



In Memoriam: Thich Nhat Hanh

by Sallie B. King

Vietnamese Zen Master and mindfulness teacher Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022) died on January 22, 2022 at the age of 95. He was a poet, peacemaker and prolific author and one of the most beloved and globally influential religious leaders to come from the Buddhist world in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A spiritual giant of our time, his words, deeds and approach to the spiritual life spoke to people of all nationalities and religions. Perhaps more than anyone else, he had a gift for taking the most profound teachings of Buddhism and expressing them in simple, widely accessible language. With the over 100 books he wrote, translated into 40 languages and numbering tens of millions of sales worldwide, and the energetic new Buddhist monastic and lay community he founded, the Order of Interbeing (Tiep Hien Order), his influence lives on, part of his “continuation,” as he taught, after the death of his body.

Thich Nhat Hanh, or “Thay” (meaning teacher), as he was affectionately known by his students, made many profound and far-reaching contributions to Buddhism and the world. I will discuss some of them as follows: 1) overview of Thay’s life and contributions, emphasizing his formative years; 2) a Renewed Buddhism; and 3) Non-self, Interbeing and Non-death.

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Overview of Thay's life and contributions, emphasizing his formative years

Thay's life was very much shaped by the wars that were fought in Vietnam throughout his young manhood: the First Indochina War (1946-1954), against the French, which ended in the formal division of Vietnam into separate states, North Vietnam and South Vietnam; and the Vietnam War (1955-1975)—called the “American War” in Vietnam—with communist states, especially the Soviet Union and China, supporting the North, and the United States and its allies supporting the South.

Thay was born in 1926 and became a novice monk at Tu Hieu temple in Hue, Vietnam when he was 16. There he was taught both Theravada and Mahayana traditions. He pursued more advanced studies at a Buddhist Institute and, on his own initiative, earned a B.A. in French and Vietnamese literature at Saigon University as well. While studying in Saigon, he became a published poet, author, and editor, beginning to express his ideas of a renewed Buddhism that would speak to the situation of Vietnam and to Vietnamese young people. In 1957 his efforts to contribute to a renewed Buddhism took a practical turn when he and like-minded friends founded a Buddhist monastic community, Phuong Boi, an intentional community in a remote location, in order to try out a new form of Buddhist community life with a great deal of freedom and spontaneity. Thay loved his time there and wrote about it in his memoir, *Fragrant Palm Leaves: Journals 1962-1966*. (This book is one of his most personal and is a wonderful doorway into his heart.)

In 1962 and 1963 Thay lived in the United States, studying religion at Princeton and lecturing on Buddhism at Columbia University. Upon his return to Vietnam in 1963, he began a time of tremendous creativity, during which he began to see

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his ideas bearing fruit. He, together with others, founded and lectured in Van Hanh Buddhist University. This was a school for higher education in Buddhism and other subjects that fulfilled Thay's ambition to open Buddhist education to new thinking. He established a publishing house and edited the weekly journal of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, the principal Buddhist institution in Vietnam. These print media allowed him to air fresh Buddhist ideas and publish works advocating for peace. Thay was a lifelong advocate of nonviolence and fundamentally rejected the idea that any peoples should be enemies to each other. As he wrote in a poem titled, "Do Not Shoot Your Brother," "Our enemy is hatred... inhumanity... anger... ideology. Our enemy is not man. If we kill man, with whom shall we live?"¹ The Buddhist anti-war movement, in which Thay was a leader, promoted the idea of a "Third Way," siding with neither North nor South, but with life.

At this time, Thay also established the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS), a school that trained young people to go into rural areas to establish schools and clinics, to teach modern agriculture and sanitation, and to support the poor. As the war heated up, this cadre of young people continued to work with the poor, evacuating villages in the line of fire, rebuilding destroyed villages, and helping the injured and orphans, while carefully avoiding taking sides with either of the warring parties. Here in the SYSS was the concrete manifestation of Engaged Buddhism, a Buddhism engaged with social and political life. Engaged Buddhism, for Thay, was always the unity of spiritual practice and compassionate action; it was never the dropping of spiritual practice for the sake of action. In the case of the SYSS, these were young people who went out to do social work in the most dangerous

¹ James H. Forest, *The Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam: Fifteen Years for Reconciliation* (Hof van Stony, Netherlands: International Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1978), p. 12.

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of situations, never knowing when bullets would start flying or bombs dropping. Thay said, “If you don’t have a spiritual practice, you can’t survive.... Engaged Buddhism is born in such a difficult situation, in which you want to maintain your practice while responding to the suffering. You seek the way to do walking meditation right there, in the place where people are still running under the bombs. And you learn how to practice mindful breathing while helping care for a child who has been wounded by bullets or bombs.”²

In 1964 Thay also founded his new Buddhist order, the Order of Interbeing (Tiep Hien). This became the institutional home for his renewed form of Buddhism. It was and is a community for both monastics and laypeople focused on the practice of mindfulness and compassionate action in the world. Today this Order consists of eleven monasteries and practice centers and hundreds of local sangha communities around the world.

In 1966, Thay was invited to travel and speak in the West. He used the opportunity to try to get people in the West, especially the United States, to understand that the Vietnamese people did not want the war in their country and to urge them to end it. Just before he left for this tour, Thay received the lamp transmission in the Zen tradition, officially making him a Zen master.³

The message that Thay delivered to the United States during this tour was published in 1967 in his important book about

² Thich Nhat Hanh, Dharma talk in Plum Village, June 21, 2009. <https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/thich-nhat-hanh-full-biography/#engagedbuddhism>.

³ Thay Phap Dung, “A Letter to Friends About Our Lineage,” <http://orderofinterbeing.org/docs/TNH-Tradition-Lineage.pdf>.

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the war, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*. He wrote that it would be impossible for Americans to win this war:

The business of war itself has been taken over almost completely by the American troops now.... Anger and hatred rise in the hearts of the peasants as they see their villages burned, their compatriots killed, their houses destroyed [by American troops].... The spirit of patriotism among the peasants is very high. They are not informed about world history of ideological struggles; what they see is a large force of white Westerners doing their best to kill their fellow countrymen, many of whom previously fought against the French.... I know it is a hard fact for Americans to face, but it is a fact that the more Vietnamese their troops succeed in killing, and the larger the force they introduce into Vietnam, the more surely they destroy the very thing that they are trying to build.⁴

Tragically, these words fell on deaf ears. Thay was proved correct by history; the war ground on until 1975, ending with a complete loss for the United States. Millions of people died in that war.

After the war, Thay was not permitted by Vietnamese authorities to return to Vietnam. In exile, he took up residence in Plum Village in the south of France, which became the headquarters of the Order of Interbeing. (It has become the largest and busiest Buddhist monastery outside of Asia, with over 200 resident monks and nuns and thousands of lay practitioners attending retreats there annually—except during the Covid pandemic.) Thay continued his activism from this base. Hearing of the peril of the Vietnamese “boat

⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), pp. 63-68.

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people” fleeing Vietnam in un-seaworthy boats, he hired a boat to rescue those he could. He worked extensively in the healing of the psychological and spiritual wounds of the veterans of all sides. He taught would-be peacemakers that they needed to “be peace” in order to make peace. He held retreats for policemen, politicians, teachers, social workers, artists, and families, and retreats in which Palestinians and Israelis were invited to practice together. In all of these retreats, mindfulness was the skill that was offered. This was the form that his Engaged Buddhism took after the war years; it was a Buddhism for daily life, as he called it.

After 39 years of exile, Thay was able to return to Vietnam for visits beginning in 2005 and to teach publicly while there. In 2014 he suffered a severe stroke and became unable to speak. In 2018, he finally returned to live at his root temple, Tu Hieu temple in Hue, where he had been named abbot while in exile, and where he was able to live out his final years.⁵

A Renewed Buddhism

One of the greatest of Thay’s contributions was his expression of an experiential worldview that was faithful to Buddhist teachings yet radically new, a worldview that spoke to the lives of laypeople and the sensibilities of the modern world. Thay often said that Buddhism has 84,000 Dharma doors (forms in which Buddhism is taught) and that we must open even more. This he certainly did.

⁵ Thay Phap Dung, op cit. For those seeking more information on Thay’s life, there is a detailed biography on the Plum Village website, at <https://plumvillage.org/about/thich-nhat-hanh/thich-nhat-hanh-full-biography/#engagedbuddhism>.

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My family (my husband and two young daughters) and I spent the “Summer Opening” at Plum Village in the summer of 1991, a month-long retreat (Thay always called his retreats “treats”) from mid-July to mid-August. Some of what follows comes from the journal that I kept at the time.

In his Dharma talk on July 25, 1991, Thay said something that was very simple and yet the implications of what he said were so far-reaching that they are striking even today. He said there are two ways of viewing impermanence: we can view it pessimistically as what robs life of value (we die and everyone we love dies); or, on the other hand, we can see it as what makes life possible, since all things arise as the result of the causal actions and conditioning of other things. This is entirely true and unarguable on the basis of Buddhist teachings. Yet, somehow, many Buddhist teachings emphasize the pessimistic aspect of impermanence to the extent that we may lose sight of the fact that everything we love and enjoy is also the product of impermanence. I am reminded of a conversation I frequently had during a long stay in Japan. When I met Japanese people they would ask me what I was doing in Japan and I would reply that I was a scholar of Buddhism working on a project. (They invariably found this very strange.) I then might ask them if they were Buddhist. The answer was usually: ‘Oh, no! I’m not that old yet!’ As they saw it, only old people got serious about Buddhism, in preparation for death.

There is no question that Buddhism’s teachings on impermanence and death are very powerful and helpful. But if one is a layperson, and especially if one is raising children, one cannot focus all the time on the negative side of impermanence; one is, in fact, focused on the constructive side of impermanence: the growth and development of one’s children and, by extension, the condition of the world and society which is shaping them moment by moment, the world of interbeing, as Thay named it.

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Thay spoke to this in the opening words of his classic, *Being Peace*: “Life is filled with suffering, but it is also filled with many wonders, like the blue sky, the sunshine, the eyes of a baby. To suffer is not enough.”⁶ “To suffer is not enough.” What a thing to say! So simple, so true, and yet such a necessary corrective! I know of no one else who was speaking like this in 1987, implying that the purposes of Buddhism might include personal happiness and wellbeing. This attitude is commonplace now, at least in Western Buddhism; I attribute this change largely to Thay and his influence. He authored book after book talking about how to live well in this world, here and now. His titles along this line include: *The Art of Living: Peace and Freedom in the Here and Now*; *The Art of Communicating*; *How to Love*. In fact, almost all his mindfulness books are about living well in this world, for example: *You Are Here: Discovering the Magic of the Present Moment*; *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*; *Happiness: Essential Mindfulness Practices*. And there was help for dealing with the difficulties of life as well: *How to Relax*; *Taming the Tiger Within: Meditations on Transforming Difficult Emotions*; *Fear: Essential Wisdom for Getting Through the Storm*; *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames*. Some of his great themes can be seen in these titles, especially the idea of finding what one is looking for here and now, in this world, in the present moment.

One has to be able to see the value of this world to write books like these. Thay doesn't speak of this world as a trap from which we should try to escape; he makes it clear that where things go wrong is not with the world per se, it is with us, our greed, hatred and ignorance, our clinging, fear and delusion. One need not negate the world, and our human life

⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Being Peace* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1987), p.3.

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within it, in order to progress on the Buddhist path. As Humanistic Buddhists like the Venerable Yinshun, who was one of Thay's inspirations, emphasize, all Buddhas gain enlightenment as human beings. This world, in this human life, is where we practice; hence Thay's title, *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment*, for a book filled with short verses (based on verses he was given to practice during his novitiate) to bring mindfulness to all the small acts of everyday life: waking up, taking the first step of the day, using the toilet, washing your hands, getting dressed, looking at your hand, contemplating your food, washing the dishes, walking meditation, throwing out the garbage, driving the car... In Thay's hands, all these mundane things became gateways to the trans-mundane. As a layperson, with a rich life full of perhaps spouse or partner, children, job, responsibilities, friends, family, community, one need not try to take time out of life for practice—time that probably does not exist if one has young children—one can practice moment by moment, in ordinary, daily life.

But how can one find what one is looking for, the Dharma, in this world of impermanence? Thay taught on July 25, 1991 that if one seeks happiness by looking for permanence, one will suffer, as there is no permanence to be found. But if one seeks happiness *in* impermanence, one can find liberation from fear and suffering. “The refuge one seeks is in life, in the present moment, in the non-self and interbeing. One can smile peacefully at the ocean of impermanence. One can touch the Buddha here.” When we take refuge in the Dharma, he said, we should understand that, “the Dharma is not the Tripitaka [the Buddhist scriptures]. The real Dharma is Dharmakaya [the body of Dharma], living, manifest Dharma,” i.e., Reality as it manifests moment by moment here and now. This Dharmakaya manifests, we can touch it, when we calm our minds and are able to see clearly: “Calm is necessary for deep looking. You see interbeing, non-self and non-death. Then non-fear, joy and the Dharma will reveal

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itself to you in a very complete manner. Then you are the Dharma itself. This is not a matter of faith, but of practice, of taking refuge. We take refuge in each moment.”

This does not mean that Thay sugar-coated things. Of course, his life itself is the strongest proof of this! But also he frequently challenged his students to face suffering and respond skillfully. As a teacher, when people asked him how to engage in society, how to help, his answer was: ‘Don’t turn away from suffering. Stay with it. Something will occur to you to do. It is very important that you do that thing.’ Thay also had many books about how to care for the world, and society, such as: *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change*; *Zen and the Art of Saving the Planet*; *Love Letter to the Earth*; *Peace Begins Here: Palestinians and Israelis Listening to Each Other*; *Together We Are One: Honoring our Diversity, Celebrating our Connection*.

As one of the most important popularizers of mindfulness practice in daily life, it is important to note that Thay was not at all sympathetic to what some critically call “McMindfulness,” the co-opting of mindfulness for the purposes of the ego or corporations. Thay always emphasized that mindfulness is a way of life rather than a tool or a means to an end. For Thay, mindfulness has interbeing with the entire practice. A case in point is the “Five Mindfulness Trainings,” Thay’s socially engaged form of the traditional five lay precepts, the moral foundation of the Buddhist layperson’s path (which in their traditional form are commitments not to kill, steal, engage in sexual misconduct, lie, or ingest intoxicants). Thay strongly encouraged everyone to embrace and practice his Five Mindfulness Trainings. For Thay these practices are based in mindfulness. He wrote in his introduction to the practices:

The Five Mindfulness Trainings are based on the precepts developed during the time of the Buddha to

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be the foundation of practice for the entire lay practice community. I have translated these precepts for modern times, because mindfulness is at the foundation of each one of them. With mindfulness, we are aware of what is going on in our bodies, our feelings, our minds and the world, and we avoid doing harm to ourselves and others. Mindfulness protects us, our families and our society. When we are mindful, we can see that by refraining from doing one thing, we can prevent another thing from happening. We arrive at our own unique insight. It is not something imposed on us by an outside authority.⁷

This clearly is the opposite of McMindfulness. Here one must take upon oneself the responsibility to look mindfully at all things, and on the basis of one's understanding and compassion, take action, accepting that one may need to make changes in oneself or in one's society on the basis of what one mindfully sees. Thus, in his hands, the traditional first precept, not to kill, becomes:

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating the insight of interbeing and compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, or in my way of life. Seeing that harmful actions arise from anger, fear, greed, and intolerance, which in turn come from dualistic and discriminative thinking, I will cultivate openness, non-discrimination, and non-attachment to views in

⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Five Mindfulness Trainings," <https://plumvillage.org/mindfulness-practice/the-5-mindfulness-trainings/>.

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order to transform violence, fanaticism, and
dogmatism in myself and in the world.⁸

The other precepts are all similarly grounded in mindfulness, and expanded. Thay's mindfulness cannot be separated from his Engaged Buddhism.

Non-self, Interbeing, and Non-death

When Thay's body, in its casket, was being driven in the funeral cortege to the cremation grounds, on the back of the flatbed truck carrying his casket there was a large poster with one of his famous sayings written in his calligraphy declaring, "a cloud never dies." As he had explained many times, a cloud can become rain or snow or ice, but it cannot become nothing. It is the same with us, he taught:

Even when the cloud is not there, it continues as snow or rain. It is impossible for a cloud to die. It can become rain or ice, but it cannot become nothing. The cloud does not need to have a soul in order to continue. There's no beginning and no end. I will never die. There will be a dissolution of this body, but that does not mean my death.⁹

There is no soul, no fixed self, in humans since we are part of interbeing. We are the continuations of our ancestors. Those with whom we interact, our children or students, our friends

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh, "I Am Not in Here," *At Home in the World: Stories & Essential Teachings from a Monk's Life* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 2015, 2019). <https://plumvillage.org/book-excerpts/>

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and those who read our words are our continuation. Death is a misconception, as is birth.

Those of us who have been strongly affected by Thay's teachings can perhaps see our non-self and interbeing in this teaching. Can we see how we "inter-are" with Thay, how much his teachings have shaped the way we see things, our values and the way we live in the world? Can we see how we each would be a different "me" if we had never encountered those teachings? This is non-self and interbeing. Thay does live on in us. We are his continuation.

In the last years of his life, he "strongly commanded" his students not to place his ashes in a stupa. He wrote:

I have a disciple in Vietnam who wants to build a stupa for my ashes when I die. He and others want to put a plaque with the words, "Here lies my beloved teacher." I told them not to waste the temple land.

"Do not put me in a small pot and put me in there" I said. "I don't want to continue like that. It would be better to scatter the ashes outside to help the trees to grow."

I suggested that, if they still insist on building a stupa, they have [a] plaque say, "I am not in here." But in case people don't get it, they could add a second plaque, "I am not out there either." If still people don't understand, then you can write on the third and last plaque, "I may be found in your way of breathing and walking."¹⁰

In accordance with his wishes, Thay's ashes are to be scattered around the world on the grounds of monasteries and

¹⁰ Ibid.

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practice centers belonging to the Order of Interbeing, his continuation.