

# From war, to peace, to the cosmos

*As the European Institute of Applied Buddhism (EIAB) prepares to mark our first decade, Director and Dean of Studies Thầy Pháp Ấn looks deeply at how the suffering of the Vietnam War formed the backdrop to EIAB's establishment by our beloved teacher Thầy (Thích Nhất Hạnh). He also describes how healing and transformation have been the Institute's primary building blocks – both spiritual and physical – during these formative years.*



*Thầy's powerful teaching "Peace in Oneself, Peace in the World" is engraved in his elegant calligraphy across the Gate of Interbeing at EIAB's main entrance. Above, Thầy Pháp Ấn explains the meaning behind the gate's construction and name as he takes visiting members of Hong Kong's Golden Moment Sangha on a tour of EIAB in May 2017. Photo courtesy of Sarah Monks.*

**Acknowledgement:** The author would like to express his deep gratitude to Ms. Sarah Monks for her research into the writings and speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Vietnam War and her detailed, creative and careful editing work; and to Sr. Song Nghiêm for her spiritual intuition in encouraging him to represent Thầy at a major event in Montreal (please see page 19) just days after the unexpected and sudden passing away of the author's father. Sr. Song Nghiêm is also to be thanked for first suggesting that a talk by the author in Norway last October should be shared with a wider audience through incorporation into this special feature article marking EIAB's 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.

## A TIME TO REMEMBER – AND REFLECT

Since visiting Norway, home of the Nobel Peace Prize, to lead an EIAB outreach program last October, I have been moved to reflect upon how, 50 years earlier, the Nobel Peace Laureate Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., nominated our teacher, Thầy, for the 1967 Peace Prize. Though none was awarded that year, Dr. King recognized in Thầy “an apostle of peace and non-violence”, like himself.

At the time, I was a small boy in central Vietnam, crawling away and hiding in terror as soldiers camped in front of our house at sunset, preparing for a military strike. I thought to myself “there is no future”. I began to see no point in growing up as it would mean becoming a soldier and killing or being killed. I became ill and suffered for years from deep sadness and depression, especially at sunset.

How joyful I feel, now, to know that all the while I was sinking into despair as a child, Thầy and Dr. King were working tirelessly together to end the war and create hope for a future of peace in Vietnam and beyond. How grateful I am that my own suffering from war led me eventually to Plum Village in France, the first monastic community Thầy established in exile and where I first experienced personal healing and transformation.

The inspiring story of the partnership between Thầy and Dr. King is, I believe, worth sharing anew as we remember Dr. King 50 years after his assassination<sup>1</sup> and, in EIAB’s 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, contemplate how deep roots in the suffering of war and discrimination prepared us for our primary mission: to help people recognize, embrace and transform their painful feelings and emotions, and to resolve conflicts in their relationships at home, in their workplaces and within their communities.



*To call the world’s attention to the repression and suffering of Vietnamese Buddhists, Ven. Thích Quảng Đức self-immolated on 11 June 1963. This photograph is displayed on the ancestral altar of EIAB, in loving remembrance of Ven. Thích Quảng Đức, his courage and compassion. It nourishes and strengthens our Bodhisattva ideal of cultivating love and peace. World Press Photo by Malcolm Browne of The Associated Press.*

## “PLEASE KILL THE REAL ENEMIES OF MAN”

Thầy and Dr. King met at a pivotal time in each other’s lives. Both were towering intellects, spiritual leaders and social activists at the forefront of non-violent movements for radical change amid escalating violence in their respective countries. Both had experienced threats, oppression and danger. Through humanity, compassion, leadership and respect for each other, they brought the Vietnam peace movement and the US civil rights movement together. This meeting of two enlightened minds helped to change the course of history.

The relationship began on 1 June 1965, when Thầy directly addressed Dr. King in an open letter entitled “In Search of the Enemy of Man”.<sup>2</sup> This was shortly before US President Lyndon B. Johnson took a further step towards committing

America to full-scale war in Vietnam by announcing he would raise “our fighting strength” almost immediately from 75,000 to 125,000 men, with more to be sent later.<sup>3</sup>

Already, Dr. King, the Nobel Peace Laureate of 1964, was wrestling with his conscience over Vietnam. But “I did not march, I did not demonstrate, I did not rally.”<sup>4</sup> He believed that the bloodshed would end sooner if Americans moved from the battlefield to the peace table, without prolonging debate over the war. The strategy of the veteran civil rights leader was, at this time, to be “a quiet actor” pushing behind the scenes for peace through negotiation.

In his letter, Thầy sought to explain to Western Christians that the widely-publicized self-burning of four Vietnamese Buddhist monks and a nun in the summer of 1963, beginning



with that of Ven. Thích Quảng Đức – whom Thầy had known personally – was not suicide. It was not despair or even protest; but an act of courage, love, and compassion of the highest order; an act of hope, an aspiration for something good in the future. The monastics were willing to suffer and die for the sake of their people at a time when Buddhist leaders and followers were being discriminated against and brutally suppressed by South Vietnam's Ngô Đình Diệm regime.<sup>5</sup>

Thầy said that he believed with all his heart that those who had sacrificed their lives in this agonizing way did not seek the deaths of their oppressors but only a change in their policy. Their “enemies” were not people, Thầy said, but intolerance, fanaticism, dictatorship, greed, hatred, and discrimination within the heart of man.

“I also believe with all of my being that the struggle for equality and freedom you lead in Birmingham, Alabama, is not really aimed at the whites but only at intolerance, hatred, and discrimination. These are real enemies of man – not man himself,” he wrote to Dr. King. “In our unfortunate fatherland we are

trying to plead desperately: do not kill man, even in man's name. Please kill the real enemies of man which are present everywhere, in our very hearts and minds.”<sup>6</sup>

### “YOU CANNOT BE SILENT”

Thầy went on to describe how countless Vietnamese peasants and children were being killed every day in a tragic war that had already gone on for 20 years. “I am sure that since you have been engaged in one of the hardest struggles for equality and human rights, you are among those who understand fully, and who share with all their heart, the indescribable suffering of the Vietnamese people.”

Thầy put it to Dr. King that “the world's greatest humanists” would not remain silent. He continued: “You yourself cannot remain silent. America is said to have a strong religious foundation and spiritual leaders would not allow American political and economic doctrines to be deprived of the spiritual element. You cannot be silent since you have already been in action and you are in action because, in you, God is in action, too...”

### “I WAS IN THE PRESENCE OF A HOLY PERSON”

Thầy left Vietnam in May 1966 for a US speaking tour to bring Americans first-hand information about “the real situation in Vietnam”<sup>7</sup> which, for the most part, they were not getting from their media, and to plead for an end to the suffering. It was in Chicago, on 1 June 1966, that he and Dr. King met in person for the first time. Thầy later wrote of that meeting: “From the first moment, I knew I was in the presence of a holy person. Not just his good work but his very being was a source of great inspiration for me.”<sup>8</sup>

At a joint press conference, Thầy called for non-violent ways to remove “the real enemy”: anger, hatred and discrimination. He said that Dr. King's activities for civil rights and human rights were perfectly in accord with efforts in Vietnam to stop the conflict.

For his part, Dr. King came out very strongly against the war. “That was the day we combined our efforts to work for peace in Vietnam and to fight for civil rights in the US,” Thầy later wrote.<sup>9</sup> It was also around this time that Thầy was banned from returning to Vietnam, forcing him into what would become nearly four decades of exile.



### “THIS GENTLE BUDDHIST MONK FROM VIETNAM”

Encountering Thầy had a profound effect on Dr. King and his deeper awakening to the humanitarian and moral challenges the Vietnam War posed for the world. On 25 January 1967, Dr. King sent the following letter to the Norwegian Nobel Institute in Oslo:

*Thầy and Dr. King held a press conference in Chicago on 1 June 1966.*

Gentlemen:

*As the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate of 1964, I now have the pleasure of proposing to you the name of Thich Nhat Hanh for that award in 1967.*

*I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize than this gentle Buddhist monk from Vietnam.*

*This would be a notably auspicious year for you to bestow your Prize on the Venerable Nhat Hanh. Here is an apostle of peace and non-violence, cruelly separated from his own people while they are oppressed by a vicious war which has grown to threaten the sanity and security of the entire world.*

*Because no honor is more respected than the Nobel Peace Prize, conferring that Prize on Nhat Hanh would itself be a most generous act of peace. It would remind all nations that men of good will stand ready to lead warring elements out of an abyss of hatred and destruction. It would re-awaken men to the teaching of beauty and love found in peace. It would help to revive hopes for a new order of justice and harmony.*

*I know Thich Nhat Hanh, and am privileged to call him my friend. Let me share with you some things I know about him. You will find in this single human being an awesome range of abilities and interests.*

*He is a holy man, for he is humble and devout. He is a scholar of immense intellectual capacity. The author of ten published volumes, he is also a poet of superb clarity and human compassion. His academic discipline is the Philosophy of Religion, of which he is Professor at Van Hanh, the Buddhist University he helped found in Saigon. He directs the Institute for Social Studies at this University. This amazing man also is editor of Thien My, an influential Buddhist weekly publication. And he is Director of Youth for Social Service, a Vietnamese institution which trains young people for the peaceable rehabilitation of their country.*

*Thich Nhat Hanh today is virtually homeless and stateless. If he were to return to Vietnam, which he passionately wishes to do, his life would be in great peril. He is the victim of a particularly brutal exile because he proposes to carry his advocacy of peace to his own people. What a tragic commentary this is on the existing situation in Vietnam and those who perpetuate it.*

*The history of Vietnam is filled with chapters of exploitation by outside powers and corrupted men of wealth, until even now the Vietnamese are harshly ruled, ill-fed, poorly housed, and burdened by all the hardships and terrors of modern warfare.*

*Thich Nhat Hanh offers a way out of this nightmare, a solution acceptable to rational leaders. He has traveled the world, counseling statesmen, religious leaders, scholars and writers, and enlisting their support. His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity.*

*I respectfully recommend to you that you invest his cause with the acknowledged grandeur of the Nobel Peace Prize of 1967. Thich Nhat Hanh would bear this honor with grace and humility.*

Sincerely,

Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>10</sup>

## **“NEVER AGAIN WILL I BE SILENT....”**

In his autobiography, Dr. King pinpoints the “existential moment” when he knew he finally had to speak out against America’s involvement in the war. It was after reading an article entitled “The children of Vietnam”. He said to himself: “Never again will I be silent on an issue that is destroying the soul of our nation and destroying thousands and thousands of little children in Vietnam.”<sup>11</sup>

In February 1967, at a symposium in Beverly Hills, California, Dr. King presented a searing analysis of what he called “The Casualties of the War in Vietnam” which, he said, included America’s principles and values – and some one million Vietnamese children.<sup>12</sup> He insisted that the US was in an untenable position morally and politically. “We must combine the fervor of the civil rights movement with the peace movement,” he urged. “We must demonstrate, teach and preach, until the very foundations of

our nation are shaken. We must work unceasingly to lift this nation we love to a higher destiny, to a new plateau of compassion, to a more noble expression of humane-ness.”

The speech provoked criticism of Dr. King across the political spectrum, including from his own supporters. But he was not to be deterred. In an impassioned speech entitled “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence”, delivered at the Riverside Church in New York City on 4 April 1967, Dr.

King took his strongest personal stand against America's "disgraceful" commitment to "this tragic war".<sup>13</sup>

"Over the past two years, as I have moved to break the betrayal of my own silences and to speak from the burnings of my own heart, as I have called for radical departures from the destruction of Vietnam, many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path," he told the overflowing congregation. "At the heart of their concerns this query has often loomed large and loud: Why are you speaking about war, Dr. King? Why are you joining the voices of dissent? Peace and civil rights don't mix, they say."

Risking his future as the leader of the civil rights movement, as well as his relationship with the Johnson White House, Dr. King argued that the issues of the war in Vietnam and civil rights in America were inseparable. He noted the cruel irony that young black men crippled by American society were being sent "to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem". Dr. King did not stop there. He knew that the issue of the war in Vietnam had gone beyond civil rights to the very soul of America. "If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read Vietnam. It can never be saved so long as it destroys the deepest hopes of men the world over."

### FINGERPRINTS ON HISTORY

Dr. King painted a devastating picture for the Riverside congregation of the war's impact on the Vietnamese people and society, echoing much of what Thầy had revealed through his scholarly writings and speaking tours. "We have destroyed their two most cherished institutions: the family and the village," said Dr. King. "We have destroyed their land and their crops. We have cooperated in the crushing of the nation's only non-Communist revolutionary political force - the unified Buddhist church. We have

supported the enemies of the peasants of Saigon. We have corrupted their women and children and killed their men."

He called for the madness to cease immediately, saying that the initiative of the war was America's and the initiative to stop it must also be America's. "This is the message of the great Buddhist leaders of Vietnam. Recently one of them wrote these words:

'Each day the war goes on the hatred increases in the heart of the Vietnamese and in the hearts of those of humanitarian instinct. The Americans are forcing even their friends into becoming their enemies. It is curious that the Americans, who calculate so carefully on the possibilities of military victory, do not realize that in the process they are incurring deep psychological and political defeat. The image of America will never again be the image of revolution, freedom and democracy, but the image of violence and militarism.'

The unnamed Buddhist leader whose words Dr. King quoted was Thầy.<sup>14</sup>

### "MARTIN, THEY CALL YOU A BODHISATTVA"

In May 1967, soon after the Riverside address, Thầy and Dr. King met again at a conference entitled "Peace on Earth", organized in Geneva by the World Council of Churches. It was there, over a convivial private breakfast in Dr. King's hotel room, that they continued their brotherly discussion on peace, freedom, the building of community and what steps America should take to end the war.

Thầy said to him: "Martin, do you know something? In Vietnam they call you a Bodhisattva, an enlightened being trying to awaken other living beings and help them move towards more compassion and understanding." Thầy later wrote that he was glad he had the

chance to say that because, in less than a year, on the exact anniversary of his historic Riverside address, Dr. King was dead.<sup>15</sup>

"I was in New York when I heard the news of his assassination; I was devastated. I could not eat; I could not sleep," Thầy later recalled. "I made a deep vow to continue building what he called 'the beloved community' not only for myself but for him also. I have done what I promised Martin Luther King Jr. And I think that I have always felt his support."<sup>16</sup>

### KEEPING THẦY'S PROMISE

Those who keep Dr. King's legacy alive describe his Beloved Community as a global vision in which all forms of racism and discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood, in which love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred and in which peace with justice shall prevail over war and military conflict.<sup>17</sup>

I look upon EIAB's beloved community both as a manifestation of Thầy's promise to Dr. King and as a continuation - far into the future - of Thầy's Bodhisattva Vow of Great Compassion. EIAB is a modern Buddhist peace project embodying Thầy's positive response to suffering and difficulties in the world of today. His deep wish in establishing EIAB is that future generations may benefit from "studying the Dharma and putting into practice the teachings of the Buddha in ways that are relevant and effective in our time."<sup>18</sup>

Thầy has tasked us to build EIAB into an enduring institution that is formal, intellectually rigorous and systematic in carrying out this work. We are, over time, to serve as a repository of learning for other Plum Village centers and to be the main campus, or "hub" - within Plum Village's global network of practice centers - for administering the training and certification of Dharma Teachers.



On 4 July 2007, Thầy outlined his vision for EIAB and its future role, in a handwritten note (reproduced below).

the European Institute of Applied Buddhism  
 The EIAB provides courses, workshops, sessions of training to helping students and others to

- release the tension in <sup>the</sup> bodies,
- reduce stress and pain <sup>in</sup> body,
- recognize, embrace and transform painful feelings and emotions
- look deeply to understand their suffering and the suffering of the people around
- to use compassionate listening and to bring speech to help release suffering and to remove wrong perception on self and on others,
- to restore communion and to reconcile etc...

by learning studying the Dharma and by putting into practice the tenets of the Buddha ~~that~~ in ways that are relevant and effective in our time.

The EIAB train Dharma teachers, both monastic and lay, that have the capacity to provide ~~them~~ the teaching and the practice in the context of individual, family, community, workplace, etc...

All courses, retreats, workshops and sessions of training given by the EIAB, ~~for~~ offer at its main campus or other campuses are auditable. It is the Council of Dharma teachers of the EIAB to decide when a trainee can be made into a Dharma teacher, ~~as a person~~

that is capable of offering the right teaching and the way of practice, the person himself or herself is recognized as having obtained transformation and healing thanks to the practice -

Longtime practitioners, after having enjoyed transformation and healing, may be motivated to become Dharma teachers to help others. They may gather all the credits they have of their studies + practice, and come ~~to~~ ask the Dharma Council Teachers Council what ~~other~~ <sup>other</sup> ~~condition~~ whether they are qualified as a Dharma Teacher. In the case they need some more <sup>studies</sup> ~~training~~ and practice, the DTC will recommend these to them, before they are bestowed with the title of DT.

In Thầy's words: "It is (for) the council of Dharma Teachers of the EIAB to decide when a trainee can be made into a Dharma Teacher, a person that is capable of offering the right teaching and the way of practice... (and) is recognized as having obtained transformation and healing thanks to the practice."<sup>19</sup> Thầy goes on to say that long-term practitioners who - having enjoyed transformation and healing - "may be motivated to become Dharma Teachers to help others", may consolidate all the credits they have received from their studies and practices and ask the Dharma Teachers Council (DTC) at EIAB whether they are qualified as Dharma Teachers (DT). "In the case they need some more studies and practice, the DTC will recommend these to them, before they are bestowed with the title of DT".

My personal connection to EIAB goes back to a spring day at Plum Village in 2006 when Thầy asked me to come to his hermitage. I thought it must be to discuss plans for his next visit to Vietnam. Instead, when I entered, Thầy was busy writing pieces of calligraphy, repeating the words "European Institute of Applied Buddhism". He carried on doing that for some time. Then he stopped, put down his brush, poured me a cup of tea and said: "This is your next project after you finish your work in Vietnam."

Thầy's intuitive choice for the Institute's location was Germany, a country whose leaders were among those who made war in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century but whose people now stand as exemplars of peace. Thầy's idea was to create an Institute not just for Germany

but for the whole of Europe, taking advantage of the fact that Germany is in relatively easy reach of many countries in Northern and Central Europe.<sup>20</sup>

Thầy had German Sangha friends out looking at dozens of properties over many months before deciding upon a large wooded estate at Waldröhl, 64 km east of Cologne (please also see article beginning on page 30). He saw that it included a splendid old building, large and impressive enough for his pan-European vision.

At our local press conference to announce EIAB's establishment, Thầy raised a laugh when he told one journalist that it was Waldröhl that chose Plum Village, not the other way round. We soon began to understand, though, that Thầy had not been joking.



*Thầy practicing his mindful art of calligraphy (above right), next to his rendering of “The European Institute of Applied Buddhism”. We adopted his artwork for our official nameplate (above left), which is displayed in front of the Asoka Institute.*

## WALDBRÖL CHOSE US

EIAB’s 150 meter-long main building, now our Asoka Institute, was constructed from 1895 to 1897 as a hospital for the mentally and physically handicapped, under the management of the Protestant Congregation. During the Nazi era, the building was commandeered. Between November

1938 and January 1939 all the patients – close to 700 in number – were forced out of the hospital and moved to a small town nearby.<sup>21</sup>

No one knows their exact fate but there can be little doubt that they suffered greatly. Under the Nazi’s “pure race” ideology, mentally and physically handicapped people were considered

a threat to “Aryan genetic purity” and a “liability for the society”. They were subject to sterilization, forced abortion and “elimination” through euthanasia. After World War 2, the building served as a general and maternity hospital and then a Germany military facility, after which it stood empty from April 2006 – until it came to Thầy’s attention in late January 2008.



*Thầy seated with Mr. Peter Koester, the Mayor of Waldbröl, at the press conference on 12 September 2008 announcing EIAB’s formal establishment.*



Less than two months later, Thầy visited Waldbröl to inspect the property. Satisfied that it was the right place for establishing the future Institute, he gave instructions for the acquisition process to begin.



*After a search lasting many months, Thầy and Sr. Chân Không visit Waldbröl on Friday 7 March 2008 to view a property shortlisted as a site for the future Institute. (Above left) Thầy, accompanied by his attendant Br. Pháp Hiền, is introduced to the site by EIAB's first Director, Dr. Thuc-Quyen Nguyen-Ryzek (Chân Diệu), who has arranged the viewing. A few paces behind, Sr. Chân Không, begins her own inspection, while Thầy seems well pleased, already, with what he sees. He proceeds up to the stately main building and steps mindfully over its threshold. Photos courtesy of Bui Huu Tuong & Trang.*

In September at Plum Village, Thầy requested me to meet with the Sangha so we could identify which brothers and sisters would come with me to the new center in Germany. Over the next two days, Plum Village's three hamlets met to make their nominations.

On Sunday 7 September 2008, after formal lunch at New Hamlet, we presented ourselves in front of the

Buddha altar and touched the earth to the Buddha, Thầy and the Sangha to ask permission to leave Plum Village and move to Waldbröl. That afternoon, three vans of monastics left New Hamlet for Germany. The entire Sangha gathered to bid us farewell. It was very moving and we were all happy.

Three days later, on 10 September 2008, we arrived at the entrance to the main

building – our future Asoka Institute. We waited for our lawyer, Dr. Alexander Puplick, to invite us inside to proceed with the acquisition formalities, helped by EIAB's first Director, Dr. Thuc-Quyen Nguyen-Ryzek (Chân Diệu).

Perhaps because of his Bodhisattva vow to help all sentient beings, I believe that Thầy knew along why we had been called to Waldbröl. He knew it was a



*Fresh from Plum Village, on 10 September 2008 members of Thầy's new monastic Sangha in Germany take our first steps on the 5.7 hectare Waldbröl estate he has selected for EIAB. This is also our first glimpse of the imposing building that will become the Asoka Institute.*



*We feel joyful as we approach EIAB's lawyer, Dr. Alexander Puplick. Together, we are to meet with representatives from the Institute for Federal Real Estate, the public agency managing the sale of the property on behalf of the federal government of Germany.*





*With a welcoming smile, Dr. Puplick (left) invites the Sangha to ascend the grand staircase leading to our future Asoka Institute.*



*We wait in happy anticipation to be called in so that the formalities may begin.*



*Thầy Pháp Ân discussing the purchase process with Dr. Puplick, left, and EIAB's first Director, Dr. Thuc-Quyen Nguyen-Ryzek (Chân Diệu).*



*Sangha members already look to EIAB's future, while waiting for the day's formalities to conclude.*



*Dr. Puplick carefully reviews documents prepared for signature.*



*Done!*



*EIAB has arrived! On 10 September 2008, we begin our new life at Waldbröl.*

request from the Nazi's invisible victims for him to help them, just as he had helped victims of discrimination and war in Vietnam.

As a scientist, I usually have a hard time believing in the invisible world, even though as a monk I have studied Buddhist teachings on the subject. But after coming to EIAB, vivid dreams persuaded me that the invisible world was, indeed, trying to communicate. I also experienced strange phenomena, such as a small bell or a plate of food inexplicably flying out of my hand and onto the floor. While there remains a degree of mystery about all this, the energy of past suffering was palpable and clearly needed to be transformed.

At the same time, multiple issues of a more worldly nature were also crying out for attention as we set about developing the Institute. The challenge was how to respond to so many needs, both spiritual and physical, in tandem!

### GETTING ON OUR FEET

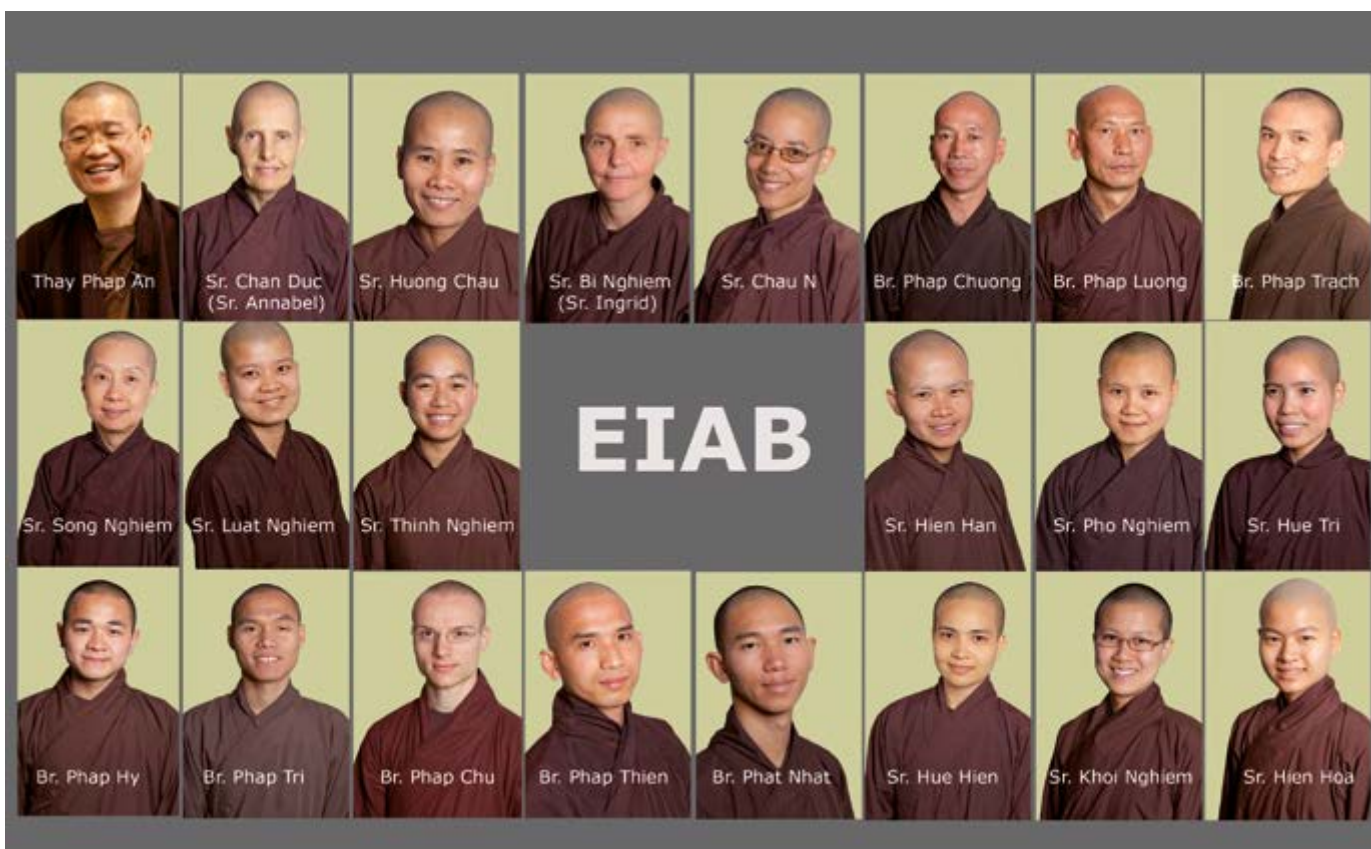
EIAB's new monastic community spent our first icy winter huddled in just a few rooms of the vast, echoey Asoka Institute, with neither heating nor drinking water. It certainly brought home our status as pioneers of another of Thầy's pioneering projects! The huge structure required a new heating system, new water pipes and electrical rewiring to make it habitable and compliant with local fire safety and other building regulations. When renovation turned the Asoka Institute into a construction site, we were thankful, in September 2009, to have the nearby Great Compassion Monastery to move into. Its acquisition by EIAB meant that we now had a facility that could accommodate students taking our courses.

Those early years were, in effect, EIAB's "soft opening". It was essential to spend time developing faculty, curricula and a solid program of courses for

the Institute, and to start building the administrative infrastructure that would enable EIAB one day to fulfil the global "hub" role outlined by Thầy. It was equally necessary to consider the overall implications for human and other resources, not least the need for new funding for the next phase of the Asoka Institute's renovation and to build a meditation hall.

EIAB's existence was still new and relatively unknown. It was important to promote the Institute more widely if we were to succeed in attracting more students and in raising additional funds that would help place EIAB's operations on a stronger, more sustainable footing. In the spring of 2010, while in Hong Kong for a retreat, I discussed these challenges with supportive lay friends, including Professor Eva Yuen an artist, curator and professor of art and design, and Mrs Therese Khan.





*The first 22 monastics (pictured<sup>22</sup>) to reside at EIAB needed to summon up a pioneering spirit when we moved into the Asoka Institute. During our first winter (2008–09), we had neither heating nor drinking water. Photo courtesy of Rolf Franke – Film- und Theaterfotografie [www.actorsphotography.de](http://www.actorsphotography.de).*



*A poster for EIAB's exhibition of original calligraphy by Thầy. First mounted in Hong Kong in 2010, the exhibition is now permanently housed at the Asoka Institute.*

We came up with an idea for EIAB to create a fund-raising exhibition of Thầy's mindful calligraphy, with a magnificent accompanying art book whose sale would also raise funds. We knew, too, from Qi Gong masters that Thầy's calligraphy radiates the peaceful, positive energy of his compassion. The proposed exhibition, therefore, would also provide a means for EIAB to transform the block of pain and suffering lingering from the past. Moreover, mounting an exhibition of Thầy's work would be a wonderful way to leverage the Asoka Institute's abundant space once the ground floor renovation was complete.

Professor Yuen and Mrs Khan flew to Germany to present the exhibition proposal to Thầy at EIAB, where he was leading the Summer Retreat. He graciously agreed. Over the summer of 2010 Thầy produced many new pieces of calligraphy. Plans moved swiftly

ahead for a travelling exhibition to be mounted first in Hong Kong at the end of 2010 and beginning of 2011,<sup>23</sup> before moving to Taiwan and Canada, then eventually taking up permanent residence at EIAB.

### SHOWING OUR LOVE TO SUFFERING SPIRITS

Two weeks after we moved into EIAB, I reported to Thầy the strange phenomena we had experienced and mentioned my dreams. He requested us to offer our energy of compassion every day to the wandering spirits. That November, Thầy returned to EIAB after a teaching tour of India and offered a public talk at the nearby hospital. He also investigated further the Asoka Institute's past. During walking meditation one morning, he came across a memorial steel plate dedicated to those who had suffered there at the hands of the Nazis. He was most moved and wrote a letter

of reconciliation which we still read aloud every day during the ceremony for wandering spirits.

In early 2012, EIAB Sangha members proposed that we invite local residents, communities, school children and members of other Buddhist centers around the world to sew hearts in memory of each of the 700 handicapped patients the Nazis had removed from the former hospital. It was a great idea and the response was overwhelming. We ended up with more than 1,400 beautiful hearts, enough for a significant exhibition.

As we prepared for the exhibition of Thầy's mindful calligraphy a unique opportunity presented itself to bring the two initiatives together – the hearts project and Thầy's sacred art – in one all-embracing, holistic exhibition on

the theme of suffering, healing and transformation.

We conceptualized the exhibition, to be mounted in the newly-renovated ground floor of the Asoka Institute, as the branch of a lotus plant whose roots begin in the mud of suffering and whose blooms, rising out of the mud, are the transformation of suffering.

We located the symbolic "roots" in the space to the left of the Asoka's Institute's foyer, where large mosaics left over from the Nazi era depict "idealized Aryan people". These images represent the historical conflict and "mud" of suffering caused by the Nazi's racial ideology and discrimination. That is where we placed the display of hand-sewn hearts. We also placed there, in the middle of this "conflict", a calligraphy Thầy wrote to help with the

process of reconciliation and healing: "With the mud of discrimination and fanaticism we grow the lotus of tolerance and inclusiveness." Thầy's words helped many visitors to accept, with compassion, the suffering caused by the painful past.

Thầy's part of the exhibition began with his calligraphy: "Are You Sure?" It is a question for all who hold rigidly to dogmas and ideologies that are the roots of all conflict and deep suffering. From there, the symbolic branch of the lotus plant traveled along the Institute's long marble corridor, where each of Thầy's calligraphies bloomed like a lotus flower.

The integrated exhibition brought so much love and life into the Asoka Institute. Thousands of visitors paused in quiet reflection at the hearts. They

*Hand-sewn hearts featured in the Asoka Institute's inaugural exhibition in 2012, in remembrance of 700 handicapped patients forced out by the Nazis when the building was a hospital, were given a new display format (pictured below) two years later. It was inspired by Thầy's calligraphy (right). In English, it reads: "The tears I shed yesterday have become rain." The hearts represent drops of rain falling from clouds above – represented by pieces of cloth hung from the ceiling – into a river. The prostrate figure on the left is releasing his/her pain and sorrow into the river of tears, which flows to the ocean to be transformed back into drops of rain. Photo courtesy of Joachim Gies Fotografie [www.joachim-gies.de](http://www.joachim-gies.de).*

die tränen die ich  
gestern vergossen  
heute sind zu  
regen geworden







*Stone columns from the Nazi era lay in storage for more than 70 years beneath EIAB's main building, the Asoka Institute.*

also benefited from Thầy's teaching and the healing energy of his calligraphy

by strolling along the lengthy corridor. Thầy himself walked in happiness

through the exhibition in August 2012 when he came to EIAB for major events marking our official opening and to preside over the Institute's formal inauguration.

### **TAKING CARE OF THE WOUNDED LAND**

Besides tending to unresolved suffering in the invisible world, we also needed to bring about healing and transformation on the physical plane. The land, too, had been wounded by what had occurred there long before EIAB arrived. We felt a strong need to heal, reconstruct and redirect its energy. This took the form of two major projects: the building of a physical structure – a bell stupa – tall enough to “balance” EIAB's other structures, and construction of a stately gate, marking a new entrance, through which fresh, living energy could flow into EIAB and compassion could flow out to the world.

Fortunately, the Nazis had left a valuable parting “gift”. Lying abandoned for



*The Stupa of Inclusiveness*



*The Diamond Stupa*



*The Many-Treasured Stupa*

*The stupa has three names depending on where you stand and on the perspective from which you view it. When you are in the center of the garden next to the stupa, it is called the Diamond Stupa. When you approach from the Asoka Building, it is called the Many-Treasured Stupa (Prabhūtaratna Stupa), and when you enter the main gate of the Institute from the town, it is called the Stupa of Inclusiveness.*

more than 70 years in the basement of our main building was a pile of massive stone masonry. It had been intended for a huge structure to be built in front of what is now our Asoka Institute, and supposedly from which Nazi leaders would address a major rally. That never came to pass.

What could be more healing than turning stone columns from the Nazi past into pillars supporting a Buddhist stupa dedicated to inclusiveness; and into a gate dedicated to peace? On that basis, I briefed architects on the design for a 21 meter-tall stupa and for a massive stone gate marking a new entrance for EIAB, positioned away from the road and angled to the northeast to receive the revitalizing energy of the rising sun.

For the stupa's location, we chose a bushy dip in EIAB's lower grounds, a place where you could feel the energy darken. As workers began to dig for the foundations, we discovered that the site had been the estate's garbage dump for more than 100 years. The more our workers dug the more garbage they uncovered. Sr. Song Nghiêm wondered how we could possibly build a stupa on top of this seemingly bottomless pit of garbage.

The answer came, in part, from a vivid dream in which I saw an EIAB friend holding a baby. When I asked whom he was holding, he answered that the baby was dead and that he was moving its body to a new home. I immediately saw the connection to an earlier dream, in which I heard the voices of children crying and calling for help. In that dream, I walked along the hallway to look for the children and elbowed open closed doors. Inside, I found children drowning in toilets and tried to save them. With that disturbing image still fresh in my mind, I was amazed when workers at the stupa construction site reported that they had found many discarded toilets buried in the pit.

With such signs to guide us, we persevered and completed our stupa in 2013. The Nazi's stone columns teeter

at different ascending angles; Buddhist symbols are embedded on every level and mantras of liberation are carved in Sanskrit for the "land ancestors" who suffered as a result of Nazi policies.

The stupa has already brought much transformation and healing to our host land. All through EIAB's extensive grounds the energy is lighter, more joyful. People tell me that the paintwork looks brighter on parts of the Asoka Institute we have not yet started to renovate. One German friend has even suggested that the establishment of EIAB in what was once a Nazi facility and the building of a Buddhist stupa from Nazi pillars is, itself, worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize!<sup>24</sup>

### ENGAGED BUDDHISM – THẦY'S GIFT TO THE WORLD

To return to Norway, EIAB's outreach there last October involved several

events, including a meeting with members of the local Sangha in the city of Kristiansand. As some of the friends at that gathering were new to EIAB, my talk was entitled "What is Applied Buddhism?"

Before attempting to address the topic, however, I had first to introduce Engaged Buddhism for – like the historical issues of the Vietnam War and American civil rights – the two are inseparable.

We can trace Engaged Buddhism's origins to 1954 when, as a young Dharma Teacher, Thầy wrote a series of ten articles for a Vietnamese newspaper, on the overall theme "A Fresh Look at Buddhism".<sup>25</sup>

In those days, the practice of Buddhism in Vietnam had become more or less confined to monasteries, where it mainly served monastics in pursuing their goal of personal liberation. The lay



*An essential stop for EIAB monastics when visiting Sangha members in Norway last October was Oslo's famous Nobel Peace Center, a museum about the Nobel Peace Prize.*



community's role was to support these monastics and they, in return, would perform ceremonies to help members of the lay community secure a good rebirth.

Thầy called for radical change that drew on a deep tradition within Vietnamese Buddhism, as a “living religion”, to adjust and adapt to the social milieu of its time.<sup>26</sup> South Vietnam was a society in crisis. Thầy proposed that Buddhism should move beyond the monastery walls to help the people. It should be active in education, economics, politics, social work, and at bringing about peace and reconciliation between conflicting groups.

Over the next decade, Thầy elaborated upon his thinking in a succession of books which were widely read in Vietnam. He advocated a form of Buddhism that included *both* a contemplative life, for personal healing and transformation, *and* activism to help bring an end to religious and political oppression, intolerance, social injustice and the turmoil of war. For this, he coined the term “Engaged Buddhism”, which in Vietnamese means “entering into life, social life”.<sup>27</sup>

Engaged Buddhism became the spiritual foundation of Thầy's movement for Buddhist reform and renewal in Vietnam, and of the peace activism that led him write to Dr. King. Today, it is the mainstream Buddhist movement throughout the world.

### **APPLIED BUDDHISM – ENGAGING ON A DEEPER LEVEL**

Thầy wrote more than 50 years ago that “the forms of Buddhism must change so that the essence of Buddhism remains unchanged.”<sup>28</sup> As the 21<sup>st</sup> Century dawned, Thầy already knew that a fresh breakthrough would be needed to deepen and sustain the foundations of Engaged Buddhism for the long term.

He foresaw that if Buddhism continued to be practiced in much the same way it

was practiced 2,500 years ago, it could not succeed in helping current and future generations transform personal suffering and societal conflict. Even what we practice today could easily be obsolete in ten years because of the speed at which people, society, knowledge and technology are changing.

Thầy also observed that, often, Buddhism is taught only theoretically. Students and participants gain knowledge but, sadly, do not experience the personal healing and transformation that is the true gem of the Buddha's teaching. They are unable to attain the happiness that is necessary for inner peace and, by extension, for peace in society and the world.

With these and other considerations, Thầy set out to transform theoretical approaches to Buddhism into a form focused on applying practical techniques to help individuals heal and transform themselves in today's world, with all of its uncertainties, pressures and challenges. Thus, Applied Buddhism came into being and with it, in September 2008, the European Institute of Applied Buddhism.

Thầy favors a scientific, open-minded approach that allows for experimentation with new practice techniques, tools and applications, and that enables us to change and evolve with the times. We do not hesitate to adopt insights from different spiritual traditions, from Christianity to Judaism and, from Asia, Taoism and Qi Gong. We also tap into latest discoveries in neuroscience, quantum physics, social psychology and other secular disciplines. So long as such disciplines can be applied in a way that follows the guidance of the Buddha's teaching, helps people to resolve their suffering and further strengthens the foundations of Engaged Buddhism, we will use them.

For Thầy, the essence of Buddhism consists of “living principles that cannot bear any specific formulation.”<sup>29</sup> Rather than spelling out ideas point by point,

Thầy transmits their essence; conveys the general direction of his thoughts and wishes. It is for his students to realize their meaning and to find ways to actualize them.

Year by year, experiment by experiment, EIAB is endeavoring to crystalize Thầy's vision for Applied Buddhism. Through this challenging, humbling process, we have so far identified five core principles that help to underpin and guide our work.

### **Principle 1: Non-Buddhism can be Buddhism**

Buddhist teaching is not removed or separated from non-Buddhist teaching. We should not discriminate between the spiritual and non-spiritual domain for, in the language of Thầy, they “inter-are”. If we know how to use non-Buddhist teaching, then it becomes Buddhist teaching.

For example, if we go for a walk when our mind is on other matters and we are chatting with companions without being aware of our steps, then that is just an everyday walk. But if, when we walk, we are truly aware of each step and of dwelling in the present moment, then that element of mindfulness makes it a Buddhist walk. In other words, whether a teaching is Buddhist or non-Buddhist depends upon how we apply it.

### **Principle 2: The Four Noble Truths are our compass**

The Buddha's Four Noble Truths are our “true north”. Thanks to the Four Noble Truths we know that suffering exists – usually in the form of unease, ill-being, dissatisfaction, emotional or physical pain or lack of personal fulfilment; that the root of our suffering can be found by looking deeply into ourselves to discover how the process of suffering operates and gives rise to different accumulations of ill-being; that our suffering can be transformed or removed, and that the Buddha has

*"Moving meditation" is part of spiritual training. During courses, we start each morning with warm-up exercises which, true to EIAB's inter-disciplinary approach, introduce participants to Qi Gong and Tai Chi. Below, Sr. Song Nghiêm leads a recent session.*



given us the path to heal ourselves and attain enlightenment.

As those who visit EIAB discover, we do not practice Buddhism out of some metaphysical idea, intellectual curiosity or theoretical investigation. We apply the Buddha's teaching because we want to solve the everyday problem of suffering, here and now. In the words of Thầy, we help our students "recognize, embrace and transform painful feelings and emotions."<sup>30</sup> We also help them to develop a new perspective or outlook on life. For example, depression has become so common that in many societies it is now considered a serious public health issue. Often, the cause

is stress and workplace-related. EIAB shows individuals how to bring the practice of mindfulness into their daily life so they may cope better. The courses we offer are equally aimed at those who wish to become more skillful in handling personal conflict in their family or workplace.

**Principle 3:**  
**Bodhisattva aspiration;**  
**Bodhicitta mind**

Regardless of how enlightened we might become, if people around us still suffer, our enlightenment is not complete. It can only be complete when, by accepting that our suffering

is deeply related to theirs, we give rise to the Bodhisattva aspiration to help all living beings heal and transform themselves.

This fundamental realization is a vital source of spiritual energy for EIAB. Without the Bodhisattva ideal, we would lack the drive to move beyond theoretical knowledge or to experiment with practical applications and new tools that can help others.

I can offer a simple illustration. For many years Thầy, has patiently given much the same basic teaching using much the same words: follow your breathing, walk mindfully and embrace





*During a dialogue with Waldbröl community leaders, we shared the Bodhisattva ideal and mission of EIAB. Thầy Pháp Ân presented an original piece of Thầy's calligraphic art, with the words "For a better world" in German, to Mr. Peter Koester, the Mayor.*

your emotions. For a brilliant, original thinker like Thầy I doubt it brings him much joy to keep repeating himself. But Thầy has not spoken out of any need of his own to speak. His emphasis has always been on the need of people in the audience to listen because, for many, his message is still new. Thầy wants them to be able to hear and practice it, even though it is elementary.

On a related note, I once directly received a teaching from Thầy that I shall never forget. He said that we work not to earn praise or recognition, fame or power, but to satisfy a deep need arising from the Bodhisattva ideal within us, the mind of love known as the Bodhicitta mind. It becomes our spiritual career. We feel uplifted whenever we are able to fulfil our deep wish to help others transform their suffering.

Thanks to this Bodhisattva motivation and Bodhicitta mind, we are constantly

re-energized and refreshed at EIAB – despite having a packed year-round program of activities! The moment we see suffering in someone who comes to practice with us, we know that something needs to be done; we have to find a technique to help him or her. It is our duty as an Institute. We cannot say: "I've already shared with you everything I know. Why can't you 'get' it? Why don't you practice? Why don't you transform?" No. When a person cannot transform it is a sign that our methods and tools are not yet effective. We need to go further, to find what truly will help him or her.

**Principle 4:**  
**We teach from our own practice and transformation**

Thầy has made it clear that if we do not directly experience personal transformation when testing new techniques

and tools of practice, then transmitting these to others would be like selling fake products.

Monastics at EIAB are encouraged to be creative in our own practice. But if an experiment does not work, we have to ask ourselves "why?" and "what can we do about it?" In this way, EIAB functions like a laboratory. We test new applications and tools for Buddhist practice in a safe environment where experiments are carefully monitored and evaluated before we share their results. Only through such authentication do we add new discoveries to Applied Buddhism's expanding body of freshly-adapted teachings, techniques and tools.

**Principle 5:**  
**We cannot succeed alone**

As individuals, we can accomplish very little on our own. Just thinking about



*During construction of the Gate of Interbeing, Thầy Pháp Ân climbed the scaffold to express his joy when the beam inscribed with Thầy's "Peace in Oneself, Peace in the World" was finally in position.*

the causes, scale and complexity of suffering in the world today can be overwhelming. For Applied Buddhism to succeed in the long term we need, like the Buddha, to build a strong and successful community of practice, a Noble Sangha equipped with practices and techniques that can help us address the age-old reality of suffering in the modern era.

That is why EIAB invites all who seek refuge in our Sangha to engage fully

with us as we develop and refine Applied Buddhism. As Thầy likes to say, one Buddha is not enough. We need a community of Buddhas.

### A "COSMIC RELIGION" FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

EIAB is a loving gift of peace that has come out of the suffering of discrimination and war. It is, in particular, a gift from Thầy, Vietnamese Buddhism

and the Bodhisattva Dr. Martin Luther King, who in a dark hour for the US as well as Vietnam, joined Thầy in a non-violent movement for peace, just as Thầy joined Dr. King in building a global Beloved Community.

Thầy's entire life is a "Peace Prize". He has been the recipient of many prestigious awards acknowledging his contributions to peace, humanity and spirituality.

Most recently, Thầy was among 100 global thought leaders whose insights are featured in a novel 3D-printed book, entitled *Genius: 100 Visions of the Future*, part of a program in Canada to celebrate the centennial of Albert Einstein's General Theory of Relativity.<sup>31</sup> I had the honor of representing Thầy at the event in Montreal last September for the book's hand-picked contributors, and to share about Thầy's vision and life.

In his extraordinary essay for the book, Thầy looks deep into the future and explains that every advance in our understanding of ourselves, nature, and our place in the cosmos is an expansion

*The Sangha was so happy that Thầy's health enabled him still to travel to preside over EIAB's formal inauguration on 22 August 2012. Thầy and honored guest Mr. Peter Koester, Mayor of Waldbröl, performed a ceremonial unveiling of the Asoka Institute's newly-renovated ground floor. Thầy also gave his blessing for us to proceed with construction of the Stupa of Inclusiveness and the Gate of Interbeing, which were formally inaugurated a year later.*





in human consciousness: “As Einstein said, the more we understand the great harmony, elegance and beauty of the cosmos, the more we feel profound awe and love.”

Thầy notes that many scientists still believe there is a subjective consciousness independent of the outside world: “They think there is a world, a universe, moon and stars that are objective and are always there whether there is consciousness or not,” he says. “But whenever we look up at the sky, moon, stars, and galaxies, we must see that they are not independent of consciousness: *they are also consciousness*. Consciousness and the object of consciousness cannot be separated, just as we cannot separate right from left. This is the insight of interbeing.”

In Thầy’s view, it should be possible in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century for us to create a spirituality and ethic that can unite

all peoples and all nations, removing all separation and discrimination. He calls this “a cosmic religion”, one based not on myth, belief or dogma, but on evidence and the insight of non-duality, of interbeing.

“Science and religion will then go hand in hand, and the insight of non-duality will lead to many important breakthroughs and discoveries. A cosmic religion founded on evidence, and a new science founded on the insight of interbeing, would truly represent a giant leap for humankind,” Thầy writes.

### A LONG JOURNEY AHEAD

A spiritual future such as that envisioned by Thầy goes further than Applied Buddhism, just as Applied Buddhism goes deeper than Engaged Buddhism. Helping it to manifest upon the foundation of Thầy’s Bodhisattva

vow and deep insights into suffering and the way out of suffering, will surely keep EIAB on our toes for the next 100 years and beyond! We aspire not only to fulfil Thầy’s intention to create a modern Buddhist institute in Europe that is a model for the world but, also, for EIAB to become a springboard for humankind’s “giant leap” to the new cosmic religion as conceived of by Thầy.

We are at the beginning of what will be a long journey. But thanks to the generosity and support of so many friends in Germany and around the world, EIAB has made a good start in our first 10 years.

We now have 38 resident monastics and the capacity to welcome more.

On our campus, alone, we have received a total of some 50,000 students and visitors, based on enrolments for EIAB courses, retreats and other activities during that period. The total number is

*For a time, EIAB’s resident monastic community was expanded to 50 with the arrival in 2011 of 28 brothers and sisters from Vietnam. In September 2009, they had been driven out of Bát Nhã (“Prajna”) Monastery, in the Central Highlands, by authorities there. Pictured below is the expanded community during the 2011–12 Winter Retreat.*

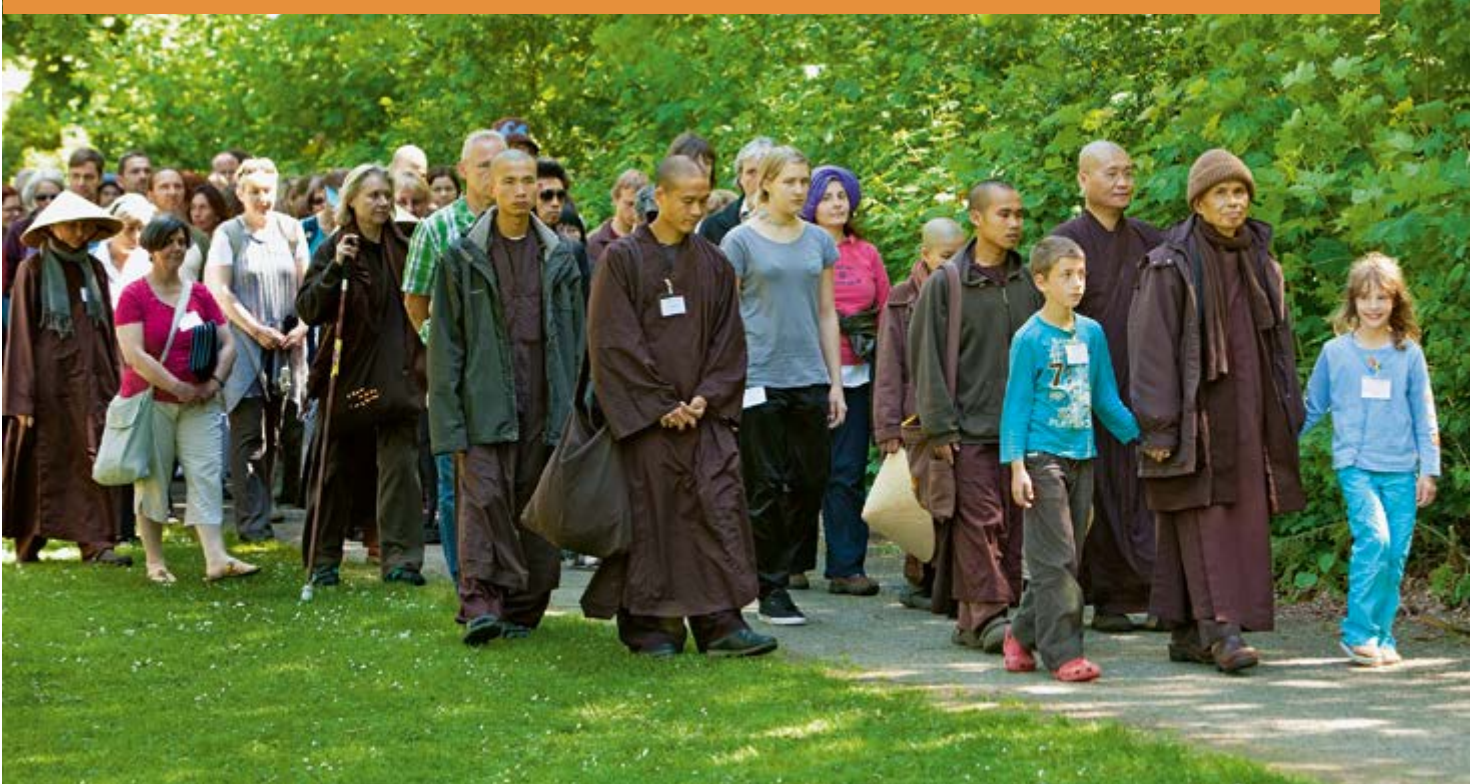






*Close to 1,000 people flocked to EIAB for the 2012 summer retreat, led by Thầy. We erected a high-tech tent as a temporary meditation hall. Above, retreatants listen to Plum Village and EIAB monastics chanting before Thầy's Dharma talk.*

*Walking meditation led by Thầy during EIAB's 2010 summer retreat.*







*EIAB regularly welcomes a total of about 100 students and practitioners for our Day of Mindfulness each Sunday. Some are in residence while they take courses; others just come for the day.*



*Above and below: ceremonies in October 2014, during our Vietnamese Retreat, to initiate construction of EIAB's new kitchen and dining hall.*







*An elevated view of the kitchen and dining hall construction site in April 2015.*



*Waldbröl's Mayor, Mr. Peter Koester, visited our construction site in March 2016, accompanied by his wife Mrs. Bertamini-Koester*



*EIAB's new kitchen and dining hall – able to seat 200 – were ready in time for the 2017 Easter Retreat.*



*Sr. Song Nghiêem with Dr. Lilian Cheung, co-author of Thầy's book Savor, Mindful Eating, Mindful Life. It is a source of much culinary inspiration and spiritual guidance for "eating meditation" in the new facility.*



*EIAB sisters enthusiastically don aprons, ready for action in the new kitchen/dining hall complex upon its completion in April 2017.*



*Having a seriously modern kitchen – at last – is cause for a fun-filled celebration by EIAB sisters.*





*We created a water feature that we named Spring Buds Pond (Hồ Mầm Xuân) directly in front of the new dining hall, ensuring diners a beautiful, tranquil outlook.*



*In September 2017, Spring Buds Pond (Hồ Mầm Xuân) welcomed its first lotus flowers.*

much higher if we include attendance at retreats lead by EIAB in Europe, Hong Kong, Thailand and other parts of Asia. Each year, the number of students and practitioners EIAB attracts and reaches continues to grow.

On the practical side, we have renovated 20 % of the 12,000 meters<sup>2</sup> Asoka Institute and its ground floor, with plans to renovate other sections still very much alive. With exceptionally generous donations from three kind

EIAB supporters and from many other contributors worldwide, we have been able to build a light and airy dining hall that can seat up to 200 monastics and guests. We have also built a state-of-the-art kitchen so we may offer our



*As we greeted the Year of the Earth Dog last February, EIAB held a solemn ceremony in the Asoka Institute to initiate work for the construction of our future meditation hall.*



*Thầy Pháp Ân performed a symbolic ground breaking at the spot where the meditation hall will connect with the Asoka Institute.*



*At day break, our ceremonies moved outside, where Sr. Song Nghiêm and Thầy Pháp Tri turned the first clod of earth on the actual site of the future meditation hall.*



*Thầy Pháp Xà and Sr. Biếu Nghiêm continued the work of digging into the icy ground. Other members of the Sangha soon followed, joining in this joyful act of blessing for the future hall.*



*EIAB is a vision of Thầy for future generations, including those who today are amongst the Sangha's youngest members.*



*Finally, the foundation stone for the new meditation hall was gently lowered by Thầy Pháp Ân.*

guests delicious, nutritious vegetarian meals prepared mindfully and with love by EIAB monastics.

Earlier this year, we formally made a start on our project to build a meditation hall, for which we have started a new fund-raising campaign. (Please see also page 46).

Many other important projects and interesting programs are on EIAB's drawing board for coming years. We shall need to be patient as well as persistent for we have – in every sense – embarked upon a work of generations.

### A JEWEL IN THE FLAMES

On the opening page of *Vietnam – Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, the book that so impacted Dr. King, Thầy published his English translation of a poem by the Vietnamese Zen monk Ngô Ân (1019–1088; 8<sup>th</sup> generation in the lineage of Zen Master Vô Ngôn Thông):

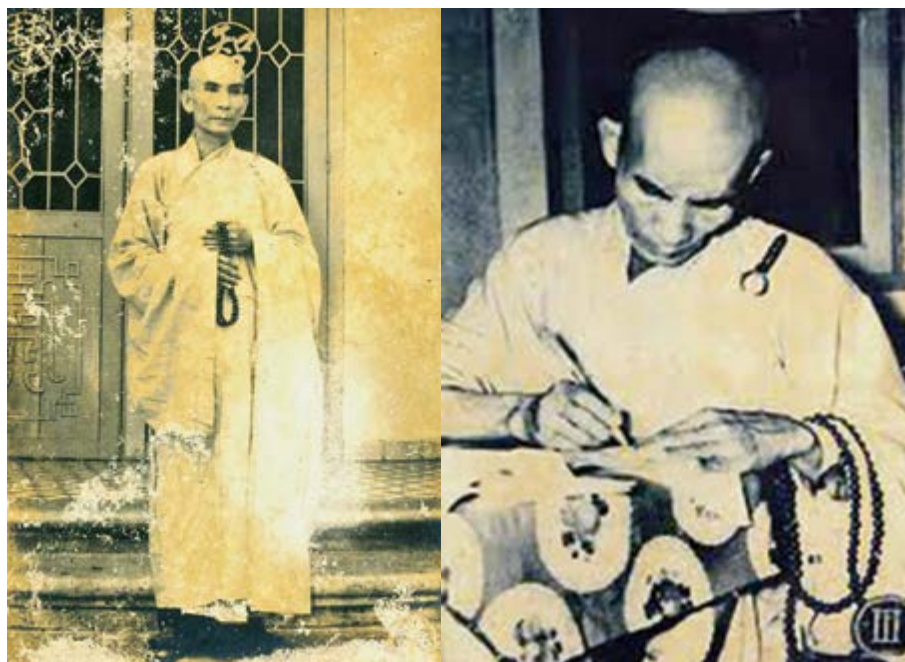
*The jade burned on the mountain retains its natural color,  
The lotus, blooming in the furnace, does not lose its freshness.<sup>32</sup>*

Reading it brings to mind the historic photograph of Ven. Thích Quảng Đức, seated in the lotus position; straight, still and serene in a circle of fire. I was

about six years old when I first saw it. My father kept several photographs of the Venerable in a drawer at our home. That particular image had an enormous effect on me.

Even today I cannot adequately express in words my reaction. I was strongly drawn to the photograph. It touched

my heart. Whenever I looked at it I felt not fear or sadness but a deep sense of love for Ven. Thích Quảng Đức. It was a photograph that made me think – and go on thinking. For many years, I kept an enlarged and framed copy in my room at Upper Hamlet in Plum Village and, of course, we have a copy on the ancestral altar here at EIAB.



Ven. Thích Quảng Đức (left) was 67 years old and Abbot of the Quan Âm Pagoda in the province of Gia Định when he self-immolated at a busy Saigon crossroads 55 years ago. Above (right) the Venerable is pictured writing his final letters. In one, headed "My Fervent Vow", he said "...it is with joy in my heart that I have made the deep vow to immolate this illusory and temporary body as an offering to the Buddha so that the merit may go to the preservation of Buddhism." In setting out his "deep wish" he, among other things, asked South Vietnam's President Ngô Đình Diệm "to look with compassion and loving kindness on the people of Vietnam and put into effect a policy of equality towards all religions so that the land of Vietnam may maintain its stability for ten thousand lifetimes". Thầy later observed in his well-known three-volume history of Vietnamese Buddhism: "...in the whole of the letter there is not one bit of hatred or despair expressed. On the contrary, the letter is pervaded by love and hope."<sup>35</sup>



The photograph also brings to mind Buddhist scriptures, dating back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD, about the net of Indra, the Vedic king of heaven. Indra's net stretches in all directions into infinity. At the center of each vertex, or "eye", hangs a glittering jewel whose surface reflects all the other jewels. The jewels multiply and re-multiply each other endlessly. In one jewel there are all the jewels and in all the jewels there is one. Each jewel keeps its own identity while reflecting all the other jewels.<sup>33</sup>

This ancient metaphor for interbeing goes to the heart of Thầy's vision of a cosmic religion free of duality, separation and discrimination. The same insight can be found in Christian scripture when Jesus says: "In my Father's house are many mansions...."<sup>34</sup> In other words, there is enough spiritual, cultural and social space for us all to live together in tolerance, harmony and peace; for each to keep his or her own identity whilst respecting the individual identity of all others.

The insight of interbeing is the spiritual ground for EIAB's mission of healing and transformation and the inspiration behind our many projects and activities, including those highlighted in this article – the combined exhibition of Thầy's calligraphy and of the hand-sewn hearts, the building of the stupa and the construction of the gate.

At a desperate time of religious discrimination and war in Vietnam, Ven. Thích Quảng Đức and others gave their lives to the highest cause of a future without intolerance, fanaticism, dictatorship and other "enemies" residing in the human heart.

It is possible to destroy a person's physical being but not the love in their heart. It is, in fact, wondrous that Ven. Thích Quảng Đức's heart survived the flames and is today regarded by many in Vietnam as the relic of a Bodhisattva. Like Thầy, EIAB still feels strongly the Venerable's love and compassion. And as with Indra's net, the brilliant jewel represented by Ven. Thích Quảng Đức

– whose Dharma Name means "Far Reaching Virtue" – continues to reflect, and be reflected, endlessly.

## END NOTES

- 1 On 4 April 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee
- 2 *Vietnam – Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, by Thich Nhat Hanh, Hill and Wang, New York, first edition February 1967. Thầy's open letter to Dr. King is reproduced in the Appendices
- 3 A transcript of President Johnson's news conference of 28 July 1965 is archived at The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=27116>. Accessed 14 May 2018
- 4 *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by Clayborne Carson, Grand Central Publishing, Park Avenue, New York, second e-book edition, January 2001, Loc 5578
- 5 In the following decade, many more Vietnamese Buddhist monks, nuns and laypeople self-immolated to draw attention to ongoing repression and the intense suffering caused by the war as the US became more involved
- 6 Thầy expressed this sentiment with equal passion in a poem entitled "Recommendation", reprinted below from *Call Me By My True Names: the Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh*. Parallax Press, Berkeley, California, 1999, P18. The poem touched the author of this article deeply. Soon after his ordination, he set it to music and sang it often to the Sangha at the request of Thầy. The poem was also musically adapted into other languages, including English, by the Brothers of Weston Priory in Vermont, US

### Recommendation

by Thích Nhất Hạnh – 1965

*Promise me,  
promise me this day,  
promise me now,  
while the sun is overhead  
exactly at the zenith,  
promise me:*

*Even as they  
strike you down  
with a mountain of hatred and violence;  
even as they step on you and crush you  
like a worm,  
even as they dismember and disembowel you,  
remember, brother,  
remember:  
man is not our enemy.*

*The only thing worthy of you is compassion –  
invincible, limitless, unconditional.  
Hatred will never let you face  
the beast in man.*

*One day, when you face this beast alone,  
with your courage intact, your eyes kind,  
untroubled  
(even as no one sees them),*

*out of your smile  
will bloom a flower.  
And those who love you  
will behold you  
across ten thousand worlds of birth and  
dying.*

*Alone again,  
I will go on with bent head,  
knowing that love has become eternal.  
On the long, rough road,  
the sun and the moon  
will continue to shine.*

- 7 *At Home In The World: Stories and Essential Teachings from a Monk's Life*, by Thich Nhat Hanh ©2016 Unified Buddhist Church, Inc. Parallax Press, P12
- 8 Ibid P72
- 9 Ibid. See also a transcript of a May 2010 television interview with Thầy by Oprah Winfrey. <https://plumvillage.org/thich-nhat-hanh-interviews/oprah-talks-to-thich-nhat-hanh/>, accessed 13 May 2018
- 10 A facsimile of Dr. King's letter can be viewed on the website of The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change ("The King Center"), established in 1968 by Mrs. Coretta Scott King, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/letter-mlk-nobel-institute>. Accessed 12 May 2018
- 11 *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Ch 30, Loc 5599
- 12 The prepared text of Dr. King's speech "The Casualties of the War in Vietnam" can be viewed at the King Center <http://www.thekingcenter.org/archive/document/casualties-war-vietnam>. Accessed 12 May 2018. An audio recording of the speech, in which Dr. King states that the civil rights and peace movements should be combined, can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjyM7V16SHI>. Accessed 26 May 2018
- 13 The text and audio of "the Riverside Speech" can be accessed at Stanford University's Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/beyond-vietnam>, accessed 12 May 2018
- 14 Dr. King quoted from *Vietnam – Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, P81
- 15 1968 also saw the assassination, on 6 June, of Dr. King's political ally Senator Robert Kennedy while campaigning to be the Democratic candidate for that year's US Presidential elections, and the sudden death in Thailand, on 10 December, at the age of 53, of Thomas Merton, the US-based Trappist monk, social activist and scholar who had written the foreword to Thầy's *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*
- 16 *At Home in the World: Stories and Essential Teachings from a Monk's Life* P73
- 17 The King Center, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy#sub4>. Accessed 11 May 2018

- 18 From a note handwritten by Thầy on 4 July 2007, in which he outlines his vision for EIAB. The original is kept in EIAB's archives
- 19 Ibid
- 20 EIAB receives visitors from many European countries, including Holland, Denmark, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Italy, France, Austria, Switzerland, Luxembourg, the Czech Republic, Poland and some from Asia. It also organizes outreach programs in Europe and Asia
- 21 *Zur Geschichte der Heil- und Pflegeanstalt Waldbröl 1893-1938*, by Hans Simon. In: *Beiträge zur Oberbergischen Geschichte*. Hg.: Bergischer Geschichtsverein Abteilung Oberberg. EV 1924, Bd. 2, Gummersbach 1989, P126
- 22 Erratum: the caption set into this photograph should read Sr. Hien Hanh (not Sr. Hien Han) and Br. Phap Nhat (not Br. Phat Nhat)
- 23 See also the Hong Kong announcement for the exhibition, which was entitled: "Calligraphic Meditation: The Mindful Art of Thích Nhất Hạnh". [http://www.umag.hku.hk/en/exhibition\\_detail.php?id=714344](http://www.umag.hku.hk/en/exhibition_detail.php?id=714344). Accessed 19 May 2018
- 24 A remark by Jochen Fassbender, a musician based in Walbröl, upon his first visit to EIAB in the summer of 2013. He felt inspired by EIAB and a duty to support Thầy's vision of peace. Mr. Fassbender has since offered music courses at the Institute and regularly performs in the foyer of the Asoka Institute to help raise funds for EIAB
- 25 "History of Engaged Buddhism" a Dharma talk by Thích Nhất Hạnh, Hanoi, Vietnam 6-7 May 2008. Reproduced in *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, VI, 3, Summer 2008, P30
- 26 *Vietnam – Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, concluding chapter
- 27 "History of Engaged Buddhism", P31
- 28 *Vietnam – Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, concluding chapter
- 29 Ibid
- 30 From Thầy's handwritten note of 2007
- 31 A multi-faceted project started in 2015, the centennial year, by the Canadian Friends of the Hebrew University. See <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/mark-the-centennial-of-the-theory-of-relativity-on-a-global-scale-503570801.html>. Accessed 15 May 2018. See also the website for the 3D-printed book *Genius: 100 Visions of the Future* <http://genius100visions.com/100-visions-of-the-future>, which lists the contributors, including Thầy. Accessed 15 May 2018
- 32 *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận*, Nguyễn Lang (Thích Nhất Hạnh), Nhà Xuất Bản Lá Bối, Sài Gòn, 1973. Vol 1. Chapter 8 (Chương 08: Tổng quan về Phật giáo đời nhà Lý (1010-1225))  
 妙性虛無不可攀  
 虛無心悟得何難  
 玉焚山上色常潤  
 蓮發池中濕未乾  
 (Thiền Uyển Tập Anh, 1715 edition, Sheet 23b1)  
 Diệu tính hư vô bất khả phân  
 Hư vô tâm ngộ đắc hà nan?  
 Ngọc phần sơn thượng sắc thường nhuận  
 Liên phát lô trung thấp vị can  
 (Sino-Vietnamese phonetic transcription)  
 Chân tính hư vô khó đến nơi  
 Chi hư tâm đạt đến mà thôi  
 Trên núi ngọc thiêu màu vẫn thấm  
 Trong lò sen nở sắc thường tươi  
 (Vietnamese translation by Thích Nhất Hạnh)  
 The wondrous nature of emptiness cannot be grasped;  
 Yet why should it be considered hard to comprehend when, with an empty mind, it can be understood?  
 Burning a piece of jade on the top of a mountain only intensifies the brilliance of its natural luster;  
 (And) a lotus that blooms within a furnace never withers or loses its freshness.  
 (Literal English translation by Thầy Pháp Ấn)
- 33 See also *Hua-Yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra*, by Francis H. Cook. (Penn State Press, 1977) P214 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indra%27s\\_net](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indra%27s_net); [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indra%27s\\_net#Avatamsaka\\_Sutra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indra%27s_net#Avatamsaka_Sutra)
- 34 John 14:2 King James Version; <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=-John+14%3A2&version=KJV>
- 35 *Việt Nam Phật Giáo Sử Luận*, Nguyễn Lang (Thích Nhất Hạnh), Nhà Xuất Bản Lá Bối, Sài Gòn, 1973. Vol 3. Chapter 38 (Chương 38: Cuộc vận động chống chế độ Ngô Đình Diệm – Ngọn Lửa Quảng Đức)





# EIAB's journey: milestones and mindful steps

## The backdrop

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**1954** – Thầy writes a series of ten articles in Vietnam calling for a fresh look at Buddhism. This marks the beginning of what he later calls “Engaged Buddhism”

**1963** – *11 June*: Ven. Thích Quảng Đức is the first of five monks that summer to self-immolate to draw the world's attention to the violent suppression of Buddhism by the regime in South Vietnam

**1965** – *1 June*: Thầy writes an open letter to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. explaining the true meaning of the self-immolations and calling on Dr. King not to remain silent about “the indescribable suffering of the Vietnamese people”, at a time when US military involvement is escalating

**1966** – *1 June*: Thầy and Dr. King meet in Chicago. At a press conference, they combine the cause of peace in Vietnam with the fight for civil rights in the US

**1967** – *25 January*: Dr. King nominates Thầy for the 1967 Nobel Peace Prize, though none, ultimately, is awarded that year

**1967** – *4 April*: Dr. King delivers his historic speech “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence”, in which he quotes from Thầy's book *Vietnam – Lotus in a Sea of Fire*

**1967** – *May*: Thầy and Dr. King meet again, in Geneva, and continue their discussion on peace, freedom, the building of community and how to end the war in Vietnam

**1968** – *4 April*: Dr. King is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee

## The Institute

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**2006** – *May*: Thầy decides the time is right to open an Institute of Applied Buddhism, an idea that has been in his mind for some years, and assigns the project to Thầy Pháp Ấn. He chooses Germany for its location

**2007** – *4 July*: In a handwritten note, Thầy sets out his vision for EIAB

**2007** – *18 July*: Dortmund-based lawyer and notary Dr. Alexander Puplick is appointed our legal representative in Germany to establish EIAB as a legal entity and to purchase a property here. German Sangha friends begin an extensive search

**2008** – *7 March*: Thầy inspects and chooses a property at Waldbröl, near Cologne. The 5.7 hectare estate includes a vacant 12,000 m<sup>2</sup> building, 150 meters long. It was constructed more than 110 years earlier as a hospital for the mentally and physically handicapped. Acquisition of the estate begins

**2008** – *May*: While in Hanoi, Vietnam, Thầy announces that an Institute of Applied Buddhism has been founded in Europe, with other campuses to be established in Asia and America

**2008** – *7 September*: 22 monastics leave Plum Village for Germany. *10 September*: EIAB “has arrived” as we take up residence in the building we now call The Asoka Institute. *11 September*: Thầy comes to Waldbröl. The following day, at a press conference with Mr. Peter Koester, the Mayor of Waldbröl, Thầy announces EIAB’s establishment. In these first weeks, we experience unusual phenomena suggesting the presence of wandering spirits with unresolved suffering from the Nazi past. Thầy requests us to offer our energy of compassion. Soon after, he writes a letter of reconciliation which we still read aloud every day

**2009** – We work intensively to build the Institute’s faculty, curricula, program of courses and administrative infrastructure. *September*: As renovations to the Asoka Institute begin, resident monastics move into a nearby building – since named the Great Compassion Monastery – which we are in the process of acquiring. Now, we can also accommodate guests taking EIAB courses

**2010** – *June*: Renovation of 20% of the Asoka Institute is completed. Thầy agrees to an EIAB fund-raising proposal, developed with the help of the Hong Kong Sangha, for a travelling exhibition of his calligraphy. *November*: The exhibition, entitled “Calligraphic Meditation: The Mindful Art of Thích Nhất Hạnh”, opens in Hong Kong

**2011** – Thầy’s calligraphy exhibition travels to New Taipei City, Taiwan, and Vancouver, Canada. At EIAB, we conceptualize two construction projects to help heal and redirect the energy of the land – a tall stupa and a massive gate – using stone columns abandoned by the Nazis

**2012** – *May*: EIAB launches a campaign for hearts to be sewn by hand in memory of each of the 700 handicapped patients the Nazis removed from the (then) hospital in 1938–39. *August*: A combined exhibition of Thầy’s calligraphy and the hand-sewn hearts opens on the ground floor of the Asoka Institute. The theme is suffering, healing and transformation. *22 August*: Thầy formally inaugurates EIAB and gives his blessing for EIAB to construct a 21-meter high stupa and a stately gate for the estate’s new entrance. Thầy also leads EIAB’s summer retreat, attended by nearly 1,000 people

**2013** – *August*: We inaugurate the Stupa of Inclusiveness and the Gate of Interbeing

**2014** – *April*: We begin to overhaul the fire alarm system of the Great Compassion Monastery, as required by government regulations. *October*: We initiate construction of a spacious modern kitchen with a dining hall to seat 200

**2015-16** – Renovation and construction projects initiated in 2014 continue; we also complete landscaping – including a lotus pond – around the future dining hall. We continue to expand and develop EIAB’s course offerings and to organize outreach programs to cities across Europe and, in Asia, Hong Kong and Japan

**2017** – *April*: EIAB’s new kitchen and dining hall are ready in time for the Easter Retreat

**2018** – *19 February*: To welcome the Lunar New Year of the Dog, we hold ceremonies to initiate work for construction of our future meditation hall. *May*: As of now, EIAB has 38 resident monastics. We welcome some 100 people each Sunday for our Day of Mindfulness, including those taking residential courses. Nearing our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, this September, EIAB has so far received a total of some 50,000 students and visitors on our campus and reached many more people through our programs offered across Europe and beyond. The numbers continue to grow each year





## EIAB: how we made it happen

*When our beloved teacher Thay determined in 2006 that the time was right to pursue his vision for an Institute of Applied Buddhism, Sr. Chan Khong sent a heartfelt appeal for support to Plum Village friends around the world. Dortmund-based lawyer and notary Dr. Alexander Puplick, and his wife Beate, were among those who answered the call. Dr. Puplick became our legal representative to establish the future Institute as a legal entity in Germany and to purchase a property here. As they recount below, it was no easy task....*



*Dr. Alexander Puplick (right) and his wife Beate with Thay at EIAB on the historic day – 12 September 2008 – when Thay announces its formal establishment.*

### A great connection arising

In the summer of 2006, my wife Beate and I attended the summer retreat at Plum Village, in France, for the second time. Once again, we were in Lower Hamlet where we enjoyed the calm, the peace and the mindfulness. We were deeply impressed by Sr. Chan Khong

and by Sr. Jina, who told us about her stays in Japanese Zen monasteries.

We had the great joy of spending our two-week retreat with the “Sunflower Family”, led by Sr. Song Nghiem. Our family was responsible for breakfast and we met each morning at 5.45 a.m. to prepare it. Sr. Song Nghiem was there

to greet us warmly with a beaming smile and provide us with gathas, which she wrote on tiny slips of paper for all participants every morning.

It was the year in which our highly-esteemed Thay Phap An gave his moving talk “Beauty in the Sun, Beauty in the Rain” in which he described

his childhood and youth in Da Nang, central Vietnam, up until his flight from Vietnam in a small fishing boat overloaded with hundreds of refugees. His life story touched us all deeply. I felt transported back to my own childhood. In the late 1960s and early 1970s almost every night the news was full of terrifying images of the war in the oppressed country of Vietnam. Thay Phap An described the war, the destruction and the unimaginable suffering, which caused so many wounds that are still apparent, in such a way that brought it to life and moved all who listened.

Although we and many other retreatants had read Thich Nhat Hanh's *Fragrant Palm Leaves* and Sr. Chan Khong's *Learning True Love* – or at least some chapters – we were shocked and many cried. The listeners were impressed by the way in which Thay Phap An had succeeded in transforming that great suffering and misery, and his apparently-lost childhood, into so much goodness and compassion.

Out of this arose an even greater connection and compassion with all those monks and nuns who had come from Vietnam and made the summer retreat possible.

The Dharma talks that year by our highly-esteemed teacher Thich Nhat Hanh (Thay) seemed to us to be particularly deep and clear, penetrating and true. We admired Thay's ability to teach the experiences of the Buddha in a way that was so relevant to modern life – to our individual and, at the same time, collective fears, difficulties, worries and conflicts – that those present felt that these teachings could be directly applied to their own lives.<sup>1</sup> Thay's words repeatedly helped us appreciate our own lives, regardless of our life situation. Many were surrounded by death, separation, severe illness, life crises, fears about economic survival. They had come to Plum Village searching for a way to deal mindfully with themselves and others, and for healing and direction.

*“The miracle is to be born as a human being and to be able to walk on this earth” (Thay)*

We felt gratitude for this life as a human being and compassion for all living beings and manifestations.

### Inspired by Thay's vision

The previous year, 2005, Thay had been able to visit his homeland after 39 years in exile. Thay Phap An and members of the Sangha had negotiated with the authorities in Vietnam for many months to enable Thay and a group of 100 monks and nuns, and 100 practitioners from 30 nations to make this journey<sup>2</sup>.

Perhaps inspired by the experience of this return to his homeland, Thay was moved to act upon his great vision to establish an Institute of Applied Buddhism – and to locate its campus in the center of Europe. In 2006, Sr. Chan Khong sent a letter to Plum Village friends around the world in which she said:

*Our planet is so desperately in need of people who can help others discover that peace is possible in this world, there are concrete ways to make peace a reality in our lives, and we only need to learn and practice these methods to realize happiness for ourselves and everyone around us. For the amount that one person typically spends on a university education, we can train many monastics, and the return on the investment is very high in terms of relieving suffering and bringing more light and hope into the world. And we don't have to wait a number of years before reaping the benefits; already during training every monk and nun is serving many people, helping them to be (at)*

*peace, to liberate themselves, to be a light unto others.*

*Please help us realize Thay's deep wish to ensure the continued training of monastics in the tradition of Plum Village... We wish that you could contribute the maximum that you are able, even just one time – one time that will make it possible for generation after generation of monks and nuns to continue Thay in the most authentic way.*

– Sr. Chan Khong

During that summer retreat of 2006, we felt that something concrete would happen. After a Dharma talk in the second week, Sr. Chan Khong spoke to us. She shared with us that Thay would like to talk to us about this project. In his small, very modest hut on the eastern side of Upper Hamlet, not far from the newly-erected bell tower, we found ourselves together with our beloved teacher and Sr. Chan Khong for the first time. Tea was handed round. After a few minutes of stillness Thay looked at us, full of inner peace and energy, and enabled us to feel an inner connection. Sr. Chan Khong introduced us. Then Thay began to talk in short, succinct sentences:

The project is about research into Buddhism on the basis of personal experience – as the Buddha himself had taught it.

The intention is to create a campus that provides an experience of Buddhism, not another scholastic or philosophical teaching institution.

The focus will be on practitioners and the application of Buddhist principles, so that each individual practitioner, regardless of his or her reasons for coming to the Institute, will have a direct experience of the teachings. It will not be about lectures but about experiences that transform.



It is about creating an institution in which the insights gained can be integrated and practiced in a way appropriate to everyday life.

The Institute should be open to people of all backgrounds regardless of education or beliefs.

The Institute should also be recognized as a research centre.

In addition, programs offered by the Institute – in particular, in the healing professions, natural sciences and social sciences – should one day be officially accredited by government and professional bodies; EIAB students should be able to apply credit points from courses successfully completed at EIAB to their other academic and professional pursuits.

We signaled to Thay that we had understood. We then drank our tea together and, with a deep bow, departed. We “felt” the deep meaning and had an inkling of what was meant, without being fully aware of the full extent of what Thay had in mind. And we felt a sense of responsibility. These moments with our beloved teacher Thay and Sr. Chan Khong left a deep impression on our life.

Thay was not founding a university for the first time. As we later learned, he had already co-founded the Van Hanh University in 1964 in what was then known as Saigon (today’s Ho Chi Minh City), after a study visit and lecture tour at Princeton and Columbia, in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

We agreed with Sr. Chan Khong that we would wait for further news. At the same time she told us that there were Sangha members in Germany who believed they had already identified a possible site where the future Institute could be established. She mentioned her friends “Bich” and “Thien” from Rheine.<sup>4</sup> Subsequently, Sangha members Bich Lien-Anh Nguyen and her husband Thien Dang Nguyen, from Rheine, contacted

us and invited us to visit them in November 2006.

### Addressing the legalities

It was a beautiful afternoon in a very hospitable atmosphere when we held our discussions with Thien and Bich, who prepared delicious homemade Vietnamese specialities. Bich explained that she had received very specific questions from Plum Village, which we tried to answer as well as we could. We examined the different options for the best form of legal structure for the acquisition of property, and for the subsequent operation of a seminar and study center. We told of our discussions with Sr. Chan Khong in Plum Village and the goals and vision that connected Thay with the proposed Institute.

Bich reported back to Sr. Chan Khong and the next task for us was to form the most suitable legal vehicle for the acquisition and operation of the campus for which we were searching. It soon became clear that the most appropriate vehicle would be a “legal person” resident in Germany, as this would offer future contractual partners a transparent structure which they could understand and trust.

We therefore created – and adapted, taking into account Thay’s and Sr. Chan Khong’s own legal understanding, plus the format of the Plum Village organization which already existed in the United States – a corresponding synopsis, with the future Institute in mind. We explored various forms of (tax privileged) charitable status, such as trusts or (partially) incorporated foundations, as well as a range of different forms of company (such as a company with limited liability) that might be considered.

Sr. Chan Khong shared her experience of establishing Plum Village entities under American and French law. These insights into what was possible in other legal systems were very helpful. Based on these, we focused on setting up a foundation in Germany, and drew up

corresponding articles of incorporation. We explored the possibilities, advantages and disadvantages offered by an officially-recognized foundation established under civil law.

The question of whether the EBU (Église Bouddhique Unifiée), with headquarters in Plum Village and articles of association (from 1986) established under French law, could be this legal entity was examined closely. It turned out that although the EBU was recognized as an “association” under French law, it was not recognized as an independent “legal person”, which meant it did not possess full authority to act independently as the “bearer of rights and duties”. Under French and European law, however, it is necessary that a legal entity is recognized as a “legal person” under the laws of a member state of the European Union in order to be able to act as a legal entity in legal affairs in another EU member state. Consequently, the EBU in France could *not* act in Germany as an independent bearer of rights and duties.<sup>5</sup>

With that avenue closed for setting up the future Institute in Germany, the project working group discussed other options, from trusts to foundations, all the way to limited companies. There was also a need to clarify tax requirements for charitable status. For this, at the beginning of 2007, we got in touch with Dr. Olaf Clemens, tax advisor and auditor at the firm WWP (Weckerle, Wilms and Partner GmbH, Dortmund/Sundern). Ever since, EIAB has been excellently advised and guided by Dr. Clemens who also clarified all tax and social security questions arising for EIAB and for the monks and nuns registered there.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately the Sangha decided in favor of establishing a charitable company with limited liability (a GmbH).

### Choosing a name

Then it was the 2007 summer retreat at Plum Village. In preparation, we had gathered our various documents, plans and checklists so we would be able to

offer a detailed outline. Sr. Chan Khong once again invited us to drink tea with our beloved teacher. Thay had further developed his ideas about the goals and purpose of the future Institute, making these more specific.<sup>7</sup>

In this more intimate discussion in Thay's Upper Hamlet hut, with its wonderful view of the eastern valley, the name the Institute bears today was decided upon. The name needed to encapsulate the idea of an institution which encouraged study and held seminars and courses based on Applied Buddhism. Inspired by our great teacher, we arrived at the name "European Institute of Applied Buddhism".

Beate and I felt connected with Thay and his vision. We were deeply moved that Thay included us in the process of choosing a name and that we could help give the Institute its final name. All present, and the monks and nuns involved in the project, understood what Thay intended and the power he had invested in developing his vision.

After intense exchanges over many months, involving long telephone calls, many emails and drafts, we were finally ready on 5 November 2007 to formalize the articles of the "European Institute of Applied Buddhism GmbH". The aims, and the means of achieving these, were described as follows:

1. *The advancement of the Buddhist religion and the world view of Buddhist philosophy as well as the advancement of Buddhist science and research.*
2. *The statutory purposes will be advanced in particular through:*
  - a) *The creation and operation of a Buddhist research and teaching institution ("the Institute").*
  - b) *The establishment of a Buddhist study and course program, including its implementation, and the holding of scientific/academic Buddhist events, conferences, Days of Mindfulness and lectures for Buddhist teachers, therapists,*

*psychologists, members of Buddhist orders and lay people, regardless of religion or world view.*

*c) The publication and distribution of Buddhist texts regardless of the specific medium.*

Our friend Dr. Thuc-Quyen Nguyen-Ryzek was appointed as Director to act with legal authority on behalf of the company. On the basis of her close contact with the Sangha in Plum Village, our dear Thuc-Quyen had already taken on significant tasks for the Sangha in 2007 and provided the Sangha with support and assistance.

On 1 November 2008 the "European Institute of Applied Buddhism GmbH" was entered into the register of the District Court in Dortmund, with its head office in Kronenburgallee 1. EIAB formally came into being that day. In November 2010, following a decision at a general meeting of the company, EIAB's head office was transferred to the Institute itself, in Schaumburgweg 3 at 51545 Waldbröl.

On 17 February 2009 our esteemed Thay Phap An formally took over the Institute's management. We would like to thank Thuc-Quyen, who managed EIAB during its start-up phase with so much commitment and so successfully until handing over to Thay Phap An. Without Thuc-Quyen's special commitment, particularly in 2007 and 2008, EIAB would not have been able to begin so successfully!

### The road to Waldbröl

Returning to the spring of 2007, the Sangha became more and more interested in the Rheine property that had been suggested to Thay and the Plum Village Sangha by Bich and Thien. In May, Thuc-Quyen and Bich, together with Ilona Schmied (House of Maitreya), had a site viewing, followed by a meeting in the Rheine town hall

with the head of the city's planning department and his staff. The meeting lasted several hours and, on the basis of our criteria for suitable properties, a comprehensive progress report was drawn up by the project working group and presented to Thay.

After the 2007 summer retreat, Sr. Chan Khong, Sr. Jina, Sr. Song Nghiem and other nuns made their way to Germany. Over the weekend of 4-5 August, they travelled more than 1,000km visiting five properties identified as having potential in locations that included Marienthal, Göttingen, Hannoversch-Münden and Salzgitter. Dozens of photos were taken at each property and, with many positive impressions, our nuns returned to Plum Village where they reported back to Thay. Additional recommendations also came in from the Sangha. By autumn 2007, we had a short list of four properties to consider.

Each property was carefully checked. Our particular criteria were: quality of existing buildings, accommodation possibilities, infrastructure, and possibilities for further development, including construction of a meditation hall. We wanted to ensure that the decision-making process was transparent – and that we could avoid any sudden surprises!

Our checklist was divided into several categories: commercial and legal aspects, infrastructure and location, and finally, comprehensive due diligence regarding technical and environmental issues. Development possibilities, site use and the character of the surroundings were also taken into account. It was necessary for the future campus to have separate living quarters for the monks and nuns. The property should also possess a "monastery atmosphere", in particular for times when neither courses nor retreats were taking place. All said and done, our search was about having an attractive and welcoming environment in which monks and nuns, participants and guests could feel welcome, secure and comfortable.



From one end of Germany to the other, members of the OI (Order of Interbeing) and committed lay practitioners helped us by participating in the property search. They gave the Sangha many recommendations, with a great deal of information about possible sites.<sup>8</sup> As it turned out, most of the properties suggested by various Sangha members were situated in the north-west or central Germany.

Among properties under consideration were redevelopment sites such as military barracks, small estates, hospitals that had been closed down and old monastery buildings. Some were available only for short-term lease, or their owners wanted to retain leasing rights. This did not correspond with the Sangha's thinking. The objective was to establish EIAB so that it could continue to exist for years – decades, even – without being subject to leases or changes in property ownership that could create uncertainty and, potentially, impose burdens in the future. So, after a closer look, some sites were dropped from the list.

Recommendations from Sangha members were also taken up by Ilona Schmied and Thomas Barth. They traveled across Germany, prepared visit reports and, on the basis of their checklists – which included 11 categories and filled more than 10 pages – reported on the results of their investigations.<sup>9</sup> By the autumn of 2007, the Sangha was focused on just two possible sites: the Haus Uhlenbusch, an historical property in the south-western city of Hanstedt, and a former barracks complex known as Gellendorf, in Rheine.

Uhlenbusch, which dated back to the 1920s, had been used as a military hospital and had subsequently been used as a sanatorium. Hans-Hermann Lahtz and his wife Jutta Besser-Lahtz were active in negotiating with authorities in the district of Harburg; discussing the state of the building as well as the need for renovation. In addition, Sr. Chan Khong commissioned a surveyor

to examine the building's structure and renovation potential. Future use was an important consideration as Uhlenbusch was located in a conservation area, which meant there would be significant constraints on possible building alterations or extensions.<sup>10</sup>

The other property in question was Gellendorf, in Rheine. As early as November 2006, when we first visited Bich Lien-Anh Nguyen and Thien Dang Nguyen, they had talked with great enthusiasm about converting this property. It had been vacated in the year 2000 by the peacetime German armed forces (the Bundeswehr). The city of Rheine was planning to reinvigorate the area, and the entire site of the barracks was to be transferred to a project development company which would be responsible for its development and marketing. City authorities had drawn up a number of land-use plans to ensure the area could be economically productive. These included housing and a mixed area for commercial and industrial usage. We considered it to be a possible location for the future Institute as it offered many advantages and met many of the criteria we regarded as important.

However, in subsequent negotiations with Rheine city authorities it became apparent that there were conflicting interests over their planning intentions. Understandably, the city also wanted to keep the area open for other forms of use, in particular commerce and industry, and to create new and attractive living spaces for young families. These differing interests needed to be reconciled. Further investigations revealed that future use as well as interim use – including talks, retreats and seminars – could potentially contravene some planning laws. In the autumn of 2007, the city's administration concluded that if EIAB were to be established on that site, the planning laws for the entire area would need to be changed or supplemented. It became clear that such a "special area" would also have spatial and planning limits. So, finally, in the spring of

2008, this building, too, fell out of contention.

In early 2008, our lay sister Thuc-Quyen found out that the Institute for Federal Real Estate (abbreviated in German as BImA) had a government-owned property, known as the "Centre for Transformation", available for purchase. It was situated in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia's Bergischen Land, east of the Rhine River, and an area known for its natural beauty.

BImA provided documents about the building, together with a map of its location in the center of the town of Waldbröl. These documents alone sparked immediate interest. Thuc-Quyen informed Sr. Chan Khong and the Sangha in Plum Village.

An appointment was made to meet on 25 February – initially with the Mayor's representatives – at Waldbröl's town hall. Thuc-Quyen wrote to me: "If you arrive earlier and are curious to look at it, here is the address: Centre for Transformation (what a coincidence!)." This first meeting served as an initial orientation and chance to get to know one another. The town representatives outlined Waldbröl's history and development and briefed us on its current situation and development.

Naturally, tolerance and respect as lived values – especially in relation to foreigners – was, and remains, an important criterion for the Sangha's choice of location. Thus, the subject of religious harmony was a key topic in the discussion and the prospect of the future EIAB co-existing peacefully in the local community with monotheistic religions was highlighted.

Thuc-Quyen gave an introductory talk about Thich Nhat Hanh and Sr. Chan Khong, and some insights into the history of Plum Village and Thay's great vision for an Institute of Applied Buddhism. The Mayor's representatives were deeply impressed, especially as their own historical experiences enabled them to sympathize with the fate of the

Vietnamese people. They had also taken the time to inform themselves about our teacher, Thay.

Even at this first meeting it became clear that the Waldbröl site offered numerous benefits above and beyond those of other properties we had been considering. The infrastructure met our anticipated needs, the grounds were large – with apple orchards that would be perfect for walking meditation (something we thought would particularly please Thay) – and a neighboring building, the former civilian service school, presented clear possibilities for expansion.<sup>11</sup>

However, we also learned that the main building, a mighty structure from the era of Imperial Germany and originally built as a hospital, had a very sad and oppressive history from 1933 to 1945. (EIAB's monks and nuns have since done a great deal to contribute to healing and transformation from these terrible events.) After World War 2, the building was used again as a hospital until the late 1960s, when it was given over for "privileged military use". This meant that, any revitalization proposal that involved returning it to civilian use would require regulatory approval and necessary permissions.

We knew from the outset that if EIAB were to be established there we would have to submit a comprehensive application for building permits in line with prevailing regulations. Thuc-Quyen sent the information that had been made available to us to Thay, Sr. Chan Khong and the Sangha in Plum Village, and reported on the discussions and the insights gained.

On 13 March, a week after Thay and Sister Chan Khong visited to inspect the property, more detailed discussions took place in Waldbröl regarding the building, the planning issues (from a legal perspective) and possibilities for future use of the building and its environs. The previous post-war uses of the building – as a hospital, up until 1969, and as a facility of the Federal

Ministry of Defence until 2006 – were also discussed.

Future use would entail commencement of a building application process. Consideration also needed to be given to the fact that since 1975, during the period when the site was a military facility, additional building and renovation work had been undertaken that had not been recorded in the building documentation made available to us. This made it necessary to compare the current building stock with the available plans and, where required, to draw up new plans of the building stock.

The municipality of Waldbröl stated that – subject to approval by the Council – in terms of planning law requirements no objections to the intended use would arise. We also gave a cursory overview of future operations for the purposes of project planning. The planning office of North Rhine-Westphalia's Oberbergischen District clarified the current situation regarding requirements for fire safety, supply of drinking water, heating and additional technical matters related to intended future use as an institution offering courses and retreats and offering accommodation.

### Securing EIAB's future home

It was a great advantage that at this early stage, on the basis of the information available, we were able to apprise ourselves of potential risks – beyond the visible state of the building – and could begin to clarify these, at least superficially, with the other parties and responsible authorities involved. Although there was no list of measures that would need to be implemented and no cost estimates regarding these, we knew that we could use this knowledge as a basis for negotiation with the Federal Republic of Germany, as the owner and seller, if and when Thay and the Sangha wished to proceed further.

We reported back to Thay, Sr. Chan Khong and the Sangha. After the

Sangha's further discussions, we were informed that we should proceed with preliminary work and an assessment of the building, which would involve appointing an architect from Waldbröl (who also happened to be a member of the Waldbröl Council) to draw up a feasibility study based on the current state of knowledge.

A date was set – 18 April – for our next meeting with the Council of the Oberbergischen District. Steps for fire safety and prevention were agreed among the Council, fire safety authorities and local building authorities, as well as the Office for the Preservation of Historical Monuments. We knew that a preliminary assessment of the site's overall viability was necessary in order to get a rough idea of the total cost of the project, and that this assessment would be linked to the question of the purchase price in subsequent negotiations. The question of whether donations would be available and, if so, how much, also needed to be clarified.

Thay and the Sangha wanted to be sure that if a decision was made for a specific project, then the building would indeed be available at a certain point in time for use by EIAB, and that the Sangha would be willing and in a position to cover the costs of modifying it for future use, as well as the operational running costs. It proved to have been a good idea to have founded the future institute as a charitable EIAB GmbH (company with limited liability) and to have put the necessary structures in place with an eye to the future, as negotiations began to assume a concrete form.

While Thay and numerous monks and nuns once again traveled to Vietnam and Hanoi in the spring of 2008, and visited Thay's root temple, we were still able, thanks to their instructions, to proceed with the negotiations for EIAB. However, the project and our negotiations with the authorities clearly could not remain confidential for long. Already, in May 2008, the local newspaper *Westfälische Rundschau*,



reported that the “Association for Living in Mindfulness” wanted to open a day center in Waldbröl in September 2008. This was subsequently taken up by the Waldbröl press.

Thay asked Sr. Jina to proceed with negotiations whilst he, Sr. Chan Khong and Thay Phap An were in Vietnam. Once again we had received the mandate and, from May 2008, negotiated with representatives of the sellers for EIAB’s acquisition of the property. In mid-June, Thay, the Sangha and also Thuc-Quyen returned from Vietnam. Thay and the Sangha reviewed the results of negotiations, to date, in relation to the overall decision-making process. In the meantime, the project’s appointed architect, Mrs. Anne Theuer, had submitted to the Sangha an estimate of what it might cost to renovate the building and make it fully compliant with all relevant government requirements.

By now, we were ready to prepare the purchase contract and negotiate on the basis of it. However, the seller, BlmA, insisted on drafting their own contract,

which we received for review on 2 July 2008. We worked our way through their draft and proposed amendments. In parallel, we asked for more information from relevant authorities. Gradually, we received answers to our queries from the other administrative agencies, unfortunately sometimes without specific details. Then came the 2008 summer retreat at Plum Village. In July, we travelled to Lower Hamlet and again spent the retreat in the group of our beloved Sr. Song Nghiem. During this time we held further discussions with Thay, Sr. Chan Khong, Sr. Chan Duc, Sr. Jina and, of course, also with Sr. Song Nghiem.

We returned home to Dortmund and, in August 2008, continued with the negotiations. At this time we received the first estimates for the basic remedial work that would be necessary for the building to be habitable again. These enabled us to adopt a clear negotiating stance with regard to additional contractual details, and the purchase price. In August, and at the beginning of September, a series of draft contracts were negotiated with BlmA.

## Putting the finishing touches

On Wednesday, 10 September 2008 the moment had come to “seal the deal”. Representatives of BlmA, and Thuc-Quyen, as Director of EIAB GmbH, signed the purchase agreement between the Federal Republic of Germany and EIAB. That very day, the monks and nuns who had traveled from Plum Village to form Thay’s new monastic sangha in Germany moved in.<sup>12</sup> Two days later, on Friday, 12 September 2008, a press conference was held to announce EIAB’s establishment. This also served as the occasion for the formal handover of the property to Thay by BlmA’s representatives, in the presence of the Mayor of Waldbröl, Mr. Peter Koester.<sup>13</sup>

Technical support was provided to the newly-resident monastics by Jörg Meyer, who had previously looked after the building for BlmA. On 22 September, a meeting was held with the building supervision authority of Oberbergischen District. In parallel, other necessary measures such as ensuring provision of electricity and water, as well as

*Dr. Puplick, accompanied by his wife Beate, arrives bearing a celebratory gift on the day of EIAB’s formal establishment. Receiving the gift on behalf of the newly-formed EIAB Sangha is Thay Phap An (far right), beside Waldbröl’s Director of Economic Development, Mr. Eckhard Becker.*



sufficient and appropriate insurance protection for the large building were undertaken.

With the Sangha's agreement, we proceeded with our official application for occupancy. The matter of obtaining permits for the monastics to live there was dealt with at Oberbergischen District level by the Foreign Residents' Department. Although the application involved a number of different nationalities, a standardized and uniform procedure was agreed upon, rules were also agreed with the social security offices and an accounting system set up at EIAB. In such matters the monks and nuns of EIAB were generously supported by Dr. Clemens (WWP GmbH). The construction requirements for the change of use were further clarified, in close consultation with the local authorities, the Office for the Preservation of Historical Buildings, the local fire service and a project manager recommended by the Sangha, Dr. Wilhelm Busch.

### A special vote of thanks

Thanks to the support of the Sangha, all the monks and nuns, lay friends and many other friends and donors, and finally also to Waldbrol, we succeeded in turning the vision of our beloved teacher Thich Nhat Hanh – to establish an Institute of Applied Buddhism in Europe and to locate it in Germany – into a physical reality.

We wish to say a very special “thank you” to our own Federal Republic of Germany. Both in the contractual negotiations and in the financial terms of the contract, itself, our country proved to be very generous towards our beloved Thay and EIAB. We are happy and feel privileged to live in this country! We would like, also, to offer our warm thanks to the Mayor of Waldbrol, Mr. Köster, the members of the Waldbrol City Council and also Council staff of both the city of Waldbrol and the Oberbergischen District, in particular to Ms. Gabriele Keil-Riegert for the positive support

she offered throughout the building application process.

Under such favourable conditions, EIAB's first programs were soon up and running, lovingly prepared by our dear monastic brothers and sisters; courses were successfully held and, today, EIAB is a large and important center for Applied Buddhism in Europe. We wish to congratulate our beloved teacher Thich Nhat Hanh and our esteemed Thay Phap An and all the monks and nuns who have served so many people – above all, families and children – so well. We wish from our hearts that the European Institute of Applied Buddhism will continue to provide people throughout Europe and beyond with access to the teachings of the Buddha and enable them to gain direct experience of what it means to live in mindfulness.

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Beate and Dr. Alexander Puplick

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EIAB expresses its deep gratitude to Dr. Puplick for being EIAB's legal representative and a legal advisor to Thay, Sr. Chan Khong and the Plum Village community. We also express our deep gratitude to his wife Beate for her years of loving support to EIAB in legal and other matters.

### END NOTES

- 1 Thich Nhat Hanh is one of few teachers who have written a history of the Buddha based on source texts which he searched out, researched and presented in their historical context. In many of his talks he has referred to the results of this research regarding the teachings of the Buddha, which were not transcribed during the Buddha's lifetime. He has also succeeded in structuring these teachings in such a way that they are understandable for Westerners with no previous knowledge of Buddhism. The contents of Thay's talks correspond so closely with generally-accepted findings of Western thought – in particular physics – that Western listeners can recognize the truth of the Buddha's experiences and ask themselves why they cannot succeed in behaving and living in accordance with his insights
- 2 Thay Phap An notes that the actual number of monks, nuns and lay people who participated in the trip was far higher than the number officially allowed. Lá thư Làng Mai số 29 ra ngày 12 tháng 01 năm 2006

(Plum Village newsletter number 29, 12.01.2006). P1, <https://langmai.org/tang-kinh-cac/la-thu-lang-mai/la-thu-lang-mai-29/>. Accessed 28 July 2018

- 3 According to Thay Phap An, after Thay returned from Vietnam in 2005, where he had observed the current state of Buddhist and monastic education, he expressed a wish to “correct” what he now considered to have been a mistake he made as a young Dharma teacher when helping to found the Van Hanh University in Saigon. That pioneering university introduced the Western model of highly-intellectual academic teaching to Vietnamese Buddhist education. But Thay's special insight, after decades of monastic life, is that Buddhism needs to be applied to daily living. Beyond acquiring knowledge of Buddhist theory, a student should be able to transform his or her own difficulties, which better equips him or her to contribute to society
- 4 The city of Rheine is in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, in north-western Germany
- 5 These intensive investigations undertaken in 2006 and 2007 to establish EIAB as a “legal person” under Germany law had the positive effect of prompting EBU in France to apply for an upgrade of its own legal status, from “association” to “congregation”. The conferring of this higher status, which was a particular honor for Plum Village, was finally confirmed in 2012 by French ministerial decree
- 6 Dr. Clemens has supported EIAB and the Sangha from the very beginning of the project. Together with his wife, Alexandra Clemens, he is one of EIAB's largest patrons. We all owe these friends a debt of gratitude!
- 7 Please also see page 7 and the handwritten note in which Thay articulated his vision for EIAB
- 8 At this point the Sangha members deserve warm thanks! They came up with so many suggestions for potentially-suitable sites and answered so many questions. Warm thanks are also due to all those who allowed us to view their properties, patiently answered many questions and provided a great deal of information
- 9 Sr. Chan Khong later wrote that, in total, more than 50 different properties were carefully considered regarding their possible suitability for the future EIAB
- 10 A short while ago we found out that the building was demolished in 2017 for structural reasons
- 11 In September 2009, one year after the establishment of EIAB, this additional property was acquired and became the Great Compassion Monastery. It was named after the first pagoda Thay entered and where he lived on his path of becoming a monk
- 12 Initially, even though the building had hundreds of rooms, we were allowed only the use of six rooms for monks and six rooms for nuns
- 13 Mr. Peter Koester took office on 18 June 2008, three months before the formal establishment of EIAB