Singing the Wake Up song at the Buddha Hill

we do as a monastic Sangha. I was deeply impressed by the story of how a Catholic nun tried to bring changes to society and cared for the poor and the sick. When I was actively engaged in a Buddhist youth organization, I found joy in helping the poor and the sick. After watching the movie, I realized that Thầy offered the Dharma doors to respond to the suffering in the West. Some people may not need food and shelter as the poor and the sick do, but they may need healing in their hearts. Thầy offered the Dharma doors such as deep listening and play for us to heal the wounds in our hearts. This is Engaged Buddhism that later on had developed into Applied Buddhism. Thầy shared about Applied Buddhism when he visited Tzu Chi in Taiwan, a Buddhist foundation that truly cares for the poor and the sick. Thầy's sharing at that time helps me to understand Engaged Buddhism or Applied Buddhism more deeply. I deeply admire Thầy and Sister Chân Không's work for the poor and the sick from the time of the war in Vietnam until now. Applied Buddhism is more than charity work. Some people are poor and sick in their hearts. Thầy experienced depression, war, and loss of beloved ones. Thầy found the way out, and therefore Thầy offered medicine for us to heal our hearts and minds.

I see play as a Dharma door, and play responds to the suffering of our time: loneliness. This kind of suffering is experienced not only by people in the West, but also by people living in big cities in Asia, where individualism is more prevalent. Some people may find it challenging to live together with many people, but community living is also a Dharma door to respond to loneliness. When we overcome the challenges, we can see how the

brothers and sisters in the Sangha help us in our practice. I deeply treasure the presence of each brother and sister in the community. When we cultivate true friendship, brotherhood and sisterhood, and harmony in the Sangha, then we can build a community of resistance—which is our response to suffering in the world. We can only respond to suffering in the world when we know how to respond to suffering in ourselves and in our community.

Thầy often shared with us that a teacher helps show us the path, but spiritual friends offer support and guidance along the path when a teacher may not be able to do so. I feel very fortunate that I have brothers and sisters or spiritual friends in the community who are always there when I experience joy and difficulty. One of my spiritual friends, Brother Thien Y, offered me calligraphy: “The path of compassion is endless, but together is a lot of fun!” I have immense gratitude to Thầy for showing us that the path can be fun and we don’t have to take the practice too seriously.

CONTINUING THẦY BEAUTIFULLY INTO THE FUTURE

I deeply appreciate the elder brothers and sisters in our community who share stories about Thầy that can help us understand Thầy’s Buddhism deeply. Through their Dharma talks and sharings, I get to see how they’ve understood Thầy’s teachings deeply. They are able to continue Thầy’s work in renewing Buddhism and be soulmates of Thầy. Thầy has shown us the path and how to be a soulmate of the Buddha. All we need to do is continue Thầy and follow in his footsteps.

*May the Sangha practice diligently,
showing love and concern for one and all,
just as for our very own family,
transforming our hearts and minds
we aspire to follow all Great Beings.*

This is my favorite line from the “Praising the Buddha” chant that I often recite to myself to remember again my aspiration to practice showing love and concern for one and all. I’ve been able to see my monastic and lay siblings as my own brothers and sisters. They are all part of this big spiritual family. Our love for one another can contribute to the collective awakening, as I’ve learned that awakening is love and understanding itself. The Sangha has embraced me so I’m able to love myself and accept myself as I am. Only when we are able to show love and concern for ourselves can we show love and concern for others and build brotherhood and sisterhood. Another one of my favorite lines from this chant is “May compassion cool the flames of the world, and wisdom shine through the clouds of confusion, revealing to all the path.” Our love and compassion can help cool the flames of the world. Our collective insight and wisdom is like a torch lighting our path and revealing the path to all.



With Brother Thien Y and the Italian brothers during the Wake Up Tour (2024) in his homeland, Italy

Brother Chân Trời Đạo Bi/Brother Compassion (pronouns he/him) is from Indonesia and has lived in the Upper Hamlet in Plum Village, France, since 2015. Before ordaining, he helped to establish Wake Up communities in Indonesia since 2010. He was one of the first young people in Indonesia to receive The Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings in 2013. He has served on the European Wake Up Care-Taking Council since 2018. He is actively engaged in sharing the practice with young people, including protecting Mother Earth, and helped to establish the Wake Up Earth Holder community in 2020. His deep aspiration is to help make Thầy's teachings accessible and applicable for everyone, especially for young people.





The Emergence of Awareness

Sister Kính Nghiêm shares about recognizing and embracing suffering in yourself and your family.



During the pandemic I had the opportunity, the practice of a lifetime, to go home and care for my parents for a whole three years. If you really want to test us monastics, our resilience in our practice, put us at home. It's easy to be in the monastery; everybody's doing the same thing: breathing and smiling and letting go. But being at home all the time is like being in a pressure cooker.

It was very hard, especially because I had an expectation of having my own space. Sometimes I could be a little bossy about the practice. For example, saying you should not be eating while watching the TV, and those kinds of things. And

one of the things that I realized in those years of practicing being confined, was not only taking care of my own emotions, but also my parents' fear of what was going to happen next. I think there was collective fear for everyone surrounding the pandemic, and especially for my parents in San Diego, California, US. They didn't speak English, and they didn't know how to navigate everything, such as how to do their grocery shopping online. It was very stressful for them.

So I had to create my own space and also to hold them in that space. Eventually, we got along well. There were a few hiccups here and there,

We can learn to
embrace the pain
and hold that space
for ourselves,
recognizing what has
been transmitted
from generation to
generation.

Our practice is to simply
accept suffering as it is
and to help suffering
understand itself.

with some big hiccups. But we grew to understand each other better. I especially came to understand myself and how I react to certain things.

But there was one time when my mother was not feeling well, and I had to do a lot of things on top of monastery work, on top of family work, including navigating all the doctors, the paperwork, and everything else that went with that. So I was sort of running thin. I asked my father to help prepare dinner for Mom; all he needed to do was put food on a plate and heat it up in the microwave. As he filled the plate I said, “Oh, no, that’s too much. Mom doesn’t eat that much.” A very simple statement on my part. All of a sudden, my father put everything down, turned to the corner of the kitchen, held his head down low, and said, “You always tell me what to do.” At that moment, I saw my father’s five-year-old child in the corner, almost as if he was being punished. I thought, *Where did this come from?*

I said, “It’s okay, Daddy. If you’re not ready, then I will take care of this. You just go sit and relax.” So I took the tray up to my mom and I told her what was happening. And she said, “You’re very much like your grandma.” I thought, *Where did that come from? How did I become Grandma all of a sudden?* And she said, “The way that you talk, you speak with conviction, almost like a sense of authority.” I know from my dad’s history that he was not loved by his mother, my grandma. Yet he always wanted to make his mother proud of him.

He was helping me, but somehow in his mind, he thought he was helping his mom. When I said, “That’s too much,” I saw this little boy that had let his mother down. So it became my practice to be his child, his daughter, and also to be the loving mother, the kind mother that my father never had. And that helped build the relationship: understanding where he was coming from. In those moments, I could react in a certain way and put

this expectation on him like, “You’re my dad. Be my dad.” But at that time, I understood from my own practice that I became like my grandma without even knowing, and somehow I reminded my father of my grandma. I didn’t grow up with my grandma, so I didn’t know that I was exactly like my grandma.

In that image of my father, standing in the corner with his head hung low, I can see the deep pain that he held inside of him. The guided meditation [seeing my father as a five-year-old child*] helps me to understand deeply without blaming him and without blaming myself. We can learn to embrace the pain and hold that space for ourselves, recognizing what has been transmitted from generation to generation.

We have so many things that have been transmitted down to us. And sometimes in this present moment, we think that we are that problem or we have this habit. And I don’t want to blame the past by saying “Oh, it’s their fault. They gave this to me, and now I’m like this, and this is who I am, and

now I have to fix everything.” But in fact, I don’t think the teaching of awareness of suffering, the Four Immeasurable Minds, is to blame suffering for anything. Our habit is anything that we like to keep with us, and anything that we dislike, we try to eliminate it.

When we have a painful feeling and a negative seed arises inside of us, we do everything we can to get rid of it. But I have bad news for you. It’s going to be there. You can’t get rid of it! You can get rid of the idea of it, but it is still there.

Thầy said that when we recognize a negative feeling arising in us, we can hold it like a baby. We can smile to it, embrace it, and offer it comfort, because more than anything else, that is what our suffering needs the most. But instead, we punish ourselves for suffering, because that is our habit. I’m going to call you guys out on this one: We sometimes use meditation to punish suffering by saying, “Breathing in, I am calm. My suffering is not there. I relax my whole body, letting go of all these emotions.”

Thầy said that when we recognize a negative feeling arising in us, we can hold it like a baby. We can smile to it, embrace it, and offer it comfort, because more than anything else, that is what our suffering needs the most.

In that way, if we are unskillful, our meditation practice can become like spiritual bypassing. The practice of being 100 percent aware is not to bypass suffering. It is about being present for whatever comes to me. I establish myself in my own body, in my footsteps, and I am prepared to embrace what is. Instead of trying to breathe it away, I am being there 100 percent. (Or, for the beginners, 10 percent.) Being in our footsteps can help us to embrace ourselves, our suffering, and our despair. It's not about learning the text or sutras, but instead establishing presence and not pushing anything away.

So now I'm more aware of when I become my grandma. And when I'm with my dad, I just say, "Good morning, Daddy," and allow myself to be a child of my father. But I'm an adult, and on top of that, I'm a nun, and on top of that, I'm a Dharma teacher, too. So the pressure is high, and I have an expectation of myself that I need to be at my best. But really I can just enjoy being my father's daughter. Because I have the practice, I can embrace that little girl inside of me. I can hold my father's little boy hand and say, "Let's do this together." We don't have to punish suffering or eliminate it. That is an illusion. Our practice is to simply accept suffering as it is and to help suffering understand itself. It also means to help us understand ourselves.

[Bell]

My father used to be a smoker. I guess for him it was a way to relieve stress. He is a victim of the Vietnam War and was also a soldier during the Vietnam War for the US side. He suffered a lot of fear, a lot of pain. He used to smoke as a way to forget things, because he didn't know how to process all that he went through.

My younger sister didn't like him smoking, because when you go to school in the US, you learn that smoking is bad; you're going to get cancer. We were little kids and we didn't know any better. So my sister would take his cigarettes and hide them all the time. She would hide them in a little corner somewhere, and she would pretend that she didn't do it. My dad got very mad at her one time, and he

spanked her, saying, "You do not touch my cigarettes!" Of course, my sister cried. When he saw my sister crying, he realized that he had hurt her.

That day he made a vow to quit smoking, because it didn't make him the person that he wanted to be. He became a victim of his own suffering, and he unintentionally transmitted it to his daughter. He has three daughters who became nuns. I don't know if it's a good sign or not, but I have two other sisters who ordained with Thầy.

Eventually my dad came to Plum Village, attended retreats, and meditated as best he could. One day, Thầy was teaching about Beginning Anew, and my father was a bit fidgety. There was something inside really bothering him.

He came to my sister and said, "I need to talk to you." My sister was so nervous, thinking, "What happened? Why did Dad change? He never wants to talk to me." She was a nervous wreck, really shaking. He said, "I really need to talk to you. I need to get this done now." My sister didn't know what to do, so she just had to sit there.

My father mustered up the courage to say, "I'm sorry." And my sister said, "What?" He said, "I'm sorry that I hit you for hiding my cigarettes. And I never told you that I was sorry." It took him fifteen years to get the courage to say that. And for my sister, it was awkward. In Asian families, we don't hug and we don't say, "I love you." My mom was there witnessing this, and she said, "Just hug already!" because it was so awkward. And they hugged, and then my dad was like, "Okay, that's enough." It irks him to get emotional, but it was a breakthrough for him to be able to communicate his pain and suffering to his daughter. Sometimes as adults, we think, *I'm supposed to know everything. I'm supposed to be okay.* We don't allow ourselves to be vulnerable because we want to be a good role model. Sometimes that can be a little bit toxic if we cannot model for our children how to communicate in a constructive way. It took my father fifteen years to apologize. We were being naughty, hiding his cigarettes. Little did we know that we had transformed him very deeply.

He never smoked again, and he has been clean for more than thirty years. That event really woke something up in him. But he could not

communicate because he was so afraid of losing himself, losing the identity that he built of himself: *I'm the father. I have this authority. I get to do what I want to do because I'm the adult in the house. And then if I say sorry, what does that make me? I'm no longer a person of authority or teaching.* My father is a man of few words; I'm sure most fathers are. But sometimes he may feel very alone. Maybe we can all tune in to our father and say, "Daddy, I'm here for you."

Now my father and I have a very good relationship. But the healing and transformation doesn't just happen overnight. It's not going to be fixed at the end of one retreat and everything is dandy. I'm warning you: this is just the beginning of a deeper transformation and healing.

It took my father fifteen years to say "I'm sorry" to my sister for something that had happened when she was five years old. We may forget the story, the details, the date, and the time, but we don't forget the feeling. And I think that feeling sat with my father for so long.

Being 100 percent, establishing ourselves, gives us the energy so that we can come to face and embrace the things that come to us, whether they are in our present moment or from our past. That then will lay the foundation for how we will be in the future. So being 100 percent can heal us now.

** You can read more about this practice in "Taking Care of Our Suffering," a Dharma talk by Thích Nhất Hạnh, available in issue 84 at mindfulnessbell.org.*

This is an excerpt from a Dharma talk given on August 20, 2024 in the Assembly of Stars Hall and in the YMCA of Estes Park, Colorado, US during the Our Earth, Our True Nature Retreat. It has been edited for clarity.



Sister Kinh Nghiê, translated to "Adorned with True Reverence" (pronouns she/her), is a senior Dharma teacher in Thích Nhất Hạnh's international community of Engaged Buddhism. She ordained in 1998 at the age of fifteen. As Thích Nhất Hạnh's personal attendant for over fifteen years, she has traveled around the world leading mindfulness and meditation retreats for communities, schools, universities, and business corporations. She received full ordination in 2001 and Lamp Transmission in 2006. She currently resides at Deer Park Monastery in Southern California, US, where she enjoys picking wild sage, studying deep Buddhism, and sharing tea and laughter with her sisters and brothers.

We Still Have Each Other

UPPER HAMLET, PLUM VILLAGE¹
SECOND WEEK OF SUMMER RETREAT,
JULY 2000

My dearly beloved students,

We are in the second week of the Summer 2000 retreat. Each of us has responsibilities, each of us has to stay up late and get up early, but Thầy still has time to think of his students and write you letters, and Thầy knows that you will also have time to read them. Whether you are in Upper Hamlet, Lower Hamlet, New Hamlet, Green Mountain, Maple Forest, or Deer Park, our responsibility and practices are exactly the same: take each step in solidity and breathe each breath mindfully, cultivating faith and happiness for each other and for those who come to us. We are able to maintain the mind of love: we all look in the direction of service, and none of us looks just for comfort or praise. Thầy is aware that we are living together; Thầy feels the presence of each of his students and Thầy is very happy. Just a few days ago, Sister Anh Nghiêm came to sit next to Brother Pháp Niệm and said: “Thầy praised you for being able to approach everyone in the Sangha and connect with everyone. I would like you to show me the way so that I can do this too.” Hearing Brother Pháp Niệm share his practice, Thầy was very happy. If all of us have the same wish as Sister Anh Nghiêm, then how can the happiness of our Sangha not increase day by day?

In the past, Thầy’s class at Báo Quốc Temple was quite large. We were very close, and it seemed like we would have each other forever.² But now that Thầy looks back, there is almost no one left. Even the youngest brothers are no longer here, like Brother Châu Toàn and Brother Châu Đức. Now only Venerable Thiện Hạnh and Venerable Thiện Bình are left. I remember Hoàng Cầm’s verses about Đông Hồ paintings: “Mother pig and her yin yang piglets are separated, the mouse

wedding was once bustling with excitement, now where do they go?” Have you seen the Đông Hồ paintings of yin yang pigs and mouse weddings? At Upper Hamlet, Thầy has a complete set of Đông Hồ paintings. If anyone wants to see it, come here and Thầy will show it to you. Looking back, we see that we are still together, we are all following the same practices, and we can call on each other anytime we want. We can do walking meditation together, we can sit and eat mindfully together, we can have the Rains Retreat together.³ This is really a rare gift. How can Thầy not feel happy?

Although some of us may sometimes act unskillfully, causing difficulties and sadness, we do not do it intentionally. Thầy is also sometimes unskillful, and he knows that you are always ready to forgive him. Thầy is grateful to you, deeply grateful. You give Thầy a lot of happiness, and his happiness grows more and more when you love each other and forgive each other’s mistakes. All of us know that the more we get along and love each other, the more we can serve, becoming a refuge for many people. Thầy sees that all of us have taken many steps on the path of practice and transformation. Everyone has transformed—some faster, some slower, that’s all. Thầy hopes that everyone will become a Dharma teacher, and that every novice will receive the Great Precepts at some point.⁴ Thầy doesn’t want anyone to be left behind, but Thầy needs the Sangha to help him provide support to the ordines, and Thầy also needs you to give Thầy a hand.

Times are changing very quickly and maybe in the near future we will be entrusted with new responsibilities, especially in our homeland. Thầy is

old, but he wishes to be present with you in those projects, the projects that he thinks the Buddha and our ancestral teachers have entrusted to us. You are smart and talented enough, you just need to love each other and hold each other's hands—then there's nothing you can't do.

During the past few weeks, despite the many tasks, Thầy still found the time and energy to shine light on and guide those of his students who need shining light and guidance. Now everything is fine, and everyone has practiced Beginning Anew.⁵ Everyone has left the past behind and embraced the present. Thầy is very glad.

Tomorrow, meaning after the summer session, many members of the Sangha will have to set out to lead retreats—there will be quite a few birds taking flight. However, in the present we are living and working together. Thầy wrote this letter mainly to remind his students of this fact. Thầy holds all of you in his arms, with all his love and trust.

Your teacher,

Nhất Hạnh

¹ Plum Village in France is composed of three separate monasteries, called “hamlets.” The hamlets are self-contained communities where the monastics and lay practitioners live mindfully together as a spiritual family. New Hamlet and Lower Hamlet are the two communities of Plum Village nuns (or “sisters”). Upper Hamlet is where the Plum Village monks or “brothers” live and practice.

² Báo Quốc Institute of Buddhist Studies in Huế is where Thầy studied from 1947 to 1949.

³ The ninety-day Rains Retreat is an annual retreat whose origins date back to the time of the Buddha. It is a time for monks and nuns to deepen their studies, practice, and focus on building the monastic sangha. In Plum Village, lay practitioners can join the retreat alongside the monastics.

⁴ During the Great Precepts Transmission Ceremony, the precepts to become a *bhikṣu* (fully ordained monk) and *bhikṣuṇī* (fully ordained nun) are transmitted to eligible novice monastics.

⁵ Beginning Anew is a key Plum Village practice for maintaining and healing relationships. For more on this practice, see *Beginning Anew: Four Steps to Restoring Communication* (Parallax Press, 2014).

This is an excerpt from In Love and Trust: Letters from a Zen Master by Thích Nhất Hạnh, published by Parallax Press.

See Thầy's bio on page 45



“I may be found in your way
of breathing and walking.”

THÍCH NHẤT HẠNH

Thầy often said that when he was gone, the world would find him in the words and actions of those who embody his teachings and example.

As his spiritual offspring, Thầy invites us to live a life of compassion and generosity; to commit ourselves to the daily practice of meditation and mindfulness; and to share the Dharma through our words and actions.

One way we can continue his legacy is by supporting Thầy's global monastic community.

By giving today, you will help ensure that future generations can benefit from Thầy's teachings.

To make a one-time gift or to join our loving community of monthly donors, the Plum Blossom Society, visit [TNHF.org/donate](https://tnhf.org/donate)

THÍCH NHẤT HẠNH FOUNDATION
planting seeds of compassion

PART OF THE INTERNATIONAL PLUM VILLAGE COMMUNITY

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Rooted in the present, committed to the future

Leaving a legacy gift
is easy. Learn how to
become a member of
the Cedar Society at
tnhf.org/legacy-giving
or contact us at
cedars@tnhf.org and
(760) 317-2330.

AS A YOUNG DHARMA TEACHER IN VIETNAM,

Thầy trained a group of 13 students to become
“like strong cedars to help support the Buddha’s
teachings,” revitalize Buddhism, and meet the
needs of people suffering during difficult times.

Named the Thirteen Cedars, they helped ensure
that Thầy’s work continued after the war and made
it possible for his teachings to take root in the
West. **We are here because they were there.**

A number of the Thirteen Cedars are still with us;
our aspiration is to grow a forest of 1,300. We invite
you to join the Cedar Society and help us share
Thầy’s teachings and practices for generations to
come with your legacy gift.

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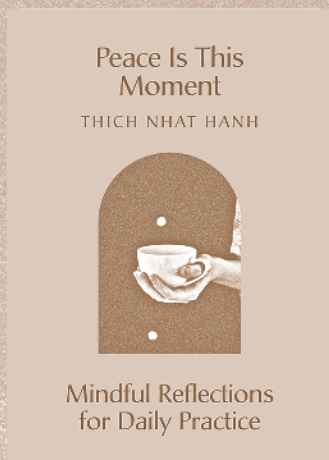
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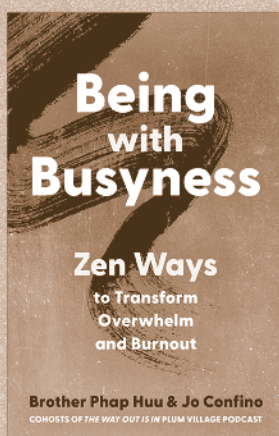
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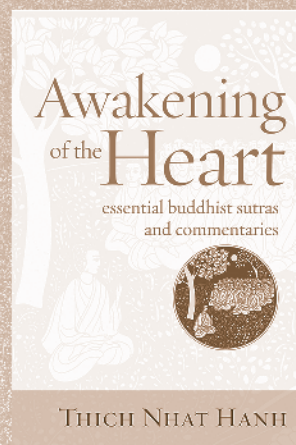
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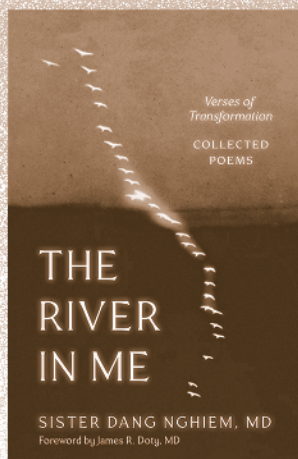
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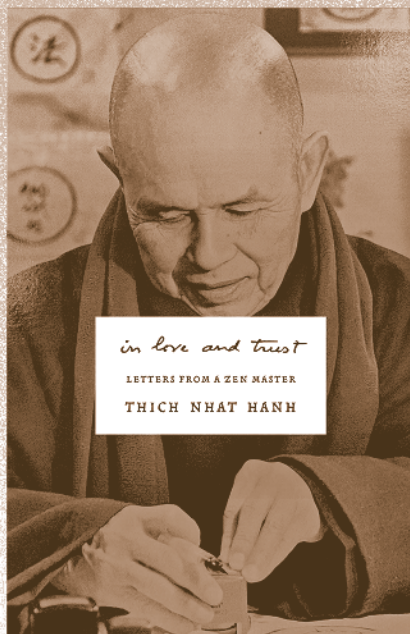
Being with Busyness



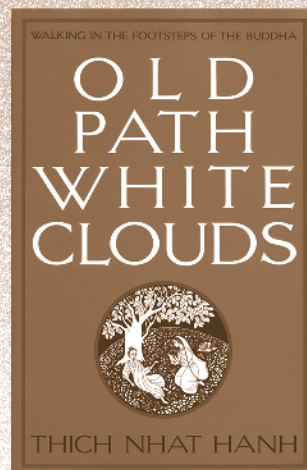
Awakening of the Heart



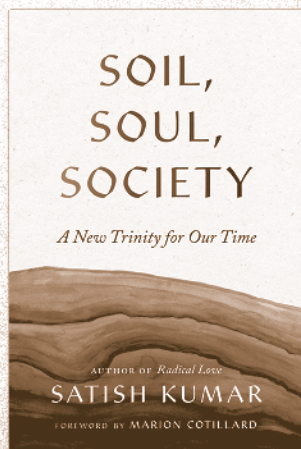
The River in Me



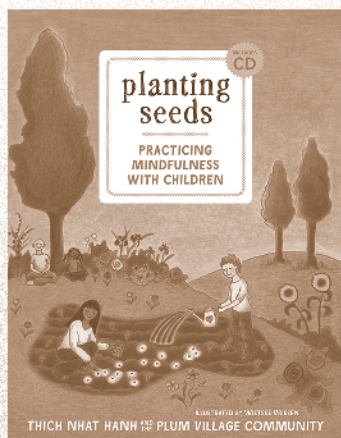
In Love and Trust



Old Path White Clouds



Soil, Soul, Society



Planting Seeds



Hiking Zen



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Plum Village

Practice Centers & Resources

The practice centers and monasteries listed here all practice in the Plum Village tradition of Thích Nhất Hạnh. The centers are generally open throughout the year, for short or long stays, to help us learn the art of mindful living. In addition to in-person and online retreats, the practice centers offer regular Days of Mindfulness and other events. Please visit their websites for information and resources.

Blue Cliff Monastery, New York, US
bluecliffmonastery.org

Deer Park Monastery, California, US
deerparkmonastery.org

Magnolia Grove Monastery, Mississippi, US
magnoliagrovesmonastery.org

Plum Village, France
plumvillage.org

Healing Spring Monastery, France
healingspringmonastery.org

Maison de l'Inspir, France
maisondelinspir.over-blog.com

European Institute of Applied Buddhism, Germany
eiab.eu

Stream Entering Monastery, Australia
nhaplouu.org

Mountain Spring Monastery, Australia
mountainspringmonastery.org

Asian Institute of Applied Buddhism, Hong Kong
pvfhk.org

Plum Village Thailand
thaipumvillage.org

We can deepen our practice with the many resources in the Plum Village tradition available online: the Sangha directory, community initiatives, guided meditations, Dharma talks, books, articles, news, songs, and much more.

The Mindfulness Bell
mindfulnessbell.org

Parallax Press
parallax.org

The Plum Village App
plumvillage.app

The Way Out Is In Podcast
plumvillage.org/podcasts/the-way-out-is-in

The Raft
thichnhathanhfoundation.org/the-raft

Thích Nhất Hạnh Dharma Talks
tnhaudio.org

ARISE Sangha
arisesangha.org

Happy Farm
thehappyfarm.org

Earth Holder Community
earthholder.training

Wake Up
wkup.org

Wake Up Schools
wakeupschools.org

Thích Nhất Hạnh Foundation
thichnhathanhfoundation.org

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