

The World Needs This Medicine Thich Nhat Hanh's Life and Teachings

As our Homage to Thay we quote Lindsay Kyte who wrote, in the October 11, 2018 edition of the Lion's Roar magazine, "Thich Nhat Hanh is one of the most important spiritual leaders of our time. His teachings are clear, profound and original. He addresses the personal and global challenges we all face. He has brought dharma to millions and helped define Buddhism for the modern world... (but) perhaps his greatest teaching is his courageous life."

BK: Take the Arrows Out

At a Q&A session at a retreat in 2005, Thay was asked,

You will be 80 this year. Do you plan to retire as a spiritual teacher at any point?

This is from the answer Thay gave:

"In Buddhism we see that teaching is done not only by talking, but also by living your own life. You don't need to talk in order to teach. You need to live your life mindfully and deeply. Your *life* is the teaching..."

So we'll explore some stories about Thay's life to see what his life teaches us about our journey, about moving our medicine out into this mad world.

The word bodhisattva comes to mind when I think of our teacher. Bodhisattva comes from the Sanskrit word bodhi, which means "awakening" and sattva, which means "sentient being." Sattva *infers* "intention," "heroism" and "courage," so we might say that a bodhisattva is a human being who is brave enough to wake up and heroic enough to help others wake up. Bodhisattvas are spiritual guides—some mythical and

some actual human beings— who carry out the work of the buddhas, moving out into the world *as they find it*— in all its stickiness and stuckness— with kindness, compassion and love. Bodhisattvas dedicate their lives to liberating everyone, helping us all to become bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas are Buddhas with their aprons on and their sleeves rolled up.

As we explore some of the stories of Thay's life, I invite you to look for these archetypal bodhisattva qualities.

What inspires, encourages, motivates, and supports Thay? What brings him joy? What frustrates him? What causes his deep suffering? How does Thay respond to his joys and sufferings?

On October 11, 1926 a baby boy, Nguyen ("New-in") Xuan ("She-in") Bao was born in the ancient city of Hue in Vietnam. Not much is known about his early life and you may be relieved to hear that I'm not going to invent it.

One day little Xuan Bao's daddy had some business in the near-by village. When he returned home, he brought back a cookie for each of his children. Many years later Thay talked about how that cookie had made him so happy. He said that he took a little bite of his cookie and later in the day another bite and later another so that he was able to enjoy that cookie for almost the whole day.

About 10 years ago I took a group to Vietnam. I invited Senior Dharma teacher Chan Huy to be one of our guides. We were walking through a market when Chan Huy said, "There is the cookie that Thay talks about." So right away we all bought one. Each little white cookie was wrapped in colorful tissue paper. I was so excited to be eating the cookie of my Teacher. I took a little bite, just like my teacher.

It tasted like styrofoam. I guess I had thought it would be sweet like my teacher. A good lesson in not setting expectations!

We'll ask Thay to tell this next story about his childhood:

“When I was a small boy of seven or eight I happened to see a drawing of the Buddha on the cover of a Buddhist magazine. The Buddha was sitting on the grass, very peacefully, and I was impressed. I thought the artist must have had a lot of peace and calm within himself at the time to be able to draw such a special image. Just looking at the drawing made me happy, because so many people around me at that time were not very calm or happy at all. Seeing this peaceful image, the idea came to me that I wanted to become someone like that Buddha, someone who could sit very still and calm. I think that was the moment when I first wanted to become a monk, although I didn't know how to describe it that way at the time.”

It is not surprising then, that when he was 16 he told his parents that he wanted to become a monk. His parents were against the idea because they thought that the life of a monk would be too difficult for him. So if he were to enter the monastery he would have to do so without their blessings.

He *loved* his mother and father. But, even as a very young boy he was pulled to the holy life. We can imagine then, that, like Siddhartha, the decision to leave home against his parents' wishes would be a very difficult one for this quiet, poetic, teenager.

We know his decision: He left his family and entered the monastery.

Like Siddhartha 2,550 years earlier, he abandoned his “fettters” so that he could seek transformation.

In 1949 he was ordained and given a Dharma name—“Meeting Spring” and a Dharma title: Thich (a name given to all Buddhist monastics in Vietnam) Nhat (#1 or best quality) Hanh (meaning good, true action). Thich Nhat Hanh.

The monastery sent him to a traditional institute of Buddhist studies for training but he didn't like the narrow curriculum so he left and went to the University of Saigon where in addition to Buddhism, he could study world literature, philosophy, psychology, and science.

By his mid-twenties, he had founded a publishing house and started a magazine for young monastics— which were both eventually shut down by the government's Buddhist authorities. Thay said at the time, “We were still too radical for the majority of the elders in the Buddhist establishment. They dismissed many of our ideas and steadily began to silence our voices.”

Thay was young. He was intelligent (For example, he spoke 7 languages: French, Chinese, Sanskrit, Pali, Japanese, and English in addition to his native Vietnamese.) He was creative, innovative, a visionary (I think if there had been a word for “sassy” in Vietnamese the Buddhist *establishment* might have called him that). He was enthusiastic, (some of the more conservative elder monks might have said impatient); he was confident and charming; a natural leader.

And...probably because of these characteristics, he often clashed with the Vietnamese Buddhist authorities.

The older monks undermined his work for peace; they accused him of sowing seeds of dissent; they discredited him *personally*; they rejected his efforts for social change and even arrested many of his followers. Frustrated Thay wrote, “Buddhism has much to contribute (to bring about social changes) but we cannot wait for the religious hierarchy to act. They are *reluctant* to bring about change and they have repeatedly neglected

our efforts to create an Engaged Buddhism. Our proposals lie in unopened folders on their desks, gathering dust.”

He was so unhappy with the Buddhist hierarchy that he and some of his close friends founded their own temple, the Fragrant Palm Leaves hermitage. Several years later it was destroyed by agents of the south Vietnamese government. They arrested one member and took others away for “protection.”

Almost single-handedly Thay established Van Hanh University to train new peace activists. He created the School of Youth for Social Service, a neutral corps of Buddhist peace workers—both lay and monastic— who went into rural areas to establish schools, build healthcare clinics and to help villagers in other ways who were suffering not only from the American War but the annual Vietnamese floods. Thay wrote, “After finishing the work, (in the village) we stayed a few days with the people. The shooting was directly above our heads. One disciple of mine jumped into the water, he was so nervous. The suffering was overwhelming. I bit my finger and let a drop of blood fall into the river, saying: ‘this is to pray for all of you who have perished in the war and the flood.’

The day we left, many young women standing along the shore tried to hand their babies over to us, but we knew we could not take care of them. We felt so helpless, we cried.”

Thay ordained into his new Order of Interbeing six of the leaders of the School of Youth for Social Service including Cao (tsou) Ngoc (Ñoc) Phuong (Fuhng), a young biology student; she would become Sister Chan Khong.

The Vietnamese government eventually revoked the legal status of the School of Youth for Social Service and the students and social workers were harassed and threatened. Six of them were murdered.

Thay's *poetry* during this time inspired many young people join him in the anti-war movement.

Please come here

and witness

the ordeal of all the dear ones.

A young father

whose wife and four children died

stares, day and night, into empty space.

He sometimes laughs

a tear-choked laugh.

Her husband is dead,

her children dead,

her land ruined,

her heart cold.

She curses aloud her existence,

"How fortunate," she says,

"those families who died together."

Thay began seeking *international* help for his peace work, in Europe and the U.S. He met with the U.S. Secretary of Defense. He met with Thomas Merton, the American Catholic social activist. He met with Martin Luther King Jr. who after meeting with Thay publicly denounced the Vietnam war and who nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize. (BTW: Dr. King didn't follow the Noble traditions when he revealed that Thay was the candidate he was nominating and when he made a "strong request" to the prize committee. So.. the Nobel committee did not make an award for peace that year.)

After the war in Vietnam ended, Thay led efforts to help rescue and relocate the "boat people" who were fleeing their country. It is said that a million people escaped Vietnam and that another million died by drowning, starvation, dehydration, or at the hands of pirates from Thailand who routinely attacked, robbed, tortured, abducted, raped, sold into prostitution, or murdered the refugees. When Thay heard the story of a 12 year old girl had been raped by a pirate and had jumped into the ocean in shame, he wept. He recalls that his suffering for her and the boat people was enormous. He says he was hurt, discouraged and angry; for several days he practiced sitting and walking meditation to calm himself. When at last he was composed he wrote one of his most beautiful and poignant poems. Please Call Me By My True Names. Because of time, I'll just read a part of it...

I am the frog swimming happily in the clear water of a pond, and I am also the grass-snake who, approaching in silence, feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones, my legs as thin as bamboo sticks, and I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate, and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.

(Thay wrote: Not *yet* capable of seeing and loving.)

Please call me by my true names, so I can hear all my cries and my laughs at once, so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

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

Because Thay had been exiled from Vietnam for his peace work (and sassines?), in 1975, he and Sister Chan Khong bought a tiny ramshackle house in the countryside near Paris. They called it Sweet Potato after the food that poor Vietnamese people eat. It was the first practice center in the West and a year-round residence for eleven

people healing from they war. They quickly outgrew Sweet Potato and in 1982, they bought an old French farm near Bourdeaux which they eventually named Plum Village after the plum trees donated by children from all over the world. (If you visit Plum Village you can buy a jar of sweet organic plum jam from plum trees planted, cared for and harvested by monks and nuns and lay people.)

Over the years, in addition to Plum Village, monasteries which follow Thay's teachings have been established in Paris and in Australia, Germany, Hong Kong, Thailand, and in the United States.

For years Plum Village had been in negotiations with the Vietnamese government to allow Thay to return to his country to bring monastics, teach, and publish his books. The Vietnamese government was willing for him to come but they would not agree to the other stipulations— until 2005 when Thay was given permission —after almost 40 years of exile—to return to his home country on his terms. He was accompanied by monastic and lay disciples from different countries—maybe you were there— and he was received by thousands of grateful Vietnamese.

During the visit, the official Buddhist Church of Vietnam—the one recognized by the communist government— gifted Thay with Bat Nha, a monastery in Vietnam. He was invited to turn it into a place of worship for *his* disciples. Plum Village donated \$1 million to develop the monastery.

in 2007 Thay returned to Vietnam to support the monastics he had ordained earlier, to conduct ceremonies to help heal the wounds from the war, and to lead retreats for monastics and lay people.

In a meeting with the President of Vietnam Thay suggested to him that the government should put an end to controlling religion in the country.

The next year, in a television interview in Italy, Thay suggested that the Dalai Lama should be allowed to return to Tibet. The government of Vietnam, unhappy with Thay's two suggestions, and pressured by China, suddenly became hostile to the monks and nuns at the Bat Nha monastery and ordered them out.

Thay instructed his followers to remain at Bat Nha.

When the monastics refused to leave, the government cut off their utilities and in a memo they strongly encouraged "local communist groups to convince the clergy to leave." Mobs threw rocks and feces at the monastery, broke windows and bashed in the doors; they dragged monks and nuns from their rooms where they were chanting and meditating. There were reports that monastics were beaten and some nuns sexually assaulted. Finally the monks and nuns fled and Bat Nha was empty.

Some of the monastics from Bat Nha gave up the monastic life; a few found homes in other Vietnamese monasteries. Many were brought to the U.S. by Plum Village.

Over the years, more than 100,000 people around the world have committed, in a formal ceremony, to following Thay's modern version of the Buddha's guidelines for ethical living: the Five Mindfulness Trainings. Thousands of Sanghas have been established in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas. More than three million of his books have been sold in the United States alone.

He established Wake Up, a worldwide movement for young people and created an international program to train teachers to teach mindfulness in schools.

On November 11, 2014 following months of rapidly declining health, Thay suffered a severe stroke which left him unable to speak or walk. When he was released from the

hospital, he received physical therapy. In 2015 Plum Village sent this update on his health:

Sometimes Thay playfully switches roles with the doctors and therapists putting a finger on his lips and inviting them to stop. In these moments he often indicates for us to prepare tea so his doctors can have a chance to enjoy a cup of tea in mindfulness. One therapist knelt down by his side, looking out of the window, and began to cry silently. She later shared with us that it was perhaps the first time in her life that she had really stopped and appreciated the blue of the sky.

In 2016 Thay returned to Plum Village, then flew to his monastery in Thailand which is not far from the Vietnamese border. In the autumn of 2017 he went to Vietnam. We've been told by some monastics that he wanted to go "home" to die but that "it was not safe." So Thay returned to his monastery in Thailand.

Gustavo and I were at the Thailand monastery the week of his birthday last year. It is a warm place—in temperature and in heart. He does not have to wear the cap and heavy coat and scarf that he needs in less warm places. The little monastery loves him, adores him.

His home is made of beautiful red wood, a tree house that snuggles into a hill and is surrounded by old big trees. There is a screened porch on the second floor where he can sit in his wheel-chair or rocking chair and look at the blue sky and the clouds he has talked about so much in his dharma talks; he can listen to the birds and and observe the visitors who wander near.

He can be still.

Sr. Chan Chong recently reported that "he cannot stand on his feet yet, but he is stronger and stronger every day. He has started to say a few words, although not very

clearly. Sometimes we sing songs like, 'I have arrived, I am home in the here and in the now,' and he'll say, 'here' and 'now,' and so on. He is making good progress but it is slow."

And I got an email yesterday:

"In the last few weeks Thay has expressed a clear wish to visit N again. We are happy to confirm that he arrived on 26th October in Da Nang along with a number of senior disciples. This is Thay's second trip back since his stroke, following his visit in late August/September last year."

From Thay's study, reflection and life experiences has sprung his teachings. I have collected some questions that have been asked at Thay's retreats between 1996 and 2007 that reveal his wisdom. I will read a question, give you an opportunity to decide how you'd answer the question, then I'll read Thay's answer or sometimes, just the portion of his answer that directly responds to the question.

The first question is:

1. *What are your views on capital punishment? Suppose someone has killed 10 children. Why should he be allowed to live on?*

(Please reflect on how you would answer this question.)

Thay:

Ten people are dead; now you want another one, you want eleven. A person who has killed ten children is a sick person. Killing him does not help him, and does not help us. There are others like him in society, and looking at him deeply we know that something is wrong with our society; our *society* has created people like that.

Therefore, looking at him we can see—in the light of interbeing—the other elements that have produced him. That is how your understanding arises. Of course you have to lock him up for the safety of other children, but locking him up is not the only thing

you can do. We can do other things to help him. Punishing is not the only thing. We can do much better. We must demonstrate that true justice must have compassion and understanding in it.

(Thay goes on to describe various Buddhist offerings in prisons— Buddhist books, magazines and Dharma talks, meditations, days of mindfulness, 5 MT ceremonies, pen pals.)

2. In regard to television news and newspapers, how can we balance not taking in toxins with not closing our eyes to suffering?

(Please reflect on how you would answer this question.)

Thay:

Myself, I want to be informed about what is going on in the world, but that does not mean that I have to listen to the news 3 times a day. I think there is some kind of vacuum in us we want to fill up; that is why we buy so many newspapers and magazines and why we view so much television. We do not need that much information. I think maybe 5 minutes daily is enough. Sometime we can survive several months without any news bulletins. And you have friends who can tell you what is important that has happened.”

3. You describe your position on abortion as one of respecting life, but that each case is special and ultimately the woman is the queen of her own body. Surely you understand that another body—another king or queen—has manifested himself or herself within that woman’s body. Every year over a million of these children are killed in the U.S. alone. They have no means to protect themselves from their parents.....Your position on abortion seems inconsistent with your position on vegetarianism and war. Is each case of a person eating meat special? Would you refuse to sign a statement against a war out of fear that you would be seen as

condemning the soldiers who have found themselves in a position where they would have to kill or be killed? Of course you would have compassion for the soldiers and those who continue to eat meat and for women who have had abortions, and you would not condemn any of them. However I would hope that you would consistently speak out against war, eating meat and abortion.

(Please reflect on how you would answer this question.)

Thay:

My position is we should not be dogmatic on anything. You are not a machine. You have to use your intelligence. There are cases when you have to give this answer and there are cases when you have to give another answer. You have to re-educate yourself and to practice in such a way so that you become less and less dogmatic, so that you continue to understand people more deeply...then you have compassion. If you have talked to boat people in refugee camps you find out that there are many who have been raped by the sea pirates. If you know them well enough you have to consider each case. There are cases you can advise the victim to keep the baby, but there are cases when you have to say yes to abortion because if not it will destroy both of them: mother and child at the same time. So the question is to be intelligent, to understand deeply and not to be dogmatic.

4. *I hear you say that the present moment is a wonderful moment. What if the present moment is just despair?*

(Please reflect on how you would answer this question.)

Thay:

The Buddha has said that even suffering can be described as holy, wonderful.

"Wonderful" does not mean pleasant alone. "Wonderful" means that there is a *depth* that we have to discover in our suffering. The fact is that happiness is not possible

without suffering. Those of us who have not experienced any kind of suffering would not be capable of identifying happiness. This is my experience.

5. There's an idea that life has to be continued at any cost...but I would like to be able to choose to die when there is no more hope. How does that reconcile with the Buddha's teachings?

(Please reflect on how you would answer this question.)

Thay:

I have meditated on this issue and I have found that we should act as a Sangha to find the answers we need. We cannot generalize. I think we have to consider individual problems.

The doctors in the clinic have to act as the Sangha, in collaboration with the family and the friends of the person concerned, to examine that specific case. Even if the law allows us to do so, we still have to decide using the Sangha eyes, the best kind of eyes we have. Never make a decision based on your own individual insight, we have to profit from the insight of everyone in the Sangha.

6. I feel ill at ease when people say that Zen is a sect. How should I answer them?

(Please reflect on how you would answer this question.)

Thay:

I don't know. (laughter) If you say Zen is not a sect, that does not seem to help. And if you say Zen is a sect, well, that does not help either. You cannot just argue whether Zen is a sect or not a sect. I think we should invite people to come and participate in our activities and our life. Once they see that this practice is providing people with more understanding, more communication and more compassion, then they will know that it is something that is important and useful to society and to all people. People

have ideas and if we go around and try to change their ideas, we won't have enough time.

7. *What does Buddhism say about homosexuality?*

We may belong to the third world or we may belong to a particular race, or we may be people of color, or we may be gay or lesbian, and we have been discriminated against for thousands of years. So how to liberate ourselves from the suffering of being a victim of discrimination and oppression?

(Please reflect on how you would answer this question.)

Thay:

When someone discriminates against the black or the white, or the flower, or the lesbian, they discriminate against God, which is the Basic Goodness in each of us. They create suffering all around them, and they create suffering within themselves. It is delusion, ignorance, that is the basis of their attitude of discrimination.

If the people who are victims of discrimination practice looking deeply, they will say, "We share the same wonderful relationship with God as you, we have no complex. Those who discriminate against us, do so because of their ignorance."

The Holy Bible says: "God, please forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing." If you reach that kind of insight, you will no longer get angry at that person who discriminates against you, and you might have compassion toward him or her. You will say: "He does not know what he is doing. He is creating a lot of suffering around him and within him. I will try to help him." So your heart opens like a flower and suffering is no longer there, and you turn to be a bodhisattva helping the people who have been discriminating against you. That is the way I see it, out of my practice of looking deeply, so one day I made the statement that God is a lesbian, because this is my insight.

8. *What is the difference between merely thinking about a problem and looking deeply at that same problem?*

(Please reflect on how you would answer this question.)

Thay:

Looking deeply is made of several elements. The first ingredient is mindfulness. When you are completely there, fully alive and fully present, you are capable of calming what is in you, your body, your emotions, your feelings. Concentration is also a very important ingredient of looking deeply. The Buddha also said that in order to look deeply you need to be guided by the insight of impermanence and interbeing.

The Buddha said that thinking is only a part of the work. Sometimes we don't need the thinking any more. Sometimes we penetrate with other elements of the practice. When you can touch a flower deeply with the insight of impermanence, of interbeing, then that insight can liberate you from fear and from sorrow. The Buddha said that all fear and sorrow and suffering are born from your wrong perceptions about reality. "Looking deeply" is not just a term, because the Buddha has indicated very clearly all the steps that you need to take in order to succeed in the act of looking deeply.

I'd like to end with a portion of Thay's teaching that he gave on the 18th of September, 2001—right after 9/11. It is hauntingly relevant today.

The violence and hatred we presently face has been created by misunderstanding, injustice and discrimination and despair. We are all co-responsible for the making of violence and despair in the world by our way of living, of consuming and of handling the problems of the world. Understanding why this violence has been created, we will then know that to do and what not to do in order to decrease the level of violence in ourselves and in the world, to create and foster understanding, reconciliation and forgiveness. I have the conviction that America possesses enough wisdom and

courage to perform an act of forgiveness and compassion and I know that such an act can bring great relief to America and to the world right away.

The next time there is a natural disaster—hurricane, tsunami, volcano eruption, earthquake, please do not label it ‘climate change’ and take refuge in despair. The next time politicians on the local, state or federal level act in outrageous ways, please don’t shrug your shoulders hopelessly and take refuge in anger. The next time there is drama in your own life or your family life, please don’t blame and shame and take refuge in self righteousness or fear. Take your story to the wisdom, the light, the teachers within. Take your story to the Buddha, to Thay. Take your story to the Dharma, the teachings. Take your story to your Sangha. Take refuge in understanding and love. Take the arrow out.

Sing: I Am Home



May the fruit of our study of our teacher’s life and the practice of his teachings benefit us which includes our teacher and all beings.

Terry Cortés-Vega, True Virtuous Action
Dharmacharya
October, 2018

For Discussion: What can we learn from Thay’s journey that will guide us on ours?
How can we support each other on our inward journey?