

# Peace in Every Step

## Thich Nhat Hanh's Life of Courage and Compassion

From the front lines of activism in war-torn Vietnam to worldwide prominence as a Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh has dedicated his life to peace and the dharma.

ANDREA MILLER tells his extraordinary story.

IN SEVEN BOATS filled to the brim with food, Thich Nhat Hanh and a small team of volunteers rowed up the Thu Bon River, going high into the mountains, where soldiers were shooting at each other and the air reeked of dead bodies. The team was without mosquito netting or potable water, and, despite the icy winds, they slept and took their meals of plain rice in their boats. Under these harsh conditions, Nhat Hanh, who had previously contracted malaria and dysentery, suffered a recurrence of both diseases.

It was 1964 in South Vietnam. After days of heavy rain in the region, gorges had overflowed so quickly that it was impossible to escape the floods, leaving more than 4,000 people dead and thousands of homes washed away. The whole country mobilized to provide relief but the victims in the conflict areas were suffering the most and no one—except Nhat Hanh and his team—were willing to risk getting caught in the crossfire of the war to go to their aid.



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*Above: Thich Nhat Hanh as a young monk. Right: returning in 2008 to Tu Hieu Temple near Huế, the monastery he entered at the age of sixteen.*



PHOTO BY PAUL DAVIS



For five days the team visited devastated villages to distribute food and when they came across wounded soldiers, they helped them no matter which side they were on. In the face of this suffering, of all his country's long suffering, Thich Nhat Hanh cut his finger and let the blood fall into the river. "This," he said, "is to pray for all who have perished in the war and in the flood."

Engaged Buddhism: the practice of applying the insights gained from meditation and dharma teachings to alleviating suffering of a social, environmental, or political nature. Thich Nhat Hanh is widely recognized as the original proponent of this form of practice, but, as the monk himself said in an interview with the *Shambhala Sun*, all Buddhism is engaged: "When bombs begin to fall on people, you cannot stay in the meditation hall all of the time. Meditation is about the awareness of what is going on—not only in your body and in your feelings, but all around you.

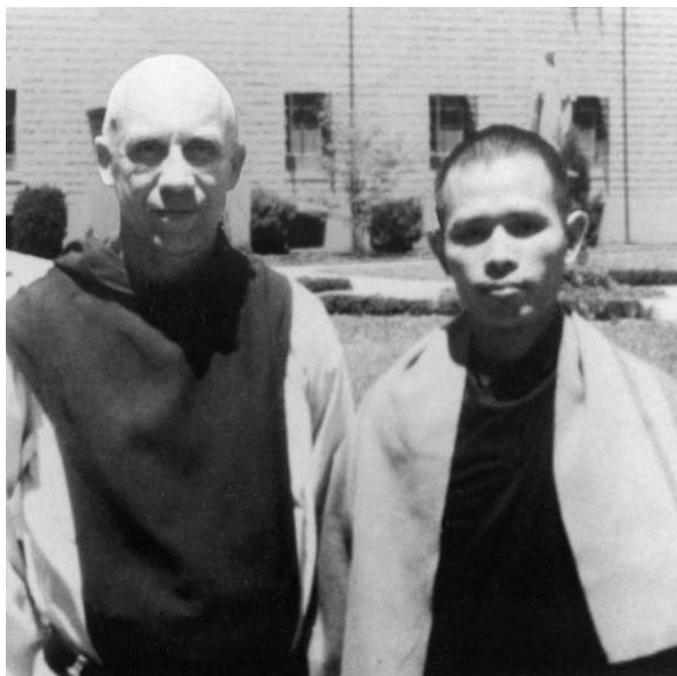
"When I was a novice in Vietnam," he continued, "we young monks witnessed the suffering caused by the war. So we were very eager to practice Buddhism in such a way that we could bring it into society. That was not easy because the tradition does not directly offer Engaged Buddhism. We had to do it by ourselves."

Engaged Buddhism, born amidst the wars in Vietnam, has struck a deep chord in the West, and today Thich Nhat Hanh, or Thay as he is affectionately called by his students, is one of the world's most influential Buddhist teachers. He is also a prolific writer, and his work has enormous breadth. He has written memoirs and journals, poetry, children's books, and historical fiction. But he's best known for his teachings. In many of his most popular books, including *Peace is Every Step and True Love*, he unpacks fundamental Buddhist principles and how they are applied to our lives. Other volumes are more scholarly in nature, such as *The Diamond That Cuts Through Illusion*, which is a commentary on the *Diamond Sutra*, or *Transformation at the Base*, which draws from major streams of Buddhist thought to offer a modern presentation of *abhidharma*, the traditional Buddhist teachings on psychology.

Alan Senauke, the former executive director of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, talks to me about Nhat Hanh's teachings: "The scholarship is very well grounded without being obscure. He makes teachings that are hard to grasp accessible and he makes them come alive. You can really see how to use them."

Jack Kornfield, the author of *The Wise Heart*, adds, "Thich Nhat Hanh has the ability to express some of the most profound teachings of interdependence and emptiness I've ever heard. With the eloquence of a poet, he holds up a sheet of paper and teaches us that the rain cloud and the tree and the logger who cut the tree down are all there in the paper. He's been one of the most significant carriers of the lamp of the dharma to the West that we have had."

THICH NHAT HANH was born Nguyen Xuan Bao in central Vietnam in 1926. The most wonderful memory of his childhood, he told Oprah Winfrey in an interview, was seeing a picture of



Above: Thich Nhat Hanh with Thomas Merton. Right: with Sister Chan Khong.

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Thich Nhat Hanh cut his finger and let the blood fall into the river. "This," he said, "is to pray for all who have perished."

the Buddha in a magazine when he was around seven or eight. The Buddha was sitting on the grass, smiling, and looking more peaceful than anyone the little boy knew. Nhat Hanh decided he wanted to be like the Buddha, to be a monk. His parents were reluctant to allow this, thinking it would be a difficult life; however, when he was sixteen years old they permitted him to enter a Zen temple in the *Lam Te* (Rinzai) sect, located near Hué.

There, he began studying under the tutelage of his primary teacher, Master Thanh Quy Chan That, and he was taught that meditation was the door to understanding. Yet the monastics did not just practice meditation all day. At the temple, everyone from the highest monk to the newest member of the community equally followed the principle of "no work, no food." So Nhat Hanh shoveled manure, polished rice, and lugged buckets of water until his shoulders were red and swollen.

After several years, Thich Nhat Hanh officially took the vows of a monk and was sent to the Institute of Buddhist Studies of Bao Quoc. Yet he was dissatisfied with the education provided there, as it lacked emphasis on literature, philosophy, and foreign languages. Authorities at the institute were not receptive to his suggestions to reform the curriculum and as a result he and a



*Martin Luther King Jr. and Thich Nhat Hanh were among the distinguished signatories of the statement of the International Committee of Conscience in Vietnam. King nominated Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize.*



*The first six members of the Order of Interbeing. Sister Chan Khong is on the far left. Third from the left is Nhat Chi Mai, who one year later immolated herself to protest the Vietnam War.*

group of other students left, taking up residence at a temple in Saigon, where they studied Western philosophy and science with the belief that these subjects would enable them to revive Vietnamese Buddhism. In the 1930s, a youth-oriented Buddhist reform movement had begun in Vietnam, and Nhat Hanh's move away from Bao Quoc made it clear that he was aligning himself with that movement.

To contribute to the reform, Nhat Hanh taught and wrote about Buddhism and, by his mid-twenties, he had several books under his belt and a reputation for having something refreshing and relevant to say. According to his writings at the time, he believed that in order to save Buddhism from growing stale, it had to evolve with the rest of the world. The first noble truth deals with suffering—that is fixed—but in every age the flavor of suffering changes. Nhat Hanh taught that in order for practitioners to alleviate suffering, they needed to have a direct experience of the suffering of their era. His thinking was colored by the grave situation in Vietnam.

During the Second World War, Japan had invaded the country and ousted the French colonists. When the Japanese surrendered in 1945, there was a power vacuum in Vietnam. This enabled the Viet Minh Front—a communist-led independence movement

popular with the people—to launch a revolution. The Allies, however, had agreed that France could reestablish their rule and in 1947 full-scale war erupted. In 1954 the French withdrew after their defeat at Bien Dien Phu, and at an international conference in Geneva, Vietnam was divided into two states—pro-Western in the south, communist in the north—that would reunify after internationally supervised free elections. But the Americans feared that elections would bring the communists to power throughout the country, and they made sure the elections never took place. Even then, it quickly became clear that only American power—



Thich Nhat Hanh leads a peace march in Los Angeles in 2006. He is considered the founder of Engaged Buddhism.

diplomatic, economic, and eventually military—would ensure the survival of the South Vietnamese government.

Like the Americans, the Buddhists of Vietnam feared a communist takeover. To encourage Buddhists to create a united front in support of an independent, democratic South Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh became the editor of a journal encouraging both nationalism and humanism. During this period he also wrote a series of articles on the dharma for a daily newspaper, convened meetings attended by hundreds of people who shared his vision for Vietnam, and started a magazine for young monastics striving to modernize Buddhism.

These efforts got him noticed by the conservative Buddhist establishment and they sought to stymie his work. Most notably, the journal he edited, which was published by the All-Vietnam Buddhist Association, was discontinued. This led Nhat Hanh to change tracks and to help found *Phuong Boi*, a small experimental community located in a forest near Saigon. In his book, *Fragrant Palm Leaves*, he lyrically describes life there. Mornings in the forest were as “pristine as a blank sheet of paper, pure white except for a pink blush along the edges.” And nights had a “curtain of darkness” that was “thick and secretive.”

While living at *Phuong Boi*, Nhat Hanh continued to write about Engaged Buddhism and he traveled to various temples to give talks. During one of these trips, he met Cao Ngoc Phuong,

a biology student to whom he would eventually give the dharma name Sister Chan Khong. She became one of his “thirteen cedars,” a group of passionate young activists who studied with him and supported him in every way. But Nhat Hanh continued to meet with resistance from old-school Buddhists who felt threatened by the large number of students he attracted, and these opponents found ways to cancel the Buddhist courses he taught. The government too took issue with his activities, as well as the activities of others associated with *Phuong Boi*. One member of the community was arrested, Nhat Hanh himself had to flee to Saigon, and eventually all those remaining at *Phuong Boi* were forced to move to a hamlet set up by government troops.

Spurred by this turn of events, Nhat Hanh accepted a fellowship to study comparative religion in the U.S., at Princeton University. His journal from 1962 gives descriptions of Princeton that are as lyrical as his descriptions of *Phuong Boi*: “It is so cool and crisp this time of year. At the slightest breeze, leaves fall from the trees and brush against your shoulders. Some are golden, some as red as lipstick.” Yet Nhat Hanh was homesick, keenly feeling the demise of his experimental community. “Princeton is beautiful,” he wrote, “but it doesn’t have the beauty of *Phuong Boi*. Fog never encircles the mountains, making you feel as though you are standing at the edge of the sea... Princeton is not untamed, like *Phuong Boi*.”

He also wrote, however, “We can never really lose Phuong Boi. It is a sacred reality in our hearts.” Finding his true home inside himself is an ability that Nhat Hanh would continue to develop over the years and now he’s well known for the meditation, “I have arrived. I am home.” He wrote in his book by that name, “I have arrived in the Pure Land, a real home where I can touch the paradise of my childhood and all the wonders of life. I am no longer concerned with being and nonbeing, coming and going, being born or dying. In my true home I have no fear, no anxiety. I have peace and liberation. My true home is in the here and the now.”

IN 1962 THICH NHAT HANH began a period of introspection, after a deep realization of emptiness sparked by an unlikely source: an old book at the Columbia University library.

After completing his studies at Princeton, he had been appointed lecturer in Buddhism at Columbia and he moved to New York, where he shared an apartment with an American graduate student who learned some Vietnamese from him and joined him in eating vegetarian fare.

One night in the fall of that year, while he was at the library, he pulled a book off one of the shelves. It had been published in 1892 and donated to the Columbia library that same year, but according to the slip of paper stuck to the back cover, it had only been borrowed twice—once in 1915 and the other time in 1932. Nhat Hanh, deciding to be the third borrower, was overcome by the wish to meet the other two. They had vanished, he realized, and soon he would as well. He wondered what he was beneath his emotions, if he was anything at all. And he felt a glimmer of insight. Later in his journal he explained, “If you beat me, stone me, or even shoot me, everything that is considered to be ‘me’ will disintegrate. Then, what is actually there will reveal itself—faint as smoke, elusive as emptiness, and yet neither smoke nor emptiness; neither ugly, nor not ugly; beautiful, yet not beauti-

ful... Like the grasshopper, I had no thoughts of the divine.” According to Thich Nhat Hanh, he became a monk in Vietnam and taught several generations of Buddhist students there, but it was in the West that he realized the path.

Meanwhile, in his home country the situation grew increasingly dire. In April, 1963, Ngo Dinh Diem, the Roman Catholic president of South Vietnam, outlawed the display of Buddhist flags on the traditional anniversary of Buddha’s birth. Demonstrations ensued and a number of people were killed; others were arrested and tortured. In June, a Buddhist monk burned himself to death in public as a form of protest. It was the first case of self-immolation in Vietnam, but others followed.

In the States, Nhat Hanh was worried—plagued with dreams of his noblest efforts causing harm and of corpses snapping in two, as if they were made of porcelain. From June to October 1963, he did frequent interviews with newspapers and television stations to garner support for the peace movement, and he translated into English the reports of human rights violations he had received from Vietnam, putting together a document he presented to the United Nations. He also undertook a publicized five-day fast.

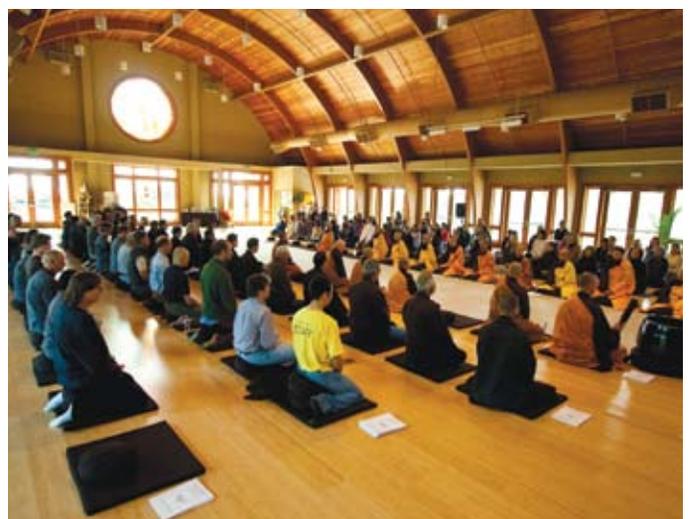
Then in November 1963, the Diem regime fell and Diem himself was assassinated during the coup. Nhat Hanh received a cable from a monk who had been one of the conservative Buddhists who’d opposed his efforts to modernize Vietnamese Buddhism. But now this monk urged Nhat Hanh to return home and help reorganize the religion. Nhat Hanh was thoughtful and moved. How wonderful impermanence is, he told his student Cao Ngoc Phuong, the later Sister Chan Khong.

On December 16, 1963, Thich Nhat Hanh flew to Vietnam and a few weeks later he submitted a three-point proposal to the executive council of the Unified Buddhist Church (UBC) in Vietnam. He asked them to call for a cessation of hostilities

PHOTOS BY DAVID NELSON



Picking plums with students at Plum Village meditation center in southern France.

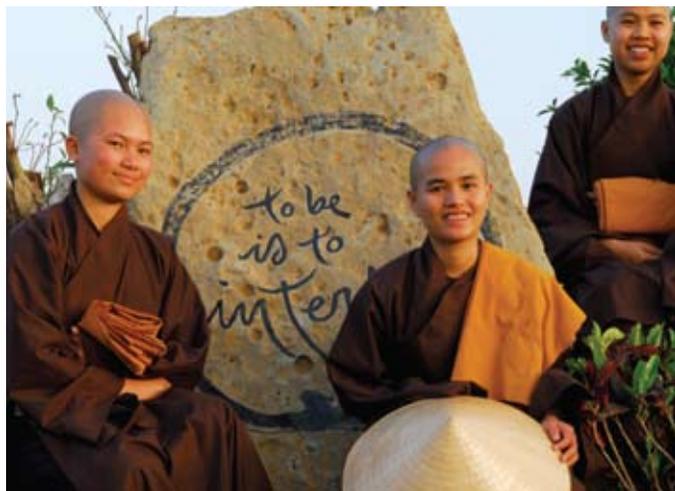


The meditation hall at Deer Park monastery in Escondido, California.

in Vietnam; to establish a Buddhist institute that would teach the country's leaders to act with tolerance; and to create a center for training social workers to help bring about nonviolent social change. But the council offered support only for the institute, which opened in February 1964 under the name The Institute for Higher Buddhist Studies, and which later became Van Hanh University. The remaining two points the council deemed the unrealistic dreams of a poet.

Nhat Hanh, however, was undaunted and, without the sanction of the UBC, he went about establishing the first of several experimental villages to serve as models for social change. The villagers were encouraged to develop their own local economy and provide their own health care and education, and young people were trained to help them become self-reliant by teaching them modern farming methods and ways to improve public sanitation. When the UBC saw Nhat Hanh's successes, they agreed to endorse his idea to train young people to serve the poor, though they offered no financial assistance.

In September of 1965 Nhat Hanh announced that the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS) would be founded as a program of Van Hanh University. The response was overwhelming; more than a thousand young idealists applied for the three hundred places in the program. But in 1966 the Unified Buddhist Church revoked its endorsement because they feared Nhat Hanh was in league with the Communists. SYSS, however, was able to



*Newly ordained nuns at Bat Nha Monastery before it was violently closed down by the Vietnamese government. The stone behind them reads: "To be is to interbe."*

stand on its own two feet by that time and—among other good works—the program participants risked their lives helping peasants to rebuild villages that were being bombed again and again, all throughout the Vietnam War.

In February, 1966, Thich Nhat Hanh ordained six SYSS leaders as members of a new religious order, which he called the Order of Interbeing. This order, which still thrives today, is a community of Buddhist practitioners—men, women, clergy,

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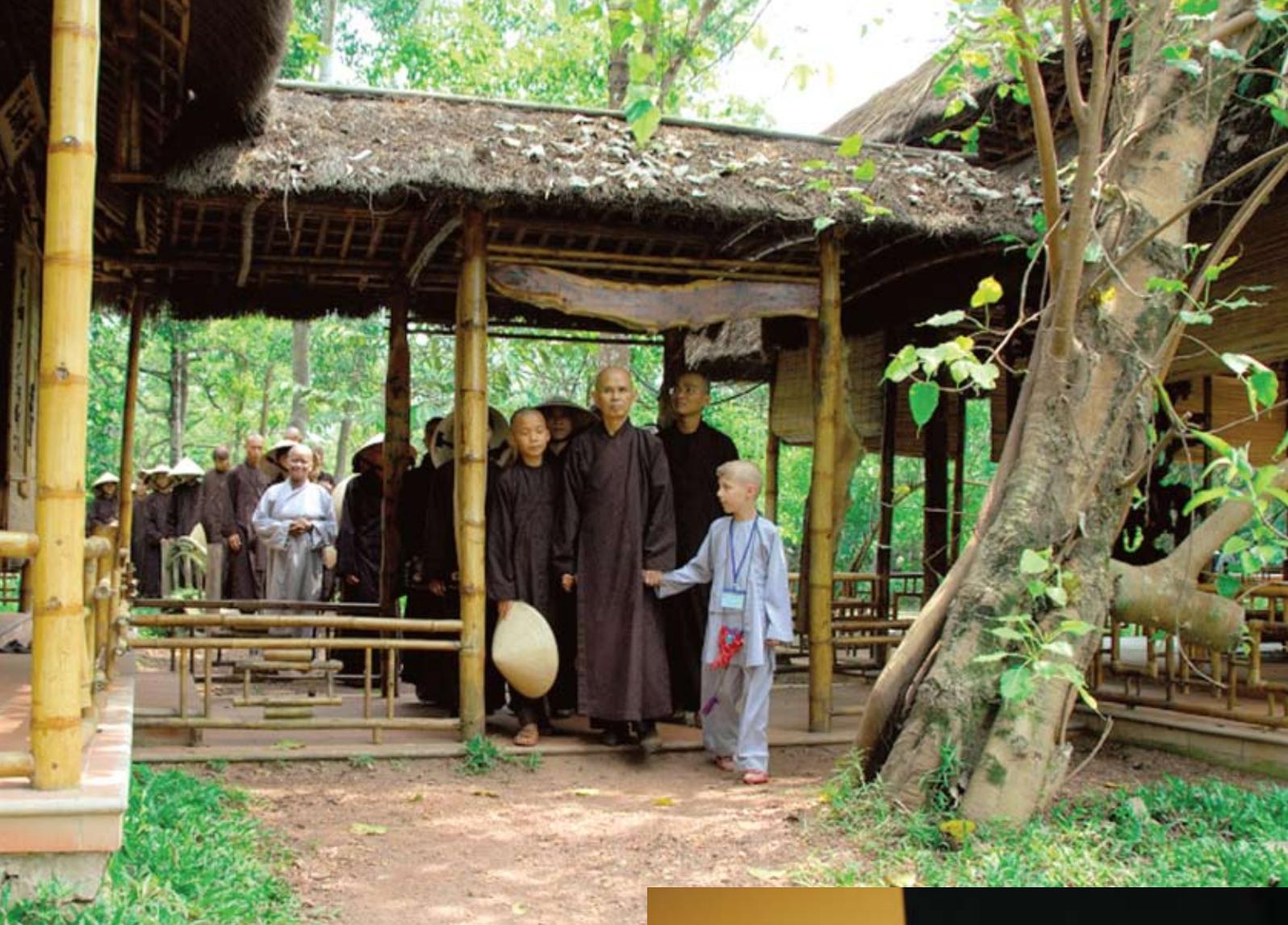
and lay—who are committed to doing service, practicing at least sixty days of mindfulness per year, and adhering to the fourteen mindfulness trainings. These mindfulness trainings, composed by Thich Nhat Hanh, were intended to be the modern version of the hundreds of traditional precepts that monastics have followed for millennium. Yet they were not meant to buck Buddhist mores, but to get to the heart of the dharma.

The first three trainings are aimed at overcoming ideological divisiveness, fanaticism, and political or religious self-righteousness. The fourth training urges practitioners to not only contemplate suffering but to actively diminish it. The fifth involves consumption—living simply and avoiding intoxicants—and the sixth concerns finding an antidote to our individual anger, since it has far-reaching social consequences. The seventh training—at the core of all of them—teaches the importance of mindfulness of the present moment, and the eighth and ninth trainings teach right speech. Then the last five trainings involve the body in the broadest sense, urging us, for instance, not to commit violent acts or engage in harmful sexual behavior.

The ordination of the first six members of the Order of Interbeing was a celebration. Each ordinee was given a lamp with a handmade shade on which Thich Nhat Hanh had calligraphed Chinese characters meaning "Lamp of the Full Moon" and "Lamp of Wisdom," etc. Of these six ordinees, three were men and three were women, including Cao Ngoc Phuong. The women chose to be celibate like monastics, though they did not shave their heads. The three men, on the other hand, chose to marry and practice as lay Buddhists. Due to the disruptive nature of the war, no one else was permitted to join the order's core community until 1981, but today there are more than a thousand core members.

IN MAY, 1966, THICH NHAT HANH left Vietnam for what he thought would be a few short weeks. It turned into forty years of exile. His purpose was to give a seminar on Vietnamese Buddhism at Cornell University and to go on a speaking tour promoting peace and expressing the views of the Vietnamese who were neither communist nor anti-communist. During this trip, Nhat Hanh met with various notable figures, including Thomas Merton, Senator William Fulbright, and Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense, as well as with Martin Luther King Jr., who later nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize.

But on June 1, the day he presented a peace proposal at a press conference in Washington, the South Vietnamese government



*Above: Walking meditation at Thich Nhat Hanh's root temple in Huế. He returned to his native country for the 2008 United Nations Vesak conference. Right: Nhat Hanh invites students to join him in song before walking meditation at Bat Nha Monastery.*

declared him a traitor. His proposal had urged Americans to stop bombing and to offer reconstruction aid free of political or ideological strings. It also made other suggestions, which made it clear that Nhat Hanh favored neither side in the war. This made him an enemy of both sides.

He moved to France, to a poor neighborhood in Paris, where he became the chair of the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation. He and his small staff worked to inform the public about the situation in Vietnam and to find sponsors for orphaned Vietnamese children. It was important work but it was a challenging time for him personally. He has said that he felt like a cell precariously separated from its body or a bee separated from its hive. He looked forward to a time when he could return to Vietnam. But when the communist government of the North seized control of the South in 1975, he was refused permission to enter Vietnam.

In 1976, Nhat Hanh attended the World Conference on Religion and Peace in Singapore and, while there, a group of Vietnamese women told him that thousands of Vietnamese refugees



were in camps in various Southeast Asian countries, with no hope of being accepted into any other country because of immigration quotas. These refugees were dubbed boat people because many of them had escaped in rickety boats. "They were packed into the boats like sardines," says Sister Dang Nghiem, a nun in the Order of Interbeing who is originally from Vietnam.

The boat people left their country because they were afraid of life under the Communists, but escape was perilous. If the government

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caught them fleeing, which often happened, they were either imprisoned or shot down. Pirates were another danger, and often refugees would no sooner get robbed and raped by one band of pirates, then they'd be attacked by another. The boat people, says Sister Dang, "had more chances to die than to make it to the other shore."

The Vietnamese women that Nhat Hanh met in Singapore told him that many governments, including Singapore's, had a policy to push refugee boats back to sea—back to danger. The Vietnamese women knew that nine people were about to be expelled and they invited Nhat Hanh to be a witness. He was moved by what he saw and began to work on behalf of the boat people. He and his allies raised money to rent two vessels—a cargo ship, the *Roland*, and an oil tanker, the *Leapdal*—and within a few weeks on the high seas they'd rescued more than eight hundred refugees. The plan was to take the refugees to Guam and Australia and if they were not issued visas on the spot, then Nhat Hanh and his friends would invite journalists to cover the situation. When word of the rescue mission leaked out, however, refugees in Thailand and Malaysia began leaving camps in hopes of meeting up with the *Roland* or the *Leapdal*. This angered the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees and, less than three months after the project began, Nhat Hanh was forced to stop his work on behalf of the boat people.

Nonetheless, he continued to be of spiritual and emotional help, says Sister Dang. *Please Call Me by My True Names*, the most celebrated of all of Thich Nhat Hanh's poems, was written in 1978, while he was helping the boat people. In these verses, he writes that he is the twelve-year-old refugee who throws herself into the sea after being raped by a pirate, and he's also the pirate, not yet capable of love. He's the member of the politburo with power in his hands, and he's also the prisoner in the forced-labor camp. He concludes:

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

"That's a lot of compassion," says Sister Dang, "and that's healing for many former boat people who read Nhat Hanh's poem. It will help them to embrace their own pain and make a connection with another human being."

THICH NHAT HANH was also developing a growing following as a dharma teacher. In July of 1971, he and his small community of mostly Vietnamese students had begun to look for an inexpensive property in the countryside, and they finally settled on a tiny, ramshackle house southeast of Paris. Nhat Hanh and his inner circle continued to live and work in the capital, but on the weekends they would go to that home, which came to be known as Sweet Potatoes. Room by room they worked on making it hab-

itable, and eventually making it pleasant. By 1975, Sweet Potatoes was serving as a year-round residence for eleven people and, with its beautiful, natural setting, it was helping them heal from the horrors of war.

By 1982, Sweet Potatoes was too small to accommodate all the people who wanted to go there for retreats, so the community bought two parcels of land in the Dordogne region, where some of the world's most delicious plums are grown for drying. One land parcel came to be known as the Upper Hamlet and the other as the Lower Hamlet, and collectively they came to be known as Plum Village.

The community had a lot of work to do to develop Plum Village into what it is today. One of the first things they did was plant a plum orchard in the Lower Hamlet, so that they could eventually sell the fruit to raise money for poor children in developing countries. By 1990, the trees were already beginning to bear fruit, and by 1992 the harvest was six tons.

Alongside the trees, the community grew. In 1983, they held their first summer opening with 117 practitioners, and by the year 2000 that number had increased to 1,800. Plum Village today has five separate hamlets, yet it remains a rustic center. In his book *I Have Arrived, I am Home: Celebrating Twenty Years of Plum Village Life*, Nhat Hanh explains, "I have never wanted to build a luxurious, beautiful monastery here. When I am able to sell my books, the money has been used to bring relief to the hungry and to victims of the floods in Vietnam. There are still many people in our sangha who sleep in sleeping bags. Sister Chan Khong still sleeps in a sleeping bag. In Plum Village, I used to sleep on a very thin mattress on a plank of wood on top of four bricks. That did not prevent me from being happy."

In 2000, Thich Nhat Hanh's sangha established its first monastery in the United States: Deer Park. The complex in Escondido, California had a history: it had been a detox center, a nudist resort, housing for prisoners, and a marksmanship training center for police officers. At the time that the sangha bought the property, the buildings—many of them barracks—were dilapidated and full of bullets and trash, but it was surrounded by a wooded glen of lilacs and sagebrush. In her book *Learning True Love*, Sister Chan Khong says, "I knew that we could take these ugly barracks and make them beautiful as we had done at Plum Village." And, of course, she was right.

Thich Nhat Hanh now counts tens of thousands of students around the world, including hundreds of groups practicing in his tradition in the United States alone. In 2007, he founded a third practice center, Blue Cliff Monastery, located in the Hudson Valley of New York, and every two years he holds East and West Coast sangha retreats, drawing upwards of a thousand participants each. Thich Nhat Hanh has written over forty-five books in English, ranging from bestsellers to scholarly works. He has taught mindfulness to police officers, prisoners, and politicians. He has led peace marches, brought Israelis and Palestinians together to meditate, and inspired a whole movement of Engaged Buddhists.

ON JANUARY 11, 2005, Thich Nhat Hanh finally had the chance

to again step on Vietnamese soil. Accompanied by members of his sangha, he traveled throughout the country, making connections with the people of Vietnam. He paid special attention to the young.

Sister Pine, a nun who visited Vietnam with Nhat Hanh, says, “More than fifty percent of the population was born after he was gone, so he was connecting with a whole new generation or two of Vietnamese people. That’s important because in Vietnam young people see Buddhism as their grandmother’s thing, and they just want to go to the big city and live a Western, urban lifestyle. They is one of the few teachers who are successful in attracting young people, even to the monastic life.” But, she continues, it frightened the communist government that so many people, particularly young, educated people, were drawn to his teachings.

In 2007, Thich Nhat Hanh made a second visit to his homeland, and this time one of his primary focuses was to help heal the wounds of Vietnam’s painful history. He had many ways of going about this, explains Sister Pine: “They made proposals to the Vietnamese government to allow overseas Vietnamese to come back without having to get special visas as if they were foreigners, and to erect memorials to people who died on the boats. But, really, the key was three requiem ceremonies—one in the north, one in the central region, and one in the south.” The idea was that the ceremonies would be dedicated to all people who died in the war, regardless of what side they were on.

Quite festive rites for the dead are traditional in Vietnam. But the rites spearheaded by Thich Nhat Hanh were the first to be allowed that were for all victims of the war. According to him, this collective practice of healing was critical. “If we don’t transform the suffering and wounds now, they will be transmitted to the next generation,” he said. “They will suffer and they will not understand why. It’s better to do something right away to transform the suffering.”

Thich Nhat Hanh made one more visit to Vietnam, in 2008. Since then, however, it has been made clear that he’s no longer welcome. When Nhat Hanh first returned, the abbot of a temple called Bat Nha repeatedly offered the abbotship to him. Nhat Hanh asked the abbot to remain in his position, but he did agree to help convert the temple into a monastery, and he sought governmental permission to do so. The government granted it, and Nhat Hanh’s sangha developed the property.

Originally it had a Buddha hall that could fit just fifty people. But, says Sister Dang, who spent many months at Bat Nha, “From 2005 to 2008 we built five buildings, including a meditation hall that could fit three thousand people. Then we bought land surrounding the area and tripled the size of the monastery. The government couldn’t have envisioned how quickly Bat Nha would develop, and they could not have predicted the response from the people. Thousands and thousands of people came to our center to practice on the day of mindfulness, which took place on Sundays.” And in less than four years Thich Nhat Hanh ordained more than five hundred young monks and nuns at the monastery.

By mid-2008, his success in attracting practitioners had become too threatening to the communist government, and they began breaking apart the community. First, they made the

monks and nuns from Plum Village leave Bat Nha. Then, they demanded the Vietnamese practitioners also take their leave.

In June 2009, an arm of the government hired a mob to throw feces at the monks and at the buildings, hanging up banners that said, “Plum Village go home. Wherever you go, you bring suffering.” In September, the situation came to a head. Approximately one hundred policemen showed up and evicted the monastics. Two senior monks were arrested and the rest of the community was forced out into the rain for ten hours without food and subjected to sexual harassment and physical abuse. But not one monk or nun reacted with violence. Chanting, they kept calm.

Many of the monastics sought refuge at a nearby temple but officials caught up with them, and the abbot there was pressured to make them leave. According to Sister Dang, “Whether they go home or they go into hiding in small groups or they go to temples, they have all been pursued. They continue to be persecuted by the government.” Currently, Nhat Hanh’s communities in France and America are trying to obtain visas for the Vietnamese monastics, so that they can come to practice centers in the West, but it is slow process and success is uncertain.

After the eviction, Thich Nhat Hanh did a lot of walking meditation, Sister Dang tells me. “Sometimes when I went to his hut and it was very windy outside and the trees were swaying, They would say, ‘The Earth and the sky are feeling the pain of our brothers and sisters over there.’

“We are idealistic and optimistic people,” Sister Dang continues. “We may or may not ever have a center exactly like Bat Nha again, but it will take different forms.” She laughs, “We will make four hundred Bat Nhas.”

IN THE SUMMER OF 2009, during a retreat outside of Boston, Thich Nhat Hanh had a flare-up of a chronic lung infection. Initially, it was thought that he would be able to continue on to his next scheduled retreat in Colorado, but doctors recommended he be hospitalized and receive a full course of antibiotics. With this medical attention, he recovered, and was almost immediately back to his regular teaching schedule. Now “he’s going all pistons firing,” says Sister Pine. At age eighty-three, “He leaves the rest of us in the dust—people half his age or a quarter.”

These days, he has been doing a lot of writing, particularly in response to the situation at Bat Nha. “We see that we are the continuation of our ancestors, and that we are a flowing stream, not a pond or a lake stagnant in one place,” he wrote in a recent letter, which he addressed to “my Bat Nha children and others near and far.” “We can also see the presence of our younger brothers and sisters in us as well as the presence of their children... We are transmitting ourselves to our younger brothers, sisters, and to the young people whom we are teaching and caring for, whether they are monastic or lay. We see them in us and us in them. We are having the opportunity to transmit what is most beautiful and healthy about ourselves to them and that is a great joy and satisfaction... We, our ancestors, and our children are unifying into one flowing stream. There is no separation, no regret.” ♦