

# EIAB MAGAZINE

CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE EIAB AND THE INTERNATIONAL SANGHA • AUGUST 2023



Peace is  
the Way





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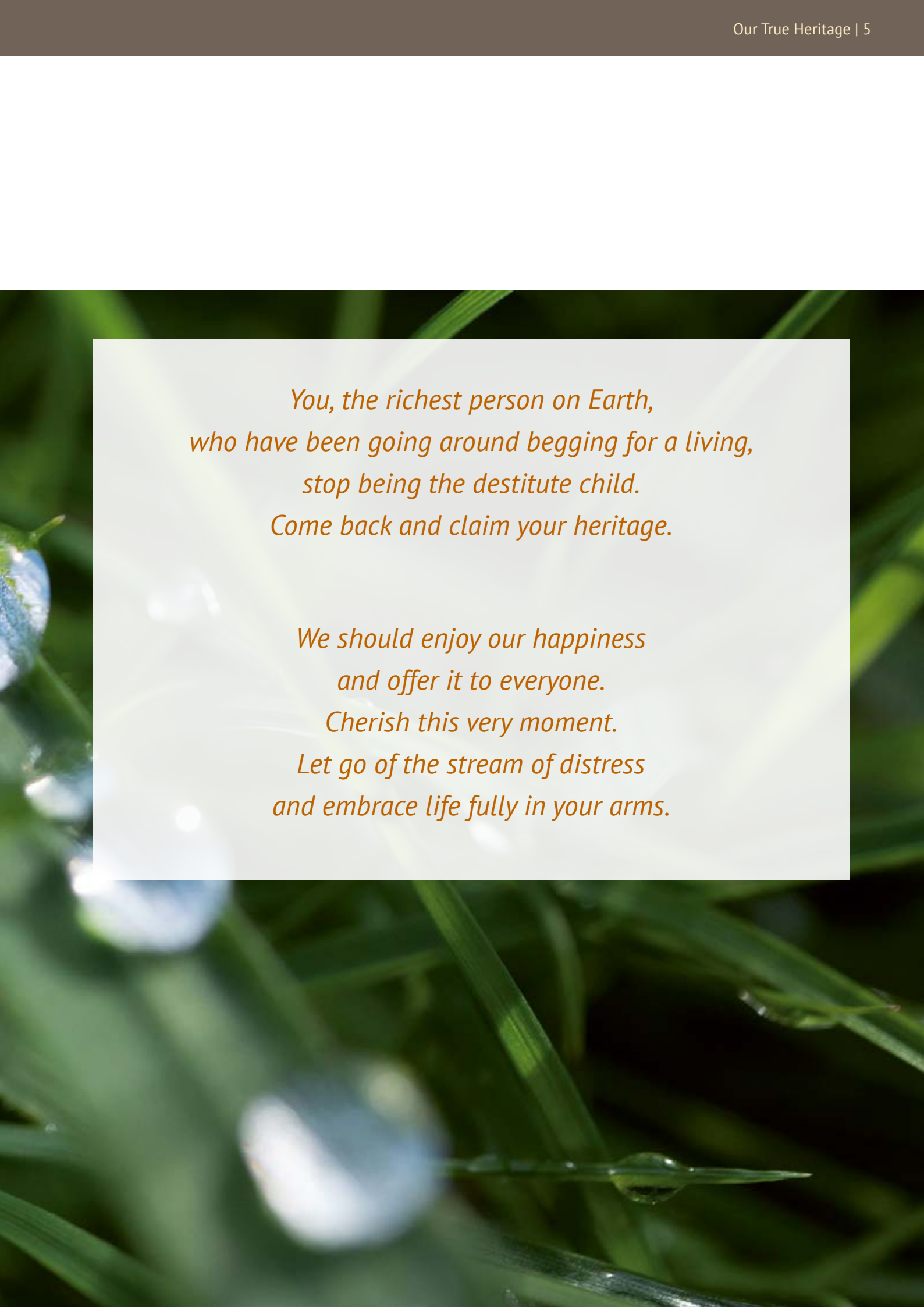
## Our True Heritage

*The cosmos is filled with precious gems.  
I want to offer a handful of them to you this morning.*

*Each moment you are alive is a gem,  
shining through and containing earth and sky,  
water and clouds.*

*It needs you to breathe gently  
for the miracles to be displayed.  
Suddenly you hear the birds singing,  
the pines chanting,  
see the flowers blooming,  
the blue sky,  
the white clouds,  
the smile and the marvellous look  
of your beloved.*





*You, the richest person on Earth,  
who have been going around begging for a living,  
stop being the destitute child.  
Come back and claim your heritage.*

*We should enjoy our happiness  
and offer it to everyone.  
Cherish this very moment.  
Let go of the stream of distress  
and embrace life fully in your arms.*

*Walking in walking meditation is really just to enjoy the walking. The technique is to walk and be present exactly where you are. Even when you are moving, your true destination is the here and now, because only in this moment and in this place, called the here and now, is life possible. The address of all great being is the “here and now”. So, you know, where you are going. Every in-breath, every out-breath, every step should bring you back to this address.*

*If we only rely on external conditions, we will get lost. We need a refuge we can always rely on, and that is the island of self. Firmly established on our inner island, we’re very safe. We can take time to recover and restore ourselves, and become stronger, until we’re ready to go out again and engage.*



*When we walk, we are not alone. Our parents and ancestors are walking with us. They are present in every cell of our bodies. Each step that brings us healing and happiness, also brings healing and happiness to our parents and ancestors. Every mindful step has the power to transform us and all our ancestors with us, including our animal, plant and mineral ancestors. We do not walk for ourselves alone. When we walk, we walk for our family and for the whole world.*

*A prayer, whether still, sung or in the form of meditation, is a way to return to ourselves in the present moment, and to touch the peace that is there for us. It is also a way to touch the universal and timeless dimensions.*

**Thich Nhat Hanh:**

Der Tag, auf den Du gewartet hast, ist heute.  
Knaur, 2022  
(Poem and Texts)







# 1. The Eternal Spring of Thay











# The Eternal Spring of Thay

*The past year at EIAB has been one of deepening our practice to continue the living legacy of our teacher Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and his life of compassionate action for peace in ourselves and the world. A special focus has been to study three great sutras embodied in Thay's teachings – the Diamond, the Lotus and the Avatamsaka – and to practice meditations inspired by their insights. As Director and Dean of Studies Thay Phap An explains, this is to help strengthen the spiritual foundations for EIAB's future meditation hall, which shall be our gift to Thay.<sup>1</sup>*

## Letting Go

### No ordinary spring

It was snowing heavily with temperatures below -6C when lay members of the

Vietnamese Sangha in Germany came to EIAB in late January to join us for Tet, the Vietnamese Lunar New Year festival that celebrates the arrival of spring. At Waldbröl

it looked and felt more like winter! But our friends gathered for another important reason: to mark the first anniversary of Thay's passing at Tu Hieu Temple, Hue,



EIAB sisters warmed everyone's hearts by painting a beautiful spring scene as a backdrop to our festive altar for Tet. The painting features blossoming peach trees, elegant Vietnamese women in traditional costume, and Plum Village nuns wide-eyed at nature's beauty.





The Vietnamese New Year festival of Tet – celebrating the arrival of spring – felt more like winter at EIAB this year, with deep snow and sub-zero temperatures. Above: in Tet tradition, we raised a tall bamboo pole<sup>2</sup> and hoisted a saffron-colored flag (which strong winds promptly wrapped around the top!). According to legend, this flag represents the Buddha's Sanghati robe protecting us from the negative energy of Mara. Hoisted beneath, in orange, red and other bright colors is a traditional Vietnamese ceremonial flag.

Vietnam, on 22 January 2022, at the age of 95.

Tu Hieu is the root temple of Thay. It is where he began his novice training at the age of 16 in 1942 and where Thay chose to spend the final three years of this life in peace and happiness. The first anniversary has been a precious opportunity to celebrate our teacher's living legacy of teachings and practices to help ease our suffering and generate peace in ourselves and the world.

A major initiative was a new documentary by British filmmaker Mr. Max Pugh. Entitled *I Have Arrived, I Am Home*,<sup>3</sup> it completes his trilogy of films on Thay's life. Released globally on Thay's actual anniversary, the film's YouTube "views" are approaching 300,000.

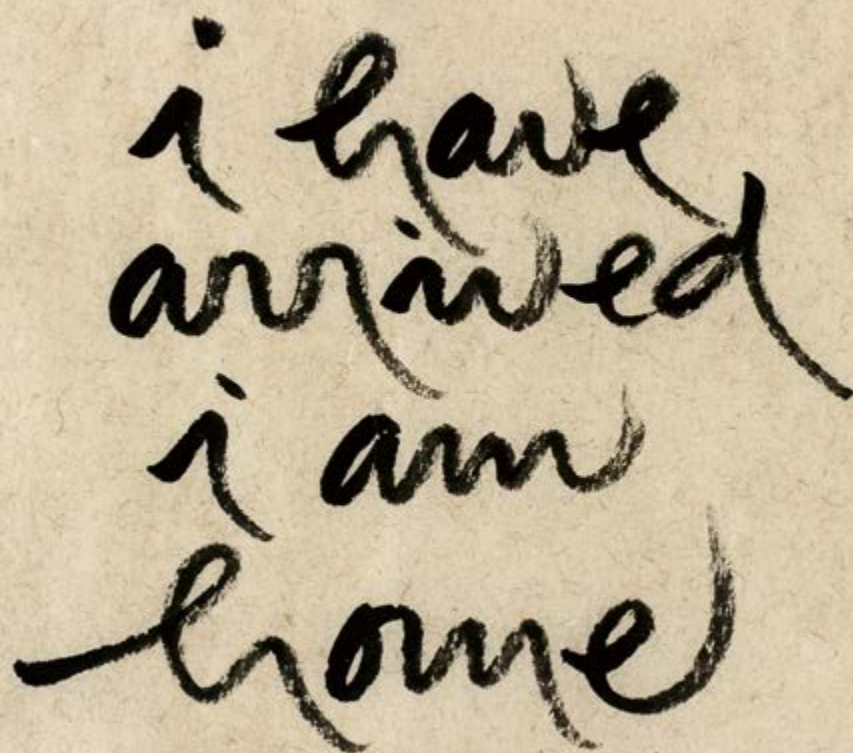
I asked Mr. Pugh if he would be kind enough to share what making this film meant to him. He replied:

*It was an immense honor to be asked to tell the story of the years between Thay's return to Vietnam until his passing in January 2022.*

*Having already made Walk With Me (2017) and A Cloud Never Dies (2019<sup>4</sup>), it felt right to conclude this trilogy by returning to the root of the story whilst also allowing viewers, one year on, to see Thay's continuation through the emotional lens of the monastics who were physically closest to him at the end of his life. We were able to do this in I Have Arrived, I am Home (2022).*

*I always reflect with my other team members involved with these films how lucky we are to be connected to Thay, this practice and the global network of monastic and lay sangha. To help tell the story of this phenomenon is rich and rewarding beyond measure for us as well as, quite literally, life changing.*

*It is also so touching to meet people who have been inspired to find out more about Thay and Plum Village because they watched one of these films in a movie theater or online. For documentary makers there is no greater joy than seeing evidence of the power of cinema to bend the moral arc of the universe towards the better, slowly but surely, little by little.*



i have  
arrived  
i am  
home

Made specially for the first anniversary of Thay's passing, the documentary film "I Have Arrived, I Am Home" tells the story of Thay's return to Vietnam in 2018, the years until his passing and the funeral ceremonies which were watched by millions around the world. It also traces his continuation through monastic and lay students at Plum Village practice centers around the world.

Another beautiful "flowering" this spring was the celebration launch in April of the Thich Nhat Hanh Center for Mindfulness in Public Health, at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston. By its creation and name, the center recognizes Thay's great achievement in presenting the ancient Buddhist practice of mindfulness in ways that help people today lead healthier, happier lives.<sup>5</sup>

Thay's best-selling book *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, published in English in 1975, was hugely influential for Westerners taking up meditation. The new center, which emphasizes nutrition and the environment among other important subjects, also takes inspiration from Thay's work in building communities of mindful living.<sup>6</sup>

The Plum Village delegation to the center's inaugural full-day symposium included members of the Sangha from three Plum Village monasteries in the US, Plum Village in France, EIAB in Germany and friends from India, Switzerland, and Vietnam.

In closing remarks at the symposium, I offered that the center's new team might first be given time just to be together and practice mindfulness. This would enable them to connect deeply with each other and allow love to blossom in their hearts, because what is the purpose of providing public health if we do not have love in our hearts and peace and harmony within our own family?

I also suggested that the way the center conducts research can be different from

conventional scientific research in that mindfulness researchers should also be active participants in the entire process of investigating the effectiveness of mindfulness practice in individuals as well as communities. It is not sufficient only to be a mindfulness observer or theoretician creating educational frameworks for others to follow if we ourselves do not benefit.

Another suggestion was for mindfulness research to go beyond the use of conventional "measurements" because these, inevitably, are artificial concepts created from our own point of view. They are not what happen in reality. One valuable "data set", for example, is how people visibly transform after a three- or four-day mindfulness retreat, something we consistently observe at EIAB.





Speakers and attendees mingled after the symposium and celebration launch in April of the Thich Nhat Hanh Center for Mindfulness in Public Health, at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston. Pictured are: (left to right) Thay Phap Luu, Dr. Ha Vinh Tho, Thay Phap Dung, Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn (founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, or MBSR), Thay Phap An, Natasha Khan and Lisi Ha Vinh.

There were many distinguished speakers and international experts at the symposium, including those directly influenced by Thay over the years. EIAB and the entire International Plum Village Community of Engaged Buddhism look forward to remaining deeply connected with this important, timely initiative.

### No coincidence

In last year's EIAB's Magazine, I mentioned my strong sense that Thay had the intuition of a Zen Master about how he would leave this life – that he chose the place, the year, the moment. Only days before manifesting nirvana, Thay looked peacefully out of his window at the first flowers of spring. Again, I believe this was no coincidence, for Thay's

original Dharma name as a novice at Tu Hieu was Phung Xuan which means “going to meet spring.”

In Vietnamese culture, the word for “spring” is considered rather feminine. Thay once said that, as a teenager, hearing the name made him feel rather bashful. As a fully ordained monk, Thay took the Dharma title Nhất Hạnh (“One Action”). But echoes of his original Dharma name are still to be found in the gatha (verse) Thay's Teacher – Zen Master Thích Chân Thật – offered Thay at Tu Hieu Temple in 1966, before Thay left for the West to call for peace in Vietnam.

That gatha, which marked Zen Master Thích Chân Thật's transmission of the lamp to Thay as his disciple begins: “When we are

determined to go just in one direction, we will meet the spring, and our march will be a heroic one.”<sup>7</sup>

### Meeting spring

Some of us are 20, 30, or already 40 years old. We may say we have passed through 20, 30 or 40 springs. Each year, we delight in the blossoms, spring flowers, fragrances, and the return of the sun's warmth.<sup>8</sup> But have we actually “met” spring?

At EIAB we offer courses throughout the year to help practitioners transform their suffering and be in touch with peace and happiness. But there is no better time than spring, with its freshness and vitality, for going straight to the nature of things and renewing our practice.



Beneath the turbulence of waves rising and falling is a vast body of water, to which all waves eventually give up their form and return. Pictured: Hokusai's famous 1831 woodblock print "Under the Wave off Kanagawa".

We are not talking, here, of the ordinary spring we experience in normal life with an ordinary mind. From the perspective of Mahayana Buddhism, of which Zen is a part, our true nature is emptiness, with no birth no death, no coming no going, no gain no loss. The magical quality of spring helps us contemplate this ultimate reality deeply and get in touch with our true nature.

It is like the relationship between a wave on the ocean and the water beneath it. The wave comes and goes but the water from which it rises and falls never disappears. The true essence of the wave is still water. Whether the wave is up or down, water is always there. Its constant presence beneath the wave is equivalent to Thay's eternal spring in the realm of ultimate reality.

When we go straight to the nature of things, we have no need to struggle through the suffering caused by our unwholesome or unskillful actions. We simply dive beneath

the white cap of the wave into the quietness of the water underneath. There, we practice letting go of everything.

We relax our whole body, bring our mind back to our body and become aware of all our feelings. We acknowledge sad or unwholesome feelings that make our body tense and our mind unstable. Then we let them go. We do the same with good feelings that make our body and mind feel light. We do not let our mind interfere either way. We do not hold on to anything.

By practicing like a wave giving up its form and returning to the water, we are able to go deeper and deeper into our existence. Whether our "wave" is up or down, if we let go of all our suffering we can access the true nature of our being.

The practice of letting go takes time. We constantly grasp onto what our mind thinks is going on around us and believe it to be

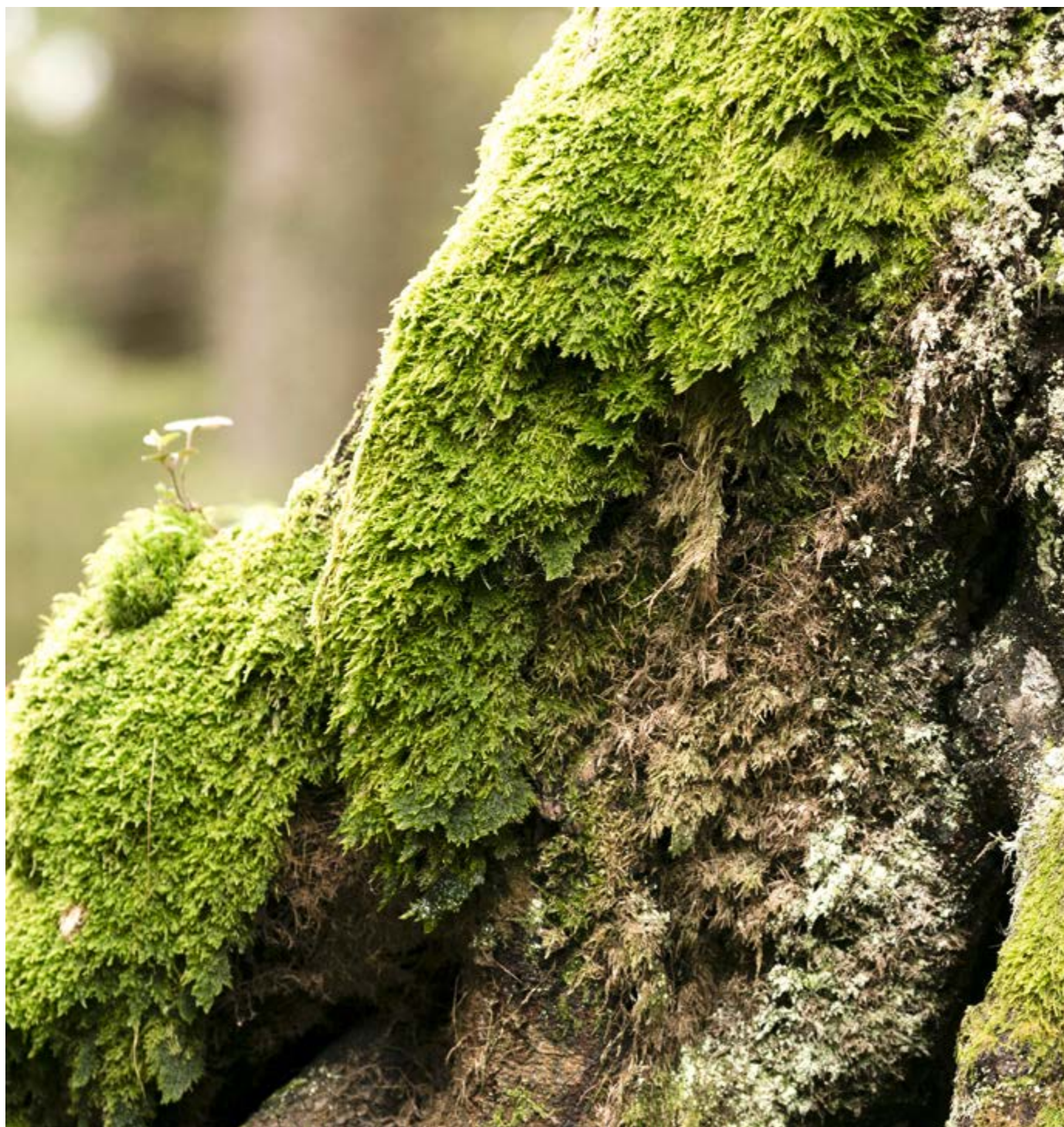
real. This gives rise to confusion. The more confused we are, the more we are driven by habit energy – the karmic outcome of our actions over many lifetimes. We fall into endless karmic loops and cycles, repeating actions that both cause and increase our suffering.

The way out of karma's grip is simply to notice things as they are when they happen, neither holding onto them nor pushing them away. As we practice letting go, slowly our whole body and mind are purified.

The act of returning to our own pure nature of existence is the meaning of "going to meet spring".

While we may rely on our Sangha for support as we practice, we cannot cling to those relationships. As the Buddha says, we each must know the better way to live alone.<sup>9</sup> We must learn to face our inner self. When we are angry, we know that we are





Suffering, attachments, and craving are like pieces of old bark clinging to a trunk. We practice to release them naturally.<sup>10</sup>

angry. When we are sad, we know that we are sad. When we are lonely and scared, we know it.

Look at what happens to trees. As they grow and age, their bark becomes rough and flaky. It is the same with us. As we go through life, our suffering, attachments, and craving become like bits of old bark

clinging to a trunk. We practice so that this bark dries up and falls off naturally. We do not feed our attachments by grasping or constantly seeking to fulfil our desires. Instead, all our actions are based on love, compassion, and service. We create “waves” of goodness by practicing loving-kindness; speaking and acting mindfully – and by letting go.

Thay is at peace because throughout his long and eventful life he practiced letting go. If we do not practice letting go, how will we be peaceful at the end of our life? That is why it is so important to look deeply into ourselves and let go of our sorrow, anger, jealousy, discrimination, and hatred. When we do, Thay will raise a hand, pat our head, and say: “So good. This one is so good.”



# Touching Thay

## Walking slowly

During meditation, when we sink our energy down and settle our mind in the unconditioned realm of emptiness, we are able to sense the fundamental reality of “no-self”. That is where we can experience Thay’s formless “Dharmakaya”, or dharma body.

Although Thay left the conditioned realm of existence in January 2022 he manifests every day through our practice. Whenever we radiate Thay’s serenity and peacefulness, he is present for us.

Once, a group of Venerables came to Plum Village from Vietnam and saw Thay for

the first time in many years. I asked them: “Meeting Thay again after such a long time, do you see anything different in him?” They replied that Thay walked slowly, just as before. Indeed, most of us see a person walking slowly when we think of Thay. The way Thay practiced walking meditation peacefully, step by step, was an unspoken



When we think of Thay, many of us hold an image in our mind of a monk walking peacefully. Above: hand in hand with children, Thay leads walking meditation during his 2010 retreat at EIAB.



Dharma talk. But we could only “hear” it if our mind was calm and still.

All Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have a special commitment to show us our true nature of no birth, no death. They do this all day long, day after day. That is how we know that Thay is still present. He is here to escort us into the ultimate reality of emptiness, from which all life manifests. Thay helps us listen to a Dharma talk with our hearts, he smiles at us while we eat mindfully, he helps us breathe and calm ourselves when we are stressed, he takes our hand during walking meditation.

While each mindful step we take lasts only a few seconds, the Buddha, the Bodhisattvas, and all the great teachers are able to lengthen moments in time. They prolong and stretch these moments until they become a continuous flow of life. There were occasions, for example, when a Dharma talk by Thay would last two, two-and-a-half or even three hours. But it seemed to go by in a flash.

This is conveyed in the lyrics of a song written in Vietnamese by one of our Plum Village sisters, Sr. Qui Nghiem<sup>11</sup>:

*Looking at Thay, my heart is lifted up  
and free  
Listening to Thay ends all my thirst and  
craving  
Sitting next to Thay, my heart is  
warmed and embraced  
The whole afternoon went by without  
my noticing*

The whole Sangha would sit happily with Thay for hours, not fidgeting, not looking at clocks or checking phones. I benefited from these “timeless” experiences because they were opportunities to try and touch Thay’s Dharmakaya body. It reminds me of the opening passage of *The Diamond Sutra*:

*This is what I heard one time when the  
Buddha was staying in the monastery in  
Anathapindika’s park in the Jeta Grove  
near Shravasti with a community of  
1,250 bhikshus, fully ordained monks.  
That day, when it was time to make the  
alms round, the Buddha put on his  
sanghati robe and, holding his bowl,  
went into the town of Shravasti to beg*

*for alms, going from house to house.  
When the alms round was completed,  
he returned to the monastery to eat the  
midday meal. Then he put away his  
sanghati robe and his bowl, washed his  
feet, arranged his cushion, and sat  
down.*

*At that time, the Venerable Subhuti  
stood up, bared his right shoulder, put  
his knee on the ground, and, joining his  
palms respectfully, said to the Buddha,  
“World-Honored One, it is rare to find  
someone like you. You always support  
and place confidence in the  
Bodhisattvas...”<sup>12</sup>*

The sutra reminds us that the Buddha has been taking up his alms bowl and begging for food every day for many years, walking slowly with eyes lowered, looking about a meter ahead, stopping for the same amount of time at each dwelling, regardless of whether the family inside is rich or poor.

Only on that day does Subhuti suddenly realize that the Buddha has not stopped teaching the Dharma for a single moment



Returning to Vietnam in the spring of 2005, after 39 years of enforced exile, Thay led the Sangha in “Cổ Phật Khất Thực”, the ancient Buddhist practice of alms round. They walked about 1 km from the root temple Tu Hieu, in Hue, to “Đàn Nam Giao” (“The Platform for the King to Pray to Heaven in the Past”).

since his Enlightenment. He has been turning the wheel of the Dharma continuously, with all his energy. And the Buddha has never stopped encouraging and supporting the Bodhisattvas or entrusting them with his way of life. What Subhuti touched was the Buddha's Dharmakaya.

### Staying present

Among unlimited gifts Thay has given us is the practice of being in the present moment. Thay would often say: "The past has gone, the future has not yet arrived. Unless we go back to ourselves in the present moment, we cannot be in touch with life." By letting go of all grasping and by being in the present moment, we learn to live in the realm of the unconditioned. There, we can begin to understand the sorrows that follow us from life to life.

In Buddhism, we firmly believe that rebirth is real because the Buddha and other enlightened ones have borne witness to previous lives. When someone suddenly does something unkind to us, we are able to recognize that it comes from old karma – past anger, jealousy, or resentment. It is

a manifestation from a dense network of causes and effects over many lifetimes.

Maybe we did something to that person in the past? Whatever our story, we do not react with anger or hurt to a person's unkindness, nor proclaim our innocence and lament their injustice. We stop, anchor ourselves in the present moment, and practice *non-action*. We do this until the practice of remaining deeply in the present moment becomes a conscious habit of mind.

### Vowing to serve

While still living in the conditioned world of birth, action, reaction, death, and rebirth into suffering ("samsara"), Bodhisattvas practice going into the true nature of emptiness. From there, they make great vows.

Thay is a great Bodhisattva who vowed to save all sentient beings. When still a novice during Japan's occupation of Vietnam in World War 2, Thay was acutely aware of the violence, suffering and hunger all around. One night, he stood looking at the moon over Tu Hieu temple's Three Doors Gate and Half Moon Pond. The moon was so beautiful and in

that shimmering scene something profound rose in Thay's heart. Picking up a pencil, he wrote in Sino-Vietnamese characters on one of the temple's columns: "Regardless of how many unlimited living beings there are, I vow to bring them all to the shore of liberation, joy and happiness."<sup>13</sup>

Thay kept this vow throughout his life. The "one action" ("Nhất Hạnh") of his Dharma title was to save unlimited generations of sentient beings through all means. That included opening many Dharma doors for us with a huge body of practice tools that help us transform our suffering and generate joy and compassion in everyday life.

The foundation of Thay's practice is the *Discourse on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness*,<sup>14</sup> from which he teaches us: "When I'm breathing in, I know I'm breathing in. When I'm breathing out, I know I'm breathing out." The breath in and out is so smooth. We do not grasp it. Thay often uses the image of sitting by a river and watching it flow without being swept into the water and carried away by the current. When we train our mind like that, slowly it calms down. Our mind's habit of creating, grasping, comparing, discriminating, and clinging goes and we experience deep peace in our body.

Throughout his life, Thay remained calm and peaceful even when facing dangerous situations such as rescuing Vietnamese refugees on the high seas. Coming from a country devastated by war, he cultivated peace in the world. He took on big, impactful projects to serve humanity, whilst also watering the Bodhi seeds in others on their journey to enlightenment.

The biographical book produced by Plum Village for Thay's funeral was appropriately entitled *Going to Meet Spring*. It recounts Thay's life's work as a Bodhisattva. Reading the book, it is beyond our imagination how Thay was able to do so many things. He is such a great being. I know I can accomplish less than a fingernail of what he did. Always walking slowly and mindfully, Thay achieved so much more than those who walk fast.



Thay (front row, to the right) is pictured with friends in front of Tu Hieu Temple's Buddha Hall around 1964. That was the year Thay entered into a leadership role in the Buddhist movement for peace and social action in Vietnam.



# Manifesting A Meditation Hall

## Obstacles are opportunities

Zen is a Japanese translation of the Chinese word “Chan”. Both derive from the Pali word “jhana”, and “dhyana” in Sanskrit which means meditation. When we set up our Institute in 2008, Thay wanted us to build a meditation hall as soon as possible because what does a Zen Master do? He teaches meditation. For that he needs a meditation hall!

Among Thay’s teachings is for us to accept that when all conditions are fulfilled an

outcome will manifest. The message is that we should base our thoughts and plans on solid foundations of compassion and practice, not on fantasies about how life should unfold. If something cannot, for whatever reason, be achieved right away, we should not try to force it. We should wait patiently and accept that a challenge or obstacle is an opportunity to grow and mature.

At EIAB, we have learned this from direct experience. Upon arriving in Waldbröl we thought we could build a meditation hall right away. To make room for its construction, we

demolished a small structure behind the main building that is now the Asoka Institute. Looking back, how naive we were about government building regulations!

For a period immediately prior to becoming EIAB in 2008, this late-19th century building was a federal government military facility. As such, it was covered by different safety codes. When we took over the building, we were first required to meet all civilian safety regulations. This has involved extensive renovations, taking many years. For all Thay’s retreats at EIAB we had to improvise



For Thay’s first retreat at EIAB, in June 2010, a hi-tech tent served as an improvised meditation hall.

with a hi-tech tent as our meditation hall to accommodate more than 1,200 retreatants.

### A test of love, dedication and patience

So far, we have waited 15 years to have a purpose-built meditation hall at EIAB. We use the Asoka Institute's spacious lobby and hallway as a "temporary" meditation hall. Often during summer or year-end retreats, when we welcome more than 350 friends, they sit in the long corridor stretching off the lobby, even during freezing weather. When we renovated the building, engineers informed us that, with our current heating system, the maximum temperature achievable in this hallway would be around 14C. Taking inspiration from the lamp transmission gatha for Thay, we have named it the Heroic March Meditation Hall!

We have also been through a lengthy legal process to acquire a narrow road, the Old Hospital Path, at the back of the Asoka Institute. Now, at last, everything is settled. All the necessary conditions are coming together in wonderful new ways, as if they have waited all this time to manifest. The long wait has turned out to be a blessing for it has enabled us to reach a higher understanding of how to move forward with EIAB's meditation hall.

### Honoring Thay

So much has changed since our first attempts in 2008. The biggest change has, of course, been the passing of our beloved teacher. Now, our meditation hall will be an offering to Thay from the Brothers and Sisters at EIAB, and our Sangha and friends of Plum Village around the world.

Another huge change has been the tragic war in Ukraine which started just weeks after Thay's passing and continues with no end in sight. Thay dedicated his whole life to building peace through his practice, his teachings and by traveling widely to offer retreats to help countless people cultivate peace in themselves, their families, and communities.

It became increasingly obvious that the name of EIAB's future meditation hall should properly reflect these developments. Now, it shall be called the Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh Great Hall of Peace.<sup>15</sup> This name also serves as a reminder to continue Thay's work as a peace activist in a world still full of suffering from war.<sup>16</sup>

On 30 December 2022 – the 8th day of the 12th lunar month, the day Shakyamuni Buddha



Above: on a propitious Buddhist date at the end of 2022, we held a ceremony to bless EIAB's new plan for our long-awaited meditation hall, symbolized by a foundation stone carried solemnly in procession.<sup>17</sup>

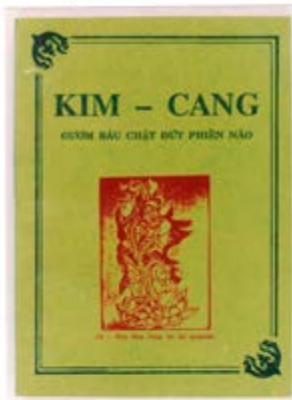


Phụ bản 38 - Kim Cang Gương Báu Chặt Đứt Phiền Nào



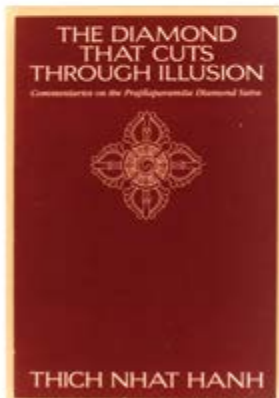
Tiếng Việt (Mỹ): Xuất bản năm 1992 ở Mỹ, nhà xuất bản Lá Bối, San Jose.

Vietnamese (USA): Published in USA in 1993 by La Bôi publisher, Ca.



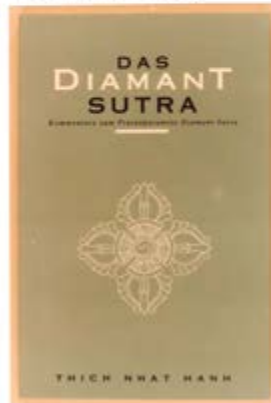
Tiếng Việt (Việt Nam): Xuất bản cuối ở Việt Nam, không rõ năm, khoảng 92 hay 93.

Vietnamese (in Viet Nam): printed underground in Vietnam around '92 or '93.



Mỹ: dịch từ tiếng Việt, xuất bản năm 1992, nhà xuất bản Parallax Press. Số ISBN 0-938077-51-1

USA: translated from Vietnamese version. Published in 1992 by Parallax Press. ISBN 0-938077-51-1



Đức: Dịch từ bản tiếng Anh, xuất bản năm 1993, nhà xuất bản Theseus. Số ISBN 3-85936-66-3

Germany: Translated from English version. Published in 1993 by Theseus. ISBN 3-85936-66-3

attained enlightenment ("Bodhi Day") – we held a ceremony to begin the project anew.

### A hall of sutras

We have come to see our future hall not just as a two-story structure but as a physical embodiment of three great Mahayana sutras embedded in Thay's teachings and many Plum Village practices: the Diamond, the Lotus and the Avatamsaka ("Flower Adornment") sutras. Reproduced alongside are covers of relevant translations and commentaries by Thay.

The Diamond Sutra is reflected in the all-encompassing name of the meditation hall. "Great Hall of Peace" represents the "diamond mind" of Thay who, with his compassionate heart, vowed to create peace in himself and cultivate peace in the world. Thay's commitment and persistence remained as firm as a diamond, the hardest mineral on earth, right up to his last mindful breath.

The Saddharma Pundarika (Lotus Flower) Dharma Hall will be on the first level. In

Left: Thay's translation and commentaries on The Diamond Sutra have been published in Vietnamese, English, and German.

Phụ bản 66 - Sen Nở Trời Phương Ngoại



Nhà xuất bản Lá Bối, San Jose ở Mỹ ấn hành năm 2001. Số ISBN 1-891667-67-X

1<sup>st</sup> print by La Bôi publisher in San Jose, US in 2001. ISBN 1-891667-67-X



Mỹ: Dịch từ bản tiếng Việt, nhà xuất bản Parallax Press, xuất bản lần đầu nhất, năm 2003. ISBN 1-868375-33-7

American: Translated from the Vietnamese, published by Parallax Press publishers, first print in 2003. ISBN 1-868375-33-7

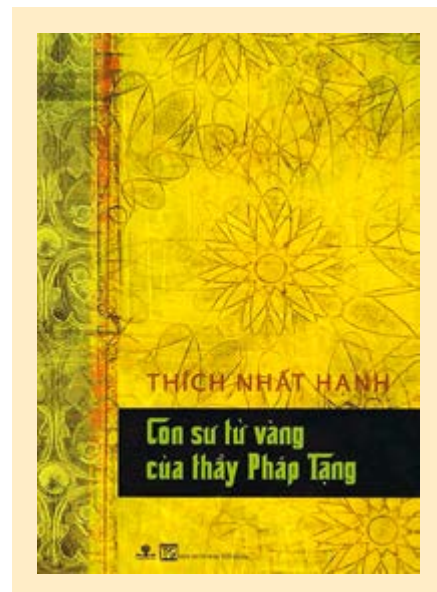
Left: In Opening the Heart of the Cosmos – Insights into the Lotus Sutra (later re-released as Peaceful Action, Open Heart – Lessons from the Lotus Sutra), Thay explores the sutra's main theme that everyone has the capacity to become a Buddha, and that Buddha-nature is inherent in everything. Emphasizing this as the basis for peaceful action, Thay goes on to demonstrate the sutra's practical and direct applicability to today's concerns.

*The Lotus Sutra*, we catch a glimpse, of the oneness of the historical dimension and the ultimate dimension where Buddha Shakyamuni is invited to seat on the lion throne with the Infinite-Jewels Buddha (Buddha Prabhūtaratna). The Infinite-Jewels

Buddha is hidden from our ordinary sight, but he is present all the time, dwelling in a jeweled stupa that is ready to appear in the sky at any time to praise the one who teaches *The Lotus Sutra*. Buddha Shakyamuni and the Infinite-Jewels Buddha share the same



According to *The Lotus Sutra* the Buddha manifested in this world to help all living beings realize the Buddha nature in themselves and, in accordance with their individual karmic conditions, find their own path to liberation from suffering. Above: a stele with Buddha Prabhūtaratna and Buddha Shakyamuni. China, end of the 6th century CE.



Above: Thay published a commentary in Vietnamese on *The Golden Lion Chapter*, a *Short Treatise* of Master Fazang (法藏), the 3rd Patriarch of the Huayan School. This famous treatise is from a presentation to the Tang Dynasty's Empress Wu Zetian of essential teachings from *The Avatamsaka Sutra*, a massive compilation of smaller sutras whose English translation runs to over 1,600 pages.

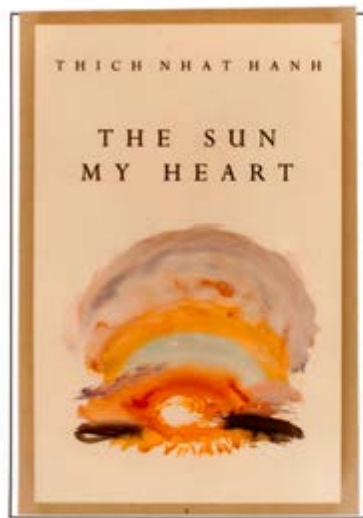
ultimate dimension. Not only that, we and all Buddhas in the whole cosmos share the same ultimate dimension.

The sutra's wondrous message is that *every* being has the potential to be Buddha. It also tells us that there is just one vehicle for achieving Buddhahood, that is the Buddha Vehicle. Moreover, we are *already* a Bodhisattva on our way to Buddhahood. All we need to do is follow the Bodhisattva path. The practice is to rise out of the mud of suffering so that a lotus flower may bloom.<sup>18</sup>

All of us are born of love and have the potential to develop that love into fullness. We aspire to be like Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion,<sup>19</sup> acting out of love and compassion to bring about the liberation of all beings. *The Lotus Sutra* is therefore the energy of the heart, as well as a joyful proclamation of universal salvation.

On the second level, the top floor, will be the Avatamsaka (Flower Adornment) Buddha Hall. *The Avatamsaka Sutra* reveals the full extent of the ultimate dimension and the





Anh: xuất bản năm 1992, nhà xuất bản Rider (20 Vauxhall Bridge Rd, London SW1V 2SA). Số ISBN 0-7126-5422-4

England: 1st edition, 1992, Rider publisher, ISBN no 0-7126-5422-4



Đức: Dịch từ bản tiếng Anh, xuất bản năm 1989, nhà xuất bản Theseus. Số ISBN 3-85936-026-4

Germany: was translated from the English version and published in 1989 by Theseus Verlag. ISBN 3-85936-026-4

In *The Sun My Heart*, Thay distills key insights from *The Avatamsaka Sutra*, presenting them in a conversational manner that deals with everyday objects and events. The book was originally written as a sequel to Thay's 1975 classic *The Miracle of Mindfulness* and remains a treasured companion guide for meditators.

practice by ourselves. When we practice, our whole family, our whole stream of ancestors and our whole community practice with us. Behind us is this whole network. We can only become a Buddha when everyone in the web becomes a Buddha.

### Architectural spirit

Together with our architect Mr. Frank Jungjohann-Feltens, we have drawn creative inspiration for our Buddha Hall from Thay's teaching on interbeing, where love is all-encompassing and infinite.<sup>20</sup> A feeling of the infinite vastness of the cosmos is incorporated in the design for the structure so that all who enter will experience – within and around them – a sense of space that is infinitely large in all directions.

Each meditation hall will have over 900 square meters of uninterrupted space,

Buddha realm, a reality beyond language, but a vibration we can feel with our heart.

The *Avatamsaka* delivers the astonishing message that we are *already* a Buddha. Its teaching is about the totality of life, where at the deepest level of reality we are all inter-connected, interpenetrated because

of our Buddha nature and what Thay calls “interbeing”.

This is conveyed through the imagery of the Net of Indra, an infinitely large web where, at the center of each vertex, hangs a glittering jewel whose surface reflects all other jewels into infinity. The meaning is that we cannot



Among many fantastical images in *The Avatamsaka Sutra* is the Net of Indra, stretching magically in all directions with glittering jewels that reflect each other into infinity. In one jewel are all the jewels and in all the jewels there is one. It is what Thay calls “interbeing”.

looking out to the even larger green spaces of EIAB's orchards through floor-to-ceiling windows that also create an overall sense of transparency. Both halls will be for giving Dharma talks, practicing Buddhist rituals such as Touching the Earth, and for meditation, including different forms of moving meditation such as qigong and taichi.

Creating such large column-free expanses is an ambitious undertaking, which is why our architect has consulted extensively with engineering experts to ensure technical feasibility. Access will be through the foyer of the Asoka Institute, with another entry point from the Old Hospital Path.

Below, computer-generated images from our architect give us some idea of how beautiful

EIAB's Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh Great Hall of Peace will be.

### Spiritual foundations

In recent months, we have offered courses on the three sutras mentioned earlier to prepare the spiritual ground for the Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh Great Hall of Peace. It has been as challenging to prepare and deliver these talks as I am sure it has been for listeners patiently to receive them!

The Lotus and Avatamsaka sutras are particularly complex and difficult. Without deep practice and meditation, we cannot fully understand their perspectives, philosophical concepts, mystical language, and fantastical visualizations of otherworldly dimensions.

It also helps to have some familiarity with the strange effects described by quantum mechanics, the theoretical physics of matter at atomic and subatomic scale. Particles change into waves, and vice versa; particles light years apart become entangled (Albert Einstein called this "spooky actions at a distance"<sup>21</sup>), and multiple worlds exist simultaneously side by side without interfering with each other.

*The Avatamsaka Sutra*, which conjures an infinite number of universes in a speck of dust, wrote about such phenomena more than a thousand years before quantum theory. It also proposed, like quantum physics today, that at the most fundamental level, life manifests as vibration.



In these computer-generated renderings of EIAB's future Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh Great Hall of Peace, the first image show where it will adjoin the back of EIAB's main building, the Asoka Institute. The new structure can be accessed from the front of the Asoka Institute as well as from the Old Hospital Path behind it. The second image shows the Avatamsaka (Flower Adornment) Buddha Hall (top) and, below it, the Saddharma Pundarika (Lotus Flower) Dharma Hall, as viewed from outside.



# Sutra Meditations

## Our mind is the solution

The essence of the Buddha's enlightenment is that he discovered the nature and structure of human consciousness, as expressed in the miraculously simple statement "consciousness is an act of being conscious (*vijānati vinnanam*)".<sup>22</sup> All of Buddhism is an application of this statement. All Buddhist philosophy, theory, psychology, and practice are derived from this single insight "consciousness is an act of being conscious".

Consciousness is how everything comes to be, it is the web from which everything manifests. The activity of our consciousness is what creates the materialized world. All living beings and inanimate objects, from the microscopic to the macroscopic, operate according to this principle of being conscious of everything else.<sup>23</sup> Consciousness is a property of the whole universe. It is the equivalent of a natural law.

The Buddha discovered that through "the act of being conscious" our mind creates our experience of the world. Whatever we become conscious of, our mind begins to act right away. This quickly becomes habit energy. Pushed by our habit energy, our intentional acts accumulate until they become karmic formations, or blocks of energy. We become a victim of our past conditioning. Caught in repeating karmic loops, we feel exhausted and powerless to escape endless feelings of discontent.

Just as the mind is the source of our suffering, it is also the solution to our difficulties. Once we understand this, we understand how to take control of our lives and transform our karma. Meditation is our starting point. It is the process where we learn to stop and come back to ourselves.

Using our breathing to bring our body and mind together, we settle our scattered energy, calm our body, mind and the bioenergetic field within us, and harmonize the three aspects of our body – physical (movement),

verbal (speech) and mental (thinking). With heightened sensitivity, we enter ever deeper states of oneness.

This has been the fundamental mindfulness practice of Buddhist meditation since the time of the Buddha. Variations based on the Diamond, Lotus and Avatamsaka sutras simply represent different meditation levels. I refer to them as Diamond Meditation, Lotus Meditation and Avatamsaka Meditation, and on p 34 offer a guided meditation that gently moves us through each.

In the beginning, our meditation practice is mainly what I call "passive transformation". We allow our energy to sink down so that blocks of painful energy from our past dissolve naturally. Gradually, we move to what I call "active cultivation" where we recycle this dissolved energy and transform it into the higher vibrational energy of love and compassion. This allows us to build a new perception of reality grounded in the present and pointing to the future. In another article starting on p 38, I have drawn a series of diagrams to illustrate this progression.

The whole process is like re-building an old house. After removing the top floor and the ground floor (passive transformation) we are left with foundations on which we have unlimited possibilities to build a new, better house (active cultivation). This is how we begin to change the direction of our life.

## Diamond Meditation

In the Plum Village tradition, when we follow Thay by saying: "I have arrived, I am home, in the here and in the now"<sup>24</sup>, we are practicing the passive transformation technique of Diamond Meditation. When we sit, we know that we are sitting, when we are angry, we know that we are angry, etc. Whatever it is, we know it is happening.

We allow painful experiences to come up and look at them the way they are. We stop completely and just observe. We are

conscious but we do not perform any "act of being conscious". We look at our pain, *such as it is*, a concept called "suchness". We allow it to be, to recognize it as it is, without judging or evaluating. We say to ourselves "It's just like that". We do not add further momentum to our mind's activities.

Increasingly, we feel the presence of blocks of energy that have built up through our countless "acts of being conscious". We experience these blocks through the tension across our shoulders, our back, in our arms, on our face, in our heart.... With Diamond Meditation we just recognize these sensations and allow them to flow down to our lower abdomen. We let the energy collect there and allow the intelligence of the body to operate until our pain melts away. A transformation happens at the level of our physical experience, and our whole body begins to feel warm.

When we reach this pleasant state of calmness, we begin to shine our light of natural awareness back onto ourselves and on our karmic formations. We look deeply into how our perceptions and expectations about life have caused our blocks of pain. The brighter the quality of "shining", the more we begin to notice and understand the workings of our mind and how things manifest. We see all the conditions that, through infinite lives, have contributed to what we are now. We are no longer helpless "victims" of our karma.

Diamond meditation brings us to the state of being fully here, fully present, fully available to life. We let go regrets about the past or worries about the future. We practice this mindfulness not just in the meditation hall but all through the day wherever we are or whatever we are doing. It helps us to accept situations and others as they are. We reduce disappointments and stress in our life and immediately improve our relationships with family, friends, co-workers etc.

When walking, we walk like the Buddha and Thay – peacefully, step by step. We relax our

whole body. Breathing in, we know that we are breathing in, breathing out, we know that we are breathing out. We just follow the person ahead of us. If that person turns left, we turn left; if that person turns right, we turn right. Aware of the contact of the soles of our feet on the ground, we silently say to our self: “I have arrived, I am home.... In the here and in the now.”

We practice mindful eating by concentrating fully on every piece of food, whether it is a vegetable spring roll or a carrot. This is so we can feel the love, compassion and caring of the cooks, the farmers, the sun – of everyone and everything that has gone into creating

our food. We see it as a gift of the whole universe. Practicing like that, we discover that we are not merely a tiny body in the universe but an active participant in a vast cosmic drama of infinite lives and beings. We begin fully to experience the miracle of being alive.

### Lotus Meditation

From the domain of “being” in Diamond Meditation, we enter the domain of “acting” with Lotus Meditation. We go a step further to *embrace* our difficulties with love and compassion. As described earlier, we actively convert painful negative energy into positive

energy and recycle it throughout our being. Practicing mindfulness throughout the day, we focus completely on whatever we are doing, finishing one task before jumping to another.

The goal of Lotus Meditation is to transform the mud of pain and sorrow into a beautiful lotus. Through active cultivation, we find that our life becomes very joyful, a blessing, a wonder. This practice completely transforms how we look at life and how we feel about it. Active cultivation helps us feel a oneness and completeness with life. From this we have a whole new perspective and develop a new way of living.





Thay practiced active cultivation when he created Engaged Buddhism. This action-oriented Buddhist reform movement emerged in the mid-1950s when South Vietnam was engulfed in violence and crisis. Thay proposed that Buddhism should move beyond the walls of monasteries to help ease the suffering of people in society. It should be active in education, economics, politics, social work and in bringing about peace and reconciliation between conflicting groups.

EIAB is likewise the fruit of Thay's practice of active cultivation. During his exile in the West, Thay continued to revitalize Buddhism by focusing away from theory and towards practical application of techniques that help individuals heal and transform themselves in today's world. In Lotus Meditation, we sit and allow our blocks of energy to sink to our lower abdomen. We generate a feeling of love for them all, for the conditions that created them, and for ourselves. We allow ourselves to release the accumulated energy of pain and sorrow. When we do so with love, we cultivate the energy of compassion.

That is how the Buddha practiced for infinite lifetimes and why he was able to develop great compassion. We cannot have compassion if we do not experience suffering. By embracing, and transforming deep suffering with our own love, compassion is born. This is beautifully represented by the blooming of a white lotus, as captured in the sutra's full title, *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra* ("The Wonderful [True and Everlasting] Dharma of the White Lotus").

As described on p 24, at the top the stupa is a chamber where the Shakyamuni Buddha has been invited to sit next to the Infinite-Jewels Buddha. According to Thay, this represents the merging of the historical and ultimate dimensions. The opening of the door to this chamber represents our mind opening to the Buddha's insight that our true nature is the nature of the Buddha and that *all* living beings are on their way to Buddhahood, regardless of who they are, what they do or what they may have done.

## Avatamsaka Meditation

Continuing to generate deep compassion, we move to Avatamsaka Meditation. Here,

beyond space and time, we enter the non-material domain of wave and vibration – the realm of the cosmic Buddha Vairochana, and all the Bodhisattvas. It is the mind of the Buddha. It is where the vibrational energy of our compassionate heart connects us to all beings, everything in the universe.

After taking deep root in ourselves to establish solidity, we learn to visualize the infinity of life and to be one with that infinity. In Avatamsaka Meditation, we imagine infinite Buddhas standing before us. Their light shines everywhere in the cosmos. We train our minds to extend our perception, views, and perspectives into infinity. We allow our energy to be transformed with the light of all the Buddhas in the universe.

At this quantum level, our mind begins to act like a wave vibrating and resonating with the waves of the cosmos. We allow the vibration of our energy to resonate with that of the field energy of the cosmic Buddha. We visualize ourselves merging with the cosmic Buddha and the entire universe. We reach out to touch the Buddha field of merit accumulated by the Buddha and all the Bodhisattvas over infinite lives. As their companions, we feel them in our heart.

*The Avatamsaka Sutra* tells us that infinite realms and arrays of information come together in one manifestation. I try to practice Avatamsaka Meditation when giving a Dharma talk. My approach is to enter the Dharma Hall without any preconceived plan of what to say. In sitting meditation, just before the talk, I begin to open my heart and try to receive the energy of the people in the room...the birdsong in the trees outside...the sunshine streaming in through the window...all the life surrounding me.

In the Dharma Talk, I continue this process of allowing the whole cosmos to come together. The infinite conditions and consequences that have manifested this audience... the speaker and the listeners engaging...and so on. In other words, it is not only me giving the Dharma talk but the audience as well as all elements of life in the entire cosmos. I learned this practice from Thay and other teachers. When we practice like this for a long time, there is deep communication across space-time. For example, we suddenly

become aware if someone we love is in danger far away. We have a physical sensation of unease and an urge to contact them. We may learn they have just been in an accident. I have experienced the "non-local" effect of this kind of entanglement on a number of occasions.

Through Avatamsaka Meditation, we experience the totality of life and see that our suffering is so small compared with that in the whole cosmos. It is the size of a peanut next to a melon. This comparison can be so liberating that compassion immediately arises for those whose suffering is so much greater than ours. We recover our sense of perspective and begin to relax.

In the Plum Village tradition, Avatamsaka Meditation is the ground principle of our practice. It is embedded in all the gathas we recite along with different activities in our daily life. This practice is based on Chapter 11 – Purifying Practice of *The Avatamsaka Sutra*.

During the incense offering at the beginning of a ceremony we visualize that we are a part of the cosmic Dharma Realms of the Avatamsaka world at that moment: "In gratitude, we offer this incense throughout space and time to all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas... May we and all beings be companions of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. May we awaken from forgetfulness and realize our true home."

Before Touching the Earth, we contemplate: "The one who bows and the one who is bowed to, are both, by nature, empty. Therefore, the communication between them is inexpressibly perfect. Our practice center is the Net of Indra reflecting all Buddhas everywhere. And with my person in front of each Buddha I go with my whole life for refuge..."

As expressed in the *Opening Verse*: "The Dharma is deep and lovely. We now have a chance to see, study and to practice it. We vow to realize its true meaning." We are encouraged to contemplate deeper and deeper into the depth of Oneness teaching of the Avatamsaka throughout our life.

# The Teacher Finds His Students

## Thay reached out

Usually, a great master waits for students to come. We first must find the teacher and request he or she to teach us. Thay was different. He went out to find his students. He expresses this tenderly in his poem “A Teacher Looking for His Disciples”.<sup>25</sup> Here are the opening stanzas:

*I have been looking for you, my child, Since the time when rivers and mountains still lay in obscurity. I was looking for you, When you were still in a deep sleep, Although the conch had many times echoed in the ten directions. Without leaving our ancient mountain, I looked at distant lands, And recognized your footprints on so many different paths.*

*Where are you going, my child? There have been times when the mist has come and enveloped the remote village, But you are still wandering in faraway lands. I have called your name with each breath, Confident that even though you have lost your way over there, You will finally find a way back to me. Sometimes I manifest myself right on the path you are treading, But you still look at me as if I were a stranger. You cannot see the connection between us in our former lives...”*

Thay goes on to write that there have been times when: “*You have left your teacher, your brothers and sisters. Alone you go... I look at you with compassion, Although I know that this is not a true separation (Because I am already in each cell of your body)*”

Even when students did not recognize him from previous lifetimes or accept him in this lifetime, Thay was compassionate. He reached out with his hand to pull them from the dark cave of ignorance. Who would do this if he or she is not like the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, hearing our cries and coming to us instead of waiting for us to come to them?

Is it possible that our beloved Thay, having entered the realm of nirvana, will never manifest again? No, it is not possible. Whenever we direct our mind towards Thay and call him he will manifest immediately. As long as we still are suffering, Thay will come to us. He confirmed it in his poem by saying: “*...you may need once more to play the prodigal son. That is why I promise I shall be there for you, Anytime you are in danger.*”

## Meeting Thay?

The words of the second part of Sr. Qui Nghiem’s beautiful song, mentioned earlier, are:

*Listening to the Sutra, we may continue to be unenlightened for eons, but enlightenment can come in a flash. Being next to Thay for a short while, I feel lighter, free of burdens on the path back to my true home.*

Some of us were with Thay for 10 or 20 years but we were not truly in touch with his mysterious, formless Dharmakaya. Thay is a reality that is indescribable. It is very difficult for disciples to “meet” their teacher because the teacher’s aspiration originates in the vow of a Great Bodhisattva which, to an ordinary mind is inconceivable, immeasurable, and boundless. Perhaps we stayed physically close for a while to enjoy Thay’s presence. But I believe we can only really meet Thay when we can go deep enough, to the ultimate source of reality.

As a disciple, I am able to feel only a part of Thay’s great vow, a part of his life, a part of the practice he has transmitted to me. These are personal treasures. Sometimes we may sense Thay’s Dharmakaya body through his poetry, which brings great joy and comfort. But really “meeting” Thay, like “meeting spring” is very difficult for any of us. Rather, it is a direction for our practice. We try

over many lifetimes to reach Thay’s eternal spring.

## When conditions are sufficient

When causes and conditions are sufficient, a Zen Master will manifest again. In the ultimate dimension, so long as we call that person’s name, that person will appear. If there is a call, there is an answer, all wishes will be fulfilled. So it is with Thay.



Through Thay's lifetime of compassionate action, it is possible to feel the energy of, Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion.<sup>26</sup>



My heartfelt wish is that EIAB shall obtain planning permission to begin construction later this year on the Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh Great Hall of Peace. We intend to submit the whole plan to the relevant government authorities around August. Much will also depend on how far the Institute's finances can stretch and on the continued generosity of many wonderful donors around the globe.

The whole process might take another two, three, five or more years. But in the realm of Thay's eternal spring there is no rush. We maintain absolute faith it will happen. So, we shall continue doing our best while allowing the right conditions to manifest. EIAB's Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh Great Hall of Peace will be finished when it is finished.



### Acknowledgements and in gratitude:

The author would like to express his deep gratitude to Ms. Sarah Monks for her detailed, creative and careful editing work; to Sr. Song Nghiêem for her creativity with the main theme of EIAB 2023 magazine as well as for the author's series of courses in 2023 to honor Thay's life and work; to Ms. Hai Yen Victoria Tran and her husband, Mr. Hiep Phung for their generosity in the hard work of translating and transcribing Dharma talks from Vietnamese to English; to Ms. Sarah Monks, Mr. Christian Bergmann, and Ms. Helga Jeanes-Wandelburg for their love in transcribing long Dharma talks relating to this article; and last but not least to Ms. Gabriele Gassen for her generosity of time and energy in translating this article as well as many others for this issue of EIAB's magazine into German.



### Endnotes

- 1 This article is based on a series of Dharma talks offered by the author in Vietnamese and English in the first half of 2023
- 2 It is called Cây Nêu in Vietnamese
- 3 The title of the new film comes from one of Thay's most famous "gathas" (verses), often featured in Thay's calligraphic art. The full gatha is: "I have arrived, I am home. In the here, In the now. I am solid, I am free. In the ultimate I dwell"



When this photo was taken at Plum Village in 2005, Thap Phap An (right) had just accompanied Thay on his historic return trip to Vietnam.

- 4 The film, which extensively features Thay's work for peace, was released on 2 April 2022 in response to the war and growing humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. The Plum Village Community wrote and circulated in English and 13 other languages an open letter calling for an immediate ceasefire. We supplemented this with personal letters to Mr. Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation, and Mr. Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine, enclosing a copy of the open letter and a DVD of *A Cloud Never Dies*
- 5 *The Miracle of Mindfulness* offers practical exercises for learning the skills of mindfulness – being awake and fully aware in the present moment. It helps us to practice in daily life *outside* the meditation hall
- 6 The new center, whose mission is "to empower people around the globe to live with purpose, equanimity, and joy through the practice of mindfulness", was made possible with a \$25 million gift from an anonymous donor. For information on the center, its establishment and inaugural event, see the website of the Thich Nhat Hanh Center for Mindfulness in Public Health ([mindfulpublichealth.org](http://mindfulpublichealth.org)), accessed 21 June 2023
- 7 On May 1st 1966, ten days before leaving for the US, Thầy received the Lamp Transmission from his teacher, Zen Master Thích ChânThật at Từ Hiếu Temple in Huế, formally becoming a Dharma Teacher of the Liễu Quán Dharma line in the 42nd generation of the Linji School. In accordance with tradition, he received a poem from his Teacher, to mark the transmission of the lamp. The original words of the gatha in Chinese, Sino-Vietnamese and in Thay's translation into Vietnamese are:



一向逢春得健行	Nhất hướng phùng xuân đắc kiện hành	Đi gặp mùa Xuân, bước kiện hành
行當無念亦無諍	Hành đương vô niệm diệt vô tranh	Đi trong vô niệm với vô tranh
心燈若照其原体	Tâm đăng nhược chiếu kỳ nguyên thể	Đèn tâm soi chiếu vào nguyên thể
妙法東西可自成	Diệu pháp đông tây khả tự thành	Diệu pháp Đông Tây ắt tự thành
<p>As translated and interpreted in English by Thay Pháp An, the words are:  <i>When we are determined to go just in one direction, we will meet the spring, and our march will be a heroic one*.</i>  <i>If in acting and living out our life, we practice peace and harmony, free from the control of karmic consciousness,</i>  <i>And always maintain the natural light of awareness shining on our original cosmic body,</i>  <i>Then the work of transmitting the wonderful Dharma in the East as well as in the West can be fulfilled.</i>  <i>* This refers to a path for a Bodhisattva to follow, as laid down in the Śūraṅgamasamādhisūtra - Sūtra on the Heroic-March Concentration</i></p>		

- 8 For those who grew up in Vietnam, Tet also brings back joyous childhood memories of the sound of firecrackers ushering in the new year and the start of spring
- 9 Discourse on Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone Bhaddekaratta Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya 131  
<https://plumvillage.org/library/sutras/discourse-on-knowing-the-better-way-to-live-alone/>
- 10 Image by freepik.com <https://www.freepik.com/free-photo/close-up-beautiful-tree-bark-texture-15515124.htm#from-view-detail-alsolike> accessed 2 July 2023
- 11 I invited Sr. Thi Nghiem to sing this song during a Dharma talk at Tu Hieu Temple before





ceremonies to mark the first anniversary of Thay's passing

- 12 <https://plumvillage.org/library/sutras/the-diamond-that-cuts-through-illusion/> accessed 2 May 2023
- 13 In Sino-Vietnamese: Chúng sanh vô biên thế nguyên độ
- 14 Thay's translation of the Satipatthāna Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya 10 is at <https://plumvillage.org/library/sutras/discourse-on-the-four-establishments-of-mindfulness>, accessed 21 June 2023
- 15 In doing so, we have "borrowed" from the US where baseball and football have a "Hall of Fame" honoring players, coaches, managers, umpires, executives, and pioneers for outstanding sporting contributions
- 16 According to the UN, the world is facing the highest number of violent conflicts since the Second World War, directly affecting 2 billion people – a quarter of humanity. See UN press release issued 26 January 2023 <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15184.doc.htm>, accessed 7 May 2023. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reports that total global military spending reached a new high of \$2.24 trillion in 2022. Press release issued 24 April 2023, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2023/world-military-expenditure-reaches-new-record-high-european-spending-surges> accessed 7 May 2023
- 17 A video of the entire ceremony can be viewed at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFbRWtjdZ5U&ab\\_channel=EIABSangha](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFbRWtjdZ5U&ab_channel=EIABSangha) accessed 5 July 2023
- 18 This was the theme of the author's article "The Blooming of a White Lotus" in EIAB's 2022 Magazine, pp 14-56, recounting the passing and funeral of Thay. For the English edition, please see [https://www.eiab.eu/lw\\_resource/datapool/systemfiles/elements/files/4df37e39-6fe2-11ed-8d7b-fe08df3aa0f4/live/document/EIAB\\_Magazine\\_2022\\_E.pdf](https://www.eiab.eu/lw_resource/datapool/systemfiles/elements/files/4df37e39-6fe2-11ed-8d7b-fe08df3aa0f4/live/document/EIAB_Magazine_2022_E.pdf)
- 19 We already have a beautiful statue of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara for the future Lotus Sutra Dharma Hall. It is a gift from a lay practitioner in Vietnam who offered it to EIAB when I went there for Thay's first year anniversary. The statue is presently located in the Vajracchedikā ("Diamond Sutra") Meditation Hall on the 2nd floor of the Asoka Institute
- 20 Please also refer to our architect's article on p 177
- 21 The term "spooky actions" was coined by Albert Einstein in a letter to Max Born on 3 March 1947 to describe the strange effects where two particles may interact instantaneously over a distance [https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/spooky\\_action\\_at\\_a\\_distance#:~:text=Coined%20by%20Albert%20Einstein%20as,interact%20instantaneously%20over%20a%20distance](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/spooky_action_at_a_distance#:~:text=Coined%20by%20Albert%20Einstein%20as,interact%20instantaneously%20over%20a%20distance), accessed 22 June 2023. It is also interesting that Einstein wrote a letter dated 29 July 1953 in which he said: "For people like us who believe in physics, the separation between past, present and future has only the importance of an admittedly tenacious illusion." See Time's arrow: Albert Einstein's Letters to Michele Besso <https://www.christies.com/features/Einstein-letters-to-Michele-Besso-8422-1.aspx>, accessed 22 June 2023
- 22 Based on a translation by Professor David J. Kalupahana in his book *A History of Buddhist Philosophy: Continuities and Discontinuities*, University of Hawaii Press, 1992, p 72. The professor's original formulation is "consciousness is nothing more than an act of being conscious."
- 23 A moving mass is aware of all the other mass and matter in the entire universe because of the curvature of space-time, as discovered by Albert Einstein. This creates a web of "oneness" where, for example, the earth is conscious of the sun, moon, and other planets and vice versa. Similarly, the 2022 Nobel Prize in Physics was awarded for experiments with entangled particles, where what happens to one particle in an entangled pair happens to the other, even if the particles are far apart. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/physics/2022/clause/facts/> accessed 5 June 2023
- 24 Thay liked to call "I Have Arrived, I Am Home" the seal of Plum Village practice and wrote a meditative song for us to practice, based on the gatha reproduced in Endnote 3 (above)
- 25 See *A Teacher Looking for His Disciple – The Mindfulness Bell* ([parallax.org](http://parallax.org)), a poem Thay published in the year 2000
- 26 Sculpture of Avalokiteśvara holding a padma (lotus). *Nālandā, Bihar, India*, 9th century CE. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avalokiteśvara#:~:text=In%20Buddhism%2C%20Avalokiteśvara%20\(Sanskrit%3A.Padmap%C4%81%E1%B9%87%20\(the%20lotus%20bearer\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avalokiteśvara#:~:text=In%20Buddhism%2C%20Avalokiteśvara%20(Sanskrit%3A.Padmap%C4%81%E1%B9%87%20(the%20lotus%20bearer)) accessed 4 June 2023





A GUIDED MEDITATION OFFERED BY THAY PHAP AN, AS INSPIRED BY:

## Three Mahayana Sutras – A Guided Meditation



Spring, with all its freshness and vitality, is a magical time for renewing our practice. In the Mahayana sutras that inspired this guided meditation, a blue sky represents true emptiness of the mind, and a blossom appears as a wonderful manifestation. In the Mahayana spirit of Zen poetry, plum blossoms such as those pictured above show us Thay's continuation in the eternal spring of the ultimate dimension.

Gently coming back to my body and my mind, I enjoy my inbreath and my outbreath.  
It is a very calm and peaceful morning; full of beautiful sunshine with stillness around me.  
It is wonderful to return to the here and the now.

Enjoying my inbreath, I breathe in; enjoying my outbreath, I breathe out.  
It is so wonderful to breathe in deeply; it is so wonderful to breathe out deeply.

Enjoying my deep inbreath, I breathe in; enjoying my deep outbreath, I breathe out.  
Allowing my deep inbreath to penetrate to my lower abdomen, I breathe in.  
Allowing my whole body to relax, I breathe out.

Gently shifting my attention to my lower abdomen, and gently focusing my attention on my lower abdomen.  
Allowing my outbreath to relax the whole body.



Visualizing from the top of my head a fall of energy, just like a fall of water, flowing down from the top of my head, over my face, the back of my head, my neck, my shoulder, my back, my arms, my hands, my fingers... This fall of energy sinks down into my lower abdomen.

Sinking the energy down to my lower abdomen, I breathe in.  
 Allowing my outbreath to relax my whole body.  
 Enjoying deeply the relaxation in my whole body,  
 and allowing the energy in my body to vibrate gently.

Visualizing the fall of energy from the top of my head flowing down to my lower abdomen and continuing to flow down to my toes.  
 Allowing my whole body to relax and feeling the vibration of energy along my whole body.  
 Letting go all the tension, all the grasping,  
 And allowing my whole body and my mind to become a beautiful river flowing without any obstacle.  
 Letting everything flow away; letting go.

Letting my toes and my feet melt away and flow like a river, like a stream of the river.  
 Letting my calves, my knees, my whole legs melt away, flow away.  
 Letting the upper part of my body flow away, melt down, resolve, disperse and flow away.  
 Letting my back, my shoulders, my arms, my elbows flow away.  
 Letting go, I do not hold anything back.  
 Letting my neck, my face, my whole head melt and flow away.

Not holding anything back. Letting go.  
 Allowing my whole body, from the top of my head to my toes, to melt and flow away.  
 There is nothing I can hold in my two hands.  
 Just like a stream of flowing water, I cannot grasp or hold any water in my hands.



This 7th century CE statue<sup>1</sup> is of the Cosmic Buddha Vairocana, a central figure in The Avatamsaka Sutra. More than 17m high, it is the largest Buddha statue at the Longmen Grottoes of Luoyang in the Chinese province of Henan. Some of the caves were carved for Tang Dynasty Empress Wu Zetian, a devotee of the sutra.<sup>2</sup>



I am of the nature of impermanence. I am of the nature of change, like a stream of flowing water.  
It is the act of being conscious that gives the illusion that I am permanent.  
Consciousness or the act of being conscious creates an illusion within me.  
I am of the nature of emptiness, of the nature of “non-self” or “no-self”.  
It is the activity of my consciousness that creates the illusion of a separate self.  
Letting go, letting my whole body and my mind flow away, melt away.  
I am not holding on to anything.

I am of the nature of true emptiness.  
Thanks to the nature of true emptiness, I am also a wonderful manifestation, a magical manifestation.  
I am of the nature of true emptiness, and I am always free.  
I am not caught in any notion or idea, thanks to true emptiness.  
I have the internal freedom of a Buddha.

Thanks to the wonderful manifestation, I can do something beautiful for life.  
My wonderful manifestation is that of a Bodhisattva walking on the path to Buddhahood.  
Regardless of who we are – he, she, they, it – we all will become Buddhas.  
We are a lotus flower emerging slowly from the mud deep down in the pond.  
Very soon the lotus flower will rise and open itself under the beautiful sunshine.

I am one with life. I deeply “inter-am” with everything in this universe.  
We “inter-are” with everything in this whole universe.  
Allowing our heart to open so that we can vibrate with the vibration of all life in this cosmos.  
Our life vibrates with the life of everything in this universe.

Visualizing that I’m sitting in front of a cosmic Buddha.  
There are infinite cosmic Buddhas in the whole cosmos, and I am sitting there in front of each of them.  
Allowing my heart to open to all these Buddhas so that the light of all these Buddhas – the light of wisdom, the light of compassion – from all these Buddhas can flow into my heart.





Infinite beautiful light from infinite Buddhas shining, radiating out throughout the whole cosmos.  
 Allowing myself to be one with this light shining from infinite Buddhas.  
 Feeling deeply satisfied, feeling deep peace and calmness,  
 Receiving the infinite light from all the infinite Buddhas.

Feeling the vibration of energy in my heart center.  
 Allowing my heart to connect to the compassionate vibrational energy of all Buddhas in the universe.  
 Synchronized and vibrating with the energy of compassion from all Buddhas in the universe.  
 May the energy of love from my heart flow out and fill up the whole universe in all ten directions.  
 Feeling so much love for everything in the universe.

With this wonderful meditation, the energy in the heart center will continue to vibrate stronger and stronger.  
 It will become deeper and deeper, and stronger and stronger.  
 For now, we will gently emerge out of our meditation.

Gently, coming back to feel my physical body, I breathe in.  
 Allowing my physical body to relax, I breathe out.  
 Gently, allowing the vibration of energy in my heart center to slowly calm down.  
 Simply coming back to feel the physical body, relaxing my physical body.  
 Aware of my inbreath, I breathe in. Aware of my outbreath, I breathe out.  
 In, out.

## Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.wallpaperflare.com/buddha-statue-longman-grottoes-stone-landmark-sculpture-art-and-craft-wallpaper-pmcd/download/1920x1200>, accessed 9 July 2023
- 2 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Longmen\\_Grottoes#:~:text=It%20has%20the%20largest%20Buddha,as%20the%20year%20of%20carving](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Longmen_Grottoes#:~:text=It%20has%20the%20largest%20Buddha,as%20the%20year%20of%20carving), accessed 9 July 2023



# Where Did the Buddha Go?

*Different Buddhist perspectives on nirvana*

*Where did the Buddha go when he ended this life on earth?  
What is nirvana? Is it the final goal of our spiritual life?  
Was nirvana the Buddha's reason to manifest in this world?  
Or did the Buddha manifest in human form to show us the Buddha's wisdom  
And how to reach enlightenment?  
Does the Buddha continue in some other form?  
EIAB Director and Dean of Studies Thay Phap An discusses  
how different Buddhist traditions approach these fundamental questions.*

## What is nirvana?

We are told that the historical Buddha was born in the 5th century BCE as a prince of the Shakya republic in the northeast of today's India. At the age of 29, he left his privileged world to search for an end to suffering. It took six years of intense practice. After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha taught for the next 45 years. At the age of 80, he passed away and, according to tradition, entered nirvana.

What happened next?

This question has been at the core of Buddhist contemplation, speculation, and study for some 2,500 years. After the Buddha passed away, the Buddhist community vigorously debated who the Buddha was, the extent of

his enlightenment, the nature of nirvana and whether we, too, can become a Buddha.

## Different answers

Within 200 to 300 years after the passing of the Buddha, there were 18 and possibly up to 30 different schools. By the 1st century BCE, Buddhism had divided into two main branches<sup>1</sup>: the southern transmission of the Hinayana<sup>2</sup>, known today in south and southeast Asia as Theravada, and the northern transmission of the Mahayana, which travelled to China (Chan Buddhism), Korea (Seon Buddhism), Japan (Zen), and Vietnam (Zen and Pure Land Buddhism<sup>3</sup>).

Followers of the **Hinayana** believe that the Buddha's enlightenment was an end in and of itself, with nirvana his final destination

after infinite lifetimes of practicing wholeheartedly and cultivating goodness. Beyond the formless, nothing-less realm of nirvana, there is no place to find the Buddha.

In Hinayana Buddhism, the goal is to destroy forever all afflictions that prevent us from attaining individual enlightenment and entering nirvana. We unify body and mind at the deepest level until we reach a state called purity of mind consciousness.<sup>4</sup> At this singular point we are completely free from the influence of our senses and liberate ourselves completely from rebirth into the karmic cycle of suffering, or samsara. That is nirvana, a timeless state of profound peace.

The image is of a flame that has been extinguished. It cannot be found in the north, south, east, or west. For Hinayana





Oneness – maintaining complete unity of mind, body, and acts in every moment – is the Mahayana path, as depicted (above) in Thay's calligraphy of a Zen circle of One Mind.

practitioners, nirvana is a static realm of infinite space, no form, nothingness. It is deemed sufficient because it is seen as equal to the Buddha's enlightenment.

**Mahayana** Buddhism, a later Buddhist development, does not accept the idea of nirvana as extinction. If that were so, it would mean there is no more life, and that the Buddha has vanished from this world. For the Mahayana, nirvana is neither static nor an end point. It is only a state of mind reached at a particular moment in space and time.

As beings, we exist beyond space and time in a universe of consciousness. Through his enlightenment, the Buddha discovered that, for humans, "consciousness is an act of being conscious" (please see p 27 of my previous article). For Mahayana practitioners,

therefore, the Buddha is a conscious being who continues to perform acts of being conscious. That is how he continues to live and manifest. Like the Buddha's enlightenment, nirvana is part of an ongoing vast, unlimited, and dynamic process.

Maintaining complete unity of mind, body, and acts (mental, verbal, and physical) in every moment is the Mahayana path. For example, when we eat, our mind is completely with eating. Nirvana is something that happens each moment we are in a state of oneness with all aspects of our existence. That oneness is where we find the Buddha.

### The bird of affliction

We can illustrate the fundamental differences between Hinayana and Mahayana

approaches to nirvana by imagining a bird flying across the sky.

In the Hinayana tradition the bird represents our afflictions. The approach is to take an arrow and shoot it out of the sky. The arrow is our concentration.<sup>6</sup> We focus our mind and shoot as accurately as possible. When the arrow pierces the bird, and it falls dead to the ground our afflictions have ended. Because our focus is on the bird (our afflictions), we do not care about the blue sky. We have reached our end point of purified mind consciousness, nirvana.

The Mahayana says, no, shooting and killing the bird cannot be the end. Our afflictions are infinite. They lie in our store consciousness for countless lifetimes. The Mahayana approach is to *go along* with the bird as it flies.



For the Hinayana, afflictions are like a bird flying across a blue sky. From this perspective, nirvana can only be reached by shooting the bird of our afflictions out of the sky.<sup>5</sup>

Just watch and stay with it until eventually it stops and lands.

Our mind acts like the motionless blue sky. The bird flies across but the sky does not move at all. We allow things to be, allow their “suchness”. Our mind remains calm and peaceful. Then, looking deeply into purified mind consciousness, we see the true nature of the mind. Allowing the true nature of the mind to manifest all the time is the Mahayana approach to nirvana.<sup>7</sup>

### Individual vs universal

While Hinayana concerns itself with the salvation of enlightenment individuals (“arhats”) who have rid themselves of all afflictions, Mahayana is concerned with the salvation of *all* because all beings have the capacity to be conscious. That is why “Hinayana” is translated as “the small vehicle”, i.e., transporting fewer people towards

enlightenment and nirvana, and “Mahayana” as “the great vehicle”, transporting all beings to enlightenment and Buddhahood.

While in the Hinayana, it is possible for an individual to practice alone to reach enlightenment and nirvana, from the Mahayana perspective that is not possible because we are deeply connected to everyone in the whole cosmos. When we practice, our whole family and stream of ancestors practice with us. We can only become a Buddha when everyone in the cosmos becomes a Buddha. The Mahayana offers a “complete” and “full” path to Buddhahood, compared with which the Hinayana approach is seen as “incomplete” or “insufficient”.<sup>8</sup>

### Analysis vs. synthesis

It is very clear to all Buddhist practitioners, that with his enlightenment, the Buddha found a final truth. As expressed in the Pali

Canon, the Buddha rediscovered an ancient path trodden by all Buddhas in the past.<sup>9</sup> So, what exactly is this final truth or Dharma<sup>10</sup> that the Buddha had found or rediscovered?

In order to establish this truth, early Buddhist scholars began to analyze and categorize the Buddha’s teaching into different dharma elements, believing that this would enable them to discover and reconstruct its totality. Knowing this truth can lead one to enlightenment and nirvana. These scholars defined dharma as that which has a self-nature. Thanks to this self nature, they say, we can identify a thing as it is. Knowing all dharmas, we can then know the Truth or Dharma, which the Buddha proclaimed.

An example of this Truth or Dharma which the Buddha taught is the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the ending of suffering and the truth about the way out of suffering,



which is the Noble Eightfold Path. This is a truth about the nature of existence, the truth of “unsatisfactoriness” of existence. It is an inherent self-nature of existence.

This inherent self-nature exists in everything, and the early Buddhist scholars believed that, with careful classification and categorization, one can discover a set of dharmas, from which everything in the whole universe can be constructed. Different Buddhist schools came up with a different number of dharmas. This method of scholastic systematization and categorization was very rational, intellectual – almost mathematical. It became known as the analytical wisdom approach.<sup>11</sup>

It is equivalent to believing that all life is contained in the periodic table of 118 chemical elements, and that if we combine their chemical structures, we can create life. But we know that is not possible. Deep within us, we sense that life is more than just the combination of chemical elements. The analytical mind is focused on dividing and fragmenting objects and concepts into separate notions that are fixed or solid. For the Mahayana, something is missing from this approach. It is the heart.

The heart is not about analysis but synthesis, completeness, love, and compassion. Mahayana Buddhism therefore became a movement that approached things differently – from the heart, not only the head. It is a syncretical wisdom about totality, an all-encompassing view that embraces all.

### A philosophical impasse

With the emergence of these fundamentally different approaches, early Buddhism faced a philosophical crisis.

A major challenge to Hinayana orthodoxy stemmed from the Buddha's teaching that everything is impermanent. If a dharma is “fixed” or has an inherent self-nature, then surely it must be permanent, which means it cannot follow the Buddha's teaching of impermanence. According to this reasoning, to be consistent with the teaching, any dharma that comes into existence has to disappear right away.

The Hinayana view that all negative mental blocks can be destroyed completely was another conundrum. The law of dependent co-origination of the Buddha is that everything arises from conditions. If all negative mental blocks are destroyed completely, it means that all conditions that gave rise to them are also destroyed. The Mahanaya said, no, that cannot be. All the conditions are still there; the key is how we look at them.

For the Mahayana, the issue is not mental formations in themselves but how our mind perceives them. If we are sad, for example, it is not that we practice until our sadness completely ends and we are free. Instead, the practice is just to look at our sadness and hold it there. We do not act on it. Even though the sadness remains, we have full control.

There is no dharma with a fixed and inherent nature of sadness. Instead, there is *potential* for sadness or a seed of sadness. The manifestation of sadness results from the accumulation of our unskillful acts of being conscious through infinite rebirths, including our present life. Being simply not aware of the process of our mind, we have allowed this accumulation to happen. Once we understand how our mind works, we can perform skillful acts of being conscious and thus, over time, reduce the manifestation of sadness to the extent it is only potential, just a seed.

### Nothing separate, nothing solid

Unlike the Hinayana, the Mahayana maintains that there is nothing “solid” in the Buddha's dharma, as expressed in the literature of *Prajñāpāramitā* (“Perfection of Wisdom”) sutras, to which *The Diamond Sutra* belongs.<sup>12</sup> Any dharma is completely empty of an inherent self-nature. This finding is comparable to that of modern physics which, looking deeply into molecules, has discovered vast spaces between and within atoms, electrons and neutrons. Chemical elements are not the final or fundamental reality. There is no “floweriness” in a flower, no “hydrogenness” in the chemical element hydrogen and so on.

Looking even more deeply into the nature of matter, quantum physics has discovered

that it can behave as a wave or particle. The implication is that matter has no core substance. It is essentially empty of anything with a fixed or separate self-existence.

The concept of true emptiness is that self-nature cannot exist. In line with the Buddha's teaching of impermanence, everything must be empty of a self-nature. A flower, for example, has no separate self as a flower. It is made of non-flower elements such as roots, stems, leaves. It exists because of the sun, the moon, the rain, the fertilizer, the gardener who planted and tended it and many other conditions.

### The mind is the middle way

Speculation over a dharma with inherent self-nature can lead to the extreme of “being”. Equally, a strong reaction to this philosophical speculation gives rise to the notion of emptiness of the dharma, which can potentially lead to the extreme of “non-being”. A middle way out of these extremes is how the mind functions with respect to the dharmas. It is not the inherent nature of the dharmas, per se.

In early Mahayana efforts to look for the Truth the Buddha discovered, Hinayana Buddhism's view of nirvana as a state of purified mind consciousness thus came to be seen as a dead end, a fixed dharma limiting the capacity of our mind when the reality of life is organic, dynamic, and expansive.

Mahayana Buddhism believes that the nature of our mind and its functions are what we should be focusing on, because any dharma is only an object of the mind. Depending on how the mind perceives it, a dharma can be looked upon as having self-existence (in the conventional sense) or emptiness (in the absolute sense).

From the Mahayana perspective, the Buddha's enlightenment is about the fundamental structure and function of our consciousness. This is also the fundamental ground of existence or reality. His enlightenment is not limited only to the achievement of a state of purified mind consciousness, a state of nirvana. The Buddha discovered that every being, animate or inanimate, has the potential



The image above is from a copy of a Chinese translation of The Diamond Sutra, dated back to 11 May 868. It was found in the early 20th century among Buddhist manuscripts in the ancient Silk Road oasis of Dunhuang, in China's northwest.

to be enlightened, a potential which they develop in different ways, according to their physical stage of evolution and capacity for consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

This potential is the potential for the manifestation of ever-present life, ever-moving vibration in the whole cosmos. According to the Buddha, there are infinite cycles of the cosmos coming and going without any ending. The Big Bang of 20th century scientific theory was not the only beginning of the cosmos and the stillness after the cosmos eventually stops expanding will not be the only ending of the cosmos. It is a great mystery that the cosmos has infinite cycles of life.

Later Buddhist generations called this potential “the Buddha nature”, which is there within all of us and the Buddha himself. The Buddha is the one who already developed this potential to its fullest capacity through infinite rebirths, with his wholesome practice and cultivation of goodness.

### From Hinayana to Mahayana

At EIAB, in order to better understand the Truth that the Buddha discovered in his enlightenment, we have looked into teachings given in the Diamond, the Lotus and Avatamsaka sutras. In the following pages, I have drawn diagrams of two cones, stacked on each other or shown separately. These are to represent the progression of Buddhist thought around the question of what happened after the Buddha entered nirvana.

#### Diagram 1

In *Diagram 1*, the lower cone is the Hinayana, where we practice mindfulness meditation based on the *Discourse on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness*.<sup>14</sup> The Hinayana stops at the singular point where the two cones meet which, for the Hinayana, is the nirvana of purified mind consciousness.

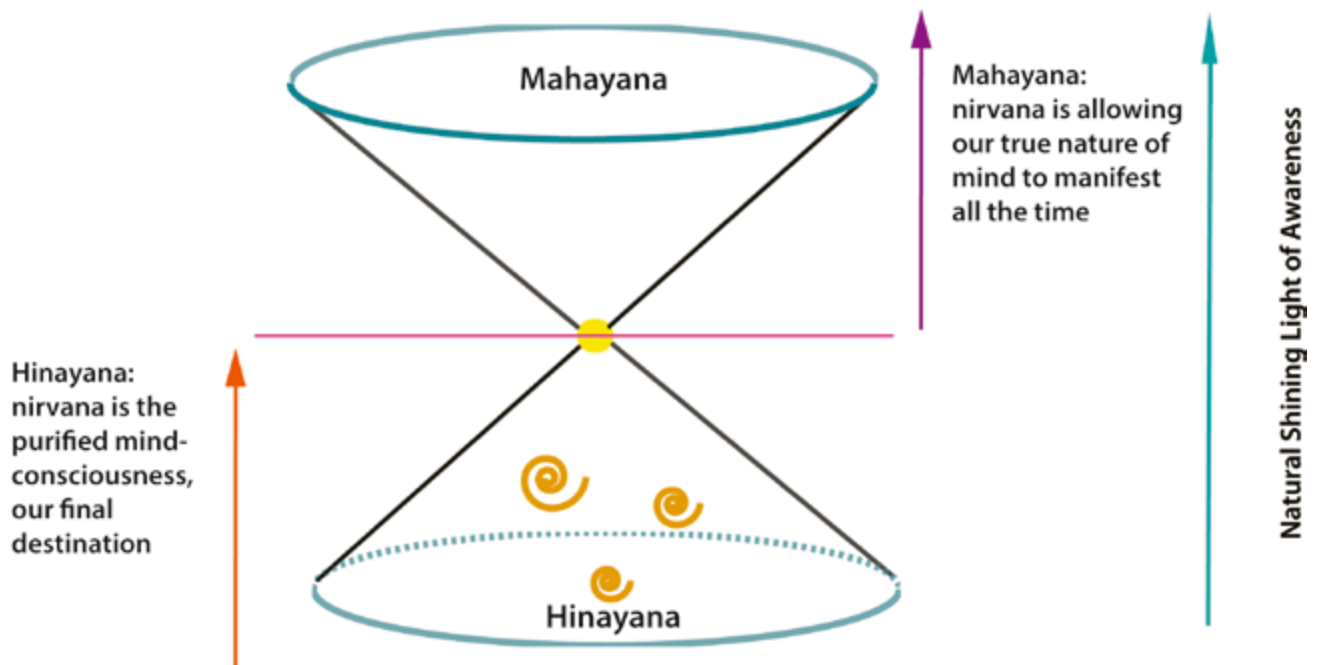
Emanating from that single point is early Mahayana Buddhism. *The Diamond Sutra* is its first attempt to describe what is *beyond* nirvana. It says that nirvana is not a fixed point in space and time. It does not have a self-nature.

The upper cone is where Mahayana Buddhism branches out, with a range of meditation practices inspired by the Lotus and Avatamsaka sutras (please also refer to pp 27–29 of my previous article).

One cone should not be considered “higher” or “lower” than the other in any literal sense. Only when we sufficiently calm the movement of our mind by mastering the practices of the lower cone can we have the full benefit of practices offered in the upper cone. In fact, the Hinayana and Mahayana follow similar meditation techniques, but their focus and interpretation are different. For the former, the object of meditation is our body and our mind. For the latter it is the whole universe, everything we can experience with our mind.



## Two Approaches to Nirvana



**Diagram 1**

The **lower cone**, which is the domain of the Hinayana, is the historical dimension. It represents the materialized universe (or in the language of quantum mechanics, a particle-like universe) in which the process of being conscious has been going on for an unimaginably long time. The more “materialized” the cone, the greater the pain and suffering. The practice of the lower cone deals with emptiness of *self*, to remove mental afflictions standing in the way of nirvana. It is the practice of “shooting down the bird”.

### Diagram 2

In *Diagram 2*, afflictions are drawn as dark whirlpools representing mental activities and karmic formations of sadness, anger, fear and so on. When we have an object of mind, we direct our mind to that object and are carried away by that object, we perform an intentional act of being conscious. We develop habit energy that gradually turns into a karmic loop.

Resolving these can take a long time – many lifetimes of practice – for someone whose “loops” of habit energy are large, whose karmic formations are thick and whose natural shining light of awareness is weak. For someone who has small loops and thin karmic formations, this natural shining light of awareness is brighter and penetrates faster. The Buddha’s light is so strong, that it is infinitely white, and this lower cone is infinitely thin.

In the lower cone a person carries a heavy burden of negativity. While he or she may, for example, be dimly aware of anger inside, the habit energy is so strong that he or she has little control when that anger erupts.

### Diagram 3a

*Diagram 3a*, showing the tip of the lower cone, is where the views of the Hinayana and early Mahayana diverge on the question of nirvana. The Mahayana “arrow of time”

runs from infinite time past to infinite time future and present. This is the realm of *The Diamond Sutra*, with its “suchness” approach. It is where, through normal daily activities, we live “in the here and in the now” without further adding to karmic formations by continuing to perform intentional acts of being conscious. Even though we still have negative mental blocks, we do not grasp onto them because we are truly present for what is happening now.

### Diagram 3b

In *Diagram 3b*, we see the crossover from Hinayana to Mahayana. In the lower cone, affliction is big, and enlightenment is small. As it merges into the upper cone, affliction becomes smaller, and enlightenment becomes bigger.

### Diagram 3c

In *Diagram 3c*, we see how the “width” of enlightenment depends on our capacity to

## Hinayana Approach

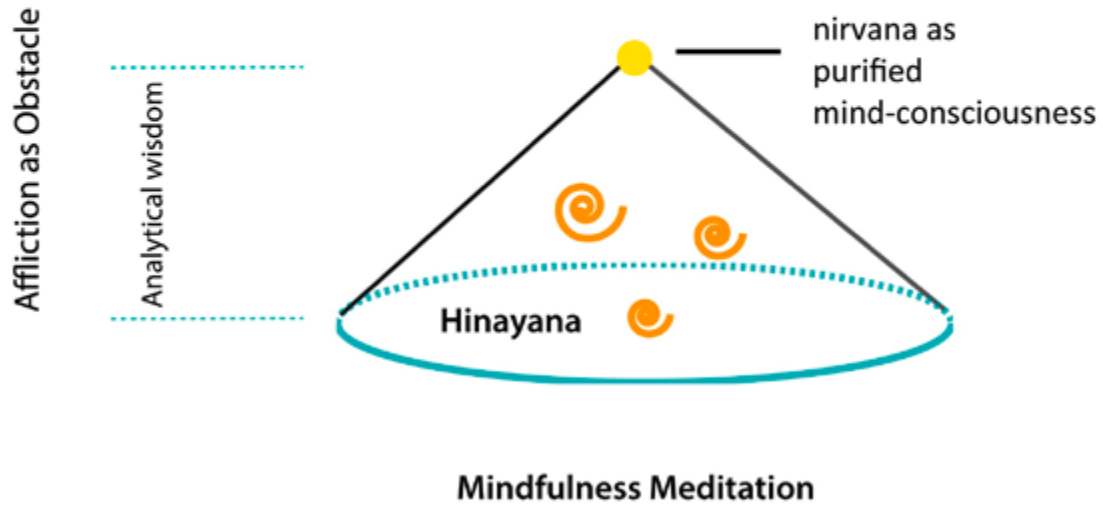
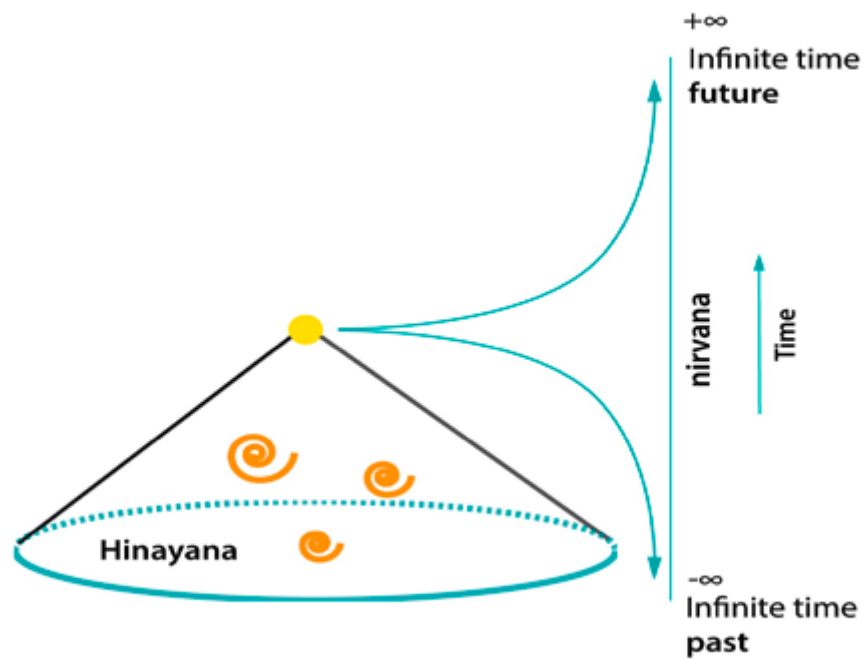


Diagram 2

## Early Mahayana



Diamond Sutra  
Suchness Approach = Such As It Is

Diagram 3a



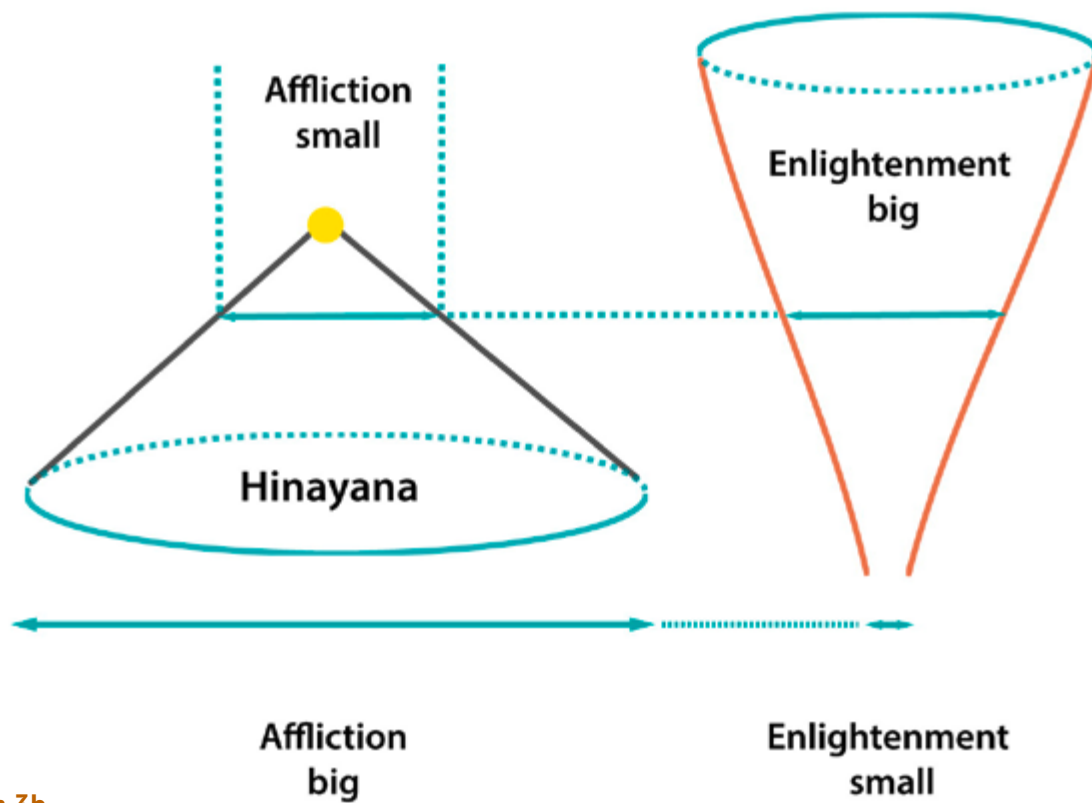


Diagram 3b

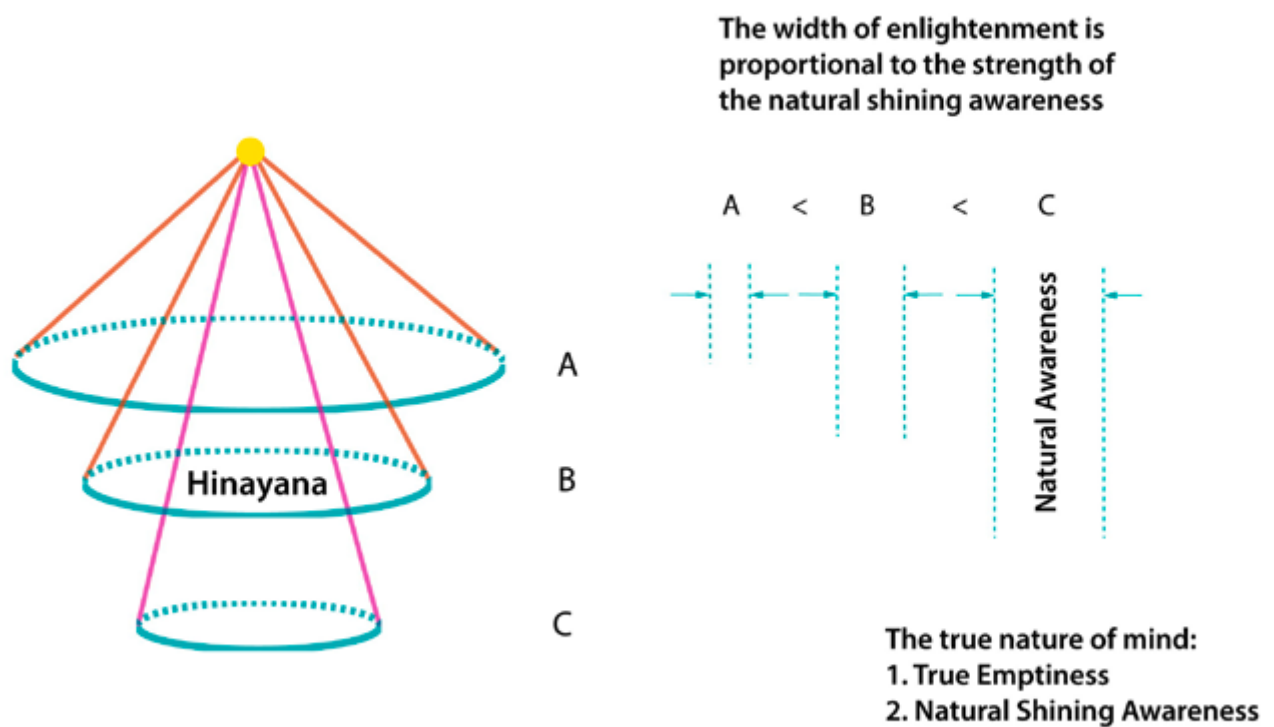


Diagram 3c

maintain the strength of the natural shining awareness.

In diagrams for the Hinayana approach, and the early Mahayana of *The Diamond Sutra*, I have not drawn an upper cone. That is because, in the early Mahayana, the true nature of the Buddha's knowledge and insight is left as an open question. In the later Mahayana, as expressed in the Lotus and Avatamsaka sutras, it is believed that the true nature of the Buddha's knowledge and insight is wave-like, quantum-like. His knowledge and insight are very subtle.<sup>15</sup> They are not limited only to the particle-like universe but extended to the full domain of the wave-like, quantum-like universe.

This insight is first expressed in *The Lotus Sutra* as two dimensions – historical and ultimate, or wave and water – and is later

fully developed in *The Avatamsaka Sutra* as the unity of Oneness or One Mind. For the Mahayana there is no such thing as a state of absolute nirvana in which all movements of mind have ceased.

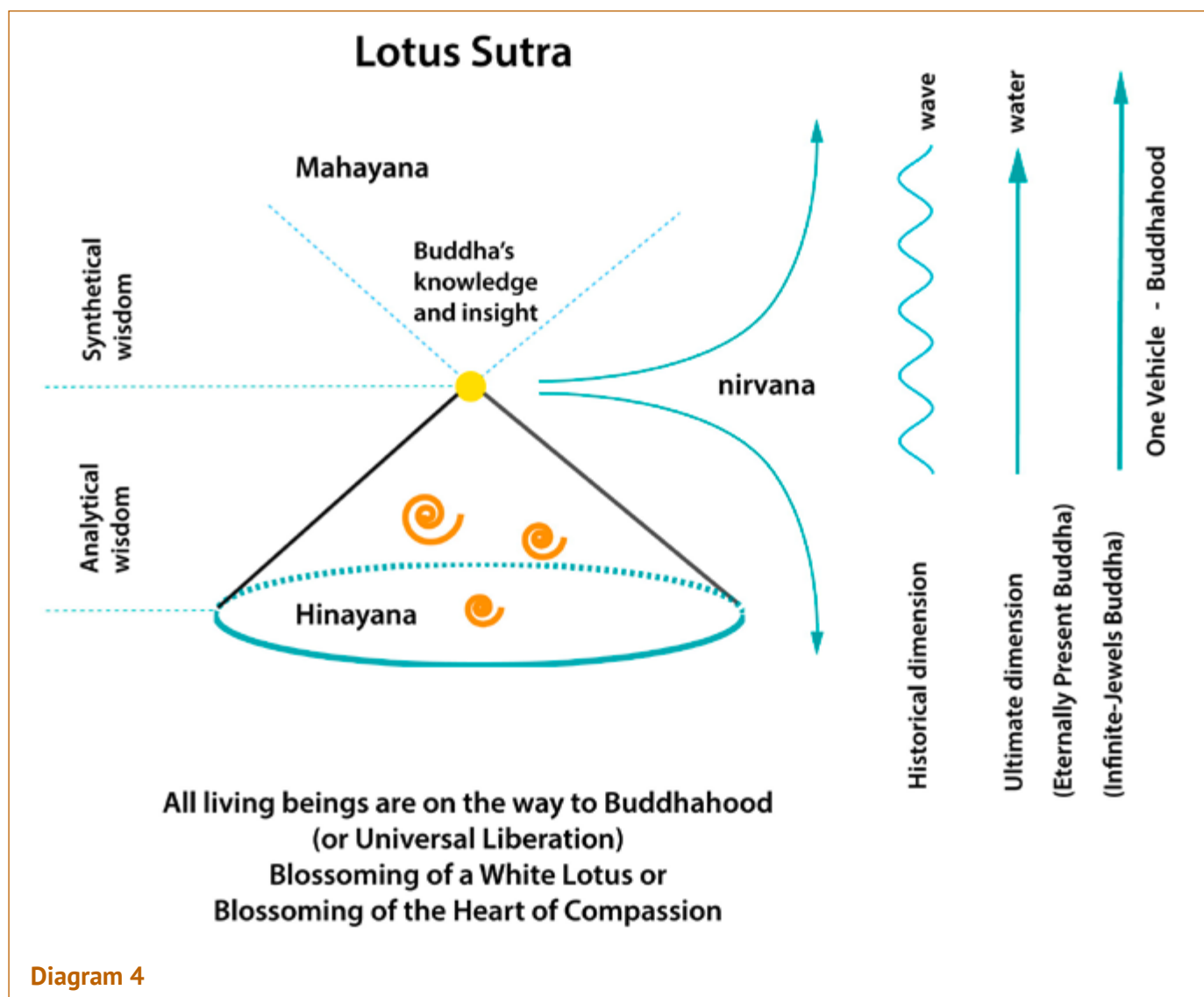
That type of “nirvana of cessation” points only to the part of “consciousness” as defined by the Buddha in the statement “consciousness is an act of being conscious”. The activities of this consciousness give rise to the particle-like universe, to the karmic cosmos of consciousness. But there are still deeper and subtler movements or vibrations of the mind. That is the *living energy* of “being conscious”.

The mind of the Buddha has full access to this living energy of “being conscious”. So, his mind embraces both the particle-like universe and the wave-like, quantum-like

universe. The **upper cone**, which is the non-material universe (or, in the language of quantum mechanics, a wave-like, quantum-like universe) now begins to appear in my diagrams (below), relating to the Lotus and Avatamsaka sutras.

#### Diagram 4

Diagram 4 depicts Mahayana Buddhism fanning out further – with *The Lotus Sutra* – into the ultimate dimension where our knowledge and insight slowly become one with the Buddha's knowledge and insight. Again, we see the point of departure from the historical dimension of the Hinayana (lower cone) with its analytical wisdom and static view of nirvana, to the Mahayana (upper cone), with its synthetical wisdom and dynamic view of nirvana. Incorporated are key insights from the sutra: that all living beings are on their way to Buddhahood and





that there is only one vehicle, the Buddha Vehicle.

Everything in the cosmos is on the way to Buddhahood. It is universal liberation for all that exists in the cosmos. The Dharma or Truth of the early Buddhist Schools now becomes the only One Wonderful or Miraculous Dharma or Truth of the Blossoming of a White Lotus (*Saddharma Pundarika*), which is the Blossoming of the Energy of Life, of Compassion.

*The Lotus Sutra* develops *The Diamond Sutra's* idea of natural awareness and its ever-shining character into the Eternally Present (or Infinite-Jewels) Buddha as an ultimate dimension represented by water. The temporal existence of our rebirths in

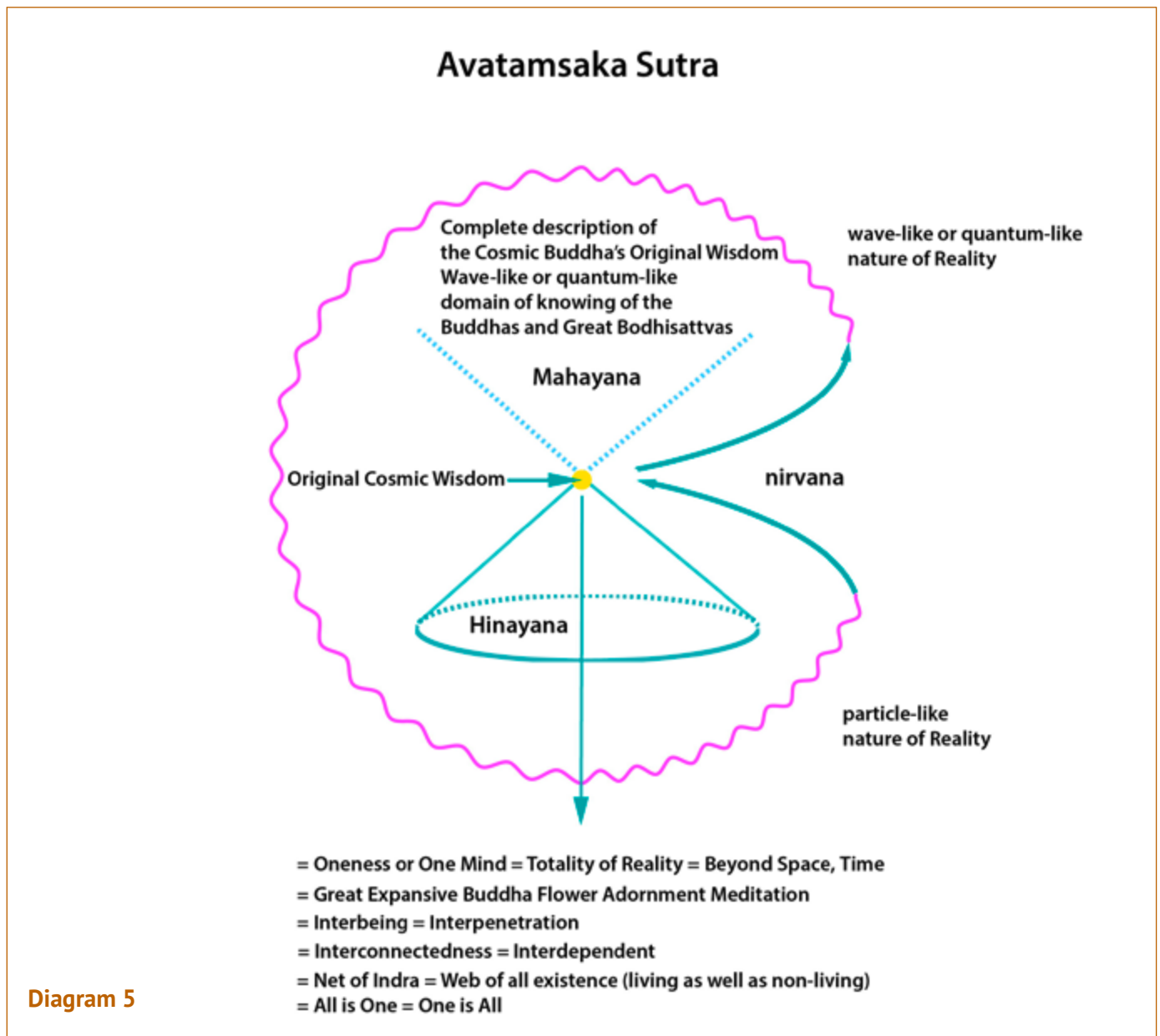
infinite cycles of suffering (samsara) is the historical dimension represented by waves. These two dimensions are also there in every moment of our existence depending on the way our mind perceives reality.

### Diagram 5

In *Diagram 5* we have Mahayana Buddhism's expansive *Avatamsaka Sutra* offering a complete description of the Buddha's knowledge and insight, by now known as the Original Cosmic Wisdom. It is the Body of the Cosmic Buddha, the Body of Truth, the Dharmakaya. It is the Oneness or One Mind, the Totality of Reality. All is One and One is All. In the smallest particle of dust are infinite Buddha lands, each being self-dependent as well as other-dependent.

Everything is interconnected and interpenetrated, like jewels reflecting each other into infinity in the sutra's symbolic Net of Indra.<sup>16</sup> The nature of reality is wave-like, quantum-like. Like the Dharmakaya, this wave goes beyond space and time. It is what quantum physicists describe as "non-local". And at the macro end of the cosmic scale, physicists speculate that there are multiple (parallel) universes. In the language of modern theoretical physics, therefore, *The Avatamsaka Sutra's* insight is that *both* non-local phenomena and multiple parallel universes co-exist in the smallest particle of dust.

Reality as experienced by the Buddha goes beyond space and time. Human language is incapable of fully describing this realm. In





In The Avatamsaka Sutra's Net of Indra, everything reflects everything else. They interconnect and interpenetrate into infinity. See also p 25.

Diagram 5, we see the infinite past and future fold themselves into Oneness. Space, time, and consciousness are manifestations of this Oneness, One Mind, One True Dharma Realm (Nhất Chân Pháp Giới), the domain beyond linguistic expression (Bất tư nghị cảnh giới).

Now, we can visualize *The Lotus Sutra's* two dimensions (wave and water, historical and ultimate), which stretch from infinite past to infinite future, folding back upon each other to become this single One Mind from which infinite arrays of Dharma Realms manifest. This phenomenon is expressed in *The Avatamsaka Sutra* by the famous gatha:

*If someone wants to know  
all the Buddhas of the past, present,  
and future,  
they should look deeply into the nature  
of the Dharma Realm  
In order to see that All Dharma Realms  
are created solely by the One  
Mind.<sup>17</sup>*

All are the manifestation of the One Mind, the Original Wisdom of the cosmos or of the Cosmic Buddha. There is infinite potential at the center of the Original Wisdom. At the center of the Oneness, the One Mind are infinite quantum or vibrating states. With a moving vibration of One Mind and an act of being conscious, a corresponding Dharma Realm will manifest accordingly. Living beings manifest from this One Mind according to their defiled karmic consciousness. All Bodhisattvas also manifest from this One Mind according to the strength and fruit of their individual vow or Bodhicitta.

### **Nirvana is not the question**

In a nutshell, for the Hinayana, the Buddha was an historical figure whose teachings enable other individuals to practice and cultivate goodness until, like him, they become arhats and enter nirvana.

For the Mahayana, the Buddha was eventually perceived as having Three Bodies. At the fundamental and ground level of existence, his body is the infinite body of a cosmic Dharma or Truth (Dharmakaya) beyond space and time. This Dharma or Truth is also known as the Original Cosmic Wisdom. It is there within all of us as potentiality and is no different from the potentiality of the Buddha.

Through infinite lives of practice and cultivation of wholesomeness and goodness, the Buddha was able to reveal this undefiled Dharmakaya completely. However, due to our affective and cognitive afflictions, our Dharmakaya does not completely reveal either itself or its wonderful capacity and functioning.

The Buddha manifested in human form to show us the fundamental Dharma or Truth that we are already a Buddha, participating in a process of universal enlightenment and salvation. The differences lie in the Buddha's other two bodies: the Enjoyment Body ("Sambhogakaya"), which is visible only to advanced Bodhisattvas in Exalted Realms, and the Emanation Body ("Nirmanakaya"), which displays the deeds of a Buddha to the world.

The Buddha lived with the quality of accepting things as they are. Even though we may have many burdens if, like the Buddha, we give rise to the mental quality of being with what is happening now, being at peace with what we are doing now, we are already living in the Buddha realm.

The Cosmic Buddha's original wisdom always was, is and will be. His acts of being conscious go on forever, as do ours. For the Śākyamuni Buddha, these stem from his Great Vow as a Bodhisattva to benefit himself and all living beings. The more we contemplate this, the more we answer our own question of what happened to the Buddha after he entered nirvana.



### **Acknowledgements and in gratitude:**

*The author would like to express his deep gratitude to Ms. Sarah Monks for her detailed, creative and careful editing work as well for*



her love in transcribing long Dharma talks relating to this article; to Sr. Song Nghiê for her deep patience in translating into German the author's series of courses in 2023 to honor Thay's life and work and for helping the author to express himself more clearly on subtle points of Buddhist teaching expressed in this article; to Ms. Mojca Fo for her gentle and finely rendered artistic illustrations; and last but not least to Gabriele Gassen for her generosity of time and energy in translating into German this article as well as many others for this issue of EIAB's magazine.



## Endnotes

- 1 In his lifetime and for the next 300 years and more, the Buddha's teachings were transmitted only orally. During this period, the Buddhist community tried to systematize the teaching of the Buddha, based on different scholastic understandings and philosophical interpretations. Various Buddhist schools arose until, eventually, there were 18 or 20. One of these schools, later known as Theravada, is regarded as the Southern transmission that can still be found across Southeast Asia today. The sutras of the Theravada school were most likely written down on palm leaves in Sri Lanka in the 1st century BCE. They were in Pali – a mix of several Prakrit languages (a group of vernacular Middle Indo-Aryan languages, from around the 3rd century BCE). Mahayana Buddhism developed from the 1st century BCE in different phases over several centuries. It was first a response to the philosophical speculation of the Buddhist Schools. Later, as it developed from its own philosophical speculations, it became known as the Northern transmission. Its schools spread their newly formed sutras and philosophical treatises ("sastra") in another classical Indian language, Sanskrit. Many of these texts were translated into Chinese and Tibetan. Mahayana Buddhism was Sinicized into Ch'an (in Chinese), also known as Zen (in Japanese) and Thiền (in Vietnamese). Thay received training in Vietnamese Thiền Buddhism and the Pure Land tradition, also part of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. References: *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, pp 12-16 and <https://plumvillage.app/the-plum-village-tradition/>
- 2 Usage of the term "Hinayana" is without any intentional prejudice or judgement. It is used here mainly for simplicity of linguistic expression and for the sake of conventional terminology in Buddhist literature and study
- 3 The Plum Village tradition established by our teacher Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh belongs to the Zen branch of Mahayana Buddhism, although our teacher also incorporated wisdom and practices from the Hinayana
- 4 *Majjhima Nikaya* i 293, MN 43, *Mahavedalla Sutta*, also *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A new translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*, original translation by Bhikkhu Nanamoli; translation edited and revised by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Somerville MA, USA: Wisdom Publications, Fourth Edition 2009, MN 43, *Mahavedalla Sutta*, *The Greater Series of Questions and Answers*, p 387, and p 389 for the relevant point
- 5 "Seagull Flying" by Frans van Heerden, <https://www.pexels.com/photo/seagull-flying-632421/> accessed 2 July 2023
- 6 In Thai and Burmese Buddha statues this consciousness is symbolized by a ring of fire above the Buddha's head
- 7 In the Buddha's definition "consciousness is an act of being conscious" we can think in terms of two layers of conscious activities. The first and fundamental layer is the layer of "being conscious", which is the potential for conscious activity in all matter, animate as well as inanimate. The second and derivative layer is the layer of "consciousness", which is the foundation for all karmic expression in the cosmos. The first layer is the natural awareness in all living beings and can be compared to the blue sky, which is always there in the background of any karmic consciousness and its activities. The second layer is the karmic accumulation of the act of "being conscious" and is usually known as "defiled" consciousness. It can be compared to the bird and its trajectory (which is a karmic expression of the defiled consciousness, or the cycle of samsara)
- 8 I consider "incomplete" or "insufficient" preferable to "deficit", "deficient" or "small" sometimes used to describe Hinayana practice, and "complete" or "full" preferable to the terms "great" for Mahayana practice
- 9 *Samyutta Nikaya* 12.65 (5), *The City Sutta*, also *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya*, translated from the Pali by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Volume 1, Somerville MA, USA: Wisdom Publications 2000, *The City Sutta* p 601–604, and p 603 for the relevant point
- 10 The word Dharma with a capital "D" is used here to denote the final, absolute, or ultimate Truth. Knowing, experiencing and embodying that Truth will enable one to enter the realm of awakening or enlightenment
- 11 "The Abhidharma" approach. It is a very important part of the practice and a great exercise to understand our mental and physical constitution, or "namarupa"
- 12 *The Diamond Sūtra* was composed in Sanskrit probably between the 2nd and 4th centuries CE. It belongs to the genre of *Prajñāpāramitā* ("Perfection of Wisdom") sutras. It was translated into Chinese seven times between 402 CE, by Kumārajīva, and 703 CE, by Yijing, as well as into other languages in Central, Northeast and Southeast Asia. It is an influential work in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition
- 13 Humans are fortunate. We have already been shaped by countless acts of being conscious over billions of years from a single cell to a higher primate. We experience joy but we also experience suffering. Because of this we have the capacity to stop and contemplate. Human existence is meaningful because of our higher potential for consciousness and to contribute to the energy of compassion in the whole universe
- 14 Thay's translation of this sutra can be found at <https://plumvillage.org/library/sutras/discourse-on-the-four-establishments-of-mindfulness>, accessed 23 June 2023
- 15 For a deeper discussion on the Buddha's knowledge and insight as expressed in *The Lotus Sutra*, please refer to the author's article "Let the Buddha in us breathe – the complementary practice of 'other-reliance' and 'self-reliance' – in last year's EIAB Magazine pp 160-175, [https://www.eiab.eu/lw/resource/datapool/systemfiles/elements/files/4df37e39-6fe2-11ed-8d7b-fe08df3aa0f4/live/document/EIAB\\_Magazine\\_2022\\_E.pdf](https://www.eiab.eu/lw/resource/datapool/systemfiles/elements/files/4df37e39-6fe2-11ed-8d7b-fe08df3aa0f4/live/document/EIAB_Magazine_2022_E.pdf), accessed 7 July 2023
- 16 A vivid description of this symbol can be found in *Hua-Yen Buddhism – The Jewel Net of Indra*, by Francis H. Cook, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, and London, 1977, p 2 (Hua-yen Buddhism is a school of Chinese Buddhism based on *The Avatamsaka Sutra*):  
"We may begin with an image which has always been the favorite Hua-yen method of exemplifying the manner in which things exist. Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each „eye“ of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected *all* the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring. The Hua-yen school has been fond of this image, mentioned many times in its literature, because it symbolizes a cosmos in which there is an infinitely-repeated interrelationship among all the members of the cosmos. This relationship is said to be one of simultaneous *mutual identity* and *mutual inter-causality*."
- 17 The original words of the gatha in Chinese, Sino-Vietnamese, and in Thay's translation into Vietnamese are:

若人欲了知	Nhược nhân dục liễu tri	Nếu ai muốn thấy và muốn hiểu
三世一切佛	Tam thế nhất thiết Phật	Chư Phật có mặt trong ba đời
應觀法界性	Ứng quán pháp giới tánh	Người ấy phải quán chiếu pháp giới
一切唯心造	Nhất thiết duy tâm tạo	Tất cả đều do tâm mà thôi

The gatha can be found in T.279 [80 fasc.](T10n0279\_019:0102a29\_0), *The Flower Adornment Sutra*, Roll 19, Chapter 20, Eulogies in the Palace of the Suyama Heaven (Kệ tán trên cung trời Dạ Ma) See also *The Flower Ornament scripture – A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra*, by Thomas Cleary, Shambhala Publication, Boston, MA 02115, 1993, Book 20, p 452



大智度論  
藐辣叶  
三撮哩  
南唵提哩  
底南哩  
始南  
吒胝提  
瑟矩細  
阿駄婆  
謨沒嘑





A photograph of a forest path. In the foreground on the left, a dark stone marker with vertical Chinese characters is visible. The path leads into a dense forest of tall trees with green foliage. The right side of the image is faded and serves as a background for the text.

## 2. Living Dharma



# Teacher of peace: Thich Nhat Hanh and Sister Chan Khong

## Preface:

Thich Nhat Hanh and Sister Chan Khong are both true teachers of peace. That is why I have devoted a lengthy chapter to the two of them (and not just Thay alone) in my book on peacemakers in Asia. They have not only taught peace or experienced it in meditation – they have, above all, lived peace step by step, because they are peace. This is expressed by Thay's quote, which I have prefaced my book with: "Peace work means, first of all, being peace." My peace book was first published in 2018, so it does not deal with the final stage of Thay's life up until 22 January 2022. It is a great honour for me to have my account included here in this publication in honour of Thay. For this I thank Sister Song Nghiem from the bottom of my heart.



Many (younger) sympathisers and also followers of Thay have hardly any idea of his life in a "sea of fire" prior to his exile. It is still not generally known in the West that from 1955 to 1975 there was a Buddhist resistance and peace movement during the Vietnam War. Even the ambitious film documentary by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick on the Vietnam War (ARTE 2017), which lasts more than eight hours and features both American and Vietnamese sources and eyewitnesses (veterans), does not say a word about this peace movement. I wanted to change this with my book. The following text is an abridged excerpt from: *In the Footsteps of Buddha and Gandhi: Buddhists and Hindus Committed to Peace*, 2018, pp. 50-73 (available only on Amazon or directly from me). The reprint is slightly updated. I have added subheadings for easier reading. I have also omitted some notes and the extensive digression on Thay's disciple Nhat Chi Mai, who self-immolated in Saigon in 1967 as a "torch of Vietnam's freedom", for reasons of space. The German translations of the English sources are mine.

## A revolutionary young monk

Born in 1926 in central Vietnam and raised in northern Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh – civil name: Nguyen Xuân Bao, called simply "Thay" by his students – was, alongside the Dalai Lama, the best-known Buddhist monk in the world. But he was far more than just a monk. Throughout his life, he was a social and peace activist, whilst also being a meditation teacher, lecturer, writer and poet. At the age of 16 – in the middle of the Second

World War – he decided to become a monk and joined the Zen Buddhist Tu Hieu temple in central Vietnam. After his ordination as a monk, he went to Saigon, where he founded a Buddhist institute in 1949, during the Indochina War (1946-1954), and became a teacher, and author of numerous articles. Thus, even before the Vietnam War began, he was the first monk to develop the concept of Buddhism as being educationally, socially, and politically relevant to everyday life, later termed "**engaged Buddhism**" in Western

translations of his book on the subject, published in 1964. In this book, Thay wrote as a "revolutionary monk" who wanted to show young Buddhists in his country – many of whom had left their monasteries because they wanted to follow communism, which was much more attractive to them – that if Buddhism was properly understood, and reformed it could be relevant to their lives and motivate them to act of behalf of their country and for peace. In the early 1960s, about 83% of the population of South



Vietnam were Buddhists, the rest Catholics, Confucians and followers of Caodaiism.

### A Buddhist resistance movement

The early 1960s was the formative phase of the Buddhist peace movement in Central and South Vietnam. It began with the social commitment of individual academics in the Saigon area, including the young biologist Cao Ngoc Phuong (born 1938 in the Mekong Delta). She had been enrolled at the Faculty of Science at Saigon University since 1958, but her real passion was working for the poorest of the poor in the neglected neighbourhoods and various slums just outside the city. Cao Ngoc Phuong helped provide medical care for the poor, improve hygienic conditions, and even began to teach the children herself. She transported tuberculosis patients to hospital on her own motorbike, which the very self-confident and independent young woman used to criss-cross the country. In 1959, she met Thay, who valued and supported her social work, and soon more and more young, educated people were volunteering to help. In the following years, the socially engaged Buddhist movement increasingly took on the character of a non-violent resistance and opposition movement against the increasing “oppression of Buddhists by the Catholic regime”. The Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem, a former official of the French colonial administration, was the first puppet president of South Vietnam from 1955 until his violent death in 1963. Together with his brother Ngo Dinh Thuc, who even became an archbishop, he pursued a vehemently anti-Buddhist policy and endeavoured to forcibly impose Catholicism in Vietnam, for example through mass conversions. In May 1963, the people were forbidden to celebrate Vesak – traditionally Vietnam’s highest holiday, commemorating Buddha’s birth, enlightenment and passing away. These measures introduced by the regime led by the Ngo brothers provoked growing resistance from Buddhists. Monks and students, in particular, increasingly demonstrated against the regime’s human rights violations and for their right to freely practice their religion: “when Buddhists demonstrated against the government, claiming to represent the will of the people, they emphasised their devotion to Vietnamese history and tradition. This was in sharp

contrast to the (sc. Catholic) government of South Vietnam, which had allowed American forces to enter the country and turn South Vietnam into a battleground between the United States and Asian communism.”<sup>1</sup>

### Flames of protest

These Buddhist demonstrations involved one of the first public **self-immolations**, which caused a worldwide sensation. Thich Quang Duc set himself on fire in the middle of Saigon on 11 June 1963. Photographer Malcolm W. Browne’s picture of the burning monk in the lotus meditation posture, which is almost unbearable for the viewer, was later chosen as the press photo of the year 1963. Cao Ngoc Phuong writes about this self-sacrifice of a monk she had known personally in her autobiography: “No one had told me about his intention, but it so happened that I was passing the crossroads on my motorbike at the very moment he set himself on fire. I saw how bravely and peacefully he sat there amidst the flames. He was completely calm while we cried around him and prostrated ourselves on the pavement. At that moment, in a flash, a solemn vow arose inside me: I too would do something to respect human rights, as Thay Quang Duc was doing.”<sup>2</sup> Although the response to this self-immolation was immense in Vietnam – to this day, Thich Quang Duc is revered as a bodhisattva in the country – and inspired resistance across the country, the Ngo brothers were unimpressed. The president had many of the demonstrators arrested, tortured and killed. The Buddhists

were defamed as communists. Cao Ngoc Phuong was about to sacrifice herself as well, but things turned out differently. She was given the opportunity to complete her biology thesis at a university in Paris. So, in autumn 1963, when the unrest in South Vietnam escalated, she was already in France. There she planned a press conference about the regime’s human rights violations. But this did not happen either, because on 1 November the Ngo brothers were overthrown and murdered in a military coup.

### The movement continues to grow

At the beginning of 1964, Thay returned to Vietnam after a three-year teaching stay in the USA. The proxy and civil war in and around Vietnam, which had already been going on for ten years, had a decisive influence on the self-awareness and peace commitment of Thay and his increasingly numerous supporters. In the following years, as conditions for the majority Buddhist civilian population deteriorated due to the war, the social and human rights movement also became an active Buddhist peace movement, with Thay and Cao Ngoc Phuong as its leading representatives. Women played a central and very active role<sup>3</sup> in the peace movement in Central and South Vietnam. Looking back on the basic position of the Buddhist peace movement, Thay writes: “During the wars in Vietnam, my friends and I declared ourselves neutral, we took no sides and considered no one as an enemy, neither the North nor the South, neither the French nor the Americans,



nor the Vietnamese. We realised that the first casualty of war is the one who starts the war.”

<sup>IV</sup> From the beginning, for Thay, commitment to peace meant not only social work but also educational work. Already during the Indochina war (1946-1954), he was interested in reforming traditional Buddhism – against the resistance of the conservative monastic elite of his country. Now he prepared the foundations for an “Institute for Higher Buddhist Studies” in Saigon and found many suitable teachers as well as volunteers among the students. This institute opened in February 1964, and quickly developed into and adopted the name “Van Hanh University”.

### The SYSS activists

Together with the experienced Cao Ngoc Phuong, who had returned to Vietnam at Thay’s request after completing her diploma in Paris, Thay started the Buddhist “School of Youth for Social Services” (SYSS) in 1965, which was affiliated to Van Hanh University. The office and classrooms were located right next to the Tu Nghiem Pagoda in the middle of the city. At this school, engaged Buddhism was to be practised in a concrete way. Young men and women were trained as social workers – the interest was huge. Soon there were thousands, many of them students. These young social and peace activists got involved in many ways

under the leadership of Cao Ngoc Phuong: “(She) became the inspirational leader of the organisation and the person most responsible for its successes. (...)SYSS members opened schools, built hospitals, fed the hungry, gave shelter to the homeless, took care of refugees, negotiated regional ceasefires during natural disasters, worked for peace and tried to end the suffering of innocent war victims.”

<sup>V</sup> SYSS activists brought food and other relief supplies to remote war zones that had suffered most from the escalation of American bombing since the mid-1960s. The aid groups were protected solely by the Buddhist flag they carried. This provided even more security than the Red Cross flag. The activists helped to rebuild bombed villages. They founded model **self-governing villages** bringing social change with the aim of enabling the peasants to independently organise their own lives, their health care, their education, their livelihoods. These SYSS-supported villages were also bombed and destroyed by the Americans, in some cases several times, but were always rebuilt by the SYSS activists. In all of this, the Buddhist social and peace workers risked their lives every day. Cao Ngoc Phuong also personally spared no risk, she was sometimes in prison, but always escaped happily with her life. For these committed young Buddhists, Thay wrote a poem entitled “Recommendation”, which begins as follows:

*“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,  
remember, brother:  
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.”<sup>VI</sup>*

In the summer of 1967, four SYSS activists were deliberately murdered by a hit squad, and a fifth young man narrowly escaped with his life. It is still unclear today whether the South Vietnamese government, the North Vietnamese or the Americans were behind it. In the end, this was irrelevant to Cao Ngoc Phuong, since for her these “enemies” were not her true opponents. She wrote the speech that was given by a monk at the funeral service. In it, she thanked the murderers for declaring that they had been forced to do it (as was known through the one survivor) just before they committed the crime. She



The peace wall in Waldbröl\* shone in the colors of the rainbow on March 5th, 2022 for peace all over the world





seized on this hint of compassion and regret: “This means that you did not want to kill us, but that you had to do it to save yourselves. We hope that one day you will help us in our peace work.” This “blood toll” resulted in a rapid increase in the number of SYSS activists: “we got support from monks and nuns all over the country.”

### Lotus in a sea of fire

This remarkable attitude towards the killers was by no means inevitable – it was the fruit of the Buddhist teachings Thay passed on to his students through talks, poems and books during these years. In 1965, he wrote a booklet in English about and against the war in Vietnam, which was smuggled out of the country and published in the USA in early 1967 under the title “Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire”. He translated it into Vietnamese himself. SYSS members arranged for it to be printed underground and then distributed clandestinely throughout the country, especially in schools. In this way, the Buddhist peace movement tried to draw attention to itself both nationally and internationally. This was also done with further self-immolations by individual monks and nuns, who not only demonstrated their opposition to the war, but above all wanted to gain attention in the Western media. Thay’s booklet also contained poems that expressed

his clear rejection of this particular war and every war in general. The real enemies, he said, were hatred, fanaticism and violence. At the end of his anti-war poem “Condemnation”, which appeared in a Buddhist weekly in 1964, it says: “Beware! Turn around and face your real enemies: ambition, violence, hatred and greed. Humans are not our enemies – even those called ‘Viet Cong’. If we kill our brothers and sisters, what will we have left? With whom then shall we live?”<sup>VII</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh was now also officially considered an **anti-war poet**. He was vilified by the new military government of South Vietnam as a pro-communist propagandist, but his poems and songs became increasingly popular in the peace movement as well as among ordinary people. Looking back, he said of those years, alluding to the title of his book, “Buddhism was like a lotus flower trying to survive in a sea of fire.”<sup>VIII</sup> This booklet was translated into many languages in the following years and became the most important Buddhist anti-war book during the Vietnam War. On 1 June 1965, Thay wrote a letter to Martin Luther King explaining self-immolations from his point of view – they are not considered reprehensible suicides under these circumstances, but a kind of self-sacrifice like Jesus’ death on the cross. Above all, Thay asked Pastor King and other religious humanists in the USA to stop being silent about the Vietnam War. The letter ends with the words: “In writing to you as a Buddhist, I confess my faith in love, in community and in the humanists of the world, whose thinking and attitude should be the standard for all men to find out who is the true enemy of man.”<sup>IX</sup>

### “To be is to interbe”

As a further step on the path of reforming Buddhism, Thay founded the **Tiep Hien Order** (English: “Order of Interbeing”, French: “Ordre de l’Interêtre”) on 5 February 1966, a full moon day. Thay translates the Vietnamese words *tiếp* as “to be in contact” and *hiên* as “to be in the present”. What is meant is: to be consciously in contact with oneself and with others in the present moment. For Thay, this is the basic practice of meditation, and at the same time what he understands with “mindfulness”. The first six members of the Order – three women

and three men – were leading members from the ranks of SYSS activists. Looking back, Thay explained: “As Buddhists who practise peace and reconciliation, brotherhood and sisterhood, we did not want to accept such a war. You cannot accept a war where brothers kill each other with ideologies as well as weapons imported from outside. The Order of Interbeing was born as a spiritual resistance movement. It is based wholly on the teachings of the Buddha.” The very name, Interbeing, expresses the whole programme of engaged Buddhism as Thay understood and founded it: “to be is to interbe”. Being human means being connected, interdependent on and with all other beings and not being self-sufficient, independent, separate from others, as is predominantly the case in western, individualistic, materialistic thinking. Even then, Thich Nhat Hanh was deeply convinced that we should “awaken to the truth that we are all interdependent, that we are inter-being. The suffering of one is the suffering of the other. When Muslims and Christians, Hindus and Muslims, Israelis and Palestinians realise that they are brothers and sisters to each other, that the suffering of one is the suffering of the other, then their wars will stop. When we realise that we and all living beings are of the same nature, how can there be any division between us? How can there be a lack of harmony? When we realise our nature of inter-being, we will stop blaming, exploiting and killing others, because we will know that we are connected to them and conditioned by them, that we are inter-being. This is the great awakening we need for the earth to be saved.”

The insight into the inter-being nature of human beings means that, from an engaged Buddhist perspective, there can be no separation between social work and peace work.<sup>X</sup> This becomes clear precisely in the work of the SYSS activists. For all of them, “it is clear that peace and social commitment are inseparable.” For Thay, however, interbeing refers not only to people but to everything that is. He likes to use the image of the **sheet of paper** in front of us to illustrate this holistic view. If you look deeply enough, you realise: the paper would not exist without the tree, and the tree would not exist without the earth, the sun, the rain etc. Furthermore, it needs the woodcutter, who in turn does not exist without his saw, without food, clothing, and



also without his parents. Then those who make the paper out of the wood, who trade with it, who transport it and print it are needed, and so on. Ultimately, this one sheet of paper presupposes the entire earth and even the universe. The problems of our world can also be found in this sheet of paper. Because even though it is recycled paper, it is made from the wood of trees that were felled for it. With the felled trees, numerous beings have lost their place of refuge, their breeding ground or their source of food. Humans may have lost important living conditions, valuable timber, their only heating material or healthy air to breathe. Chemicals were used in paper production, water was consumed. Drinking water is spoiled, rivers are polluted, fish die, etc. On the other hand, paper production supports the existence of printers, writers and publishers, and we have the opportunity to read books and share ideas. In particular, the Order's **Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings**, written by Thay, clearly express this holistic view of interbeing, and use it as a

basis for the ethical commitments or practice paths that form the basis of the Order's work. They all make it clear that every external commitment always includes the challenge to work primarily on oneself and to recognise one's own involvement in external structures that create suffering.

Almost 60 years later, the Order has members in many parts of the world. It is no coincidence that most members come from Vietnam and the USA. People whose nations were formerly at war come together to work in a spirit of peace with an awareness of mutual solidarity. In this way, the members of the Order embody the interbeing for which it stands. When they are admitted to the Order, the aspirants decide for themselves whether they want to practise as celibate and propertyless ordained people or as lay people who can also live in partnership and family. The first three men in 1966 opted for lay membership, while the first three women opted for membership as nuns. One of them is Cao Ngoc Phuong, who

is now known all over the world with her new name as a nun: Chi Chan Khong – "Sister True Emptiness".

### Thays Peace Work in the West

By the spring of 1966 the war had escalated further – more and more American bombs were destroying more and more lives. Thay had received several invitations to the USA. In view of the increasingly dramatic situation, he decided to travel for a few weeks to the USA, where, in his view, the decisive causes of the war ultimately lay. So, in May 1966, only a few months after founding the Order, he left Vietnam for what he thought would be a short time. However, things turned out differently. His absence was to turn into almost 40 years of exile. In June, Thay and Reverend Martin Luther King met in person for the first time in Chicago. They immediately felt a close bond with each other. Their mutual esteem was immense. Thay said in retrospect about their first meeting, "I



knew immediately that I was in the presence of a holy person.”<sup>xi</sup> Their alliance – they felt the struggle for peace in Vietnam and for the civil rights of black people in the USA to be a common, spiritually related concern – led King from then on not only to speak out publicly against the war in Vietnam, but even to propose his Buddhist friend for the Nobel Peace Prize in a letter of 25 January 1967 to the Nobel Institute in Oslo. King also personally participated in demonstrations against the Vietnam War in the USA – such as in Chicago in April 1967 – with the demonstrators carrying the last words from Thay’s anti-war poem “Condemnation” on banners: “People are not your enemies. If we kill our brothers and sisters, with whom shall we live?” Thay also sought contact with Christian peace activists in the US. In 1966, he met with Trappist monk and anti-war activist Thomas Merton (1915-1968). In Europe, Thay also met with Pope Paul VI. In October 1965, he had already made an urgent appeal for peace in Vietnam before the UN General Assembly in New York. For Thay, it was important to meet with the Pope, as he had shortly before fallen out with the major political actors in the Vietnam War. He had in fact presented a **peace initiative** at a press conference in Washington on 1 June 1966, which contained five proposals addressed to the USA to end the war, including a complete cessation of bombing in the North and South, a unilateral ceasefire on the part of the USA, and a clear declaration of intent on the part of the USA to help the Vietnamese people rebuild as an independent country “and to provide such assistance completely without ideological or political ties”.<sup>xii</sup> The proposals indicated that the programmatically impartial Thich Nhat Hanh “did not favour either side in the war. This made him an enemy to both sides.”<sup>xiii</sup> After this there were no more talks with representatives of the US government. He was also considered a traitor in the eyes of the South Vietnamese government and was declared an undesirable person. After this, Thay lived in **exile in France** for decades, from where he continued his peace work. At his express request, Sister Chan Khong followed him into exile at the end of 1968 to do public relations work from Paris and to answer the growing number of enquiries from journalists. She learned English and in turn travelled throughout Europe and the USA from 1969 onwards to inform people

about the Vietnam War through lectures and interviews on radio and television and to collect donations for the victims of the war in Vietnam.

### Working Together with Christians for Peace

In June 1969, a public peace prayer took place in the middle of Paris, recited – better: chanted – by 500 Vietnamese Buddhists.<sup>xiv</sup> Many Christian and secular peace activists took part, including Vietnamese Buddhists living in Europe. This event and the subsequent peace conference became the birth of the Vietnamese Buddhist delegation led by Thay and Sister Chan Khong at the official peace negotiations of the great powers in Paris. These negotiations were sealed in January 1973 with an agreement that, among other things, committed the USA to a complete withdrawal of troops within 60 days, but in fact could not prevent the continuation of the war. The Vietnam War only ended in 1975 with the conquest of Saigon by North Vietnamese troops. In the last years of the war, many Christian peace activists approached Thay and Sister Chan Khong to offer their support. Among them, for example, Hebe

Charlotte Kohlbrugge (1914-2016) should be mentioned. As a young woman in the Netherlands, she had saved countless Jews during the Second World War. Now she stood up for the Buddhists in Vietnam – against the will of her government and her church. Sister Chan Khong was very impressed by the Christians who were committed to peace, as in her home country she had not encountered this kind of Christianity. She writes in her autobiography: through these encounters “my heart opened to Christian charity. In the past, I had only met European Christians who forced poor Vietnamese to accept the Christian faith by giving them rice. Here I now found that there were more Bodhisattvas in Christian circles than in Buddhist ones. The wonderful presence of someone like Hebe (sc. Kohlbrugge) transcends such concepts as ‘Christians’ and ‘Buddhists.’”<sup>xv</sup>

### Rescue Missions for the Boat People

In 1975, the war in Vietnam finally ended. Thay and sister Chan Khong were not granted entry permits by the new regime. On the contrary, they were both branded as traitors and war criminals. The communists



did not appreciate either the neutrality or the great commitment of the Buddhist peace movement in Vietnam; rather they put an immediate end to their activities after the end of the war. The social institutions, the Youth School for Social Services and all Buddhist schools and training centres were closed or converted. The social and peace workers – lay people as well as many monks and nuns – were sent to re-education camps or to prison unless they could go into hiding or flee. Sister Chan Khong and Thay therefore became involved in many humanitarian projects in the 1970s and 1980s, for example by arranging Western sponsorships for orphans in Vietnam, sending countless parcels to destitute families or campaigning for the release of political prisoners in Vietnam. Among their many projects as engaged Buddhists, the dramatic **mission to rescue Vietnamese refugees** should be highlighted. After the end of the war, one to two million Vietnamese fled from the communists by boat across the South China Sea – they came to be known as the boat people. Hundreds of thousands drowned in the sea because the governments of Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore refused to allow them to dock in their ports. Sister Chan Khong and Thich Nhat Hanh started a relief programme to save at least some of the boat people. They collected donations and in 1977 hired two ships, a cargo ship called “Roland” and an oil tanker called “Leapdal”, with which they picked up about 600 to 800 boat people on the high seas. For weeks, the refugees were supplied with food and fuel via two smaller supply boats, as the large ships were not allowed to call at the ports of the South-East Asian states. Subsequently, however, differences arose both with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and with other actors in this rescue operation. However, through their contacts with the media in Australia, Sister Chan Khong and Thay managed to get the Australian government to agree to take in the refugees.

In 1978, Thay wrote a poem that became perhaps his most famous poem ever: “Call Me by my True Names”. It was even more popular with the surviving boat people themselves. It was a spiritual help in facing their fate, their pain, and their losses. The poem vividly describes what Nhat Hanh means by “interbeing”: he does not see himself as

separate from those who are conventionally called “perpetrators” and those who are called “victims”. The poem says:

*“I am the child in Uganda, all skin  
and bones,  
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks;  
And I am the arms merchant,  
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.  
I am the twelve-year old girl,  
refugee on a small boat,  
who throws herself into the ocean  
after being raped by a sea pirate.  
And I am the pirate,  
my heart not yet capable  
of seeing and loving. (...)  
Please call me by my true names,  
so I can wake up,  
and the door of my heart  
can be left open,  
the door of compassion.”<sup>xvi</sup>*

### Plum Village

When it became clear that a return to Vietnam was out of the question, Thay and Sister Chan Khong settled down to live permanently in France. After only a few years, their first community in the countryside in northern France called “sweet potato” became too small, as more and more guests and visitors from all over the world crowded in. So, in 1982 they founded their first spiritual retreat centre in Europe on a large site near Bordeaux, which they called “Persimon Village” (Vietnamese: Làng Hông). This was the name of the practice centre they had planned in Vietnam. In France it is known as Village des Pruniers, but otherwise throughout the world by its English name Plum Village. This place, whose construction, organisation and management Sister Chan Khong took over, became, as it were, the epicentre of the ever-expanding Order of Interbeing. From here, Thay, Sister Chan Khong and the members of the Order have continued their diverse social and peace-building activities, supported by an ever-growing number of followers, sympathisers and supporters. Their decades-long commitment to peace is based on a fundamental insight that Thay, as a Buddhist monk, already conveyed to peace activists in the midst of the Vietnam War and has repeated continuously ever since: “Can the

peace movement speak in a loving language and show the way of peace? I think that will depend on whether the people in the peace movement can be peace. Because if we are not peace, we cannot do anything for peace. If we are not smiling, we cannot help others to smile. If we are not peaceful, we cannot contribute anything to the peace movement. (...) Peace work means first and foremost being peace.”<sup>xvii</sup>

From the beginning, this also applied to the retreats in Plum Village, which were not intended to gain converts to Buddhism as a new religion, but to win old and young **multipliers for peace**, as Sister Chan Khong emphasises: “With his teachings for children and adults during the summer retreats, Thich Nhat Hanh wants to help people realise peace within themselves and thus contribute to peace in the world.”<sup>xviii</sup> Today, around 200 monks, nuns and lay people live in the various “hamlets” of Plum Village. Every year, thousands of people from all over the world come to visit for retreats and other events.

### Working with War Veterans

For several years, Thay declined invitations to give lectures and conferences in the USA because of increasing tensions with the American peace movement during the Vietnam War (which he saw as partisan – i.e. siding with the North Vietnamese communists – rather than being neutral). It was only through the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and Thay’s growing North American following that he returned to the USA in the 1980s. Sister Chan Khong has also been a Dharma teacher since 1987. In the same year, they began to hold **retreats for traumatised US veterans** of the Vietnam War, who at that time were mostly treated as outcasts in American society. Thay and Sister Chan Khong were able to offer this very personal and therapeutic form of peace work to the former mortal enemies of their people, because they had experienced the war themselves and through compassionate interbeing had learned to leave behind the concept of perpetrator-victim. Most veterans initially came to these retreats full of mistrust and rather reluctantly. Usually, their psychotherapists or social workers had recommended these retreats to them, but most of all they feared that these retreats were a trap to kill them, since the retreats were conducted



by Vietnamese, their mortal enemies. Thay started the retreats by saying, “I am also a war veteran. I lost many friends – many brothers and sisters – in the Vietnam War and went through endless suffering. Grenades were thrown into my room but were stopped by a curtain. Social workers who worked under my direction were murdered or maimed. We all did our best and tried to face the violence with love, but we had to cry a lot. I have practised for a long time to transform my suffering and share my insight with other people. I don’t blame anyone anymore, but I feel peace and compassion, and through that I can now help other people.”<sup>xix</sup>

Thay tried to make it clear to the veterans that they were “the light at the wick of the candle”, that they could show their country the way, provided they succeeded in consciously transforming their pain, their guilt into understanding and compassion. The Vietnam veteran Claude Thomas took part in one of these retreats. In his autobiography he writes about it: “He said we represented an enormous potential to bring healing into the world. He also told us that non-veterans had greater responsibility for the war than the veterans. That because of the interconnectedness of all things, there was no way to escape responsibility. That those who believed they were not responsible bore the greatest responsibility. That the lifestyle of the non-veterans supported the institution of war. The non-veterans, he said, needed to sit down with the veterans and listen, really listen to us, really listen to our experiences.”<sup>xx</sup>

The retreat, the encounter with Thay was unfathomable and momentous for Claude Thomas: “My enemy embraced me and helped me in ways that would never have occurred to my compatriots.” After the turn of the millennium, Thay repeatedly undertook public **walking meditations for peace** in major cities, for example in Paris, London, New York, Los Angeles, Rome and Hanoi, with tens of thousands of people taking part, always including a great many children and young people. Although for Thay every mindful walk is a kind of peace meditation, every path a path of peace, every step a step of peace. In the following decades, for his rapidly growing number of followers, Thay became the personification of peaceful walking. Again and again he said, “Walk in

such a way that your steps leave only peace. That is the secret of walking meditation.”

**Dialogue between religions** is also part of Thich Nhat Hanh’s commitment to peace. As a prominent Buddhist “global player”, he took part, for example, in the founding of the World Conference of Religions for Peace in Kyoto in 1970 and – together with the Dalai Lama – also in the second assembly of the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1993, at which the “Declaration on Global Ethics”, which Hans Küng had been instrumental in preparing and which calls for a worldwide “culture of peace”, was adopted.

### At Home Everywhere

After almost 40 years in exile, Thay and Sister Chan Khong returned to their homeland of Vietnam for the first time in January 2005 for three months. They were allowed to visit monasteries and to a certain extent hold public lectures and meetings throughout the country. Contacts with the Communist Party and Vietnamese government officials led to a reduction of mistrust and eventually to a breakthrough. Several more visits to Vietnam followed, the last in the summer of 2017. On his visit in 2007, Thay said, “I’ve been a monk for 65 years, and what I’ve found is that there is no religion, no philosophy, no ideology that has a higher value than brotherhood and sisterhood.”<sup>xxi</sup> Meanwhile, his proposals for reform are gaining ground among Vietnam’s conservative Buddhists as well as communists. The Order of Interbeing, and its following among lay people is also spreading more and more in Vietnam.

More practice centres and monasteries have been founded around the world, especially in the USA, Thailand, Germany, Australia and Hong Kong. Arguably, the largest number of people practising and engaging in Buddhism today according to Thay’s Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings live in the USA, where the Community of Mindful Living was founded in Berkeley in 1983 and now comprises more than 200 local and regional communities, most of them within the USA. People practice mindfulness through breathing, walking and Metta meditation. They practise facing their own suffering, embracing it, learning methods of inner and outer reconciliation. Thay is also enjoying increasing popularity

in Germany. Practically all his countless books have been translated. In 1999, an “Interbeing Centre” for mindfulness practice and meditation was founded in Bavaria, and in 2007, the “European Institute of Applied Buddhism” (EIAB) was founded in Waldbröl in the Bergisches Land. In 2013, Thay gave a talk on peace and reconciliation at a retreat in Waldbröl, in which he talked about his diverse peace work over the decades in many parts of the world. Referring to the seemingly insoluble conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians and between North and South Korea, amongst others, he observed a continual decline over recent years in the ability of politicians to bring about peace. In his view, this is not surprising as politicians have too little understanding of the real, deep causes of these conflicts, which can be found in a state of mind, which is the same on both sides: “Our political leaders have not been trained in the art of helping to reduce fear, anger and mistrust. This is why we need to ask for help from those of us who are spiritual, who are compassionate, who know how to listen, and who know how to transform fear, anger and mistrust within ourselves. When fear and anger become a collective energy, it becomes so dangerous that war can break out at any time.”<sup>xxii</sup>

A year later, in autumn 2014, Thay suffered a severe brain haemorrhage. He was in a coma for many weeks. Although the doctors had given up on him, he came out of the coma and returned to Plum Village in spring 2015, sitting in a wheelchair and paralysed on one side. After this he was no longer able to speak, at least not with words. Until his death in 2022, he continued to teach the Buddha’s message without words, as it were with “thundering silence”, as one of his book titles from the 1990s reads.

### In Peace with Brother Animal and Mother Earth

It should be clear that while for Thich Nhat Hanh and Sister Chan Khong peace work has been a political task, it encompasses much more. Being politically engaged comes naturally to them as people who for years experienced war at first hand and have the ability to empathise despite everything they have experienced. As committed Buddhists, their commitment to peace begins with

a fundamental **rejection of war**, as Thay explains: “That is the nature of war: it makes us enemies. People who don’t even know each other kill each other out of fear. War creates an incredible amount of suffering – children are orphaned, villages and entire cities are destroyed. All those who suffer through such conflicts are victims. Having experienced the devastation and suffering of both the Indochina and Vietnam wars myself, I am determined to help ensure that there is never another war. I pray that nations will no longer send their young people to fight, even if it is supposedly in the name of peace. I reject the idea that war could be waged for peace, a ‘just war’, as well as the idea that there is justification for slavery, hatred and racism.”<sup>XXIII</sup>

For Thich Nhat Hanh and Sister Chan Khong, interbeing includes an awareness of oneness with all other human generations: “We must live in a way that liberates our ancestors and future generations within us. Joy, peace, freedom and harmony are not an

individual matter. If we do not liberate our ancestors, we will remain bound all our lives and pass on our negative habit energies to our children and grandchildren. Now is the time to liberate ourselves and liberate them. It is one and the same. This is the teaching of interbeing. As long as our ancestors still suffer, we ourselves cannot find peace.”<sup>XXIV</sup> But peace is more than just a political matter, more than just a ceasefire or the absence of war and violence, it is far more than just something between peoples.

According to Thay, taking responsibility for peace is closely related to **ecological practice**. From an engaged Buddhist perspective only a peace agreement between peoples, “brother animals” and with “Mother Earth” can bring true peace. This inter-ontology does not exclude any kind of being, not even plants: “The flower cannot be a separate entity, it must inter-be with the light, with the clouds, with the rain. The word ‘interbeing’ corresponds to reality more than the word ‘being’. Being actually means interbeing. The

same is true for me, for you, for the Buddha. (...) We have to realise that we are inter-being with our mother earth, that we live and die with her.”<sup>XXV</sup> Thay was committed to ecology; he, the members of the Order and probably most people in the practice centres worldwide eat a vegan diet. Thay wrote hymns to the earth, inviting each individual to make their own personal peace treaty with the earth, which includes self-commitments to an ecological lifestyle. Here, too, the same maxim of “first within, then without” applies as in the case of peace policy commitments: “The Buddha is very clear about this: we must first heal ourselves before we can heal the planet.”

In 2015, Thich Nhat Hanh was awarded the Catholic Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom Award in the USA. But neither Thay nor Sister Chan Khong have received the Nobel Peace Prize, for which Martin Luther King nominated Thay more than 50 years ago. But these two teachers of peace do not need prizes: they are peace.

## Endnoten

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| <p>I Robert J. Topmiller, <i>The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam 1964-1966</i>, Lexington 2002, S. VIII: „when Buddhists demonstrated against the government while claiming to represent the will of the people, they emphasized their dedication to Vietnamese history and tradition. This stood in stark contrast to the GVN (sc. catholic Government of South Vietnam), which had allowed the introduction of American forces into the country, turning South Vietnam into a battleground between the United States and Asian Communism.“ Klammerzusätze MB.</p> <p>II Learning True Love.</p> <p>III Cf. Topmiller, <i>Struggling for Peace: South Vietnamese Buddhist Women and Resistance to the Vietnam War</i>, in: <i>Journal of Women's History</i>, Bd. 17, Nr. 3/2005, S. 133-157.</p> <p>IV Creating True Peace.</p> <p>V Topmiller, <i>Struggling for Peace</i>.</p> <p>VI Call Me by my True Names.</p> <p>VII Call Me by my True Names, Parallax Press.</p> | <p>VIII History of Engaged Buddhism: A Dharma Talk (Hanoi 2008), in: <i>Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge</i> Bd. 6/Nr. 3, Boston 2008, S. 35: “Buddhism was like a lotus flower trying to survive in an ocean of fire.”</p> <p>IX Quotation from: <a href="http://www.aavw.org/special_features/letters_thich_abstract02.html">http://www.aavw.org/special_features/letters_thich_abstract02.html</a> (Aufruf Mai 2023).</p> <p>X Chan Khong, <i>Learning True Love</i>.</p> <p>XI At Home in the World.</p> <p>XII Cf. A Peace Initiative in Love in Action</p> <p>XIII Andrea Miller, <i>Peace in Every Step: Thich Nhat Hanh's Life of Courage and Compassion</i>, in: <i>Shambhala Sun Magazine</i>, Juli 2010, S. 43.</p> <p>XIV <i>Learning True Love. Practising Buddhism in a Time of War</i>. Revised Edition Berkeley 2007, S. 127f.</p> <p>XV</p> <p>XVI Call Me by my True Names</p> <p>XVII Being Peace, Berkeley 1987, S. 82): “Peace work means, first of all, being peace.”</p> <p>XVIII Learning True Love.</p> | <p>XIX Cf. Thich Nhat Hanh, <i>Love in Action</i>.</p> <p>XX At Hell's Gate: A Soldier's Journey from War to Peace</p> <p>XXI „I've been a monk for 65 years, and what I have found is that there is no religion, no philosophy, no ideology higher than brotherhood and sisterhood.“: <a href="https://plumvillage.org/news/thich-nhat-hanh-arrives-in-vietnam/">https://plumvillage.org/news/thich-nhat-hanh-arrives-in-vietnam/</a> (Aufruf Mai 2023).</p> <p>XXII To Make Reconciliation Possible, in: <i>The Mindfulness Bell</i> Nr. 64, Autumn 2013, pp. 4-10.</p> <p>XXIII Creating True Peace.</p> <p>XXIV At Home in the World</p> <p>* In den Farben des Regensbogens erstrahlte die Friedensmauer in Waldbröl am 05. März 2022 für den Frieden auf der ganzen Welt <a href="https://www.rundschau-online.de/region/oberberg/waldbroel/statement-gegen-den-krieg-waldbroeler-friedensmauer-angeleuchtet-252707">https://www.rundschau-online.de/region/oberberg/waldbroel/statement-gegen-den-krieg-waldbroeler-friedensmauer-angeleuchtet-252707</a></p> |
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# The power of the original Fourteen mindfulness exercises

In the months leading up to Thay's passing, I had the opportunity to assist the monastic brothers and sisters together with other lay friends by helping to arrange and translate into Italian some materials that would eventually be of help and support to the Italian community in that important moment of transition and continuation. It was at that time that, in a footnote of the detailed biography of Thay prepared by the sisters and brothers of Plum Village, I discovered the first version of the 14 mindfulness trainings. It was a revelatory discovery for me. The original wording, dating back to 1966, goes like this:

1. Do not be bound by doctrines and theories.
2. Do not think there is one changeless or absolute truth.
3. Do not force others to accept your views.
4. Do not close your eyes to suffering.
5. Do not become wealthy while others go without food.
6. Do not hold on to anger and hatred.
7. Do not say things that cause discord.
8. Do not say untruthful things.
9. Do not use Buddhism for personal gain.
10. Do not do work that is harmful to humans or nature.
11. Do not kill.
12. Do not possess things harmful to others.
13. Do not mistreat your body.
14. Finally, do not assume that your teacher, *Thầy*, is able to follow each of these rules perfectly.

This simple, direct, immediate form seemed lucid to me. The trainings are all expressed in negative form because the positive counterpart was all to be invented and reinvented day after day in direct action, it was all in the ongoing construction of a new way of living together. The negative way

is that of the mystics. Here is a pragmatic mysticism of care, in which the right path can only be hinted at. The right path belongs to the concrete and ever-changing dimension of the earthly world and looks to an ultimate dimension beyond words. I remember saying to myself: «These are the mindfulness trainings as they were practised under the bombs, by brothers and sisters who devoted all their energy not to liturgy maintenance, but to helping others!». As I looked at those trainings, I thought back to my own experience. Fortunately, I cannot say that I lived through a war, but the traces of the Second World War are still visible, for those who know where to look, in some corners of Palermo, my home town. On the façade of a building nearby one can still read the signs that indicated the way to the shelter where my grandparents used to hide during the allied bombing raids. The rubble from those bombings was still there in the centre of town when I was a boy in the 1990s. Back then, however, I did experience a different kind of war, perhaps more deceitful at times, but no less ferocious. Since 1992, after the mafia massacres that struck among others the magistrate Giovanni Falcone, killed with a 15-quintal bomb that destroyed a section of the highway to the airport, my hometown was garrisoned by the army for years. I remember going to school as a boy and seeing soldiers a little older than me on street corners, holding automatic rifles almost as long as they were tall, next to armoured trucks. I remember the peace march I took part in together with tens of thousands of other students and citizens, walking the twenty kilometres of highway separating the site of the bombing from the city.

In his teaching over the past few years at retreats held in southern Italy, in Sicily and

Apulia, Thay Phap An has often emphasised that the ethical dimension of the mindfulness trainings points to the potential of practising them as a training of the mind. I find very clear evidence of such correlation in my personal experience. There is no mafia without a mafia mentality. Mafia violence and bombs, control of the territory, racketeering, illegal trafficking, and corruption are not possible without a widespread mentality of suspicion, envy, prevarication, reticence, and a code of silence, which poisons human relations at all levels, from the institutional political one to the most everyday and intimate. It is a poverty mentality that does not know openness, warmth and care. And this poverty of mind in turn feeds on widespread injustice and blindness to this injustice. It has always been clear to the anti-mafia movement that the fight against organised crime starts with transforming the mindset, and it is in this context that building a spiritual community of peace in these lands has its meaning.

These hindrances of the mind are universal and timeless, but nevertheless take on their own very specific and distinct form here in these lands and in this era. And so do the conviviality, the cheerfulness, the out-of-the-box creative thinking and the readiness for mutual support that specifically characterise the Mediterranean cultures at their best. We need a Mediterranean version of engaged Buddhism, of engaged ethics. I feel that we should let go of the temptation to crystallise and dogmatise the teachings, and we should resist the demon of bureaucracy that sometimes takes over our organisational mindset. We should keep our guidelines simple, so that they can adapt to the transformation of very different mentalities and cultures. The universality of the message is not a matter of standardisation, but of



awareness and care for diversity. This is how Buddhism has spread historically, taking on very different forms of the same message in the traditions it has come into contact with. We should allow the teaching to find the most skilful forms best suited to those who can receive it, just as the roots of a tree adapt to a soil with its own unique characteristics by slowly finding a way through, tilling the soil in depth and finally consolidating it into a new vital unity, connected to other trees.

I am well aware that Thay himself has since reworked the wording of the mindfulness trainings by expanding and refining them, and

I have great respect for the continued efforts of the community to transform and adapt the trainings to the changing times. Personally, I am very attached to the reminder of the awareness of oppression and social injustice, which is evoked no less than six times in the most recent formulation. But I printed the first version of the mindfulness trainings on a sheet of paper that I keep next to my desk, and it is in this form that the trainings are the object of my daily contemplation. I work with words and sometimes, together with many friends, I conceive and write cultural and social innovation projects that seek to bring concrete help to people living

in conditions of great difficulty, educational poverty, cultural and relational deprivation. And yet it is precisely these guidelines of a few simple sentences in which I find support when I have so much to do. Sometimes I find myself hoping that we can rediscover some of the straightforwardness of our first founding text, so that we will be able to unlock more energy to invest in society.

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# Doing nothing is something

## A gradual reconciliation with doing nothing.

"A flower does not have to do anything to fulfil its task. It is simply a flower, that is enough." This thought from Thay is always a compass for me.

Am I also simply enough? Without doing anything?

I sit on my cushion. Silence. Quietness within me. It could be even quieter. I consciously breathe deeper. Once more. I notice how I subtly want the experience to be different from what it is. Letting go of wanting. A moment of acceptance. Stillness. Trying to feel my heart so that a feeling of happiness arises. Notice that I subtly want the experience to be different again. Let go of wanting. A moment of acceptance. Stillness... letting go and letting go again. All ideas of how meditation should be... Relaxing into the moment ... Again and again....

This recognition was a moment of deep humility, bringing an awareness of just how often I am in doing mode, busy tweaking experiences to make them just a little bit better. Not accepting things the way they are right now; cultivating rejection of life in the present moment.

I remember well the first time I heard the line in the Satipatthana Sutra: "The practitioner has abandoned all craving and all distaste for this life." Especially the second part, the distaste for life, I found very strange. It didn't fit at all with my self-image, which seemed to be open and tolerant, welcoming of everything. Over the years of practice, this view began to falter, I became more and more aware of how I constantly want (crave) or don't want (distaste) something. How my mind is constantly busy wanting things to be different than they are. And how beautiful life becomes, how wonderful the moment

when I can let it be, when I let go of all the wanting things to be different and am with it as it is. How deep peace arises in acceptance.

This constant having-to-do is a habitual energy that has been all too familiar to me all my life. This constant having-to-do that I can let go of over and over again if I observe it with mindfulness.

### Why can't I just let it be? What is driving me?

I have been carrying these questions through life for a long time. I observe my mind, which always wants to optimise - and let go. Consciously relax into the moment. Again and again. Then one morning, during meditation, images appear suddenly: as in a film, I see situations from my life in which I felt I had to do something to restore harmony or avert chaos. I see myself as a baby alone in hospital, so young, yet already having to do something to survive; see myself as a teenager in so many situations trying to create harmony in the family; being very strong as a young woman at my mum's funeral, holding everyone else with my strength; if I don't do anything, no one else will ... I feel how painful these situations are, feel in the now the physical pain of that time, the pain of past suffering.

Suddenly, I see very clearly how fear of losing control dominates my life. Fear of losing control. Wow. I'm trying to control a life that cannot be controlled. Never could be. A life that follows its own laws. That's why I'm trying so hard? Like Sisyphus heaving his stone up the mountain so that it rolls back down the other side. That is somehow absurd.

I realise I'm taking all my habitual energy with me onto the cushion to meditate. In the

stillness of sitting, I see it more clearly, like under a magnifying glass. By consciously stopping I can be at peace with it, allow it space and recognise what lies behind it. I can look deeply and understand - and thanks to this understanding slowly change my everyday life.

A magic word helps me to do this: "greeting". I don't have to do anything; I can greet life as it is. Nothing has to be different. I feel how this greeting changes my whole attitude. How my chest expands, my breath flows deeper. Greeting. This moment. And this moment. I greet the beauty of nature, the freshness of the forest, the warm summer wind in the evening, the happy chirping of birds in the early morning. I greet every breath, fresh and new.

My ideas of how things should be are also softening. I no longer have to be right. With mindfulness, my own point of view becomes fragile - and this is not frightening, but increasingly provides a very stable foundation.

"Doing nothing is something," Thay said, smiling mischievously. Slowly I begin to guess what he might have meant.

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#### Sabine Jaenicke

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# Grieving is not the **problem** – grieving is the **solution**. Because – grieving has the **power to heal**!

*“When I had three healthy children, I thought I would not survive if anything happened to them.*

*When my daughter was sick, I thought I wouldn't survive if she died.*

*After my daughter died, I thought I would never be happy again.”*

*Five years have passed. I am alive. I laugh. I enjoy. And I am happy...not always, but again and again.”*

My book, “The night brings back the day”, which I wrote 5 years after the death of my daughter Pauline ends with these lines.

Without Thay and without my mindfulness practice, I would hardly have survived my daughter's illness and death in one piece. As it is, I have not only survived this challenge, but been able to rediscover my strength and zest for life.

Even at a young age my life was beset with great challenges that led me to search for

happiness: When I was five years old, my father took his own life. When I was 17, my beloved brother died in a traffic accident, and when I was 27 my best friend died of cancer.

To avoid being overwhelmed by grief, I began to run through life. The faster the better: I trained as an actress and ran from theatre to theatre, then I ran across the stage, from one premiere to the next, then I had children and ran to the kindergarten, then to the shops, then home to clean my flat, and then back to the kindergarten, because when I ran, I couldn't feel my grief as much.

When I was 40 years old, my middle daughter Pauline, aged 9, got leukaemia. So, I ran even faster: to the clinic and back home to her siblings, from the lab to radiology, from the intensive care unit to the sausage stand... driven by great fear...just don't stop...

One day I received a book as a gift, and this book changed my life. It is by our revered teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, and it is called Steps of Mindfulness (only available in German). It

led me to the practice of mindfulness and then to Plum Village, to Thay and later to the EIAB.

I liked part of this book so much I memorised it: “You have an appointment with life. And life does not take place in the past, because the past is already gone. Nor does life take place in the future, because the future is not yet here. Life takes place in this moment, and it's right where you are right now. So if you miss this moment, you miss your appointment with life.”

As I said, I didn't have an appointment with life at that time. Stillness, mindfulness - I thought it sounded good, but I just didn't have time for it. I had to run.

But one day I needed mindfulness. To survive, to sleep and to save my daughter. To make this clear, I would like to quote a small passage from my book:

*Every Monday, Pauline gets a dose of chemotherapy injected into her spinal cord. This so-called lumbar puncture is part of her twelve-week treatment plan. For this she has to sit cross-legged on the treatment couch, bend her upper body deeply downwards, breathe into her lower back and not move a millimetre. She is held down by me and a nurse. Then a doctor sticks a fifteen-centimetre needle between the vertebrae of her back and injects the cytostatic drug methotrexate, or MTX for short, into Pauline's spinal cord. A gruesome procedure, every Monday for twelve weeks. If the doctor hits the right spot, the whole thing doesn't hurt, it's*





*just, as they say, unpleasant.*

*When she hits it. The tragedy is that the second time, a junior doctor tried her luck and missed. The pain was sharp and unexpected and took away all Pauline's confidence in the safe hands of doctors.*

*How does one live with such a threat?*

*Well, after the shot is before the shot! Pauline doesn't have an appointment with life, but with fear.*

*Her life, my life, our entire family life revolves around this syringe that will be back on her back in seven, in six, in three, in two days. There is no more joy for her during the day, and by the time she has cried herself to sleep, it is well past midnight. In the morning when she wakes up, it continues. Mummy, I'm so scared, Mummy, I can't stand it anymore, Mummy, my stomach is hard from the fear, I can't eat, please don't go away, otherwise I start thinking about the injection.*

*And then she cries until both our jumpers are wet from the tears.*

*And I am annoyed. I want to be compassionate, but it's too much. I have other things to do than comfort Pauline all the time. My patience is exhausted, and I still have two children who need me.*

*But Pauline cries.*

*Every day.*

*Even on that sunny Saturday when we all wanted to go on a hike to the river mouth - you remember, when there was high water with picnics and everything, which you loved so much. Everyone was looking forward to it. But you're lying on the sofa, in tears, and you're afraid of Monday. How can I look forward to the picnic if I have to go back to the clinic on Monday, you scream and get so panicked that I want to shake you and slap you.*

*Instead, I grab you by your skinny shoulders, look you firmly in the eye and say:*

*What are you afraid of now?*

*Of the injection.*

*No, now.*

*It hurts so much...*

*What hurts? What hurts now?*

*Not now, but on Monday.*

*No, only what's now counts.*

*Silence.*

*Is the sun shining now?*

*Yes.*

*Who's purring on your lap now?*

*Mimi.*

*Where are you now?*

*In my room.*

*Who is sitting outside in the garden waiting for you?*

*Josef and Flo and Daddy.*

*What do you feel now?*

*Scared.*

*Of our picnic??*

*No... of Monday...*

*Only what's now counts!*

*Silence.*

*Well?*

*Suddenly she jumps up, climbs on my arm, clings to me like a little monkey*

*and whispers "now" in my ear.*

*Then she jumps through the flat, runs into the garden, dances a wild dance around the beech tree with Flora, jumps on Josef's arm, sings to herself now, now, now and is really happy again for the first time since the day she fell ill. In the evening, after our wonderful walk and delicious picnic, after lots of fun and sun and laughter, she comes crawling quietly onto my lap.*

*Mummy, now it's coming again and I don't know what "now" is. What should I think about so that I don't have to think about fear?*

*And again, what is written in the book about the moment comes to my aid.*

*How can you tell, right now, that you are alive?*

*That my heart is beating.*

*Good. What else? What else?*

*My breath.*

*Good. Good. Good. Now, if something comes up that you don't want to think about, you just think about your breath.*



*How do I do that?*

*You think, when I breathe in, I feel that I am now alive, when I breathe out, I am happy that I am now alive. That is what is now, that is this moment and that is the only thing that counts, nothing else. Look, life is so precious. Actually, you only have to be afraid on Mondays from ten to eleven, but you ruin Tuesday and Wednesday and the rest of the week and even the beautiful weekend if your thoughts are always on the injection on Monday. Unfortunately, I didn't teach you that the only important moment in your life is always this moment, but now I'll start. Sit next to me and close your eyes, we'll practise it now. Together.*

*This was six years before Pauline died. We both knew that this exercise was important for us. But how often it would help us when we were lost in fear and hopelessness and sleeplessness, we couldn't have known then. Nor did we know that life had much worse in store for us than a shot in the spinal cord.*

*(END)*

Now meditation took on a new significance. Pauline and I meditated together, and we learned about the miracle of the moment. We learned that in all the fear, all the panic, all the distress, there was a place of refuge that we could go to - the present moment. Present moment, wonderful moment. That became Pauline's mantra when her world threatened to collapse again. She wrote this poem:

## The moment

*Moments,  
they fly by  
we barely notice,  
they are the most beautiful moments,  
they fill the room.  
Tempted, to be in the next one already,  
we miss the only moment,  
which could truly be with us.*

*(Pauline Schupp)*

Unfortunately, Pauline had a relapse after four years. She received a transplant, had another relapse, and died six years after her

illness began on 29 December 2006 at home, surrounded by her family.

Her death hit me like a tsunami. The pain churned in my guts, every second, every minute, every day. My life lay before me like a pile of broken glass, nothing was as it used to be, everything was dark and lifeless inside me, and I could not imagine that a person could go on living with such heavy grief in their heart. I may have survived a lot in my life - but this blow would be fatal.

As I had learned from Thay, and as I had taught my daughter, I sat on my meditation cushion for half an hour every day, trying to focus on my breath and on the positive things in my life and to smile gratefully at them. I went into the forest and tried to smell the good air and be grateful for the forest. I ate a chocolate ice cream and tried to taste the chocolate ice cream and be grateful for chocolate ice cream. I tried to breathe in and out and be grateful for my breath.

But it didn't work. Gratitude felt like mockery, the chocolate ice cream stuck in my throat, the breath flowed unheeded through my body. Grief, despair and anger at fate were far too strong.

Three months after Pauline's death, I attended my first grief seminar. It was offered in Switzerland and was entitled: Facing Grief with Mindfulness. I thought, for God's sake, that won't work anyway, I've already tried everything.

But because it was the only one far and wide, I went in my distress.

It was the best thing that ever happened to me and changed my life completely.

Because there, the *miracle of mindfulness* came to me from a completely different angle and in a way I had never understood previously. In that grief seminar I learned how healing it is to accept pain instead of pushing it away. Until then I had thought that I had to concentrate on the beautiful things, which still exist, so that I could be happy again. That my sadness had to disappear so that I could be happy again, that I had to let go of my daughter, and with her the pain around her, so that I could breathe again,

Instead, I learned how healing it is to acknowledge that grief and pain are there, I learned how healing it is to invite grief to cry, to lament, and to be with my grief instead of trying to get rid of it.

There is a saying in English: What you feel, you can heal. What you feel, what you perceive, what you sense...that can heal.

And there is the saying: Things you resist, persist. What you want to get rid of, you keep. And that's what we do with all our difficult feelings: We want to get rid of them. Run away. Babble about them.

Thay had probably always said this in his Dharma talks, but I never really understood it. He often gave the example of the crying baby: "My baby is crying because its tummy hurts. I don't like that - but still, I would never think of running into the kitchen, closing the door on the crying baby and turning on loud music so I can't hear the crying anymore. No, I go and lovingly take the baby in my arms and see what she needs. This doesn't make her tummy ache go away, but the baby feels better."

It is the same with our feelings. Our feelings are our baby, and mindfulness is the mother who is there to provide relief.

I decided to train as a grief counsellor so that I could also offer grief seminars in Germany.

In my training I learned that you cannot grieve too much, but only too little. That you can't grieve too long, at most not long enough. That grieving is not to be confused with "talking about grief", but that grieving means to lament and cry - and not alone in a quiet room. Grief needs to be expressed, heard, and seen - then it is healing.

I learned that it is not about letting go of the loved one or the grief, as well-meaning therapists like to recommend. It is about integrating both the loved one and the grief into our lives - finding a good place for them.

And I realised that mindfulness means something other than what I had taught my daughter. That mindfulness can be helpful in other ways than observing the breath and



noticing the beauties of life. I learned that mindfulness is a kind of miracle cure:

When we face difficult feelings such as pain, sadness, bitterness, shame and guilt with compassionate mindfulness, they lose their power.

By the same token when we are mindful of moments of contentment, security, joy and happiness with mindfulness, these become greater over time and take up more space in our lives. We know from brain research that the neuronal structures in our brain that are responsible for contentment and happiness become stronger when we succeed in consciously experiencing joyful moments. Even completely neutral moments can be transformed into joyful moments through mindfulness.

From then on, I started to give more space to mindfulness practice in my life. I started practising regularly and attended a Vipassana retreat every year.

And I learned about Metta (loving kindness) and the power of mindful self-compassion in an MSC (Mindful Self Compassion) course. I learned that a difficult feeling loses its power and its severity when I meet it with compassion.

I would like to share an example of how mindful self-compassion can change a bad feeling...: My brother was in a car accident when he was 18. He was burnt and

hospitalised with life-threatening injuries. A paediatrician friend who had seen him with his burns advised my mother and I to remember my brother as we knew him and not to visit him in hospital.

And I kept to it. My brother died 5 days later without me visiting him again. Unthinkable! Today... for me... unthinkable!!!

Every now and then I am overcome by this shame and this bitter feeling of guilt that I left my brother alone in his distress. Maybe, I sometimes think, he would still be alive if I hadn't abandoned him like that. These feelings of shame and guilt are among the most brutal feelings of all, they are so bad that they are almost unbearable. Then - I put my hand on the part of my body where the feeling is, close my eyes and bring my awareness to this bad feeling in my body. Then I say to myself, as lovingly as I would speak to a small child: Yes, I know it's bad. It's bad that this feeling is there and that it hurts so much and that I have to endure it right now. That is real compassion. Not talking it away, not trying to make it better, not trying to comfort. No. Letting it be there, acknowledging it, bearing it, caring for it.

After a short time, I can sense how this brutal feeling changes. Not that it disappears, but I notice how it becomes softer, how it becomes wider and warmer in my chest. The feeling is still there, I suppose, but no longer so brutally painful.

I finally understood what Thich Nhat Hanh meant when he said, "Dear pain, I am here for you now, I am taking care of you."

So the practice of mindfulness and mindful self-compassion have found their way into my grief seminars, which I have been privileged to offer every year at the EIAB, to mourners after the death of a loved one.

In these grief seminars, mourners who have lost a loved one through an accident, illness, suicide or some other way can find support on their individual path through grief.

In the protective space of a community of those affected, memories can be shared and new courage to face life can be found. There is time and space for painful feelings, but also for what may become better and different.

[www.blauerfalter.de](http://www.blauerfalter.de)

*Don't give up your sadness so quickly!  
Let it penetrate deeper into you.  
Let it linger and spice you up,  
As only a few choice ingredients can.  
Something missing in my heart tonight,  
has made my eyes so soft,  
my voice so soft,  
my heart so wide.*

(Hafiz, lived around 1300, is a highly respected Persian poet and mystic)

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Isabel Schupp



## Flute tunes and ink wash – there are so many Dharma doors

Thây has shown us countless gateways to the Dharma. Every time I look into the treasure chest of our practice, it reminds me how happy I am to have found this wonderfully diverse path. Coming from a rather strict Zen lineage, I was amazed at the cheerfulness, the singing, the laughter, the festivals and celebrations, the play and the lightness I found at Plum Village. In the late 1990s, I once wanted to escape from the

hustle and bustle of Christmas to the silence and contemplation of a Zen monastery – and abruptly found myself in the midst of the colourful, joyful hustle and bustle of Plum Village, where preparations for Christmas were busily underway: the meditation halls were being decorated, stars were being made, a Christmas choir was being recruited, a play was being rehearsed, and of course plenty of food was being prepared. I had never experienced a more joyful yet profound Christmas season as I did then in Plum Village. Thây gave talks on Jesus and Buddha, and everywhere I looked there were glowing faces. Despite the dazzling activities, the place radiated peace, silence, and great contentment and harmony.

I found this quiet serenity and evident cheerfulness captivating. The diverse cultural treasures, the aesthetics of the rituals, the beauty of togetherness appealed to my musical inclinations. I had arrived where my heart could soar. Here was the space to make the almond tree blossom. Music and art found a spiritual home. Thây encouraged me to discover more Dharma doors. I learned to pause, open the eyes and ears of my heart, to listen to and be touched by my inner music.

Then one day I stood quietly in front of an ink painting by a contemporary painter whose technique in Chan-Art is minimalistic in the extreme: rubbed black ink, applied with the finger to white handmade paper, allowing the hint of a landscape to arise out of the emptiness of the paper, which in turn leads me, the viewer, into the emptiness, home to myself. I was absorbed by this ink painting, stood oblivious in front of this small-format

work in an exhibition that juxtaposed old Chinese scroll paintings with contemporary ink paintings by two Western artists, the Cologne painter René Böll, whose expressive pictorial works are inspired by East Asian Zen painting, and Thorsten Schirmer, who stands entirely in the tradition of Chan painting, which he creates only with his finger, abandoning the brush. That only a little later, chance should put me in the hands of Thorsten Schirmer, whose work had so gripped me, is a strange coincidence. I have found my Shifu (master) in painting, and also a new Dharma door. As a Xuétú (apprentice) I paint, according to tradition, usually only a single subject – in the Chan tradition, reduced to black ink and a few spontaneous brushstrokes. My subject is the cat. It could also be landscape, flowers or birds. The motif is not so important. What matters is presence, concentration, endurance and strength (Qi). The representation does not have to be true to nature, it must be true to the essence, springing from the spirit of the heart. Does the image represent the core of the teaching, does it point to emptiness? Does the image lead into the nature of being? Is the form free and alive? Is the image inspired? These are crucial questions. None of my work so far has fulfilled these criteria. But there are certainly moments of happiness, inspiration and oneness. It is like any exercise: the task is to practice steadily and faithfully. This exercise here and now in the present moment is what matters. Or as Thây said: you don't have to practice for ten years to become a Buddha. Now is the right moment to be fully here.

The paintings also reflect back to me when I'm not quite present. They show me where





I let myself be guided by intention, where I am inattentive. If I lack energy or am tired, then my cats will lack energy and look tired. Often the first brush stroke will show me if I am unfocused, careless, distracted. The ink does not lie. My thoughts, on the other

hand, can easily outsmart me and make me believe flattering things. But if my state of mind becomes visible on paper, then I can no longer avoid the mirror. So, painting is far from being just fun; it can be an arduous path – and the better I learn to see, the more

bluntly the mirror shows me my true face. There are barren spells and disappointments, frustration and failure. In this, the path of Chan painting is no different from any other path of deep practice.

In addition to ink painting, I have discovered the shakuhachi, the Japanese bamboo flute, on which I learn mainly the traditional spiritual pieces (honkyoku), which have been passed down from generation to generation for centuries. Just as the ink forms arise from emptiness, the sound of the flute arises from silence. It is the audible counterpart to visible painting. And like the brush, the shakuhachi requires constant dedicated practice. A single note can be deeply gratifying when it resonates with the “soul”. There is the saying *ichi on jōbutsu* 一音成仏, meaning something like “the attainment of Buddha nature in a single tone.” So, it is necessary to pay attention to every single sound; each sound is an expression of the living breath. The breath flows through the bamboo pipe and becomes audible. To play the shakuhachi means making the breath audible. If I am excited or lack energy, then no sound comes. The instrument also holds up a mirror to the person playing it. But like the ink, the flute is also has the power to lead me into silence, to calm and relax me. When playing I can observe very clearly how the breath deepens, how my mind collects itself and concentrates. This form of meditation is called *Suizen*, meditation in blowing the flute. Often the sounds also have an immediate effect on those who listen, either intentionally or accidentally. Sometimes I take the flute to my cushion to get in the mood for meditation. It is similar to the bell: the sound resonates with the breath through the room out into the distance and I can send my blessings along with it to those who hear it.

I would like to encourage you, dear reader, to take a moment to feel what resonates with you. What brings you joy? What enlivens your practice? Which Dharma door is waiting to open for you? Maybe you’re right in front of it, and this very breath brings you home to your true self – in your unique life, in this very moment.

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**Jan-Michael Ehrhardt**  
True Practice of Harmony



# "I have arrived, I am home" ...

How often did Thay speak of having arrived and being home. Recently I saw a sequence in a film where he explained walking meditation to Zen students at the San Francisco Zen Centre using these very words. The image of him gently pressing his foot into the ground and saying "I have arrived" always comes back to me so vividly. This arrival, coming home, is clearly a process, a movement, something dynamic and not a state of being. It is probably no coincidence that for Thay, who had to leave his homeland and live in exile for decades, the question of the real or true home was deeply existential, and he liked to use such images to lead us to the core of Buddhist teaching, because in my view home is what they are all about.

*Walk as if you were kissing the earth  
with your feet,  
as if you were massaging the Earth.  
The marks left by your feet,  
will be like the marks of an emperor's  
seal,  
calling for Now to go back to Here;  
so that life will be present;  
so that the blood will bring the colour  
of love to your face;  
so that the wonders of life will be  
manifested  
and all afflictions will be transformed  
into  
peace and joy.*

---

Thich Nhat Hanh:  
Call Me By My True Names, Selected Poems, Paral-  
lax Press.

The process he describes so poetically is, of course, not limited to walking. Every now and then, as I write, I look out of the window at the hill opposite, see yellow-dried patches of meadow, behind them a dense row of trees whose trunks are mostly hidden behind green foliage. In the foreground, the crown of the cherry tree in the garden; I can clearly make out the individual leaves, see how the branches and leaves are in constant motion. Insects fly past. Birds are chirping.

*Look as if you were kissing the leaves  
with your eyes,  
as if you were caressing them*

...

*Listen as if you were kissing the twitter  
of the birds with your ears,  
as if you were touching it*

...

*Smell as if you were kissing the aroma  
of the lilac with your nose,  
as if you were embracing it*

...

*Taste as if you were kissing the slices of  
apple with your taste buds,  
as if you were hugging it  
Touch as if you were kissing the skin  
with your hands,  
as if you were caressing it  
Think as if you were kissing your mind  
with your thoughts,  
as if you were gently massaging it*

What does this mean in relation to the emotions? With the joyful ones, it is not difficult to feel them as if I were kissing and touching the joy with my senses; how wonderful to experience them so purely - yet how rarely do I take time to do it. But what about feelings of anger, fear, sadness? There I always have the tendency to turn away, to distract myself, to want to rid myself of these feelings, to move away into more pleasant emotional worlds, be it through meditation or reading spiritual books.



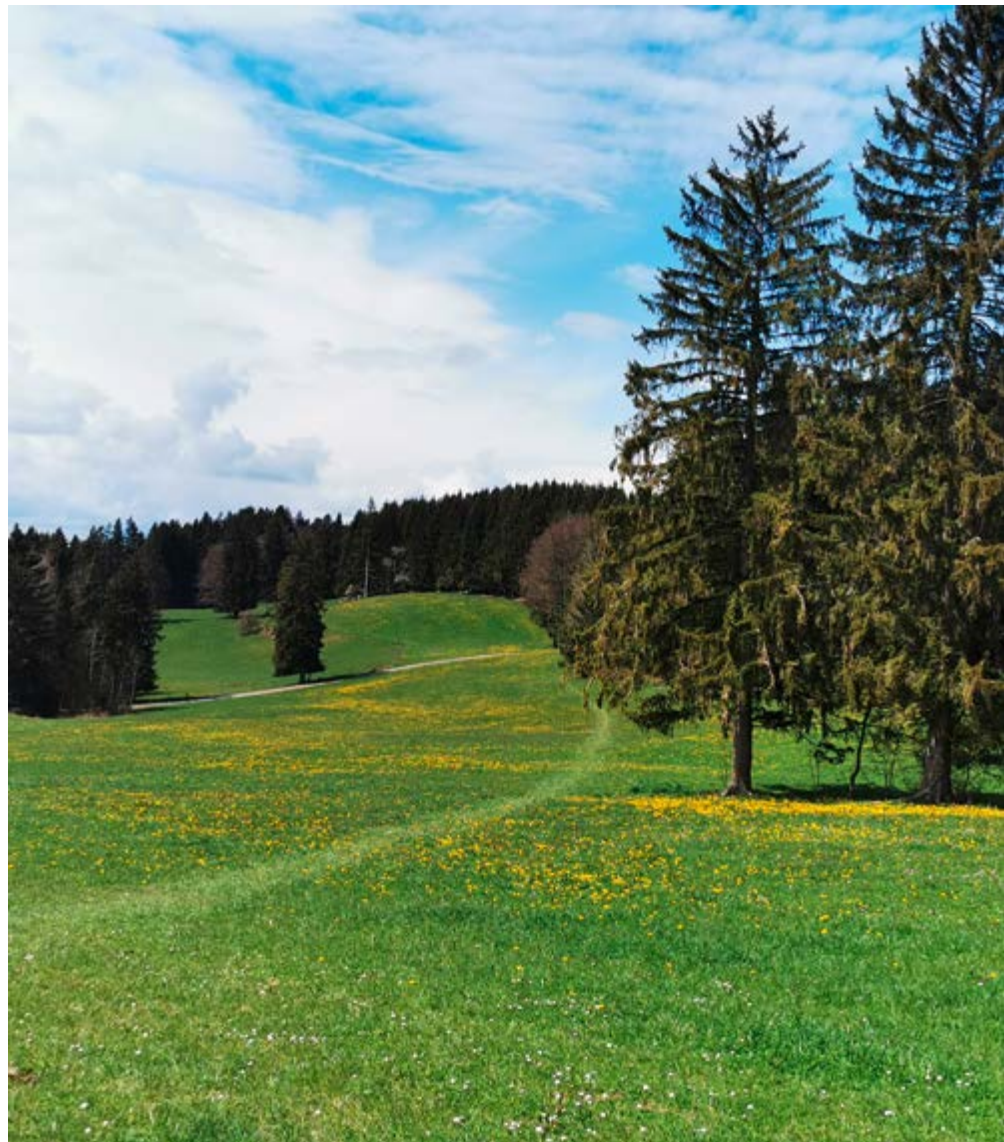


In a magazine article by the writer Karin Petersen, I read: "At some point in the course of my search, I realised that my basic drive for all my spiritual experiments was to be someone other than who I am. I felt inadequate. I meditated to become more serene, practised yoga to become fitter. Everything I did for my spiritual salvation consisted of this 'in order to'. Stopping, I came to the amazingly simple realisation that I always wanted to get away from myself - and endured all the difficulties of the path to be exactly not the person I am."

I know exactly what she is talking about, I know this movement away from myself only too well. Although I know that to keep running away from myself is the wrong path, it is *also* a very tempting one, and so, over the years, again and again I have nourished a habitual pattern of wanting to run away.

"Let go of the current of sorrow and misery and embrace life fully," I read in Thay; however, it is increasingly clear to me, that if I want to let go of the current of an emotion like sadness, fear, anger, greed, jealousy then I need to dive into the current of that emotion, and not run away from it for fear of getting wet, or being overwhelmed by churning waves. The emotion wants to be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, sensed, touched and thought through, as Thay puts it for walking, it wants to be kissed and embraced with all the senses. And that too is a kind of coming home, arriving, but not in the sense of "that's over, now everything is okay"; rather, at the same time, I am also aware of the fleetingness of the emotion; it is not stable, but changes from moment to moment, loses its name and its solidity, becomes vibrating liveliness. This is how life shows itself to us in this moment, and it is up to us to embrace it as a whole and include ourselves in it. We could also say that we let life take us wholly in its arms.

Recently a teacher in the Tibetan tradition told me not to focus so much on the "what", i.e., what I perceive in meditation, which then allows me to carve up the stream of life conceptually into small portions and to hold on to it and ultimately fix it: in thoughts, feelings, sensory sensations, etc. Rather, he recommended focusing more on the "how". Not what do I hear, but how do I hear, how is it when I hear, see, taste, feel, think something,



how does it feel when I experience sadness, when I feel joy, when I think, etc.? How does it feel to live, how does it feel to be?

How does it feel to read the following lines of a poem by Thay as if you were kissing the words? How does it feel to be space without boundaries? To have no more plans? No baggage? To float as a moon through a completely empty sky? To be freedom?

*Breathing in,  
I have become space  
without boundaries.  
I have no plans left.  
I have no luggage.  
Breathing out,  
I am the moon,  
that is sailing through the sky of utmost  
emptiness.  
I am freedom.*

How does it feel to arrive? How does it feel to be home?

#### **Ursula Richard**

Übersetzerin vieler Bücher von Thich Nhat Hanh; seit der ersten Begegnung mit Thay Mitte der 1980er fühlt sie sich ihm und der Plum-Village-Tradition sehr verbunden; sie ist Zen-Praktizierende, Autorin und Verlegerin der edition steinrich.





# Walking Just to Walk

“Walking just to walk” is the title of the first chapter of 81 in the book “Old Path, White Clouds”. Thay put a lot of time and love into this book, in which he writes about the life and teachings of the Buddha. In this first chapter we meet the young monk Svasti to whom it seemed that “the Buddha walked just to enjoy the walking, unconcerned about arriving anywhere at all”.

Walking meditation in nature was always very nourishing for Thay, and Thay has talked and written a lot about this practice.

Thay walked very slowly and he relaxed with each step, feeling great stability and freedom.

Many sisters and brothers enjoyed walking, and we tried to transfer the mindfulness we enjoyed during slow walking meditation to a faster walking pace. We enjoyed this a great deal and suddenly the thought of a hiking retreat was no longer very far away.

Sister Jewel was part of the first group of brothers and sisters to move to Waldbröl in autumn 2008. With the support of Ivo

and Johannes, she began to offer hiking retreats twice a year. Step by step, I grew into these retreats and have been leading hiking retreats with great joy for more than 10 years.

For me, walking in nature is a very important source of nourishment and I am very grateful for the many varied hiking trails around Waldbröl. This year, 2023, I will lead six hiking retreats with Brother Phap Lich, and no two walking retreats are ever the same. Over the years many hiking trails have become overgrown and many others have been added.

Walking mindfully is not a difficult thing to do. Or rather, it is not difficult to explain how to do it. Nevertheless, our mind often goes wandering too. That is quite natural. But we see again and again that after a few days the mind is clearly more relaxed, fresher and more mindful. And physically, too, many of us feel better and more energetic with each passing day.

Every day, we walk between 15 and 18 kilometres. Then, a few years ago, Brother Phap Tri had the idea of offering hiking retreats over shorter distances so we have more time to dwell in nature. During these retreats we take a lunch break in our hammocks and enjoy just doing nothing. This year, because Brother Phap Tri is in Vietnam, I also led this retreat together with Brother Phap Lich.

The way I see it, these retreats make up for some of the things we frequently lack in everyday life. First and foremost, I mean contact with nature. Many of us do not spend much time outdoors or in the forest. During hiking retreats, we spend many hours outside in contact with nature and the natural sunlight, and mindfulness helps us to deepen this contact so that it can heal and transform us. This healing can take place on different levels, and each day offers a chance





to focus on different aspects of mindfulness, such as being mindfully aware with our senses or being mindful of our connection with nature or with our ancestors.

Walking with two legs is something very natural for us homo sapiens and it gives me a lot of pleasure. Unfortunately, many of us don't walk that much. There are hiking clubs, and hiking together motivates and gives pleasure. But this is usually not in silence and in our hiking retreats we walk in silence. For some, this takes some getting used to at first, but after a while, not having to talk and listen, but simply being with oneself, deepening our contact with nature and the group in silence is greatly valued.

In 2018, I had the wonderful opportunity to do a seven-week walking retreat on the Appalachian Trail in the USA with a few other brothers. We started from Blue Cliff Monastery, in New York State and hiked to Washington DC. We walked during the day and slept in a hammock at night, braving all weather conditions, such as snow, hail, rain, wind, and cold. The memory of those seven weeks is very dear to me because

experiencing the closeness to nature day and night nourished me physically and mentally. During these seven weeks we met Joydeep, who, together with his son and father-in-law, hiked with us for a week. He is originally from India and a friend of his (Hemant) organises professional trekking tours in countries like Nepal, where we organised a hiking retreat together in 2022 and 2023.

So far, I have been to India three times and each time I enjoyed travelling and accompanying retreats together with Shantum Seth, a Dharma teacher from India. Shantum is very dedicated and has been organising trips to Buddhist pilgrimage sites for many years. India is a very large and spiritual country, and the home of the Buddha. We come a full circle when we bring Buddhist teaching and practice back to India. Buddhism is returning home. That is why I am also very happy that we will soon have a permanent monastic presence in India in our Plum Village tradition.

It was wonderful to be able to offer mindful hiking retreats in Nepal at the same time as mindfulness retreats in India. We live here

in Waldbröl in the Oberberg region, but the mountains here are tiny compared to the mountainous giants in Nepal. I could only marvel at the wonder of the mountains and beautiful landscapes. At night we stayed in simple hostels in small villages. Most of the people in these villages were Tibetan and had altars with pictures of the Dalai Lama. We were often addressed as „Lama“ (spiritual teacher). They were very friendly, and we felt very much at home.

The hiking retreats in the USA and Nepal were very adventurous, but nature around Waldbröl is no less wonderful. Contact with nature and mindful walking is a very important source of nourishment for me, and if I'm not in nature or hiking for a week, I feel I'm missing something. It is so good for me, and I see that it is good for many others too. I am very grateful to be able to share mindful walking in nature with many friends every year, and to hear how healing the retreats are. Yet the practice is always just "walking just to walk."

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**Phap Xa**





# Silent-Hiking-Retreat in Oberbergischen Land

from 7.–11.6. 2023

DEDICATED TO OUR DEAR BROTHERS PHAP XA AND PHAP LICH

## **IN SILENCE**

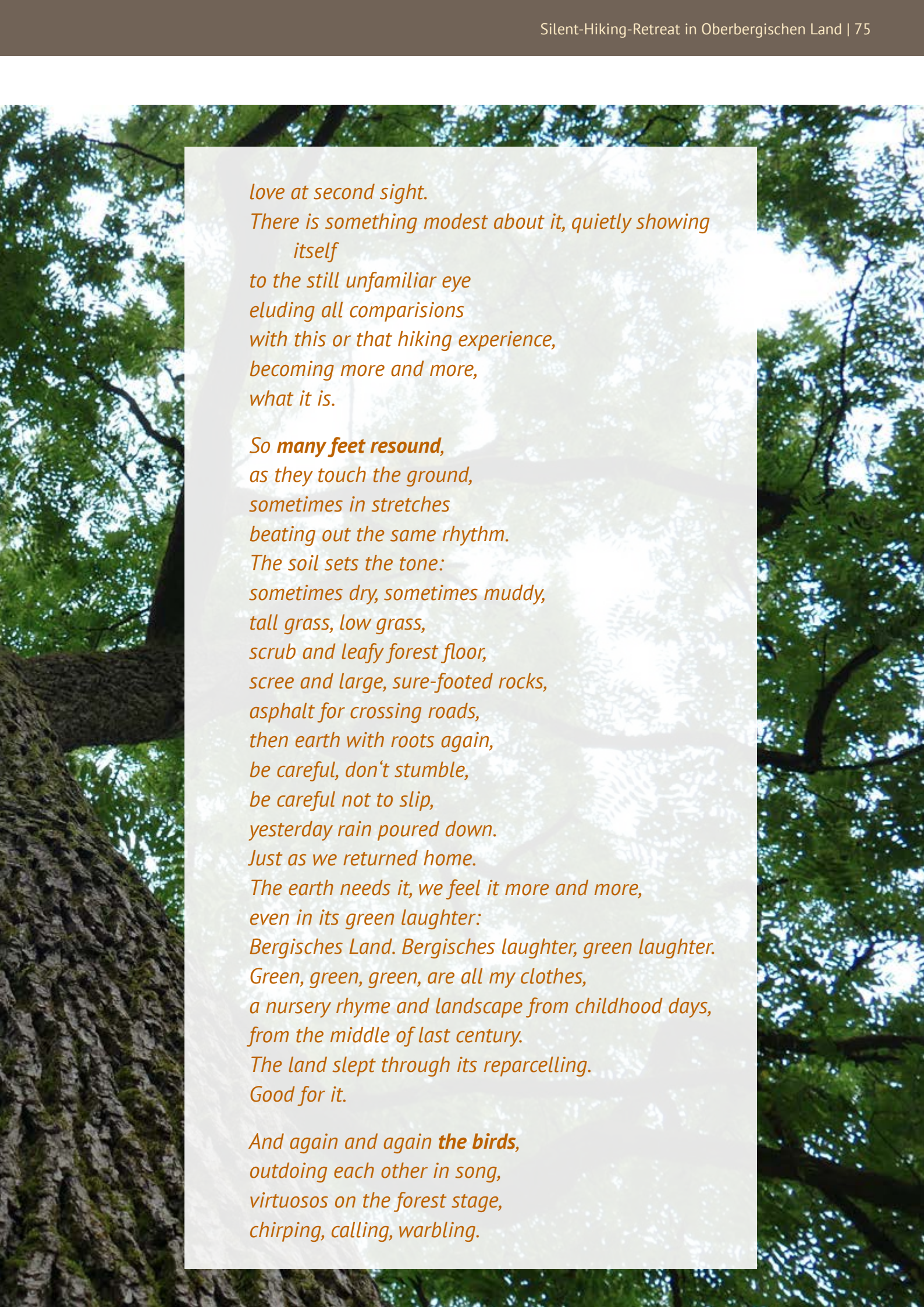
*we go  
hour by hour  
day by day.*

*Feet touch  
stones, grasses, dry and wet earth.*

*The **landscape** walks with us:  
forests, narrow valleys, then wide vistas  
small villages, mostly hamlets, some isolated farms;  
many no longer working farms but not deserted.  
The houses are neither ornate, nor stately,  
but carefully tended, as was the local custom;  
the dark slate roofs, the whitewashed facades  
or walls covered with slate shingles  
and their white-painted paned windows,  
green shutters thrown open.*

*The **horizon**, almost a constant plateau,  
and yet the way was constantly up and downhill,  
small inclines, again and again.  
Sometimes we see the Siebengebirge in the distance,  
whose name and moving forms  
have made it as famous as a fairy tale.  
This one, unspectacular as it is,  
draws us onwards.  
The little inconspicuous sister landscape,*



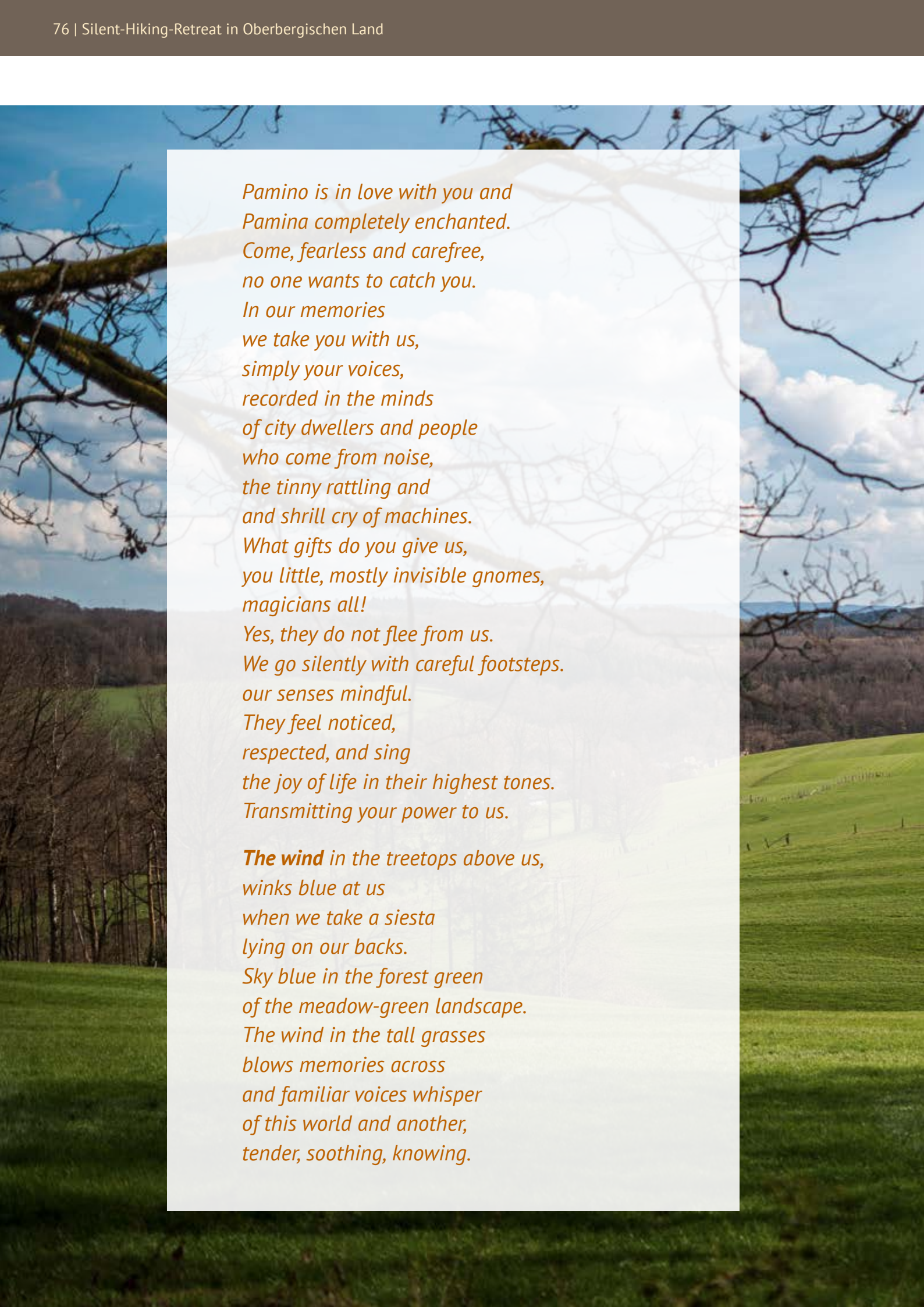


*love at second sight.  
There is something modest about it, quietly showing  
itself  
to the still unfamiliar eye  
eluding all comparisons  
with this or that hiking experience,  
becoming more and more,  
what it is.*

*So **many feet resound**,  
as they touch the ground,  
sometimes in stretches  
beating out the same rhythm.  
The soil sets the tone:  
sometimes dry, sometimes muddy,  
tall grass, low grass,  
scrub and leafy forest floor,  
scree and large, sure-footed rocks,  
asphalt for crossing roads,  
then earth with roots again,  
be careful, don't stumble,  
be careful not to slip,  
yesterday rain poured down.  
Just as we returned home.  
The earth needs it, we feel it more and more,  
even in its green laughter:  
Bergisches Land. Bergisches laughter, green laughter.  
Green, green, green, are all my clothes,  
a nursery rhyme and landscape from childhood days,  
from the middle of last century.  
The land slept through its reparcelling.  
Good for it.*

*And again and again **the birds**,  
outdoing each other in song,  
virtuosos on the forest stage,  
chirping, calling, warbling.*





*Pamino is in love with you and  
Pamina completely enchanted.  
Come, fearless and carefree,  
no one wants to catch you.  
In our memories  
we take you with us,  
simply your voices,  
recorded in the minds  
of city dwellers and people  
who come from noise,  
the tinny rattling and  
and shrill cry of machines.  
What gifts do you give us,  
you little, mostly invisible gnomes,  
magicians all!  
Yes, they do not flee from us.  
We go silently with careful footsteps.  
our senses mindful.  
They feel noticed,  
respected, and sing  
the joy of life in their highest tones.  
Transmitting your power to us.*

***The wind** in the treetops above us,  
winks blue at us  
when we take a siesta  
lying on our backs.  
Sky blue in the forest green  
of the meadow-green landscape.  
The wind in the tall grasses  
blows memories across  
and familiar voices whisper  
of this world and another,  
tender, soothing, knowing.*



*The **grasses** along the path  
caress palms,  
that touch them in child's play.  
Wild roses and elderberry bushes  
fragrant for a thousand footsteps.*

*I am – one step  
in the train of the caravan.  
You are – a drop  
in the stream reflecting the sun.*

***Time** is only strength  
or fatigue  
and the sound of the bell  
that connects  
before and after.*

*The **history** and the **stories**  
of the past, and mine and yours,  
become ever more silent.*

*We go through the silence  
until we become **one in silence**.*

*Who are you taking with you today?  
Let the Buddha go first,  
then all effort is gone.*

***Silently**  
we go  
hour by hour  
day by day.*

*Walk and walk  
until the walking becomes itself.*

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Gabriele C. Ziegler



# My life as a monk

## The Journey

It has been nine years since I moved to Plum Village, initially, from 2014-16, as a lay member of the Sangha. I had a strong aspiration and a great deal of persistence and dived wholeheartedly into learning how to take care of my body, emotions and mind, in the midst of community life. While I was learning a lot, wanting to do everything to the utmost, my life was filled with deep contentment, which is still the case today. I also learned (near the Happy Farm) how to make compost (from kitchen scraps, mainly), which was challenging at first and then more and more fun (the latter completely unexpected) – a beautiful symbol of how, with the help of the practice, anxiety and confusion can be transformed into well-being and understanding.

## Ordination

In December 2017, I was able to ordain as part of the „Poplar Family“ – what a joy!

In the monk's residence, I had the good fortune to share rooms for three consecutive

years with elder brothers whom I admired; offering me a clear example of how the path can manifest and concrete examples of how I could realise it.

What can I say? By and large, all the desires and questions that had brought me to Plum Village were, in a sense, fulfilled and answered. More than that – the happiness of practising in the Sangha surpassed what I had previously imagined. Perhaps I was like someone who had worn a blindfold all his life. We may have a vague intuition (which could symbolise bodhicitta) of the beauty of nature in autumn, but we only experience it when the blindfold is removed – with the help of friends. At the same time, I still need to keep turning the compost. But that's fun too!

## The wheel turns a full circle

In May 2022, together with three brothers, I had the pleasure of travelling to Austria for ten days, the country I come from. I was so happy to be helping to bring the practice-body of mindfulness and true happiness; it felt like we were bringing light. My Plum Village identity and my Austrian identity

were able to merge quite naturally, and my blood family was happy to see this mixed manifestation of me. In March 2023, I moved to the EIAB. This was an obvious step for me, as being a German-speaker and with my cultural background, I was likely to fit in well. Moreover, I have long held the EIAB Sangha in high regard, and since I have been here my initial impression of industry and conscientiousness has been confirmed.

## Some things that bring me joy

- My notebook: I like to record my steps by writing a logbook. From most of my notes I distil simple, short phrases of insight (in the spirit of Buddhist meditation) that I can breathe with and use to look at things in my daily life. Sometimes, what I write down serves as a way of communicating something to myself or to other people.
- Drinking tea: Sitting quietly in my room alone or with my brother in front of the small tea table, enjoying the silence and the morning, there is nothing to do and the boundaries between sitting meditation and drinking tea become blurred.





- I like to show people who are new to the EIAB around, and give an insight into our practice, our Sangha, and the place we are in. I try to make sure that in the process we can enjoy arriving together in the here and now.
- It has been nice for me to be able to participate in the programme for teenagers during the big retreats. I don't just focus on „leading”; I also like to be present in the here and now with the teens. Although I am actively involved, I know that the focus is not me, but the collective process of the group. I can enjoy wonderful moments when the boys and girls themselves are active and live mindfulness and (true) love, e.g. going blind in pairs in the forest or preparing cards for „beginning anew „ with their parents.

## Love

To be happy, we must be able to love one another, i.e. to be tolerant and to forgive. To do this, we stop to listen more deeply to ourselves and our fellow human beings. We all feel this need – individually and collectively, personally and globally. At the EIAB, I see how monastics and non-monastics alike cultivate this (in different areas) and how we learn with and from each other, bringing us joy and a sense of fulfilment. As a member of the monastic order, I see our practice of love and compassion as manifesting in the continuous hosting of retreats and living together with guests.

Continuity and continuation of Thầy's legacy can be seen in the broad diversity of our sangha. I think that as a monastic community we are still available, not only geographically – people feel welcomed by the brothers and sisters in the corridors, halls and gardens of the centre; residents and visitors to the centre live and practise together.

Most guests enjoy just being here. I think they feel more need to draw inspiration, perhaps to find a new direction or learn a new practice, than to network and express themselves verbally. New insights about mindfulness, understanding and love often develop without having to say anything. So the silence in the EIAB dining room is not something oppressive, but refreshing and joyful.

What the experiences in the centre enable many people to take away is a sense that I can do it too, we can do it too, at home. This *spirit* of openness and a determination to practice, what our own experience has shown us the worth of, is something I appreciate very much in German culture today. Could there be a more interesting dialogue: Engaged Buddhism with its focus on arriving in the here and now, with people and families interested in more pragmatic solutions to their problems in life.

## A Lotus for You,

**Brother Trôi Khiết Tâm**  
(Clear/ pure Mind)



# Looking Back in Gratitude

## My Path to Dharmacharya

### Dear Revered Thay!

I have been asked to introduce myself here in the EIAB magazine as a new Dharma teacher. I would like to do this in the form of a letter to you, who accompanies me in everyday life. Often when I don't know what to do, I become still and ask you. And so far, I have always received an answer. Thank you so much!

I first met you in 2005 in a video of a retreat in Berlin. I had already read several books by you, which had inspired me enormously. But seeing your smile on those videos touched me so deeply that I decided to travel to Plum Village for a retreat. My Zen path started long before, in the late 80s.

### Bowing to the root teacher

I practised for many years in a Japanese Zen tradition and was deeply devoted to my first teacher and the practice of sitting silently with a koan. In this tradition it was – and is – customary to practise only with one's own teacher and not to seek out other teachers or follow other paths. Nevertheless, I asked Rico Mark, my root teacher, for permission to travel to Plum Village. Lovingly and without hesitation, he immediately agreed. "If it's important to you, go for it!" I am still grateful to him for that today! He showed me how important it is as a teacher to let students find their own way.

When I then met you, dear Thay, "in the flesh" in Upper Hamlet under the old pines, it was immediately clear to me: "This is my teacher, this is my path!" There was an immediate heart-to-heart connection that was inexplicable to me at first. But the decision itself was clear. Since then, I know from my own experience what is meant in Zen by a "transmission from heart-mind to heart-mind". I received the Five Mindfulness Trainings at the very first

retreat in Plum Village and then joined the Order of Interbeing a few years later. The 14 Mindfulness Trainings had already become a "compass" for my life. They were printed in the sutra booklet of the Sonnenhof, where I took part in two sesshins every year with Rico Mark. These "rules for life", in a very simple, short version, inspired me then, at the beginning of the 90s, with their clarity and simplicity, so that I took them as my compass, without knowing about the Order of Interbeing. So you were already present in my life long before I met you personally, dear Thay. It then took me another two years to say goodbye to my first teacher and to the community of the Sanbo Kyodan Zen lineage, with respect and gratitude, and to enter fully into the Plum Village tradition. This also had a certain logic, as Master Linji, the founding father of our Plum Village tradition, is also considered an important ancestor of the Sanbo Kyodan lineage. So, I practise the same thing – just a little differently. Same, same, but different.

### Heart to Heart Transmission

Why was it so clear that Plum Village is my path, that you are my heart teacher? I could talk about many aspects: The great importance you, dear Thay, give to the Sangha is very important to me. During weeks and years of sitting alone with the koan "Mu", I realised something essential was missing. In general: your relativisation of zazen – which doesn't lose its meaning! – and your emphasis on everyday life, walking, eating, mindful speaking, mindfulness exercises ... I could go on and on. But it doesn't get to the core.

What was and is the core? On my first visit to Upper Hamlet, my tent was close to the bell tower. When I heard a monk singing the morning chant in Vietnamese early in the morning, I burst into tears, deeply moved. I didn't realise at first why this touched me so

deeply. When I looked deep into those tears, I realised that seeds deep in my consciousness had been touched by this chant. As a child, the television news from the Vietnam War accompanied me every evening, worried me and preoccupied me. At the time of the Tet Offensive, in 1968, I was 13 years old, and then I must once have heard a Vietnamese song, so that it seemed familiar to me in a unique way.

Later I realised other, deeper connections. Outside the dining room in Upper Hamlet are the ivy-covered remains of an old wall. In a niche in the wall, a small white statue of Avalokiteshvara smiles. At this wall, I was told, German soldiers shot French partisans. And my father was a soldier in France as a young man. He was stationed in the north, in Normandy, but still: he too could have done this.

I was in Dharma exchange groups with the French, the English, and Americans. We got on so well, were so close. We could hug each other lovingly. And it was beautiful and frightening at the same time to realise that I belonged to the first generation of German men in a long time, maybe in centuries, who did not have to wage war against their neighbours. In Normandy, my father fought against the Americans – and probably killed many with his machine gun company before he was captured. So my practice in the Plum Village tradition is also a practice for him, who did not have the chance to walk peacefully, who in his youth had to march, obey orders, give orders. And it is a practice for my grandfather, who enthusiastically marched off to fight in the First World War for the German Kaiser and was severely wounded. As a result, he had a severe disability, which he compensated for by being tough. He passed this suffering on to my father, who enthusiastically fought for the Nazis. My fight was then on the left. In doing so, I carried on the legacy of my



grandfather and my father. You, dear Thay, have made it possible for me to contribute to the transformation of my own suffering and the suffering of my ancestors through my practice. For this I am grateful to you with all my heart and bow deeply to you!

### Parts of Life's Mosaic

It took a long while to find you, and I am so happy I had the privilege of meeting you. On my path, I had already encountered many elements of the Plum Village practice; when I look back on my life this becomes clearer and clearer to me. You brought these many different pieces of the puzzle together, integrated them into a whole, so I can now really say with all my heart: I have arrived – I am home. My path began with **suffering** – as is probably the case with most people who embark on a spiritual path. That is why Buddha speaks of the Noble Truth of suffering. There was the suffering in my family. Apart from the suffering of the wars in the male lineage, it was above all the tensions between my parents, who later divorced. These tensions also had a lot to do with the Nazi era, as I only realised much later. My paternal grandfather's family were all Nazis – whilst my mother's family were rather critical of the Nazi regime. This seed of discord, along with many other conflicts, had such an effect that the tension in our home was palpable most of the time. And I took responsibility – much too early – for mediating and being there for my mother. Consequently, I later became a family therapist. The other ailment was my congenital severe visual impairment. I couldn't do many things as a boy, like playing football or riding a moped. Instead of looking outwards, I therefore began to look inwards at an early age, to occupy myself with philosophy and religion. And at the age of 16 I had already started practising **meditation**. At that time, it was Transcendental Meditation according to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. The Beatles also practised with him, especially George Harrison. That made me want to try it too. You recite a personal Sanskrit mantra in silence for 20 minutes a day. This practice brought me my first deep spiritual experiences. And at this time, from around 1970, I also started practising **yoga**. So, before I found Buddhism, I had been shaped by the Hindu tradition. I practised yoga for 40 years

until I got to know the Qi Gong exercises with the bamboo stick in Plum Village, which have been part of my daily practice ever since, because I felt that I now needed a more dynamic, more “masculine” form of physical exercise. And Qi Gong also has a lot to do with the martial arts.

The next station on my path was a Christian youth group, where I studied the Bible intensively for several years, prayed and above all got to know the power of a healing community, the Sangha. I often recall this time and the experience of the transforming

power of a community with great fondness. What you mean by “beloved community” was therefore already familiar to me from my time as a young adult. It was also during this time that I met my first **Bodhisattva**, a person who dedicated his whole life to quietly abiding in the Great Mystery and compassionately reaching out to others: Frère Roger Schutz, the prior of the ecumenical Taizé Community. The motto of the “Council of Youth” in Taizé was “Struggle and Contemplation” – as I see it today, a Christian counterpart to **engaged Buddhism**. It was also here on the hill in Burgundy that I first encountered the power





of a **monastic community**. When the 70 brothers in their white robes entered the church, where often thousands of young people were gathered, it gave an inspiration and energy that I still remember clearly and fondly today. When a group of people dedicate their whole lives to the spiritual path, great things can come out of it, that's what I felt then and still feel today when I experience the Plum Village monastics with their joy of life and gentle clarity.

In Taizé I also got to know **silence** – prayer without words, sitting quietly without wanting or asking for anything. First during the many hours of religious services where there was mainly silence. Then in a whole week of silence, the concentrated power of which touched me deeply. The **sharings** in the discussion groups with other young people from all over the world reminds me of our sharing: I have experienced how mindful speaking and loving listening can build bridges between people, cultures, and religious beliefs.

## A Common Theme Emerges

The spiritual path then manifested in work for **political liberation** and **ecological** movements during my social work studies. Both are still very important to me today. The fact that it is “preserved” in the Plum Village practice, that we practice not only to feel good, but to bring peace and healing into the world by embodying peace and healing, makes our tradition so meaningful and so fitting for me. Politics and spirituality are no longer separate, as they were for a long time in my life.

Dear Thay, I could go on and on about my path, about the psychological and therapeutic ways of liberation I learned and practiced as a Systemic Family Therapist, about the teaching of social work at university that shaped my life for decades. You have all of that. You founded a school for social work and trained social workers, founded a university, did great things as a scholar for the study of Buddhism ... I am

amazed time and again at this wealth and your diverse abilities.

And I marvel at how, in retrospect, my life feels as if it had a certain direction from the beginning. That I am now allowed to join this wonderful tradition as a Dharma teacher fills me with great gratitude and joy. Everything that makes my life rich and beautiful was given to me by my ancestors!

I bow to you, dear revered Thay, and to the whole, long line of my spiritual ancestors – the Buddhist, the Christian, the Hindu, the indigenous, the Taoist. Thanks and great appreciation to you all!

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### Uli Pfeifer-Schaupp

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# My spiritual path

## Introduction

I would like to start by saying that it is not easy for me to put myself in the spotlight. However, I know how much I enjoy hearing about others' experiences on the path, and it's not just about me; it's about the Dharma, the positive effects that I've experienced, and the numerous people who have helped me along the way. Since the time of the Buddha, the Dharma has been passed on by so many wonderful people. In my life alone, there are so many it is impossible to mention them all. So, hopefully my experiences will be helpful to you, remind you of your own path, and support you in continuing on it.

## The First Noble Truth

The first noble truth, the existence of suffering, has always been true of my life, not just in my own experiences, but also in those of my ancestors.

My **father** left his family in India to complete his doctorate in Germany. He had chosen Germany because of famous Indologists like Max Müller, and he eventually, as a professor, even became a German civil servant. But he always longed for home, until he finally discovered that, after decades in another country, he no longer felt at home in his former homeland either.

As a result of the Second World War, my **mother** also lost her beloved East Prussian homeland along with many people and animals, as well as prosperity and reputation. Her twin brother was conscripted and fell shortly before the end of the war. She had to

build a new life as an unwanted refugee. In the process, she also felt unwanted in her family, having been born after the older, intelligent sister, and together with the longed-for son, her twin brother. Later, when she married a foreigner with a very dark skin colour, her parents cut off all contact, even though he was a colleague of her sister's husband. After the birth of her second child, psychological problems forced her to go into hospital. Moving to India with two small children put her under a great strain; there were so many difficult conditions: language and climate, rats and monkeys, water rationing and strict rules about food, partly based on religion. And when the marriage failed, she could not get over it, demonized her husband and considered me, her elder daughter, a confidant, until I contradicted her because truth and impartiality were important to me, and she told me to go to the devil; by which she meant my father.

For me as a child, it was difficult to face so much grief from my mother and to hear her tell how proud she was that she had succeeded in preventing me from crawling when I was a baby, and that she had never wanted children with such dark skin in the first place. Now, I can see how she suffered from her family's and other people's rejection of her dark-skinned and dark-haired husband, and her own worries. But as a child, the feeling of not being wanted and not being good enough shaped my life. So later I dreamed of a boy with fair skin kissing me and turning my skin fair, just like in a fairy tale a frog could become a prince. The fact that as children we were, on the one hand, always supposed to get the best marks, but on the other had to be

almost invisible and above all silent, also left deep scars.

Sharing at the EIAB and the conversations that followed were part of the process of dealing with this inner knot: however, it also taught me how many layers an inner knot has, and how they have to be untied little by little over a long period of time.

In addition to the **separation and divorce of my parents**, the **break with my younger sister**, who previously used to hang on my coat-tails, with whom I played, for whom I made up stories, who I helped to learn her multiplication tables, with whom I spent most of my time, was also very painful. But when, because of the difficulties with our mother, I moved in with our father, the "devil" as my younger sister had learned from our mother, she no longer looked at me, even when we walked right past each other on the stairs at school. This deep rupture was interrupted by two phases of reconciliation, but only healed much later. I will speak about this later.

Of course, I too knew that we are all mortal, yet **my father's death** was a deeply painful surprise to me. A person who had been there throughout my life, to whom I felt closely attached, was suddenly missing. In addition to the pain of separation, there were self-reproaches. On my advice he went to the anthroposophical hospital Havelhöhe, where he was misdiagnosed – otherwise he would probably not have died so early. At first, I fell into a dark hole; the beautiful spring felt like mockery. Not only was I missing my father, but also my spirituality. So, I set out on a search. And was later able to

describe this experience in terms of a bulb lying in dark earth, finally germinating, coming to light and blossoming. I learned to experience the connection with my father, even when meetings and conversations were no longer possible (except in dreams), and to feel the connection with other people who experienced similar things.

## Religions

As a child, I grew up among different religions. Sporadically, I experienced my mother's evangelical Christianity through evening prayer, "I am small, my heart is pure, let none dwell in it but God alone." Later, church visits followed and, especially at school, participation in Protestant religious classes, which was very tolerant and open.

My father's Hinduism was more present than Christianity. At home there were pujas with chanting in Sanskrit. In India, as children we visited the temple every evening. Everyday life there was accompanied by ceremonies. In Germany there were silent meditations at home. My father, as a scientist, was interested in Buddhism. Therefore, in Berlin, we visited the oldest European temple in Frohnau and had visits from the monks. Later, my father gave me his articles to proofread or other people's articles to help translate. I was particularly attracted to Buddhism. I loved mindful breathing, even as a child I enjoyed the peace it brings. But I had problems with the emphasis on suffering, which was very present for me, but difficult to bear. And as a teenager, I often thought of ending my life.

So Thay's teaching, with its emphasis on the third noble truth, that there is an end to suffering and how important joy is in our lives was very important. How wonderful that Thay pointed out how the wheel of samsara can also turn in a positive direction: If the twelve links of conditional arising are not unwholesome but wholesome, they create a positive cycle: understanding, motivation, consciousness, mind and body, sense organs and their objects, contact, feeling, desire, grasping, becoming, birth, old age and death. Then, when we see clearly, the desire to act lovingly and compassionately arises, namely bodhicitta, the mind of love. This also means treating ourselves with love, understanding that this is not selfish, but rather the

prerequisite for being there for others and not causing them additional problems.

## Path to practice and teaching

After the death of my father in 1996, I took part in a **retreat at the Buddhist House** led by a monk from Sri Lanka. There I experienced a wonderful moment full of peace and light. Afterwards, my husband Erich gave me two **books by Thay**: "The Sun, My Heart" and "Smile to Your Own Heart" (only available in German). The image of the sun as my heart stayed with me. Looking in the rearview mirror when we went on vacation with our three children, I saw it as a passenger in the car. In "Smile to Your Own Heart," I also read the 14 Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing and knew that I had arrived, because they were exactly in line with my own ideas and goals.

However, Thay emphasized the importance not only of practicing alone, but also of practicing together in a sangha. So, I was delighted when I spotted an ad in the health food store from **Annabelle Zinser** offering Mindfulness Sundays at **Dharma Schlösschen**. I was looking forward to the coming Mindfulness Sunday, and Erich had agreed to take care of our children. But with three small children, many things take longer, and as I would have ended up being late for this Mindfulness Sunday, I did not dare to go at all. Unfortunately, I used this child-free day as a Sunday of sadness and crying. But after that I took part in the Mindfulness Sundays, where I experienced the soothing silence and the sitting together. In addition, they introduced me to mindful body exercises, which brought together breath, body and mindfulness. At noon we ate a soup prepared by Annabelle. These Sundays were so healing and important for me. Later, when I was asked in a retreat with others to imagine a place where I felt completely at ease, for me it was this space of practice at Dharma Schlösschen. Annabelle was the ideal teacher for me because of her deep roots in the practice and her loving nature. Annabelle's retreats were characterized by silence and not an overly tight daily program. In the summer there were retreats at the **Haus am Wannsee**. There I experienced an overwhelming feeling of connection during sitting meditation. And during a break, I

sat outside under a tree and was completely at one with the sunshine and peace. On Mindfulness Sundays, Annabelle also spoke of other teachers in her talks, especially Thay. This pleased me; after all, his books had led me to her. And so in 1998, when Thay offered two retreats with the Plum Village Sangha in Germany, I attended the retreat on Buddhist psychology in **Regensburg**. It was held in a big hotel. And right at the beginning I experienced the joy of seeing Thay in the hallway up close. It was nice that Sister Chan Khong answered the question I had put in the bell, which Thay had not answered. In general, I was very touched by her manner, and by other members of the community, such as Steffi and Margret, who were in the Dharma sharing group. At this retreat I received transmission of the Five Mindfulness Trainings. Back in Berlin, I attended the Kreuzberg Sangha for a while, but it was a long journey, which did not make it easy for me. I was very happy when





**the Source of Compassion** was founded in 2002. At the celebration in the Tempodrom, I noticed how critical my mind could be, and reminded myself that I was not there to feed my addiction to criticism, but to experience peace, connection and inspiration. This helped me to settle down and be truly present. Later when I discovered something disturbing in myself, it often helped me to recall that moment. To begin family and school consumed so much time, I found it difficult to find the time to attend the practice evenings at the Source every Tuesday.

But then Annabelle called me and pointed out the importance of regular attendance. So I made a commitment to myself that I would not let work or anything else, but only important reasons like illness or vacation, keep me from attending. This commitment brought great relief, as I no longer had to argue with myself. Regular practice together was a great support and helped me grow

closer to the Sangha. So, I also began to lead evenings. When Annabelle finally asked me if I wanted to take the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, I immediately agreed. After all, these were the very exercises that had made me sure Thay was the right teacher for me. And I shared Thay's main wish for members of the Order of Interbeing, to help the Sangha flourish. Then, after three and a half years of preparation, I had the great joy of receiving the transmission from Sister Annabel/Chan Duc in 2009 at the EIAB, which had been founded a year earlier. Since then, I have attended many retreats at the **EIAB**, especially family and summer retreats. And in 2014, I was able to participate in a Plum Village Sangha pilgrimage in the footsteps of the Buddha through India, including a visit to Nepal recommended by Sister Bi Nghiem. I have read many books by Thay and others in the Plum Village Sangha, as well as by other Buddhist teachers such as Sharon Salzberg, Matthieu Ricard, and the Dalai Lama. I

have also been to two of his retreats, one in Frankfurt, and the other together with my younger son in Hamburg. It has been very inspiring for me to have contact again and again with nuns and monks, such as Sister Song Nghiem, Thay Phap An, Thay Phap Xa, Sister Bi Nghiem, Thay Phap Ung, especially live, but also on Youtube or later via the PV app.

When Jan Ehrhardt from the Dharmacharya team called me and told me that I had been proposed as a Dharmacharya, and asked me how I felt about it, I could simply say I was very happy, but I would be just as happy not to be, because I would still be able to do everything I was doing, such as leading evenings or retreats, giving lectures and supporting the Sangha. Every time I consciously experience this non-attachment, it is a special moment. Again, I had the privilege of being mentored by Annabelle through the preparatory period. In addition





to the mentoring, I have already been able to participate in the meetings of the Dharma teachers.

The lamp transmission ceremony was very special. It took place in 2022, a year marked by numerous problems: the ongoing Corona pandemic, Thay's transformation into a cloud, the beginning of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, concern about the security of food supply lines, also in Germany, cold homes to save energy,

my children's and my own serious health problems, which have extended up until today. So, I was only able to experience the trip and retreat in Plum Village thanks to the support of two dear Dharma friends from the Source of Compassion, which greatly strengthened our bond.

The day before the ceremony, we had a preliminary talk with Thay Phap Huu in Upper Hamlet. It was a great honour to have a small private tour from him. And it was a

great pleasure to experience him, after so many talks and podcasts and all the events after Thay's death. And while we were discussing the ceremony, Thay Phap Ung walked by the window, and we were both filled with joy and gratitude at seeing him again. That was one of the many special moments in this retreat. The ceremony was led by Sister Chan Khong and Thay Phap Ung, which was especially beautiful for me. I was touched by how the two of them managed to address the five future Dharmacharyas personally,





while at the same time also including all those present. It was a beautiful and deeply moving ceremony. And it was especially nice to share the experience with Elke and Klaus, two friends from the Source of Compassion, as attendants. We also had the joy of being able to visit all three Hamlets in Plum Village during the retreat. There were many special moments and conversations with different people. And an incredible starry sky graced us at night in this gentle quiet landscape emptied of people; the sun and moon shone

together on our way to morning meditation. I felt great gratitude that some people, who had come to know me due to the ceremony, dared to approach me with their questions and concerns with confidence. It is wonderful to experience how we all contribute to this Dharma flow.

### Fruits of the Practice

For a long time, the deep wounds I had suffered, and my mother's own negative attitude and psychological problems, made my **relationship with her** very difficult despite all her love for us as children. Every encounter and every conversation seemed to consume an incredible amount of energy. Also, her rejection of and negative attitude towards my father made it hard for me. But Thay's teaching, practice of touching the earth, and beginning anew helped me understand her difficulties, develop greater understanding for her, and become aware of her positive qualities until finally my relationship with her was characterized by gratitude and love instead of hurt and aversion. This enabled me to enjoy a positive relationship with her for many years, and finally even to see her as a Bodhisattva too. She, who used to criticize everything, could utter such wonderful sentences as: "How nice that the sun is shining. That's all a person needs to be happy," or, "How wonderful to breathe the fresh air. I am the happiest woman in the world." Albeit in a nice bright room, she was able to come to terms with living in a nursing home, needing help, and being dependent on others. She died after we, her daughters, had spent many hours sitting on both sides of her bed, full of harmony and love, while the sun shone into the room.

Among the most important moments for healing my **relationship with my sister** was a long Metta meditation followed by contemplation. During a telephone conversation, my sister had told me that she had no more time, yet continued to rant at me for many minutes. Finally, I cut the conversation short, feeling very upset and hurt, and then tried to explore the reason for her behaviour, so painful for me. Finally, I wrote to say how sorry I was that our conversation had ended that way, that I had tried to understand her and did not know if my reasoning was correct, but

that I wondered if her love and attachment to our mother had led her to be so upset about my suggestion about a nursing home; that I would like to know more from her and would be very happy if she got back in touch. Of course, there were other conditions that deepened our understanding: We experienced the last years and the death of our mother together, her husband attaches great importance to good contact with the family, and my husband was ready to have contact again. Today we have a very good, loving and close relationship, which I am very grateful for.

A big challenge for me and my whole family is that our **daughter** Mira was born disabled. Especially in the first months after her birth, I was confronted by doctors with little empathy, and wasn't able to give her two brothers enough attention. Even today it is a great challenge to give her all the care she needs, whilst also having the courage to allow her the freedom she needs with all the accompanying risks. Through Mira, I have met many people with immense difficulties, as well as many people willing to help others. On top of which, Mira herself is a wonderful person, full of joie de vivre and affection, full of empathy and helpfulness, and she embodies patience to an admirable, unusual extent. When after a checkup, the first paediatrician walked off leaving me holding a referral form with an unfamiliar abbreviation on it, I ran after him, but he quickly fobbed me off with the full term, which was also foreign to me. It was a very difficult situation, as was the encounter with a female doctor who was supposed to assess whether Mira was a nursing case. She did not greet the child or the mother and did not treat us kindly at all. It was somehow fitting that immediately afterwards the sensitive Mira should badly injure her head and need a doctor immediately. Mira helped me understand that it is not intellectual or physical abilities that are decisive, but a loving, open heart, the willingness to enjoy life in this moment, to support others or to accept help without feelings of inferiority or superiority, to simply do what makes sense, and by being at peace with oneself have enough patience to help others to find their way back to a peaceful, friendly state of being. Without the help of the practice, I would certainly not have been able to cope as







well as I did with my own physical problems, the occasional problematic, even wrong, diagnosis or the suspicion of severe illnesses. Without the practice, especially the practice of beginning anew and deep looking, I would

also not have been able to cope with difficult times in my marriage.

Since childhood, I have had a tendency to be **overly critical** of myself. As a result, I

have often interpreted praise as hidden criticism, belittled it, or brushed it off. Practice has helped me learn to accept praise, because I have come to see praise as a way of expressing something positive that



arises not just in me, but in all the people and energies that have contributed to something positive. Part of the addiction to criticism is that I used to admire how others translated at retreats, but didn't think I could do it myself, let alone simultaneously. After all, in school and especially in Latin studies I learned to examine each sentence, each word carefully, to look at it from different angles, to search very carefully for the best translation and to invest a lot of time in this search. So my heart sank when, during a lecture at the Source, Thay Phap An said after a few minutes that consecutive translation would take too much time, that I should translate simultaneously. This challenge demonstrated how the inner critic prevented me from translating simultaneously, and that the only thing that matters is not to listen to it, but to simply pass on the words and energy of the speaker, to simply be there as a mouthpiece for the listeners. It's an exercise of non-self, of connection and surrender. This practice has been with me ever since, and it has given me the great joy of being close to some of the presenters, especially Thay Phap An, Sister Chan Khong and Thay Phap Ung, but also Tenzin Palmo and Martine Batchelor. It also brings me close to the listeners. Especially at the EIAB, many people have approached me, asked questions, and sought one-to-one conversations. So, everything contributes to supporting the Sangha.

## The Subject of Death

At school I took part in a performance of "Our Town" by Thornton Wilder. In it, a deceased woman is allowed to return to a day in her life and experiences how everyone worries about what is actually unimportant and neglects what is important. This view of life from a higher perspective made a great impression on me. Later, I practiced non-attachment by imagining I was dead, as suggested by the Buddha, or that people close to me were dead. When I was hit by a car during my first pregnancy, I thought that was the end of my life, and I felt very sorry for the unborn child. Also, when I had a difficult appendectomy after the birth of the third child, I realized that I was not afraid for my own life, but I was worried about my children. I thought I was free from fear of death. But at the beginning of 2022, I experienced despair in the face of the threat

of war. Probably the experiences of my ancestors were also at work. As a teenager, I had decided to put an end to my life because it was so strongly marked by suffering. The constant practice of opening my eyes to the beauty of life and all that is wonderful in every moment has helped me overcome my mother's tendency to melancholy, despair and depression. Recently, in a talk by Kaira Jewel, I was very touched to hear how a despairing woman refrained from suicide because she realized how much some people had done to save her life. Just being **grateful** for all the wonderful people I meet and have met, in person, through reading or online, and for all the good conditions that are available is a great help. I am grateful that we are experiencing peace here right now, that our country is rich enough to support those in need such as the disabled, to help the sick, and to offer many opportunities to both women and men. I am also grateful for all the difficult things I have already encountered in this life, because it helps me practice, to develop more understanding and to feel connected with all those who are also experiencing difficulties. I am very grateful for the Sangha, here at the Source of Compassion, at the EIAB, in Plum Village and around the world, for family, a circle of friends and work environment. I know that peace and joy within me are the most important things I can share. It's nice to feel that I'm already so much better at being with all that is right now, even if it's not pleasant, and consciously making choices about how I respond and what I share. Remembering the five certainties helps me a lot: none of us can escape illness, old age, death, and separation from everyone and everything we hold dear, and the only thing we will be left with are our own actions in thought, word, and deed. On a visit to the island of Madeira with its rich, colourful, diverse flora from strelitzias to cacti, I thought how we humans are just as diverse and complementary. All are equally valuable and beautiful; we can all give joy and make the world more beautiful and colourful. We can all grow lotus flowers from the mud we find.

## Passing on the Teachings

At each meditation evening, mindfulness day or retreat, everyone contributes to creating the energy of loving mindfulness and peace,

everyone can inspire others to share and contribute to greater understanding. Of course, it is also important to guide a group in this direction. For me, it is now as much a pleasure to participate in an evening as to lead it. The first time I led a group there was more excitement, as I can see now with others. Now I am very happy that there is so much on offer and that I can contribute to it, also offer things myself. It was interesting for me to experience how we moved the practice to the Internet. What was initially unimaginable has turned out to be a great gift: We can be in different places and still practice together and experience the shared energy; even while in a hospital or rehab or during an illness or with physical limitations, this is possible. The joint practice comes right into our homes, changes the atmosphere there. A particularly beautiful experience for me was leading a Dharma sharing family at the EIAB, and eventually choosing Dharma names for those who took the Five Mindfulness Trainings. I have also been able to mentor a friend on her journey into the Order. It is also a joy to work on the PV app. At Plum Village I was able to be available for numerous one-on-one sessions, the need was great. To my surprise, I was also told that it was something special that I now represent people of colour in Europe as a Dharmacharya. So my dark skin also has a positive meaning.

## Essence

We have had the great fortune to have come into contact with the practice, and have the opportunity to support each other in the practice and contribute to more joy and peace in ourselves and in the world. I would like to thank you all very much for this. Especially my family, Thay, Annabelle and the Plum Village community. Thank you for your attention. May you also experience so much joy from the fruits of practice.

Finally, I would like to ask you to take some time to enjoy your sitting and your breathing and to notice what is inside of you right now, to just look at it kindly, and to look with loving kindness at yourself.

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Maya Brandl



# How Consciousness Functions

## and why mindfulness is our most urgent task!

When we answer the question “How are you?” we usually describe the inner state we are experiencing in the here and now. Every person on this planet is experiencing some inner state at this moment. Perhaps we are feeling well at the moment. Other times we feel anger. We might feel anxious or exhausted and sometimes even depressed. What we convey with the answer to the question “How are you?” is our mental, emotional, physical and spiritual state at that moment.

Although this inner state of mind seems to affect only the single individual (ourselves), in reality it has much larger implications. I would even argue that this inner state is the most important thing that humanity should be concerned about. Because our emotional, spiritual and psychological state not only defines our own happiness or unhappiness, it also manifests in war or peace between nations and the degree of compassion we show towards nature and its creatures.

To understand why people's inner states can have such far-reaching consequences, I will first explain how an emotional state develops in our consciousness.

We can roughly divide the development of an inner state into 3 phases..

### How an inner state arises.

#### Phase 1: Perspective (Thoughts)

Our inner state is a perspective that we adopt in the here and now. It is the perspective from which we look at ourselves and at the world. This perspective arises as soon as we pay enough attention to a thought.

For example: If I am in an inner state in which I feel inferior, then I probably think I am “not good enough”, “not lovable”, “not intelligent”, “not attractive”, etc. I have to believe these thoughts, otherwise I won't be able to maintain this perspective for very long.

If, on the other hand, I am in a state of “superiority”, then my thoughts will tend to take a direction of: “I know better”, “I can do better”, “I am better than you”, “It is my right to behave this way”.

#### Phase 2: Emotions

The associated emotions then appear immediately based on this inner perspective. It's the law of cause and effect: because I have these thoughts, I have these emotions. When I'm thinking inferior thoughts about myself, I'm likely to feel anxious, blocked, depressed, lonely, etc.

On the other hand, when I have thoughts of “superiority” I'm more likely to feel pride, aggression, or impatience.

The more identified I am with an inner state - i.e. the more I believe my thoughts - the stronger the emotions I experience will be. From the perspective of “inferiority,” this means that the more I believe I am unlovable, the greater the anxiety and feeling of depression. Likewise, in the state of “superiority,” the more convinced I am of “being right,” the more angry or impatient I become.

#### Phase 3: Actions

The inner perspective (thoughts) and my emotions will now cause me to behave in a certain way. Let's look at our examples again:

If I am in a state of “inferiority”, I may consume something (alcohol, drugs, media, etc.) to help me better endure the painful emotions of fear or loneliness. Or perhaps, to avoid being criticised, I try to do all I can to do everything right - because in this state I am already criticising myself more than enough.

From the perspective of “superiority”, on the other hand, I may constantly criticise and devalue other people. I may even disregard laws because my delusions of grandeur lead me to believe I have the right to take what I want.

Our behaviour is directly related to the state we are in. The inner state of mind consequently has an impact on every aspect of our lives. It determines whether we are able to treat ourselves lovingly and also how we treat our children, partners and co-workers. This applies to every human being on this planet - from the shop assistant in the supermarket to the president of a country.

Let's say the board of a company wants to make a decision about the future direction of the company. If the board members identify with a state of “greed”, they will mainly focus on maximizing profit as quickly as possible. Such a perspective usually brings harshness and ruthlessness. In this inner state, they will not care very much about the consequences for the environment, animals, and employees.

The inner states of politicians can have even greater consequences. For example, if the president of a state is in a combined state of “superiority” and “greed”, then he may go to war because he is convinced that it is his right to take what he wants. From this



perspective, he does not care about the lives of other people - including his own people.

Let us summarise once again:

1. an inner state is born from a perspective (thought) that we believe.
2. this perspective generates certain emotions
3. these emotions lead to actions

### **Mindfulness as Care for Ourselves and the World**

The inner state not only has far-reaching consequences for every single person, but also for society as a whole, for the environment and all living beings on our planet. This is why it is so crucial that we

begin to pay much more attention to people's emotional, psychological and spiritual states. This is exactly what we do with mindfulness. Because if we don't learn to deal with our inner states, then, in the long run, our inner states will deal with us.

When I came to Plum Village Buddhist monastery in 1999 and was introduced to mindfulness practice, my first thought was, "Why didn't I learn this sooner?! I could have saved myself a lot of suffering!"

Mindfulness is a form of inner self-care that is at the same time care for the world. The identifications described above, such as "inferiority" or "superiority" are like islands in the sea of our consciousness. When we

land on one, we identify with it and perceive from this point. On the other hand, when we become mindful, we do not occupy a particular island. Rather, we stay in the sea - the expanse - the space around the island. We observe - from a perspective of stillness, that does not identify with one state or another. From this value-free perspective we automatically experience more freedom, peace and compassion. This is the most natural, most original of all states. It is the silent presence of just being. A stateless state from which we can observe with more clarity and make wiser decisions.

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Georg Lolos











### 3. Living Practice



# Nurture the **peace** within us

*Public Lecture by Thay Phap An  
in Bari, Italy, on 15 May 2023*

## Welcome address by Father Mariano



I would like to express my joy at being here. So many of us have come here this evening, and my wish is that tonight we not only meet and listen to Thay Phap An and Sister Song Nghiem and the other monks and nuns in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, but that we also practise, either alone or in small groups, because in today's world we have many scientific studies showing the benefits of

spiritual practice. Neuroscience is doing a lot, and from 3-4 June there will be a conference in Florence where neuroscientists and representatives of spiritual traditions and practitioners will meet.

There has been a big shift from a science that was opposed to faith and spirituality to a science that works with representatives

of spiritual traditions and movements. Neuroscientists have demonstrated the changes that occur in the brains of those who practise meditation daily and consistently, even for brief moments in the morning and evening, helping them to overcome all kinds of fears and worries, and lead meaningful lives.



## Welcome address by Pater Angelo



Understanding the value of meditation and spirituality leads us to also understand the value of each of us as a seed that can grow in a way that brings more harmony and solidarity into this world.

Prayer should unite, not exclude anyone, just as meditation is not something that should make us feel superior to others. Both prayer

and meditation should lead to openness, acceptance and harmony amongst people. Nevertheless, some people regard even this as a form of exclusion. I was very hurt that yesterday we could not hold a prayer vigil as planned for the victims of homotransphobia to help overcome discrimination. There are some in our world who would rather put emphasis on what they understand by rules,

morality and respectability than cultivate a heart that is open and welcoming to all. Our presence here tonight makes me happy. This is not the first time; we have had other meetings together, and for me this is truly a moment of grace and a gift that helps us all grow. Thank you.

## Lecture by Thay Phap An

Dear Father Mariano and Father Angelo, thank you so very much for the warm welcome here in Italy, especially here in Bari today. We have been here many times and are happy to be in this beautiful city. Thank you for opening your church to welcome us and to allow us to share our practice.

### Compassion

To begin the evening, I would like to invite you all to open your hearts, to open yourselves. We will offer a chant invoking the name of Avalokiteshvara, the embodiment of

compassion. In the Buddhist tradition, just as in the Christian tradition, we practise prayer. In your Christian, Catholic tradition, you address your requests for compassion to Mother Mary. In the Buddhist tradition, we address our prayers to Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of great compassion.

And as in the Christian tradition, there is a kingdom within us, in our hearts. In the Buddhist tradition, we believe that the Buddha is also in our hearts. We all have the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara within us. When we chant, we invoke the energy of

compassion so this energy can rise within us and lovingly embrace our own worries as well as those of society.

The energy of compassion will heal us, it will heal separation and discrimination and help us to be closer to each other. We will chant together to invoke the energy of compassion within us.

Listening to the sound of the bell, my heart becomes light. My mind fills with peace. I release all my suffering. I come back to myself and look deeply into life. As soon as

## Meditation before Chanting

*Just come back to your in-breath and your out-breath.*

*Aware of my in-breath, I breathe in.*

*Aware of my out-breath, I breathe out.*

*Feeling my whole body, I breathe in.*

*Relaxing my whole body, I breathe out.*

*I allow the energy of chanting to flow into my body.  
I allow the energy of compassion to flow through my whole body.*

*Body, speech and mind are in perfect harmony.*

*I send my heart along with the sound of the bell.*

*May the hearers awaken from forgetfulness and transcend the path of sorrow and anxiety.*

*Listen, listen this wonderful sound of the bell brings me back to my true home.*

*May the sound of this bell penetrate deep into the cosmos.*

*May the sound of this bell be heard in even the darkest places.*

*So that understanding lights up the hearts of those who hear it and t  
hey transcend the cycle of birth and death, suffering and pain.*

*When they hear the sound of this bell, may they awaken and  
find the way back to their true home full of peace.*

I understand my life, my suffering, the life and suffering of the people around me, great compassion and deep love arises within me. My heart opens, there is no discrimination, no exclusion, only openness, closeness and complete acceptance.

The tide rises, the ocean of compassion is rising. The universal Dharma door to the

wonderful Dharma of liberation opens for all living beings: humans, animals, plants and minerals. A beautiful child is born in the heart of a lotus flower. The universal Dharma door of liberation excludes no-one. All beings have the capacity to become a beautiful child in the heart of a lotus flower. Everyone can become a baby-Buddha in the heart of a lotus flower. A single drop of this compassionate

nectar is enough to bring back the spring to the mountains and rivers, to bring it into every corner of the universe. With deep reverence we invoke the name of the Bodhisattva of deep listening, the Bodhisattva of great compassion, the Bodhisattva of great liberation: Avalokiteshvara.



## Chant: *Namo 'Valokiteshvaraya*



## Calming the Mind

Thank you very much for sharing this chant with us. As Father Mariano has already said, meditation is a great help in transforming our mind. Chants or prayers, like Christian prayers, also transform our mind because we repeatedly send it the same message. If we do the same thing for long enough, then our mind becomes calmer. For example, if we chant *Namo 'Valokiteshvaraya* or sing a Christian song for long enough, we become calm. If we focus our mind on a single object for long enough, we stop the activity of our consciousness.

The Buddha explored the structure of our consciousness. The Buddha defines consciousness as the act of becoming aware of something. For example, when we look

at this glass of water, this glass is the object of our consciousness. When we focus our attention on this glass of water, it is usually for a brief moment; the next moment we begin to think about something else. We don't keep our mind on just one object for long. We look at the glass of water for a moment, then immediately turn our attention to something else. If, on the other hand, we chant a mantra or hold an image in our mind's eye, or if we look at an image of Mother Mary for a long time, pray to her and hold her in our consciousness for a long time, then our mind remains continuously with that one object. As long as the mind dwells on one object, there is no act of becoming aware of something, and because there is no such act, there is no consciousness. When there is no

consciousness, our brain becomes quiet and relaxes. Our brain becomes activated when consciousness makes our brain active. But when the movement of consciousness ends, our brain relaxes. If we stay with our practice for a long time, then the state of relaxation of our brain becomes deeper and deeper.

So, the main principle of meditation is to learn to keep our mind, our attention, on a specific object for long enough. When we focus our attention on this object and remain focused for a while, this is called mindfulness. If we stay focused on the object a little longer, this mindfulness develops into concentration. In Buddhism, the word concentration is sometimes used as a translation for the Sanskrit word *samadhi*.

And the word mindfulness is often used as a translation for the Pali word *Sati* or the Sanskrit word *Smṛti*. Pali is a Middle Indian language, used more in the south, and in which many sutras, i.e. teachings of the Buddha, were written down, and Sanskrit is the classical North Indian language.

By contemplating a single object for a long time, we can develop **sati**. And the word **sati** can be translated as mindfulness or as remembrance. Remembrance means that we hold the object in our mind in order to recall it again and again so that we don't forget it. When we pray or chant, we keep a single

object in our mind for a long time, and that is **sati** or remembrance. The nature of our mind is to wander from one place to another. Whereas if we develop remembrance, then our mind can settle on that one object.

## Butterfly and Flower

In the Buddhist tradition there is a beautiful metaphor for this process: the flower and the butterfly. For example, the object is a flower. And there is a butterfly that flies towards the flower. As soon as the butterfly approaches the object, the mind starts to develop awareness in the form of attention. Then the butterfly flies round and round the flower. This is mindfulness or **sati** or remembrance. When the butterfly has finally convinced itself that this flower offers safety, then it very slowly settles on it and becomes one with the flower. This is then called concentration. Concentration or **samadhi** is the oneness of our mind with the object. The object is no longer outside of or separate from us.

The butterfly settling on the flower shows that there is no longer a separation between subject and object. This means that concentration is a state in which the mind begins to relax completely. When we reach this state, our brain enters a state called coherence because all parts of the neural network begin to synchronise, to vibrate at the same frequency.

The firing neurons calm down. The neurons are always firing to send messages, but when the butterfly settles on the flower, it doesn't have to look for anything anymore, it's not interested in anything else; it is contented. So, if we can stay with a prayer and be contented, not looking for anything else, our brain becomes calm, the firing of the neurons calms down. The more this state deepens, the more it becomes part of our life; it becomes a way of living. In Buddhism, this is called wisdom. Wisdom is a way of leading our lives. It is a way of life that allows us to be stable in every moment of our daily life. We

feel completely satisfied, there is nothing to search for. This is already the most beautiful moment of our life. If we can feel this, then we can open ourselves to life in any situation.

Life is beautiful. When the sun is shining, it is a beautiful day. If it is cloudy or rainy, it is also a beautiful day. In every moment we receive God's blessing, to use a Christian expression. God grants his blessing to every human being in every moment, even in the most difficult moments of our lives, as for example in the Book of Jacob; these moments are also a blessing. Blessing is a state in which the mind is relaxed. This is a spiritual dimension; it means not looking here and there for something new ... Blessing is a state in which the mind is completely satisfied and relaxed, regardless of what is happening in our lives. And when our mind is relaxed, we are in contact with a higher being, which in the Christian tradition is called God. In the Buddhist tradition we speak of the ultimate dimension and the **dharmakaya**, the Buddha body.

In the Buddhist tradition, the Buddha body is everywhere: it is in our revered Father Mariano, in Father Angelo, in our friend Pino, and also in this beautiful cross, in this glass of water, in this sheet of paper, and in all parts of the cosmos that you can think of, from the microscopic level to the macroscopic level – the Buddha body is in everything. And in the Christian tradition you say that God is everywhere, that God created the world and that everything is His creation.

Buddhists have come to the same realisation. This state of perfect peace, of complete relaxation of our brain activities, is a state

of the unknown, the state of being in God. God is unknown. Because the moment we think about God, we create a subject and an object. To be in contact with God, we need to leave behind all that we know, all that we think, all our conceptions and ideas. Because the moment we have a thought, an idea, we cannot be in contact with God. The saying you touch God with your **heart** is very beautiful. The Kingdom of God is in your heart. Because the moment your heart is touched, all thinking comes to a halt. You feel life, but you don't think about life. You feel God, but you don't have to think about God. God is in your heart, you feel it.

When the mind quietens the brain relaxes, neurons stop firing chaotically, your mind calms down, you touch that beautiful realm of life, the spiritual dimension of life. This realm is at the level of the heart, this realm is in the heart, which is why the heart can embrace so much. The heart opens to life, the heart does not discriminate, the heart does not exclude anything. When we can feel another human being and open our heart to him or her, we touch his or her suffering, his or her feelings, and we feel the connection. The heart enables us to be open to the infinite dimension. We can feel what is barely accessible to our limited mind. When our mind is imprisoned by a particular object, then it cannot be limitless, then discrimination, exclusion, rejection arise. But if our mind is not imprisoned, then we can touch things with our heart, then we do not exclude anything or anyone. The realm of spiritual life is the realm of the heart.

In the realm of the heart there is love, compassion, communion, acceptance,





loving closeness that the mind alone cannot experience. To open ourselves to life, we must open our heart, we must learn to experience every moment of our life with our heart. Opening our heart to life is called **sati** or remembrance in Buddhism. When our mind begins to focus on an object, when this is done with sufficient attention, in which no discrimination exists, ultimately causing the distinction between subject and object to fade, then this is the moment when concentration arises. When concentration arises, we experience everything with the heart, we open our heart. So, the practice begins on the upper, mental level and slowly descends. And at a certain moment we open our heart. Everyone can practise, can practise gradually sinking lower from the level of the head, of thinking, towards feeling the heart space. In Buddhist practice we have a special technique to do this.

We first come back gently to our breath. Our breath is the object of our mind. We just gently come back to our breath and allow the butterfly, our mind, to settle on our breath. We just gently come back to our breath in every moment of our life. And this practice is called **mindfulness of the breath**.

When we walk, we feel the contact of our feet with the ground and come back to our in-breath and out-breath. We take perhaps two or three steps with our in-breath and maybe two or three steps with our out-breath. We are aware of both our steps and our breathing. We learn to remain mindful of our breathing and our steps for longer and longer. Just as the butterfly circles the flower for a while, so we return to our breathing and to our steps. When we first practise awareness of our breathing and our steps, our mind wants to

wander off all the time. But with practice, the butterfly will slowly come closer and closer to the flower. If, for example, we practise taking two steps with the in-breath and two steps with the out-breath, and keep practising that, the butterfly will slowly settle on the flower. And our mind will slowly settle on our steps and our breathing. When the butterfly settles on the flower, it will not fly anywhere. When our mind settles on the breath and the steps, it won't go anywhere else.

If we practise this over a long period of time, the mind will settle down again and again and finally become still. And the mind, which is very active at the level of the head, will slowly sink down to the level of the heart. This is Buddhist meditation. When the mind settles down and stops running around, we begin to open our heart. When our heart begins to open it takes on the quality of



**limitless mind.** In Buddhism, this limitless mind is called **true love**. True love consists of the four elements of loving kindness, compassion, joy (that is, the ability to share joy, happiness, and successes with others without competitiveness) and equanimity or openness, that is, the ability to include everything. In the head the mind is limited,

but when it descends to the heart, it begins to expand, to become limitless. When the mind is limitless, the quality of true love arises of its own accord: we act with loving kindness; we act with compassion; we have the capacity to truly share with others; we have the capacity to accept anyone and everyone. So let us practise breathing.

Let us enjoy a sound of the bell, and I invite you to sit upright with your backs straight and to gently return to your breathing. I will guide you through this process.





## Guided Meditation: Opening My Heart

*We sit upright, our backs straight and relaxed at the same time.  
We gently pull our chins in a little, so our necks are straight.*

*Gently I come back to my body and my mind, and enjoy my in-breath and out-breath.*

*It is so wonderful to come back to myself and feel myself.*

*Gently I allow my mind to settle on my breath, just as a butterfly settles gently on a flower.*

*Aware of my in-breath, I breathe in. Aware of my out-breath, I breathe out.*

*It is so wonderful to return to my breath and feel my breath.*

*Aware of my in-breath, I breathe in.  
Aware of my out-breath, I breathe out.*

*It is so wonderful to breathe in and relax my whole body.  
It is so wonderful to breathe out and relax my whole body.*

*Gently I focus my attention on my lower abdomen and feel the movement of my lower abdomen.  
I enjoy the in-breath and the out-breath together with the movement of my lower abdomen.*

*As I breathe-in I allow the energy of my upper body to sink downwards into my lower abdomen.  
As I breathe-out I allow my out-breath to relax my whole body.  
Allowing the energy to sink down, I breathe in.  
Relaxing the whole body, I breathe out.*

*I imagine the flow of energy as a waterfall flowing down from the top of my head,  
over my face, my head, my neck and my whole body.  
All the water from this waterfall collects in my lower abdomen.  
As the energy flows down, my whole body relaxes.  
Allowing the energy to flow down; relaxing my whole body.*

*I allow the relaxation to vibrate from my head down to my feet.  
I feel the gentle vibration from the top of my head and body down to my toes.  
I enjoy the relaxation throughout my body.*

*My head can relax. My face can relax. I let go of all the tension in my face.  
And I allow a gentle smile to blossom on my lips.*

*My throat and neck can relax. My shoulders can relax.  
I let go of all the tension in my shoulders.  
I let go of all the burdens I have accumulated in my life.  
I simply come back to this wonderful present moment.*

*It is so wonderful to let go of the burdens I have been carrying.  
I release the tensions in my arms, the tensions in my hands, in my fingers.  
All the tensions in my back, all the tensions in my upper body.  
They can all go.*

*I allow the relaxation to flow down to my legs, feet, ankles and toes.*



*It is so wonderful to relax my whole body and allow my mind to gently focus on my lower abdomen.*

*As I breathe in, I allow my lower abdomen to gather all the energy.*

*As I breathe out, I allow my out-breath to relax my whole body.*

*Now I gently turn my attention to the centre of my heart.*

*The heart centre is in the middle of the chest.*

*Gently I focus my attention on my heart centre.*

*The heart centre is the centre of love and compassion.*

*I allow my heart to open to life and enjoy my in-breath and out-breath.*

*I allow my heart to open, the energy to flow out of my heart and embrace my whole body with love.*

*As I breathe in, I feel my whole body.*

*As I breathe out, I feel so much love for my whole body.*

*I feel so much love for myself.*

*I embrace all the pain in my body and in my mind with my love, I feel so much love for myself.*

*I open my heart and accept myself completely.*

*I am already beautiful just as I am. I am already beautiful, with all my strengths, as well as all my weaknesses.*

*This is the blessing I receive from the whole universe.*

*I open my heart to life around me:*

*life in my surroundings, life in my nation, life in Italy, life in the whole world.*

*Feeling the whole world, I breathe in.*

*Feeling so much love for the whole world, I breathe out.*

*I allow my heart to open to the whole world, to all the wonderful things happening in the world,*

*as well as to all the painful and difficult things happening in the world right now.*

*I open my heart and accept the world completely as it is.*

*Whether this particular manifestation is wonderful or painful, our lives are blessed. It is the blessing we receive in this world.*

*I open my heart and accept the world as it is.*

*The best thing I can offer the world is my peace right here and now, my total abiding in the ultimate dimension.*

*I open my heart and offer the open, peaceful state of my mind to the whole world.*

*May the whole world also be calm and peaceful, may it transform all unnecessary karmic formations  
and cultivate peace, joy and happiness in this beautiful world.*

*I can practise this meditation every day, as a prayer of peace for myself and as a prayer of peace for the world.*

*I know that with my calm and peaceful mind I can help the world to become calmer and more peaceful.*

*Now we will gently end the meditation.*

*As I breathe in, I gently return and become aware of my physical body.*

*As I breathe out, I relax my physical body.*

*I let go of all visualisations, all concepts, just feel my physical body and relax.*

*Aware of my in-breath, I breathe in, aware of my out-breath, I breathe out: in – out.*

*(sound of the bell)*

*Gently we open our eyes and carefully and lovingly massage our face and body.*

*We will listen to one sound of the bell before we continue.*





**Question:** *Can you say something more about how we can open our hearts?*

To open our heart, it is very important we bring the energy from our head down to our

lower abdomen. When we are in our heads, in thoughts, at that level of the mind, it is really

very difficult to open our hearts. At the level of the mind, as Father Mariano said, we have

a tendency to judge and discriminate. Our mind is a very wonderful tool. For example, thanks to the ability to discriminate and judge, we can build such a beautiful church. We know how to design the foundations, how to build the walls and roof, how to create this beautiful altar. So, the mind is very useful when it comes to constructing a building or building a car. It is very useful in getting to Mars and exploring the solar system. Because without discriminative thought and judgement, we could not do that. But the heart is in another spiritual dimension. The heart doesn't pay so much attention to judgements like "this is right, that is wrong".

For example, our event was supposed to start at 6:30 pm tonight. But there was so much traffic on the motorway that we couldn't drive from Polignano to Bari in 40 minutes as usual but found ourselves stuck in traffic jams after only a few minutes. Thanks to our sisters Hilaria, Carla and Angela, we were able to drive here via country roads, but it took much longer, and we didn't arrive until 6:30 pm. We actually wanted to be here 30 to 45 minutes before the event started to have time to set up the equipment and the microphone. When we arrived, I rushed in, it was very noisy and there was a lot of stress trying to get the microphone plugged in. The first problem was that there was no power flowing to the speaker. So, there was a fault. We tried different things, we thought there was a fault in the microphone. So, we reconnected the microphone, but that didn't help either. Finally, I discovered that there was no power at all. So, the first thing I had to do was to make sure that we had electricity. To cut a long story short: in a difficult situation, the discriminating and judging mind would say: we should be punctual and start at 6:30 pm. How could we have been so late? We might criticise ourselves and be unhappy. When we are in that state of mind, we cannot be peaceful, and we cannot give a talk full of peace. But if I remain connected to the energy of my heart even in difficult circumstances, then I can use my head just to solve the problem of no electricity, or of the microphone not working – only at that level. But not to complain about the situation, to blame the electricity company or to rant about the traffic. So, we can put the mind to good use. I had to think hard about what the problem with the speaker could be in order

to find out what it was and why the speaker wasn't working. Thanks to the discriminating mind, I was able to discover that there was not enough electricity. But with the heart, I was able to embrace the whole situation and retain my peace and calm.

If we can stay in this state where mind and heart work together, then we call this state **oneness** or unity or connectedness of all beings: interbeing. The state of oneness is the state in which both the mind and the heart have their place. I have a place in this world, Pino has a place in this world, Father Mariano has a place in this world: everyone has his or her place in this world. This is the practice of cultivating our heart. The energy of the heart comes from this oneness. The heart energy is the energy of love and compassion that manifests through the ability to dwell in this oneness. It means we can see how completely connected we are, as in a web.

In Buddhist teaching there is the image of the **net of Indra**. According to Buddhist teaching, there is a king and god called Indra, who is the king of all gods. One day the king of the gods, Indra, felt the need to decorate his palace. He asked himself: How can I beautify my palace, the palace of the king of the gods? He sent for an artist. The artist thought about what might be worthy of the king of the gods. Finally, he said: I will make a net, the net of Indra, the king of the gods. So, he created this huge, infinite net. This net has many knots – it's like a fishing net, there's a lot of fishing industry in Italy, so you can imagine it – and in each knot there's a jewel, a beautiful diamond. And with magical power, the artist spread this net, this infinite net, throughout the cosmos. And, this is quite wonderful, each of the diamonds in the net reflects all the other diamonds.

Let's say here is a diamond, a second diamond and a third diamond. This first diamond is reflected in the second diamond, the image of the second diamond is in the first diamond, and the image of the first diamond and the image of the second diamond is in the third diamond: this is reflected back and forth, and all the diamonds are reflected in each individual diamond. So, the net of Indra is a web of oneness, oneness of all being. This means that as soon as we can touch this oneness, our heart opens, because this idea of the net of Indra shows how our existence

is connected to the existence of everything else, and the existence of every other being is connected to our existence. Imagine that none of you were here, and I was giving a lecture in this empty hall. Do you really think I would come into this empty hall all by myself and begin to speak? It is only because of your presence that this talk is manifesting. It is through your questions that our conversation develops. If you do not ask questions, I will not have the opportunity to speak about the oneness of all beings. So, everything is connected with everything else. This insight is very important because it opens our heart.

Finally, I would like to give a short summary: First we have to bring the energy from the mind down to the heart. When the energy is in the heart, we learn to touch the oneness of all being. If we don't bring the energy down to the heart, then we only have a concept, an idea of oneness. We have to bring the energy into the heart to be able to feel the oneness. And once you touch that oneness, the energies of love and compassion flow. – All the best for your practice!

Thank you, Father Mariano, thank you all for the evening together.

### Closing speech by Father Mariano

Phap An, you have given us a wonderful opportunity to experience joyful and peaceful togetherness. It has been like a rebirth for us. When we attend events like this, we almost always experience speakers who are thinking and talking about the mind all the time. But the mind leads to judgement, to an emphasis on the negative aspects, to separation. You, on the other hand, have helped us gradually, with understanding and much compassion, to move from the level of our mind to the level of our heart, because the heart is made to love and to open. I thank you for that.

Many of us have come here, some to pray, others eager for change and knowledge. You have said that we need this experience every day in order to bring about change, to enjoy peace and to feel love towards ourselves and be able to open ourselves to others. I would like to come back to the connection





between mind, body and spirit. I will read some passages from a prayer by Don Tonino Bello, written just before Pentecost:

“Holy Spirit, drive away our fears. Let us joyfully realise that you do not speak only through the microphones of our churches.

That no one can boast of possessing you. That just as the seeds of the Word can be found in all flower beds, it is true that our sighing finds expression in the tears of Mohammedans, in the truth of Buddhists, in the love of Hindus, in the smiles of idolaters, in the good words of pagans and in the integrity of atheists.”

So many people have different religious experiences, but when there is love, everyone is on the path to God and to loving others.

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**Thay Phap An**

## A new experience – the 7 a.m. morning ZOOM meditation with the EIAB

Shortly after the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian army at the end of February 2022, Dutch brother Thay Phap Xa created the 7 – 7.30 a.m. morning meditation. He wanted to help people deal with the shock that this event had caused many of us and to develop the collective energy of the Sangha to allow understanding and compassion to arise.

After about 14 days, the brother announced the end of the 7 o'clock meditation in order to be able to attend to his duties. Of course, some of us found this very sad. Regine Pfeifer called me and asked me if I would like to continue the morning meditation with other friends from the Order of Interbeing, and I spontaneously said “Yes, I can imagine that dear Regine, if you are willing to take over the coordination.”

Regine then approached some friends of the Order and announced the project of continuing the morning meditation through our Order mailing list. She introduces new leaders to the structure and, with her loving nature, has become the heart of the morning meditation for many of us.

The structure is as follows:

- Playing the instrumental Avalokiteshvara Mantra, about 20 minutes before the 7 a.m. start by way of preparation,
- then the morning verse or morning gatha,
- a guided meditation,
- reading a text from Thay; some of us also sing a practice song
- followed by a video of the Avalokita Chant of the monastic community from Plum

Village and EIAB from the August retreat 2013 at the EIAB, with Thay sitting at the front of the big bell.

- At the end, the Avalokita Mantra was played again, then later a video was added showing the walking meditation on the EIAB grounds with the sisters and brothers – with two beautiful, newer songs as accompaniment from Plum Village, which I like to sing along with.

Now (June 2023) we will soon have been meeting for a year and a half – with only a small summer break in August 2022 – continuously every day at 7 am.

Over time, new facilitators joined, others left, but Regine always managed to fill the gaps in time. Thay Phap Xa also occasionally leads





the morning meditation and usually brings one or two monastic sisters or brothers with him, which makes many of us particularly happy.

In the ZOOM chat we can read the great gratitude of the participants who gather there in the morning and feel inspired by Thay's different meditations and texts or simply enjoy being together as a community. In the chat, some also ask for the spiritual support of the ZOOM Sangha when they are facing an operation, or a dear friend has died.

I always find it interesting how strongly Thay's texts affect me the moment they are read out. Most of the time I know the texts, I have often heard them in lectures by Thay or read them in his books. In a very direct way, they bring me right into the moment and enlighten and expand my consciousness, and I feel a great joy. Often, they touch me as if I was hearing them for the first time.

So almost every morning at 7 a.m. I sit there and look forward to the text from Thay the facilitators have chosen for today. I hear the speaker and feel the energy of Thay in him or her and in me. The transmission works and is very simple and beautiful.

It creates a connection between all of us who participate in the morning meditation,

because I think the others feel the same as I do. So, we come together as a ZOOM community. Some of the people I can see in the little pictures or whose names I read, I know personally and am happy to meet them here: People who came to my Mindfulness Sundays at Dharmaschlösschen 30 years ago, people who once did retreats with me at the EIAB, Beatenberg or Waldhaus, or from my "Source of Compassion" sangha in Berlin. We have also put the EIAB's 7a.m. meditation on the "Source" website.

Most of the 130 to 210 people who meet in the morning are of course new to me, but in the meantime, they have also become familiar faces or names. They come not only from Germany, but also from the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Switzerland and Austria.

Donations for the morning meditation go, of course, to the EIAB.

I am very happy about this beautiful cooperation between the monastic sangha of the EIAB and the lay Dharma friends of the Order of Interbeing.

For me (Regine) the greatest gift of the morning meditation is connection and interbeing on many different levels.

It is a living expression of the multifold sangha of monastics and lay practitioners: The EIAB provides the zoom room and advertises the meditation on its homepage. Brother Phap Xa and the sisters and brothers who join bring the monastic connection to Thay. As they often chant in Vietnamese, we can hear and see the origins of Plum Village. Lay practitioners help by providing continuity and offer concrete examples of how normal people live the practice. Together we are responsible for the meditation and manage it together at occasional online meetings.

As the lay facilitators are members of the German-speaking Order of Interbeing, it too is given a face in morning meditations. The shared task creates a connection between the approximately 12 facilitators that did not exist beforehand: Although we are physically distant, we maintain contact, support each other and get to know each other better. For me it's a miracle that we've managed to find a facilitator for every day of the year –

Christmas, New Year, Pentecost – apart from the planned summer break. Everyone can get involved to the extent that they want to.

Basically, the morning meditation represents one of the positive effects of the corona pandemic. As in many other areas, the online format has created access for many who would otherwise not be able to attend daily shared meditations. Some participants report in the chat that illness or domestic commitments and time constraints make it difficult for them to attend meetings of the local sanghas or retreats. The morning meditation enables these people to experience a very special kind of sangha. You can make yourself visible or not by switching the video on or off, you can share something about yourself in the chat or not. Some participants tell us when they are unable to attend for a longer period of time or they tell us how they are taking part from distant holiday locations. If you are a regular participant and have not been there for a long time, you will be missed and happily welcomed back.

I'm also amazed at the connection that has developed between the participants. Every day there is feedback on how valuable the daily meditation is and how much gratitude there is not just for the structure and guidance, but just for the sangha being there. As a participant, I experience how helpful it is to be able to take refuge in the morning sangha in a particularly challenging life situation, and how supportive it can be to ask for sangha energy just by sending a short chat message.

I hope that it will be possible to keep this very special sangha going for a long time.



**Annabelle Zinser**  
True Fragrance of Mindfulness Practices and  
**Regine Pfeifer** True Deep Looking

## Together we are strong!

It began in June 2022 at the retreat of the Order of Interbeing in Plum Village: The wish arose in both monastic and lay circles for the increasing number of German-speaking monastic brothers and sisters from Plum Village to visit Germany together. It was a happy moment when brother Thien Duc from Stuttgart responded to this idea with: "We had the same idea; we would like to do a tour of Germany in 2023." The fruits were ripe and only needed to be plucked. The driving force was the desire for Fourfold Sangha and a stronger sense of togetherness between monastics and lay practitioners. The common aspiration was to strengthen small sanghas in Germany.

What a fortunate coincidence that both Uli Pfeifer-Schaupp and Brother Dai Giac, from German-speaking Switzerland, received transmission of the Dharma lamp at this retreat. The requirement that a monastic Dharma teacher accompany the tour was met.

The Germany tour was supposed to start in Freiburg, the next stops were Stuttgart,

the Rhine-Main area, Bonn, Essen, Bielefeld, Friedenshof/Hanover, and Hamburg.

Back in Germany, it was clear to me that the Essen Sangha, which I founded nine years ago, could not handle this visit alone. I immediately began to put out feelers in the direction of Dortmund and Wuppertal.

In the wake of Corona, the Dortmund sangha had started again on the initiative of Peter Reinartz and Cornelia Bedorf with many new members. There was great interest in networking, so the monthly mindfulness afternoons in Essen have since been enriched by the "Dortmunders".

So, the Plum Village Germany tour bore fruit before it was even approved in southern France.

Then in October, after the end of the Rains Retreat, the "go ahead" came from Plum Village: Five sisters and brothers were given permission to travel through Germany for five weeks and to visit sanghas: Sr. Moi Len, Br. Dai Giac, Br. Thien Duc, Br. Thien Khai and

Sr. Lam Hy. The tour plan meant they would stop in Essen for five days. To our delight, Thay Phap Xa would be joining in Essen, what a gift!

Together with the Essen Sangha gardeners, Kristina Huguen and Steffi Weisgerber, I began to look for a location and suitable accommodation. We had no prior experience hosting retreats or monastics. For months there was no sign of life from Plum Village; the brothers were otherwise engaged, and we were on our own. Two video conferences with the other "station managers" and countless phone calls with Regine Pfeifer later, we decided to rent a Protestant community centre and to leave everyday life behind us and stay with the monastics in a Protestant conference centre. Months later we received a detailed how-to for accommodating Monastics – oh dear, quite challenging, no chance of doing justice to all of it... There were anxious moments – and lots of joyful ones. The whole tour seemed to be under a lucky star. Although I was only accepted into the Order of Interbeing in October 2022, I experienced a strong network of people





deeply rooted in the practice, who welcomed me with open arms and willingly shared their experiences with me.

Our website proved to be very helpful in advertising the event, running the registration link and providing information. With Charlotte Kennemann, we had expert support from within our own ranks.

In the Ruhr area – although relatively close to the EIAB – the Plum Village practice is not very well represented. There is already a wide range of other schools of Buddhism that are gaining popularity. We therefore decided on a low-threshold offer – the lecture on Friday and the mindfulness days on Saturday and Sunday could be booked individually, and the entrance fee should not be too big a hurdle.

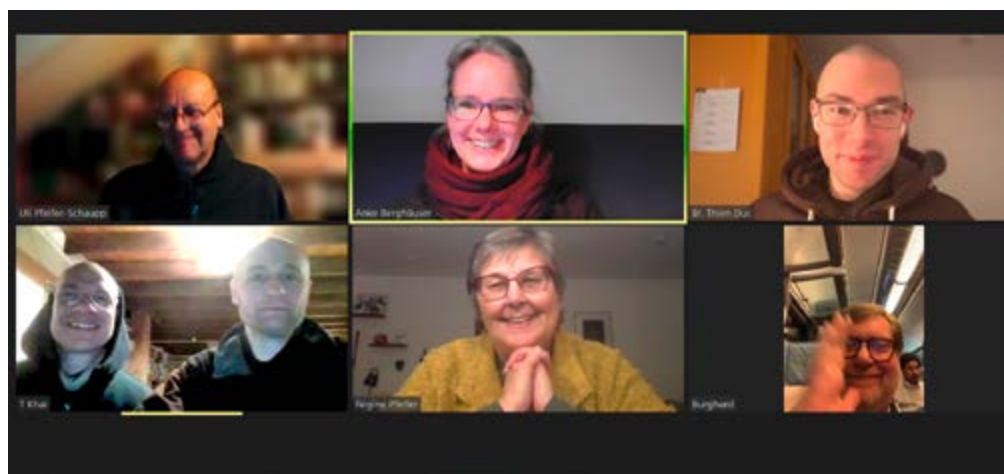
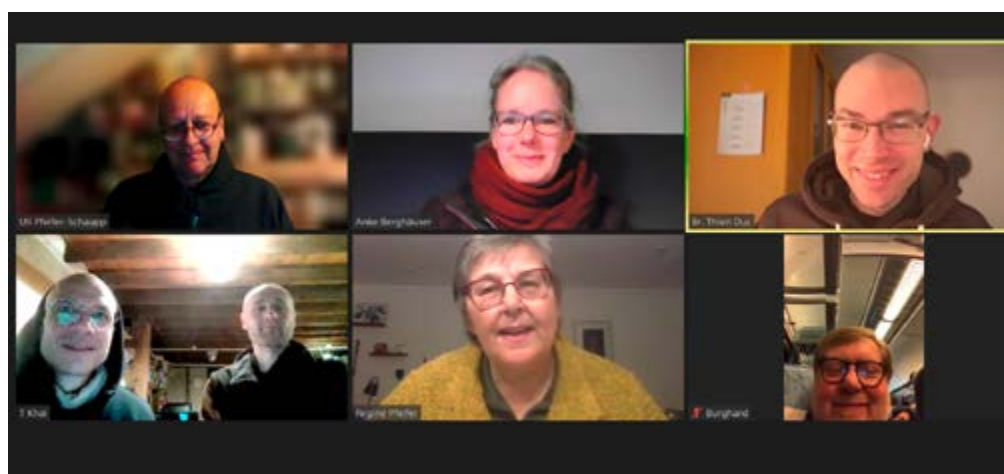
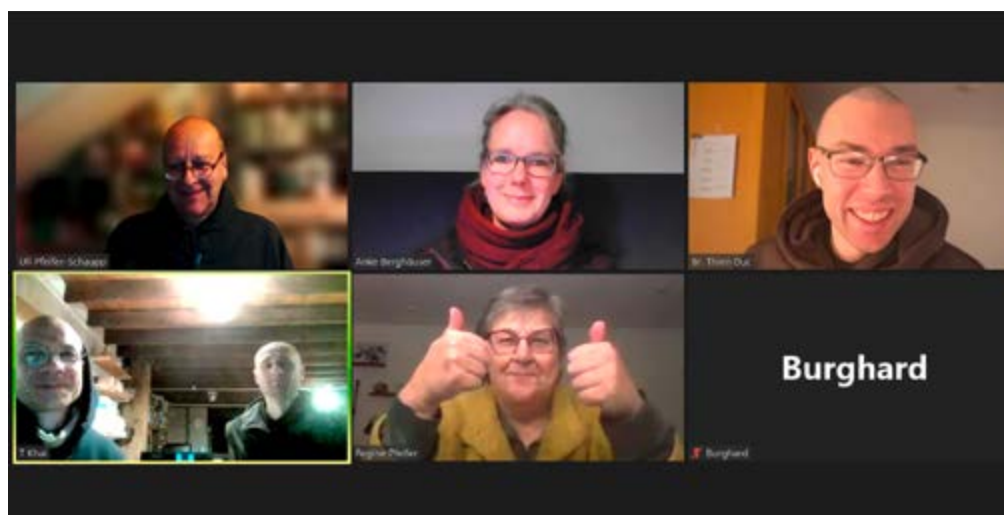
Then the monastic brothers from Plum Village came into play: with little to no tour experience on their side, it was initially a process of settling in, comparing ideas and possibilities, and building trust. They could quickly see that we were all doing our best, and it became a joyful togetherness. The lightness and trust in togetherness, the space for our own ideas whilst not clinging to them, internalized practice in every moment of the organisation – during the preparations I had the chance to delve deeply into the Plum Village practice, here was the living teaching from Thay. And although the tour hadn't started yet, there had already been plenty to harvest.

At this point we approached the wider sangha as well as the "Dortmunders" who had previously pledged their support. Tasks were defined, teams formed, ideas developed and synchronized. Working with Cornelia Bedorf, my contact person for Dortmund and aspirant for the Order of Interbeing, proved to be harmonious, uncomplicated and very supportive. We hardly knew each other before, so it was all the more joy to unearth this treasure of sangha sisterhood.

Charlotte, Susanne Eisbrich, Annika Seebach, Eva Möller, Thuy Ly Nguyen, Marten Krull, Nadine Reitemeier, Ulrike Pilz-Kusch – there were many imaginative, energetic, and reliable sangha siblings with whom we were excited to continue the project.

On the weekend of the event, we all met together; most of the laypeople hardly knew each other, then there were the monastics from two different monasteries. We had little time to attune to one another; however, the young nuns and monks had already had the opportunity to develop their own routine. The result was – almost surprisingly – a peaceful and easy coexistence and

togetherness in the preparation and implementation of the events. Rosani Reis gifted us with her beautiful voice, Siggie and Jürgen also came to help on Sunday. The teams were well prepared, and our joint practice formed a stable soil for the seeds of sangha building, which were intensively watered doing things together. We experienced the Fourfold Sangha with







an intensity previously unknown. The physical proximity to the EIAB was certainly noticeable at this point: Many of us have often been to Waldbröl and are familiar with the practice of the Plum Village community.

The Monastics made it a point to support us in our sangha building and took every

opportunity to help us. We were richly blessed on so many levels!

The term “Sangha Ruhrgebiet” was born, and it felt right. On the following mindfulness afternoon, in addition to the joyful togetherness, a new quality was noticeable: a powerful self-confidence – together we are strong!

After all, what are city boundaries? Just as in the Ruhr region city follows on city and transitions are hardly recognisable, the Sangha brothers and sisters materialise sometimes as Sangha Essen and sometimes as Sangha Dortmund, but our common catchment area reaches from Duisburg to Lünen; from Gelsenkirchen to Remscheid; a network of interbeing. Since then, to our great joy, we have held our online meetings together as Sangha Ruhrgebiet.

The Monastics, by the way, turned out to be very uncomplicated and unpretentious guests who could take good care of themselves.

The ice has been broken; we are no longer so shy about inviting monastic brothers and sisters, and there are already new ideas to invite Brother Phap Xa to Essen, or to practise as a Sangha Ruhrgebiet at the EIAB – perhaps under the leadership of Brother Phap Xa? – for long weekend of practise.

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**Anke Berghäuser**

(True Source of Generous Action)  
practises with the Sangha Essen  
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# Happiness is the Way

A few weeks ago, the postman brought a packet. I live on the second floor and called down: "Just put it in the entrance". He came up the stairs and said, "I'll bring it to you, then you won't need to come down." Two days later, there was a note stuck to the windshield of my car on which an unknown man apologized for hitting my outside mirror. When I thanked him on the phone for his honesty, he said, "I hope to create some good karma so whoever someday demolishes my mirror will also be honest."

The world is full of kindness. As a collector of positive experiences, I can attest to this. My passion for collecting began during the pandemic, when amidst all the pain, loss and economic woes, so much generosity and loving care suddenly blossomed. World-famous musicians streamed live concerts from their living rooms. We all learned how to use Zoom and offered our seminars online, and people rejoiced. Now, three years later, the world has different problems, but the media is dealing with them in old familiar ways, focusing exclusively on crises and problems. I did not want to believe that all the joy and lightness have disappeared from society, so I set out in search of happy everyday moments. I started to record these beautiful experiences in a book.

Meditation teaches awareness of what is happening right now, in me and around me. Everything can be as it is, nothing needs to be ignored, suppressed or glossed over. When we truly rest in clear awareness, life

shows amazing balance. What we perceive as unpleasant exists simultaneously with what we call positive. But our feelings often tell a different story. We seem to be conditioned to notice what we lack, what bothers us, what we would like to have and unfortunately do not.

There is an explanation for this. Neuroscientists have researched what they call negativity bias and found that negative thoughts, feelings and experiences have a stronger psychological impact on us than positive ones, even if they are of the same intensity. Our brain reacts more intensely to losses, defeats and pain than to gains, victories and health. And media reports about negative world events get twice as much attention as positive news (which explains the success of the tabloid media). But epigenetics shows that we can change our brains by educating our minds to see beauty and kindness.

I grew up with a mother who, because of her own life story, could neither feel joy herself nor bear it in others. Unfortunately, she had a child who was filled with unbridled joy. For me, the world was a place full of light, everything shone and glowed in very concrete ways. My mother was also filled with light, only unfortunately she didn't know it. Every day, with every strictly forbidden pleasure, my childhood was characterised by the archetypal struggle between light and darkness. By the time I reached puberty, the outer darkness had suffocated the light in me as well; I became depressed. I know

how much pain someone who feels that life is a place of suffering can create in those around him or her. That is why I consider our happiness to be the most valuable thing we can offer ourselves and others.

Happiness is not a goal; it does not wait for us at the end of a tedious path, and it has nothing to do with following rules or even commandments. They summed it up in the beautiful phrase, "There is no way to happiness, happiness is the way." We can cultivate our happiness so that it is available to us whenever life gets tough. We don't need drugs to get through the situation, and we don't respond with aggression or depression.

Wanting to be happy is a choice that can liberate us. We no longer expect other people or situations to make us happy. And because we no longer pester other people with demands they can't meet; we allow them the space to nurture their own happiness. Although our sense of happiness is independent of external circumstances, it still needs regular nourishment so that it doesn't dry up and seep away in everyday life. Each beautiful experience in my notebook is a seed of joy and happiness, and I plant each seed back in the earth for it to grow. My first book is full now. Tomorrow I will buy a new one.

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**Margrit Irgang**  
True Lotus of Virtue  
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# Art and Dharma with Children

(from the EIAB children's programme)

## **This apple is not an apple ...**

*"Today with your help I'm going to do  
some magic!"*

*"What do I have in my hands?" (hold up  
an apple).*

*The children call out 'an apple.'*

*"Who thinks this is an apple?"*

*Hesitatingly, suspecting a trick, all the  
children call "Yes, it's an apple."*

There are blank posters on the floor, each with an apple on it. The children's task is now to get into groups and draw a network that shows: "Everything that is necessary for the apple to get here!"

At the vernissage, the children look at each other's works. Laughing at funny ideas and noticing interesting connections. The sun can be found in every picture.

"What happens if something is missing?" I cover the bees with my hand. "Then the apple can't be here!" the children quickly blurt out.





“So, this apple is a product of many ‘non-apple elements’”.

“The Buddha recognized how everything is connected. And our teacher Thich Nhat Hanh even came up with a word for it: he called it “interbeing”, to show how things are woven together. In a sutra the Buddha said the following:

**This apple is not an apple,**

because it is made up of non-apple elements

**and because it’s not an apple,**

when we are aware of interbeing

**it is an apple.**

because we recognize the true nature of the apple.

A little surprised, the children absorb the sentence, recognize its essence, and let the words sink in.

While they’re doing this, pieces of apple are handed out for the snack meditation. With a sound of the bell, children and carers are invited to eat the “apple” in silence. For 5 minutes the children smell, taste the fruit juice, chew with relish and concentrate on their snack.

The “snack meditation” ends with a sound of the bell.

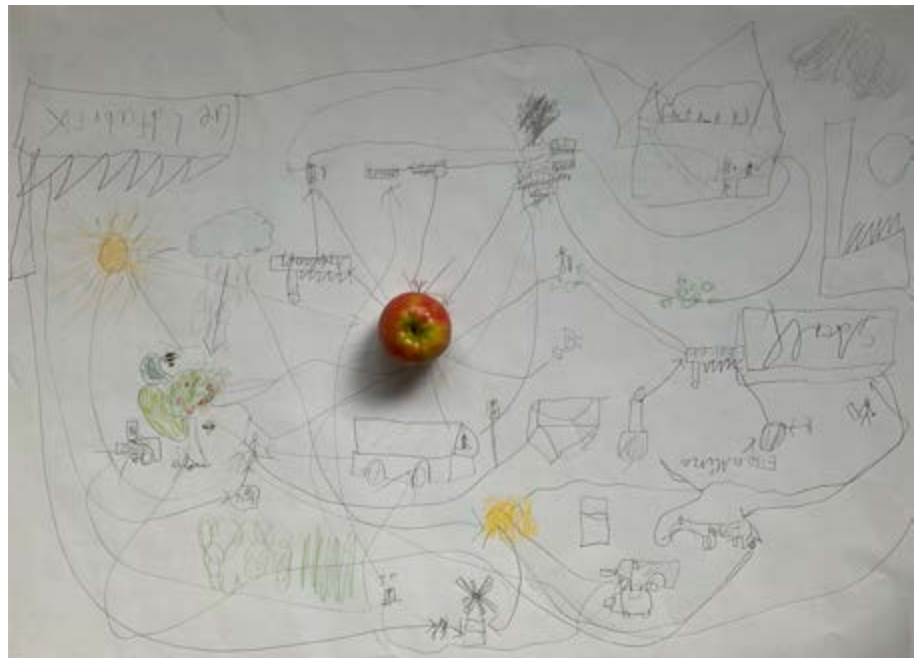
“We talked at the beginning of the children’s programme about what I was holding in my hand. Now where is that thing you called the apple?” “In our bellies,” the children say. “But it’s not just in your stomach. It’s in your blood and in many parts of your body. It has a different name now. What’s it called now?”

After a moment’s thought, a child says his name and then the “apple” is suddenly called: Ella, Elsa or Julietta. Paul, Robin or Friso.

*“There is no longer any distinction between us and the apple.”*

With these words we let the children go for walking meditation with their parents.

Uli Lüttrighaus



# Taking a Fresh Look at our Dharma-Practice

## Seeds of Awakening in Uncertain Times

The teaching of the Buddha is deep and wonderful. It is an effective medicine for the challenges of our time, which invites us to look mindfully at all inner and outer phenomena, to penetrate and understand them more deeply. The Buddha and his followers have shown concrete ways to be happy even in difficult circumstances. Our practice teaches us that we are not isolated beings, but are always interdependent, resulting in a sense of interconnectedness and natural responsibility – for ourselves and for the world.

In this article, I would like to offer three invitations for self-reflection, presenting three concrete ways that have helped me understand the Dharma more deeply and keep its valuable teachings fresh.

**(A) Contemplations on areas of tension in our Dharma practice**

**(B) Buddhist practice ethics: experiences with the Mindful Business Commitment**

**(C) Calligraphies by Thich Nhat Hanh, inviting us to practice in everyday life**

**(A) Contemplations on Areas of Tension in our Dharma Practice**

Be still or speak? Alone or with others? Focus on happiness or on suffering? Study or practice? On our path of practice, we repeatedly make decisions and develop our own emphases in relation to the teachings of the Dharma. In doing so, we are always in danger of losing our balance and becoming one-sided or even dogmatic in our practice.

The following contemplations invite us to develop an awareness of different areas of tension within our Dharma practice. It is recommended that after each contemplation we pause, invite a smile and gently connect with our breath.

- *May I look deeply into the Dharma using both language and reason, and experience and appreciate the wisdom of non-duality beyond words.*
- *May I learn to feel connected and at home both in silence and in sharing with others.*
- *May I reflect on both the causes of suffering and the causes of happiness when contemplating the Four Noble Truths.*
- *May I strengthen my inner aimlessness whilst also making good use of Dharma tools to help me in my practice.*





- May I appreciate the immaterial and the material, may I not place the mind above the body.
- May I devote the energy of my heart to bringing about positive change in this world while remaining, or becoming, free from this world and its entanglements.
- May I find a balance between the historical and ultimate dimensions, avoiding one-sided practice and not losing myself in either dimension.
- May I experience the power and concentration of individual practice in seclusion whilst developing an awareness of the power and energy a community can offer by practising together.
- May I find skilful teaching methods and effective Dharma doors for these times without wanting to be available at all costs or sacrificing the profundity of the Dharma through oversimplification.
- May I have basic trust in experienced Dharma teachers without blindly following them or closing my eyes to their human imperfections. May I call abuse by its name and at the same time not be overhasty in condemning it.
- May I honour the Eastern roots and teachers of the Buddhist tradition while seeking a translation of the Dharma appropriate to our Western culture and language.
- May I maintain my sense of humour whilst practising seriously, not look too harshly on myself and the world, and balance lightness and depth.

The areas of tension sketched out here can help support us in reflecting on our personal Dharma practice and help us avoid one-sidedness in our thinking and our practice. This will increase our respect and openness for alternative Dharma paths and emphases. If we stay on the Middle Way – avoiding the extremes – we nurture happiness, connection and peace.

### **(B) Buddhist Business Ethics: Experiences with the Mindful Business Commitment**

The Mindful Business Commitment (MBC) was developed in 2016 by members of the Network for Mindful Business (NAW). It formulates a mindfulness-based practice for everyday business life based on Buddhist teachings. In six practice areas – (1) Personal

Practice, (2) Mindful Economic Thinking and Action, (3) Work, (4) Consumption, (5) Money and Finances and (6) Acting Mindfully within the Collective – insights are offered into wholesome and unwholesome economic forces, which can be deepened through practice and reflection in our own lives. The MBC serves as a mirror and compass. Its statements are not to be understood as commandments or prohibitions but are intended to draw attention to inner and outer pitfalls in a kind and friendly manner, and to show the path towards a more mindful economy.

The MBC is not just a “piece of paper”, but very much alive and is regularly recited and reflected on online and at NAW retreats at the EIAB. Regular readings and study have proved so helpful that it has been translated into ten languages by experienced practitioners and now has its own website.

Here, it is only possible to offer excerpts from the Mindful Business Commitment. I would like to invite you to contemplate once more how they relate directly to our own lives and economic actions. It is helpful to first collect ourselves and pause briefly after each statement, to be mindful of our emotions, thoughts and inner images that arise and to refrain from an intellectual analysis of the contents...

### **Excerpts from the Mindful Business Commitment**

#### **I will stop regularly and practice:**

- ... *giving my spiritual practice sufficient time and energy, both in my daily life and by participating in retreats and practice days.*
- ... *keeping my mindfulness alive throughout the day, particularly in difficult situations.*
- ... *finding reliable support for my path from spiritual companions, connecting to a community of practice or Sangha, and seeking contact with teachers.*

- ... *touching, understanding and healing my difficulties, my hurt and my suffering.*
- ... *developing my own personal criteria for success and gradually letting go of any unhelpful external measures of performance or success.*
- ... *freeing myself from the notion that wealth, influence, popularity or sensual pleasures lead to lasting happiness*
- ... *treating myself kindly, being patient with myself and smiling lovingly at my imperfections.*
- ... *comparing myself less often with others and letting go of the superiority complexes, inferiority complexes and equality complexes.*
- ... *recognizing how much is enough, taming my wants, and wisely choosing from amongst my wishes. I am conscious that increasing demands often lead to dissatisfaction.*
- ... *strengthening my inner and outer generosity and learning to give without intention and to receive without shame.*
- ... *choosing – and creating – healthy working environments.*
- ... *joining together with like-minded people to explore and experience mindful forms of community.*
- ... *seeing money as a powerful form of energy that can produce either healthy or unhealthy effects, aware that every euro I spend represents my vote.*
- ... *foregoing cleverness, manipulation and calculation and not taking advantage of others' weaknesses.*
- ... *viewing even those whose behaviour is destructive through the*

*eyes of compassion and to recognize a suffering brother or a suffering sister in them.*

... *sharing what I have experienced through my own practice and being aware that the crowning point of sharing is personal embodiment.*

The MBC are practised in the spirit of a free self-commitment; however, they need to be strengthened and nurtured regularly through individual and collective recitations (and sharing of experiences). This gives energy and power to the different fields of practice, make them more alive in everyday life so they can unfold their transformative power.

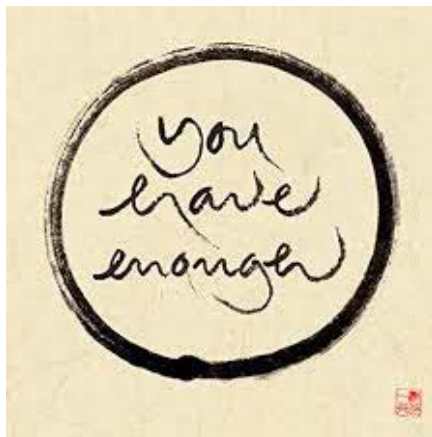
### (C) Calligraphies of Thich Nhat Hanh that invite us to practise in everyday life

In January 2022, one of the greatest Dharma teachers of our time, Thich Nhat Hanh (or affectionately: *Thây*), went to the Great Transformation. One of his favourite practices was calligraphy. Calligraphy and gathas – short mnemonic sentences for contemplation – capture Buddhist teaching in a nutshell and bring us to the heart of the Dharma. Contemplating the gathas with an open mind, we can touch their essence and understand Buddhist wisdom teachings more deeply and relate them to our current situation. Profound calligraphies can touch seeds of awakening in our minds and become seeds of insight in themselves as they accompany and guide us on our path through everyday life. Here I would like to share three calligraphies by *Thây* that can remind us again and again of the essentials on our practice path.

**“Peace is every step.”** Every step is important. Happiness, peace, transformation does not happen in the future, but right now. We can begin anew with each step, and with every step we can send a message to the world. Right now – in times of war in Europe – this Gatha calls us to calm our minds, collect ourselves and strive to look at all people with friendly eyes – whether at work, on the roads or in challenging situations. Peace can and needs to be practised everywhere.



We come back to our breathing and take the next step a little more peacefully. We enter a meeting with a collected mind. We practise non-reactivity and impulse-distance, and we don't respond to provocation. These are the small acts through which we can patiently transform deep-seated habits and the seeds of violence and division in our bodies and minds.



**“You have enough.”** When is enough enough? What do we really need? This Gatha reminds us that even in times of inflation and uncertainty, we still have more than enough conditions to be happy. It is the mind that creates our image of the world. Our meditation practice teaches us that our happiness is not found in fame, wealth, power or pleasant sensory impressions. My two years at Plum Village taught me how little it takes to be truly happy when my mindfulness practice is alive day after day. And that it can be the permanent comparison with others that feeds our feeling of not enough. In our sangha in Berlin, contemplating this calligraphy, we quickly came to the conclusion that a feeling of “not having enough” often hides a feeling of “not

being enough”. Consequently, strengthening healthy self-love is the prerequisite for overcoming a never-ending sense of not enough, an insatiable hunger that has the potential to devour our world.



**“To be is to interbe.”** Loneliness is one of the diseases of our time. We feel separated and begin to suffer. Mindfulness practice shows us that separation is an illusion. We are never alone. We are all constantly interdependent with each other. Since our Western languages did not have a word for this natural law, Thich Nhat Hanh invented the term “interbeing” to describe it. Looking with the eyes of interbeing means that we recognise more and more clearly the interactions, the interpenetration of all things, of all beings – even, and especially, in the smallest things and contexts – and thus experience step by step a deeper feeling of interconnectedness with all beings. This is the medicine for our time, in which a culture of separation, opposition and misguided competition threatens the very foundations of our lives. Experiencing interbeing is active peace work. Interbeing reminds us that we can only overcome the current crises of humanity together.

### Epilogue

We can regard the work of the Buddha as that of a gardener sowing healthy seeds in our collective mind consciousness. A seed can be a classical meditation method that we practise in everyday life or an insight into our true nature that fundamentally changes our view of the world. A seed can be the free commitment to a phrase of the Mindful Business Commitment or another body of ethics. Or the deep contemplation



of a calligraphy. Something is triggered and strengthens our understanding. The will not to cause harm grows within us, qualities of the mind such as generosity or compassion receive fresh nourishment and are strengthened.

At first, these seeds may be small, but if we nurture them, they can grow powerfully and transform our lives and the lives of all those with whom we are connected. The Buddha and his followers sowed so many healthy seeds and it is the task of each generation of Dharma practitioners to guard this treasure, to keep it alive and to keep sowing new seeds. And in addition to the tried and tested methods, to find new ways that are helpful for the problems of our dynamically evolving world.

This requires community, this requires Sangha. Thich Nhat Hanh was a great

sangha builder. In his vision of Engaged Buddhism, the EIAB plays an important role as a mediator between profound Buddhist practice and application-oriented methods for the problems of our time. Thây once said, "One Buddha is not enough." In this sense: May we always encourage and support each other from the bottom of our hearts on our path of awakening, looking at each other in all our colourful diversity with friendly eyes.



## May all beings be happy!

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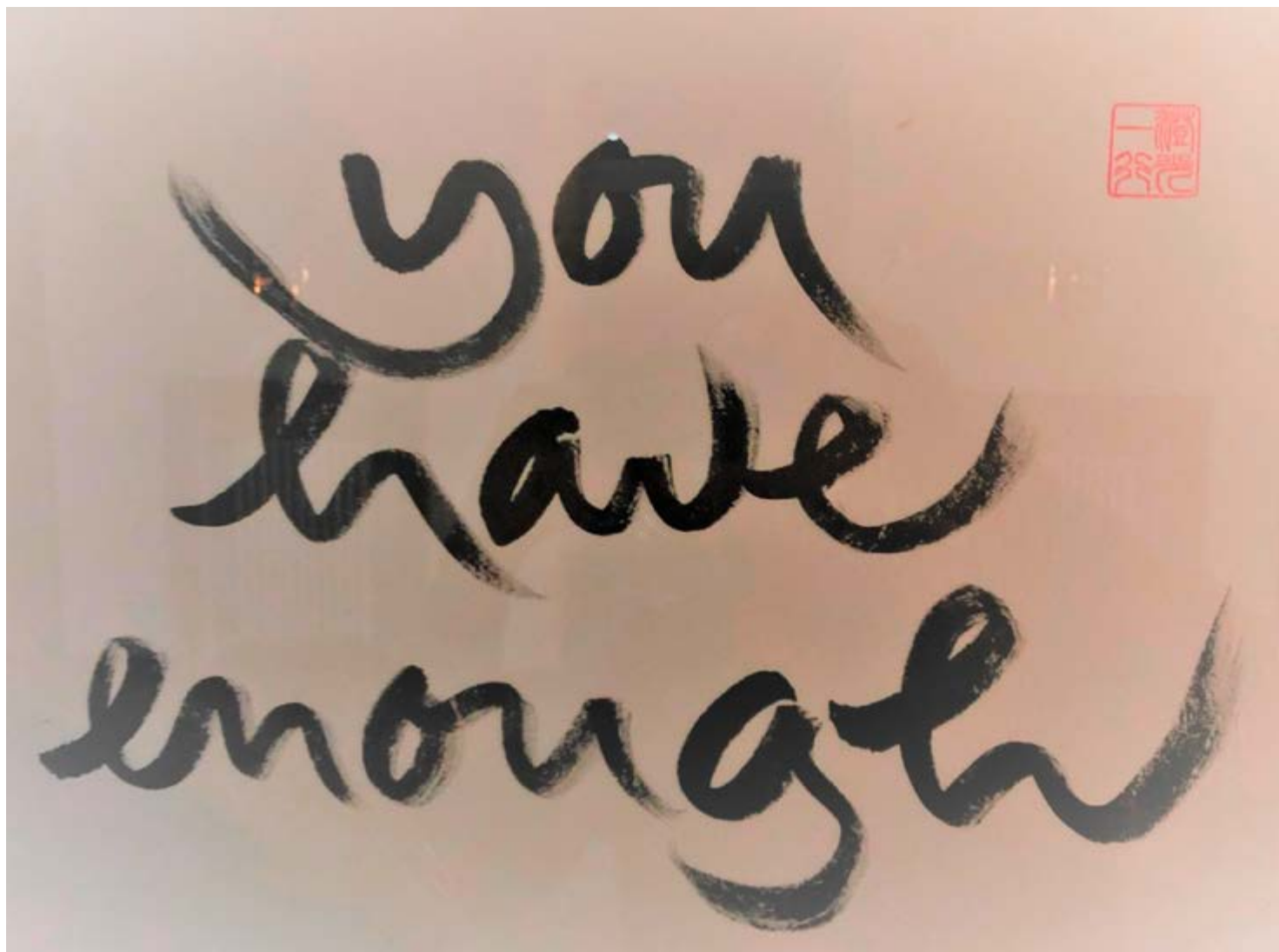
### You can find more information at:

[www.achtsame-wirtschaft.de](http://www.achtsame-wirtschaft.de)

<http://network-mindful-business.org>

<https://www.mindful-business-commitment.net>

[www.romhardt.de](http://www.romhardt.de)



# The Clown: I felt like a butterfly, so I flew!

## Who Dreams?

*Once Chuang Tzu dreamt he was a butterfly,  
Fluttering here and there,  
Aware he was a butterfly.  
Suddenly he awoke  
And found he was Chuang Tzu.*

*Now he does not know  
If he was Chuang Tzu  
Dreaming he was a butterfly,  
Or a butterfly  
Dreaming he is Chuang Tzu..*

---

**Chuang Tzu**, China,  
translated by Robert Fisher

For several years now, I have had the honour of bringing the clown Geist to the European Institute for Applied Buddhism in Germany, thanks to two people: Teri West and Sister Bi Nghiem. The original idea came through Teri West, a practitioner and clown in the UK. Here is how she describes her clown journey: *Once, by mysterious circumstances, I found herself in a field in France in 1988, listening to a story told by our dear teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh. I have been a student of his ever since, and in 2016, was ordained by him as a lay dharma teacher in the UK Sangha. She goes on to say: A central pillar of Zen practice is mindfulness. When I began to train with Nose to Nose (UK), I realised how mindfulness is a perfect support for this particular style of improvised clowning. To find my clown, I had to be truly present. I had to be aware of my body, my breathing, and my feelings, and able to be*

*equally aware of and present to others while engaged in clown exercises and impros.*

As for Sister Bi Nghiem, after her first clowning workshop, she was clearly hooked on the magic of the red nose. She gracefully stepped into the laughter, lightness, and freedom of the clown. I suspect that she enjoys the loving naughtiness of the clown and/or she found a place where she can touch into what Stephen Nachmanovitch calls “spontaneous creating which he describes as the essence of improvisation, which comes from our deepest being and is immaculately and originally ourselves.” He adds, “What we have to express is already with us, is us, so the work of creativity is not a matter of making the material come, but of unblocking the obstacles to its natural flow.” All I know is that I have never had to spend time explaining what

clowning is all about to her. She intuitively it. She experienced the clown Geist. She wallowed in it, embracing the deep heavy warm perfect mud!

In the most recent EIAB clowning workshop (2023) which Ira Anderson and I co-facilitated, me the passionate clown and she the dedicated practitioner. We combined open hearted readiness and flexibility throughout our practices. The meditations Ira led complimented and supported a softening and opening process in the group. She seemingly effortlessly listened to her inner intuition, sharing recent additions such as the 6th mindful training: smiling with life. Wow. When discussing the possibility of a biography and clowning workshop, Sister Bi and I spoke about how the clown embraces themselves fully, the way the



clown's playful approach to life can help us relate to our experiences in fresh new ways, and open doors to a world of freedom and new possibilities. The combination of meditation and clowning supports looking at our inner world from two different perspectives that compliment each other – both with the intention to deepen our love and understanding for ourselves. I was brought back to Thich Nhat Hanh's words in his book entitled *How to love*. The words that jumped out at me, like neon lights, were: *"the first practice of love is to know oneself. The Pali word Metta means loving kindness. When we practice Metta Meditation, we touch our deepest aspirations. But the willingness and aspiration to love is not yet love. We have to look deeply, with all our being, in order to understand the object of our meditation. The practice of love meditation is not autosuggestion. We have to look deeply at our body, feelings, perceptions, mental transformations and consciousness. We can observe how much peace, happiness, and lightness we already have."* (pp.66-67, *How to Love*). Yes. Wow. So clown.

### **Your purpose is to be yourself. Thich Nhat Hanh**

Thank you for joining me this far. I am aware that if I were to read my own words, I suspect I would be thinking: whatever, easy for you to say, I am SUFFERING!! Nobody gets my suffering. NOBODY understands me. Then the clown brain switches on and reminds me someone does get me, know me, me. As with meditation, when practicing clowning, I am the starting point. Everything that makes me a one-time event, a unique individual with a perspective of the world formed through my experiences on the planet. The beauty of the clown is that they know they are fantastic because they are breathing, no matter what happens.

First step in both meditation and clowning, the breath. Coming back to ourselves, practicing loving curiosity about all that we are. Start with the breath, move to the senses, inner world, then outer. A continual, natural, miraculous exchange. We have never taken two identical breaths. The breath transforms the outside world through its passage in our being. We are transforming ourselves and changing the world with each inhale and exhale. The clown is transformed by how the

world touches them, moves them, inspires them, awakens deep parts of themselves.

### **The clown: fully in the moment.**

If you have never participated in a clowning workshop, you might be scratching your head trying to see how these worlds fit together. Each time I talk about clowning, I discover new aspects. Clowning is my vocation, a full-time adventure. I devote a lot of time to wondering if it is even possible to define clown or clowning? Definitions can be limiting, and they can be a point of orientation, a springboard. What I do know, is that the clown is limitless: clown falls into the category of terms such as *self, play, spirit, love, living*. Clowning speaks to the conscious choice to open, to being present to all of my experiences and to the world. A wholehearted inner yes steeped deeply in loving curiosity. The clown is fantastic because they are breathing and meets life knowing that everything is happening FOR them, not to them: the breeze that blows the papers off the table, the person who bumped into them on the street, the birds singing in the trees... Not that the clown doesn't experience problems, they do. Oh yes, yes, yes. Problems. Delicious problems. Moments to be celebrated where the clown plays in the sticky complicated world of fears and desires, knowing that they are real and not real. The *heartfelt* yes of the clown's relationship to themselves and the world has them floating down the river of life, not resisting the flow, nor swimming upstream, moving downstream towards the ocean they can feel is waiting for them.

### **The Joy in Interruptions**

I have recently been working with the idea of interruption. There is an exercise called the Pivot Dance. 2 people dance together, like an in breath and out breath. First one person moves in any way that makes their body smile, as long as they want, as close or as far away from their partner as they choose, in relationship to themselves and to their partner. When the first dancer stops, the second takes off into their world of movement, trusting their inner rhythm to know when to return to stillness. Movement. Stillness. Exchange. Exploration. *How do I feel like moving? How is my breathing? Am I dancing for someone else or for myself while*

*in relationship? Do I feel free?* Once the Pivot dynamic is clear, we might play with Pivot Interruptus. In this structure, it is the person who is still who decides when to start moving. The change sounds perhaps minor, however it brings deep energetic changes to the relationship between the partners. A touch of naughtiness, provocative energy, seeps into the pairs, a charge, a playfulness. Interestingly I have seen people laugh far more in the second structure than the first. What happens when they laugh? Participants have shared that they felt more alive in the 2<sup>nd</sup> version, more present in their bodies, more excited, more attentive, curious and awake. How fun is that?

Interruptions. Change. How often have I resisted both? Since Pivot Interruptus is a game, people often play it with an open heart and at some point, many have expressed how something inside of them gave up worrying when their partner was going to start up and they would have to stop. They let go, watched, and waited without waiting, enjoying the silliness of the moment. I have heard feedback such as: *I just stopped caring wanting something to happen a certain way and felt free. I got lost in the flow of movement in the second version. I had so much fun interrupting my partner and having them interrupt me!*

Interruptions. Opening space for change. A moment, when received is full of potential, something new. I can step out of my ongoing-well-programmed mind natter, experience a shift for just one a breath, and just maybe be fully present. Just maybe, I can celebrate the interruption and meet the world as it is in this moment. I can discover a new way of relating to my present self. Oh how my mind loves the security of its ideas. Oh how the clown is enthralled with the world of possibility. The clown is about saying yes to the world as it is, the ultimate 'Wow.' Wow to me encompasses a deep compassionate curiosity for all that being human encompasses. Wow. I know this thought. Wow. I recognize this knee jerk reaction. Wow. I wonder how many times I am going repeat this particular pattern? Wow. How human I am being, again. How perfectly me. Wow. Today I felt drawn to a person sitting on a parc bench and when I got closer, I saw they were crying gentle quiet tears. Wow. All I did was sit in silence beside

them and my heart felt like it expanded in an ocean. Wow. We didn't exchange a single word, however when they got up to leave and turned cautiously to look at me, I felt both our hearts bursting with warmth. Wow.

The clown's world is full to overflowing with life. Every gust of wind, honking of a horn, blister on their foot, is life. Every feeling of tiredness, frustration, excitement, suffering, anticipation, all life.

These kinds of experiences lead me to the topic of fulfillment: *"We should practice in such a way that every moment is fulfilling. We should feel satisfaction in every breath, in every step, in every action. This is true fulfillment. When you breathe in and out, there is fulfillment. When you take a step, there is fulfillment. When you perform any action, there*

*is fulfillment that comes from living deeply in the present moment."* (p. 88. How to love.)

*"[...] we need to not give up on living lightness, celebrating absurdity, realigning ourselves with truer connections, honouring our feelings, including fears, and we simply need to be more creative to do so. At times like these, I feel that it is even more important than ever to confirm the perfect imperfections in life."* Catherine Bryden (EIAB Workshop 2023)

These last words are to express my deep and growing gratitude to all beams of light that are not oncoming trains; to all the living beings who have guided me deeper into my self during this adventure of life. I dream of the day when I am excited about an oncoming train in a tunnel, who knows? Wow. Yes. Here comes change! When I started to feel

the clown's deep enjoyment of how life is happening for me, not too me, I was then able to embrace Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings; or it was Sister Bi's laughter? Or maybe Teri West's singing? Or maybe Ira Anderson's gentle way of being? Or maybe....?

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**Catherine Bryden**





# RETREAT

## RETREAT

*in the stillness of night  
through the Gate of Interbeing  
calmly i walked  
onto the Path of Joy  
with its serpentine ways  
into the Garden of Transformation  
where promises await.  
under the Stupa of Inclusiveness  
i dream to return  
in the stillness of night...*

---

**Coppelia Hays Branscheid**

## RETREAT

*in der stille der nacht  
durch das Tor des Interseins  
schritt ich ruhig  
auf dem Pfad der Freude  
mit seinen verschlungenen pfaden  
in den Garten der Transformation  
wo versprechen warten.  
unter der Stupa der Unvoreingenommenheit  
träume ich von einer rückkehr  
in die stille der nacht...*

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**Coppelia Hays Branscheid**

# Being beautiful, being ourselves – Rainbow-Retreat 2023

Coming home – this was the feeling that united all of us who attended the third Rainbow Retreat “Being beautiful, being ourselves” at the EIAB in May 2023. More than 20 people from different generations and countries came to practise together and spend time with each other.

The Rainbow Family brings together all people who identify as LGBTQIA+, meaning

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans\*, Queer, Questioning, Inter or Asexual/Aromantic.

For many it was their first time practicing together with other LGBTQIA+ brothers and sisters. Some of us don't have our own sangha, others can't show up as a whole person in their sangha. So the Rainbow Retreat is like coming home – breathing out, letting go, feeling space, experiencing connection,

feeling you belong. “I have arrived, I am home”.

We took time and space for the traditional practice elements, such as sitting and walking meditation, deep relaxation, and Dharma sharing, as well as Dharma talks via video and audio from our monastic brothers and sisters. It was a special experience to be able to practice together with other LGBTQIA+ brothers and sisters as a family and to feel the special connection and closeness. As LGBTQIA+ people, we live in a world that often views us indifferently or dismissively, or in the worst case, denies us the right to exist. This has a profound effect on our consciousness, our minds and bodies, and on our love for ourselves. Inspired by a Dharma talk by Brother Phap Hai on the Rainbow Family, in a sharing in pairs we asked ourselves the fundamental question, “What does it mean to love myself?” Deep looking and listening revealed doubts, hurts and tears, and enabled us to embrace our anger and nurture our self-love.

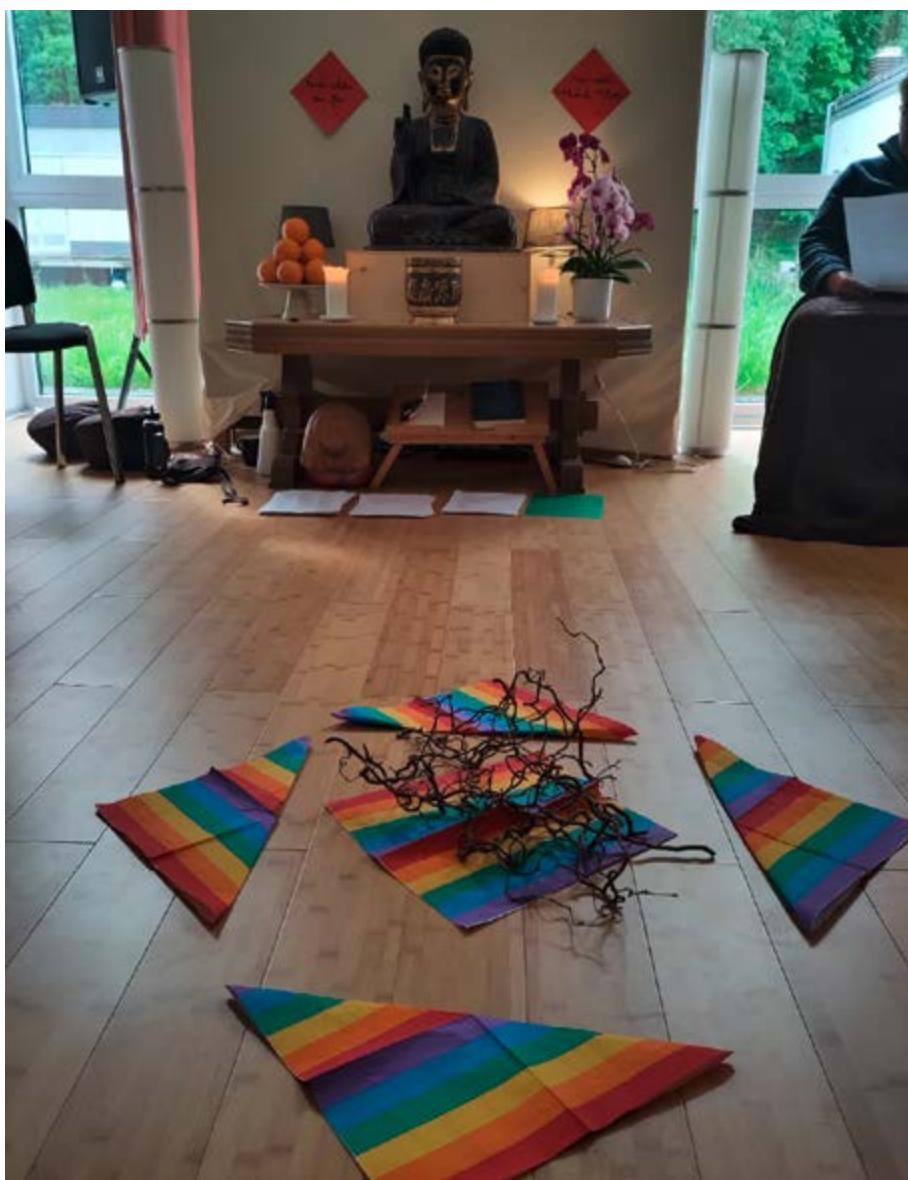
Sprinkled throughout the retreat were other exercises and activities: a trust exercise in the forest where we experienced ourselves as part of nature; journeys of discovery with our voice; moving meditations; singing together and, of course, an informal tea meditation with poetry, songs and sharing.

For me personally, the rainbow retreat was an invitation to get to know and understand myself more deeply, to notice my hurt and my joy, and to nourish and celebrate the wonderful diversity and uniqueness of our queer family and sangha with everyone.

Being beautiful, being ourselves.

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**Kirstin Lee Bostelmann**  
Skillful Listening of the Heart





# True Love and so on ...

*"How do you deal with your sexual energy?"*

*"Uh? What do you mean?"*

*"Well, I don't find the Third Mindfulness Training so easy. So I thought I'd ask how others get on with it."*

*"Well, I don't have any problems with the third one, it's quite simple. Observe, embrace, transform, just like always. For me, the first one is much more difficult. I can't eat soy products, nuts, pulses nor avocado neither. And where is the protein supposed to come from, if not from dairy products. Vegan would be better, but that's totally difficult for me."*

*"Aha. Nice weather today!"*

*"Yes, the sun does you good!"*

People don't like to talk about the "dirty subject". Too much shame, too private.

But the brief dialogue resonated with me.

I am single.

Since I arrived at the EIAB five years ago, I have been able to give up the never-ending loop of "serial monogamy" without missing anything elementary. It used to be quite natural for me to have a new partner soon after a break-up, to keep living my sexual energy. Today I regard sexual energy in the same way I do other big feelings. When anger arises in me, I embrace my anger, take some time for myself and see where my anger comes from. It usually goes away on its own and I often find it helpful to understand where my anger came from and what triggered it in

me. I deal with fear or sadness in exactly the same way. And it's very similar with sexual energy. For me at least.

When the desire for sexual activity arises in me, I pause. I embrace my sexual energy, tell it, "I am here for you. It's normal for you to rise in me sometimes. You belong." I try to understand the real reason behind my sudden sexual desires. Am I lonely? Am I unhappy? Do I want to distract myself or am I bored? (There are certainly other causes too). For me, the sexual energy that arises often hides another need and it makes more sense to take good care of the causal need than find a quick remedy for my sexual energy. In my eyes, sexual energy is justified when I am confronted with a potential partner and a romantic relationship is in the offing. But not just because circumstances are making me feel a little uncomfortable.

For me, the desire for human contact, escape from the loneliness of the eternal home office of a self-employed person, is often behind supposed sexual energy. So I have developed a ritual for myself that I call "smile walk". When I feel such sexual energy rising in me, I look at myself in the mirror and smile to myself. Because I have every reason to smile at myself and be proud. After all, haven't I just managed to recognise a big feeling and guess its cause. I smile deeply at my reflection for a minute or two. Then I put on my shoes and take the smile outside. I walk smiling around the block, through the park or briefly to the supermarket on the corner. I try to smile at all the people I meet. And not infrequently, complete strangers return my smile, and we are both happy to have shared a smile. I find people smiling back every time I go for a walk. Senior citizens are very receptive, small children too, but also the cashier in the supermarket is happy to receive a friendly smile. These smiling encounters are a fulfilling change in my daily routine, and I enjoy them very much. I have been practising my smile walks for several years now and it has become a matter of course that neighbours as well as strangers

smile at me when they meet me. A wonderful gift.

And quite imperceptibly, over time, my sexual energy tries less and less often to grab me with its tentacles. I have learned that I can find comfort in other ways. Comfort that is healing. At the EIAB, I understood what is meant by self-care and self-love and practiced taking good care of myself. After two years, I read the gatha "I'm here for you, my darling" with different eyes. At first it hurt me that nobody was there for me and that I'm nobody's darling. But once I realized that this is the ultimate call to self-love, and how to practice with it, it has become one of my favourite gathas. Slowly but surely, I have recovered from the separation from my life partner. At this point I would like to thank Thay and all the monks and nuns from the bottom of my heart for opening the path to myself! It is such a big gift.

So far so good. I'm doing reasonably well with the Third Mindfulness Training. But as not every practitioner succeeds equally well, I wanted to learn more about it. So, I started listening to everything that Thay and other Dharma teachers had said about true love. On the Plum Village app, on YouTube, in books.

And because the subject of "True Love" has aroused my interest, I stumbled across a documentary in the ARD media library. "Pornoland Germany – addicts and profiteers". The essence in seven sentences: Since 2007, pornography on the Internet is no longer prohibited. With a click of an "I'm 18 years old" button, without any verification, anyone interested has access to uncensored pornographic material. Made by men for men, scenes are depicted that have nothing to do with "true love" that nourishes, heals and sustains. Ratings and clicks are more important than mental health. Germany is the nation with the highest online pornography consumption in the world. Online pornography consumption, which initially appears harmless, often slips unnoticed into addictive, pathological behaviour.

“Pornography-use disorder” has been a recognized illness in Germany since 2022. The illness with the longest incubation period of all: it often takes several decades for those affected to overcome their shame and seek a way out. Only when their job is at stake, when many hours are spent secretly consuming pornography every day, when real relationships are affected and users become increasingly trapped in the loneliness of their vortex of lust, do they consider getting help for their addiction.

But how? Who to turn to for help?

Many psychotherapists are still not trained to recognize this disorder.

A combination of qualified therapists and a supportive self-help group has developed. The first step could be to seek contact with “Sexaholics Anonymous” ([www.anonyme-sexsuechtige.de](http://www.anonyme-sexsuechtige.de)). Sexaholics Anonymous informs people about the options that are available nearby. Self-therapy offers little prospect of overcoming the addiction, because unlike, for example, alcohol addiction, a “zero diet” is not the desired goal when it comes to sexuality, since it is a primal drive that cannot be suppressed. Rather,

the aim is to rediscover a natural, healthy sexuality in the context of interpersonal relationships and love.

Aha. If that’s the current reality, then I’ve been living on a different planet until now. But now I understand why some people have difficulty with the Third Mindfulness Training.

But what is even more worrying is that children and young people are competing with each other to show pornographic content on their smartphones. In addition to instructions for suicide, pornographic content is being passed from child to child in messenger apps without filters, without Internet via Airdrop or Bluetooth in school playgrounds. Pornography is first consumed at an average age of eleven. And the age of real sexual contact has, for the first time, risen to 16 years. It is precisely in these five years, in which young people’s sexual preferences manifest, that teenagers consume degenerate sexuality. Unprotected by the state, which has not yet been able to enforce protection for young people from online pornography.

To remain silent or speak out? Write about it or pretend nothing is happening? I talked

about these things on stage at the EIAB Winter Retreat as part of the presentation on the Third of the Five Mindfulness Trainings. Even though my contribution wasn’t soft and cuddly mindful or cosy and joyful, it was warmly received. It is probably better to be aware of the reality than to focus exclusively on the joyful little things in life. Humanity needs Bodhisattvas of True Love more than ever! If we want to continue beautifully, if we want to do everything we can to protect children from sexual abuse and abusive sexuality, if we want to support friends in protecting the integrity of their partnerships and family, and society, then a quick look at the reality of online pornography is arguably a moment well spent.

On a smile walk, giving away a gentle smile, practicing peace with each step, is wonderful. When it comes to true love, deep listening, deeper listening, and even deeper listening can be the beginning of healing.

“Nice weather today!”

*A lotus for all readers*

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**Marion Mayer**





# Meditation and Inner Wisdom – in everyday life

This text is about how to apply what we learn at the EIAB to everyday life, and how to develop a wholesome attitude towards oneself and the world. The retreat I attended at the end of May was called Meditation and Inner Wisdom, and was led by Thay Phap An and Sister Song Nghiem. In his Dharma talks, Thay Phap An often referred to the 16 exercises of mindful breathing from the Anapanasatti Sutra.

It may sound complicated, but it is quite simple. In – out, deep – slow, calm – ease, smile – release. Present moment – wonderful moment. You have probably sung this short song at the EIAB. And perhaps you have succeeded in breathing more deeply and calmly, and in smiling. This little exercise is very easy to do in everyday life: you stop what you are doing, your thoughts and judgements and breathe consciously and smile. And you are free the moment you let go of all judgements, regrets, and expectations with this smile, and say to yourself: This is it. Aha, right now this is it. Thay Phap An likes to call this small realisation: mere recognition. That means pure recognition. And it can be a form of inner wisdom that guides us through the day, and through our lives.

Pure recognition. Without judgment, regret, appraisal, expectation, comparison. I would like to describe how this works in my everyday life and how it contributes to a healing state of mind. I am a sixty-year-old woman who six years ago was quite sporty, adventurous, helpful and liked to be intellectually challenged. For the past six years, I have been a chronically ill woman who is significantly impaired both physically and mentally. So now the challenge is to

accept the illness and impairments, to adjust my self-image to: this is it. It is no longer possible for me to go hiking, not even to go for a stroll. But I can still walk, even if only a short distance, for example 300 metres. It is no longer possible for me to concentrate and be active for a long time, so I can't take part in all the activities at a retreat, for example. But I can still participate! And at home I can still look after myself. I enjoy every breath, every step on the stairs, every little activity I can do on my own: making coffee in the little espresso pot, then drinking the coffee on the terrace, holding the hot cup, smelling the delicious coffee, tasting it, drinking it. Preparing and eating three meals, practising the five contemplations before eating and chewing each bite mindfully and enjoying my food.

Another occasion when I find the practice of mindfulness, and the mindset it creates, healing is this: To see what state the liver metastases are in, I have a regular scan, i.e. imaging, every three months. I have an appointment and go to the radiology department. Before that, I don't succumb to the danger or the habit of driving myself crazy, as I hear some fellow patients do. I register, fill out a few forms, and wait my turn. Then I am pushed into the tube. This can take up to 30 minutes and can also be quite noisy. I already know this, I breathe calmly and slowly, I stay calm and composed and tell myself: this is it. Then I have to wait again. Throughout the whole process, before I arrive, while I am in the tube, while I am waiting, I do not think. I practise emptiness and 'not thinking' as best I can. I perceive what I can perceive through my senses in this moment, without thinking anything.

Because no matter what I think about it in advance: it will not influence the result of the imaging, but only upset or worry me. Then my name is called, and I go into the doctor's room and the doctor tells me what he has seen: what condition the liver metastases are in. And that's it. Heart and mind remain open, moment to moment. Pure recognition is possible.

So I enjoy the life I have left. Because the illness is malignant and incurable, and this current state may not last much longer. This sounds tragic, but it applies to all of us: we are all mortal and grow older and become ill. Suddenly or insidiously, deterioration can set in, and sooner or later death comes. Impermanence is life, life is impermanence. Everything changes, from moment to moment. Being anchored in the present moment with body, mind and senses gives us the opportunity to enjoy this moment: present moment – wonderful moment.



**Anne von der Lühé**

True Inclusiveness of the Ocean  
is bound to the monastics of the eiab and all  
Dharma friends with love and gratitude.

# Cologne Sangha at the Aachener Weiher

## A Sangha that accompanies my human and spiritual development

During Advent 2022, I thought “Next summer will come for sure”. In the year ahead, I planned to stop going to the city every week during the summer months for the sangha meeting. Every now and then I felt like skipping a Wednesday meditation to enjoy being in nature. I also wanted to concentrate my time and energy more on my own and the Windeck-Bach community’s development – in terms of “art, nature and mindfulness”. Almost immediately after I had had this thought and slept on it for a few nights, there was no more doubt in my mind that now was the right time to hand over leadership of the “Cologne Sangha at Aachener Weiher”.

I immediately let the Sangha know of my decision and asked that we all use the next three months to consider what each of us can contribute to continuing the Sangha in a new way.

### Founding and leadership

One year after the “StadtRaum Cologne” came into being in the immediate vicinity of my then flat in the “Belgian Quarter” in 1997, a

meditation group in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh was set up by Werner Heidenreich, Gisela Sellmons and Ulla Coenenberg. Gisela led and shaped it; I learned from her and the well-meaning group how leadership can work. This sangha became my weekly anchor and accompanied me through my everyday life. Not even moving to Windeck-Bach in 2001, about 80km away, could stop me from attending weekly, unless illness or other adverse circumstances prevented me.

The intensive practice and the subsequent informal get-together in the nearby “Bauturm-Cafe” were like a “step into the future” for me. Here I experienced how mindful conversation, enabled us to share experiences and resolve difficulties and challenges in a supportive way. It filled me with confidence to see that there was no blaming or judging. Everyone looked at themselves. For me this group became a matrix for “life outside”, in the so-called everyday world.

With Gisela’s support and the consent of the sangha, I took over the leadership of

the sangha in 2014 – after joining the Order of Interbeing. A few interested people volunteered to facilitate and guide the meditation on Wednesday morning and took turns. On an impulse, the recitation of the 5 Mindfulness Trainings was included monthly (every 1st Wednesday). Everyone was able to participate and contribute their own ideas, but when things got difficult and there was unrest in the group, they asked for leadership. We were not very used to dealing with conflicts in the group without leadership.

Also in 2014, the “Windecker Sangha” was founded in our house and garden in Bach, which still meets weekly to this day, and I am still involved in leading it too.

### Growth and Communication

There were also times when “only” two of us meditated. We freed ourselves from the idea that there weren’t enough of us and that a sangha meeting would only be worthwhile with several people. On the contrary, we felt





nonetheless challenged to continue walking the Sangha path.

A notice in the EIAB brought a number of new members. Other Sangha friends also found us through the summer retreats there. The group grew. New structures became necessary and helped us to find a new, more transparent communication structure:

We founded the “Sofa Group” and the “Big Sangha”, which took place alternately on the last Wednesday of the month. The “Sofa Group” was open to everyone, and everyone had the opportunity to contribute their own concerns and ideas – concerning the

sangha. In the “Sofa Group” we collected and discussed the topics; In the “Big Sangha” the preliminary considerations were presented, and important points decided in the “Sangha process” before being implemented.

### **The pandemic as a challenge and opportunity**

During the corona pandemic, two different groups met:

One met for meditation – in accordance with official regulations – outside in the city garden or meditated via ZOOM. Those who disagreed with the regulations stayed

in the meditation room of the Rigpa centre for about a year and a half. They then created the “living room sangha” in private homes, so that the other group could once again use the meditation room.

There was no agreement on how to deal with the Corona rules. Many were convinced that their own view and resulting behaviour was correct. It was a challenge that the sangha seemed unable to meet.

For a while, the “second-body practice” enabled the two groups to keep in touch via telephone. I kept up regular phone sharing throughout the Corona period with





two members of the living room sangha. I still felt connected to them, why shouldn't I just because we had different views about Corona and how to deal with it? Even in the face of these challenging circumstances, my appreciation, inner connection, and interest for Sangha friends remained. Above all, it was reassuring to know that we were willing to keep in touch and talk, and we kept our faith in the practice of sharing. We really wanted to understand each other and not get stuck in concepts of right and wrong.

Once the rules were relaxed, I occasionally attended the meditation meetings of the "living room sangha". I realized that a new sangha had come into being and felt equally comfortable here too. I felt connected to both groups equally, both played a significant part in my development.

Two and a half years later, five members from both groups met for the first time for a mindful sharing. A sangha friend was bell master and facilitated so the hurt and disappointment could also be shared and mutually understood in a safe space.

All the friends from the living room sangha came to the tea ceremony and my farewell party, as well as the 25th anniversary at the end of May 2023, and we celebrated together. It felt right. It was a gift and deep happiness at the same time.

### 25th anniversary of the "Cologne Sangha at the Aachener Weiher"

The sangha now knew of my 'retirement', but the question of how to carry on remained. For example, I could imagine a management committee. Surprisingly, two crucial hints came from the EIAB: Sr. Bi Nghiem said that Thay hadn't appointed a specific successor either, and Thay Phap Xa said: "The sangha has grown up, they're already doing it!". I passed this impulse on to our "sofa group" and a very invigorating and hopeful mood developed. The day of our 25th anniversary was the first event that was organised by the sangha as a whole.

Lucky coincidences and surprising gaps in schedules made it possible for Thay Phap Xa, Br. Khiet Tam and Alexander from Hamburg

to come to Cologne on May 24, 2023 for our 25th anniversary, which was a special honour, and great support for us. Thay Phap Xa accompanied our process of re-discovery by offering a Dharma talk followed by a question & answer session. With a lotus bow, I "officially" handed over leadership to the whole sangha.

### Outlook

Has leadership now become superfluous? When things go well, each individual can take responsibility and has the opportunity to help shape the sangha, depending on how much they want or can do; everyone on an equal footing, with one vote, and decisions made on the basis of consensus.

Surprisingly, up until now I have continued to attend every week, even though summer is close and I'm already busy scything the tall grass or with the gardening. I don't want to miss a Wednesday. For me it's an enrichment to experience everyone in their uniqueness, with all the ups and downs that life can bring. I am grateful for this togetherness, for the mutual understanding, for the lived practice of mindfulness.

Now I am a participant like everyone else. With my contribution I want to serve the sangha. I feel satisfied and grateful for the time I was able to lead the sangha, combined with the confidence that new paths will be found. Now the potential of the sangha for further spiritual growth can unfold; as a sangha friend put it: "Now the 'becoming' begins".

Recently, we read excerpts from Thays' book "Understanding Our Mind", a text about "store consciousness", which continues to work throughout the night. Statements such as: "I'll sleep on it" or from our friend from Spain: "I'll talk about it with my pillow tonight" and: "Courage is fear that has prayed" were collected in the sharing.

May our collective store consciousness continue to work for us and bring further ideas and impulses to help us wake up...

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**Annette Schramm**

True River of Great Compassion  
Windeck-Bach, June 2023



# Wake Up Your Artist

**A bow and a smile to all the participants from this year's Wake Up Your Artist retreat. And a bow of appreciation to the EIAB for holding us. Like a tree, we grow a little each year; a new set of buds appear on the branches and get nourished by the gifts of mindfulness and creativity. And I'm a bud too, as I open through the week, inspired by the buds around me.**

It feels like a good metaphor in many ways; I certainly feel the growth during the week; from the first circle, expectant, unknown, hopeful, not sure...to the closing be-in; closer, rested, inspired and ready. As a facilitator, I feel myself nourished too. I'm not sure where to put myself in the image, one of the gardeners maybe? Maybe a neighbouring tree who once had the idea that growing more trees would be a good idea!?

*Thank you EIAB for letting us grow.*

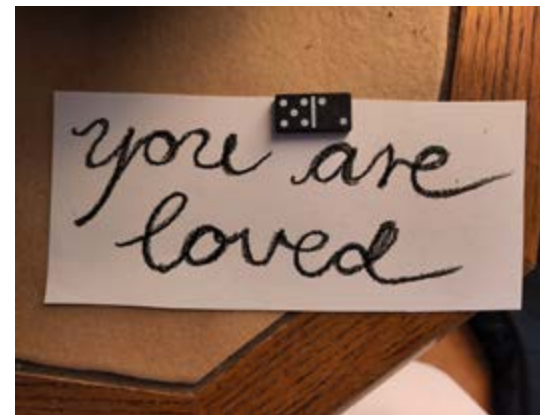
The courses, WUYA (Wake Up Your Artist) and TRUYA (Trust Your Artist – the all ages retreat we do) follows 5 characters that make up the artist: The Inner Zen Master, The Inner Child, The Self Compassionate One, The Art Adventurer and The Art Activist. If you come (you'd be so welcome!) you would experience meditations, contemplations,

exercises, songs, games ... to encourage these parts. Thay's legacy is made of this I feel; each character brings another picture of the Plum Village founder to my mind; sitting in meditation, walking and smiling with a child, putting a hand to his heart, drawing a calligraphy circle and sitting at breakfast with Martin Luther King; maybe other images come to you?

A quote we use in each retreat is from Thay's words on art, "We can", he says "awaken the collective consciousness of the people...the painter, the architect, the film maker, the artist can do that"

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Joe Holtaway (Facilitator)





### *My 30<sup>th</sup> birthday is near – what to do?*

Follow my heart's desire for colour, creativity and mindful connection.

The inner child; climbing trees, dancing freely, playing joyfully, feeling safe connection. That moment of looking at others rolling down the hill, laughter bubbling forth like a water spring, true freedom drawn from nature – children simply do.

Yet specs of mud peek up at me from between the grassy covering – what if... can I really lie down, roll in the grass? Is this silly? Are others watching? What will the onlooking neighbours think? So many questions as an adult. Then my playful inner child rolls free – less questions a greater simplicity of feeling my body and giggling as I too roll free down the hill.

Today I try to bring forth the question; what may help me roll forward with the free flow of my child's heart and desires, to nurture my being amidst life's hills, troughs and valleys.



Be free. Bee wild. The authenticity of wild horses. A quality I openly embrace as I bask in the midst of a healing song circle where warmth and comfort surround me. This feeling flows through me and around me like a gentle flowing river. Enjoying the sounds of harmonious singing, a sense of understanding, love and soul deep connectedness. The wonderful giggles flowing free, my heart so fulfilled hearing sounds of horses, hoofbeats, song and joy. This moment encapsulated my desired birthday dream – without planning or preparing. After the retreat listening back to beautiful melodies from this song of a lifetime, my horse – my spirit, next to me in the field raises her head as she hears this song. She too feels shared joy.

Colours spread on paper. No grades or end result, simply watching creativity unfold all



around us. A dash of humour to transform challenging thoughts.

*Breathing in, I see my trash  
(negative thoughts)*

*Breathing out, I watch my trash  
transform... To mud (We need compost  
for new lotus flowers, colours and  
thoughts to blossom)*

*Listening to shared poems. Repeating a  
line all together we chime;*

*"Keep going I love you"*

*"Hold your own"*

*"Keep going your doing great!"*

The uplifting voice resonates and repeats like the vibration of a gently strummed guitar to the soul. These voices encourage me along and along and along.. "Keep going your doing great!"

Sharing and listening. Hearing about others dreams, some akin to mine and others beautifully different and inspiring. Celebrating diversity no longer striving to fit in or be like them, rather just be me, us, together. I am a free flow of colours, separate yet intertwined, mud, flowers, rain, sunshine and fresh air.

I carry the energy forward – taking inspiration from my inner playful child – go play, if you fall hop back up – life's a playground. Climb a tree, roll around on the floor, swing, play, be wild, cry, hug.

*Be beautiful. Be you.*

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**Aisling Miklis** (Participant)

Wake Up Your Artist is a creativity and mindfulness retreat for young adults facilitated by **Larissa Mazbough** and **Joe Holtaway**



# Transformations in the EIAB

## Transformation 1. The neck

In 2009 I had a cycling accident. After the accident I couldn't move my neck for a while. My life stopped for a moment. At that time I did not know the practice of stopping and looking deeply. I wanted to get well as soon as possible. Being a yoga practitioner, I decided to heal my neck by doing daily yoga exercises for the neck and a few months later my neck was back to normal. I could not believe it. I was so happy. I thought I had magically cured my neck. I continued to do yoga. But over time, the neck pain came back.

In 2019 I meditated with my friend, Arina using one of Thay Phap An's meditation recordings. It was a warm summer day. At one point in the meditation I felt as if someone had put a bottle of hot water on my neck. My neck felt warm, even hot. This warmth in the neck was very pleasant. And after this meditation the neck pain was gone, mystically. I could not believe it. I was happy. I thought I had magically cured my neck. I continued to meditate. But as time went by, the neck pain came back.

Recently at the EIAB, I understood the connection between these two events and the reason that why the neck pain was coming back to me.

Since I discovered the EIAB, I come here often and every time I leave this place, I am a little nicer, more joyful, more happier and more compassionate person. My last visit was 3 weeks ago. I was on a retreat called "Meditation: the door to inner wisdom" led by two wonderful teachers – Thay Phap An and Sister Song Nghiem. I love them both very much. They are my teachers.

Whenever I listen to Sister Song Nghiem or do the morning exercises with her, I feel joyful, alive, vital and connected to her, to the brothers and sisters, to the people around me, to the nature and to humanity. Her joy

of life, her sense of humour, her vitality and her love for people are extraordinary and contagious.

When I listen to Thay Phap An's Dharma talks, I always feel that I don't need to use my head. His words go straight into my heart and I feel that I fully understand the Dharma teachings.

The last time he gave a Dharma he talked about the structure of our consciousness, about energetic blockages in our bodies and healing. "Our mind is always wondering. It doesn't have fixed attention. It is always grasping from one object to another. It jumps like monkeys and we never finish any task. That is the main problem, that we cannot be happy. And because we are jumping like monkeys, we have a lot of blockages in our body and mind. An energy blockage is a tension in the body, a feeling of not being satisfied, of having pain, sorrow, anger, fear, or our traumas. Meditation is one of the ways to release the energy blockage." These words of Thay Phap An stayed with me.

What I understood was that through mindfulness practice we can dissolve and transform our blockages, our sickness, our traumas, our pain. I can even transform my neck pain! And the practice of mindfulness

involves both the passive and the active transformation.

Passive transformation can be achieved through meditation by sinking the energy down and allowing the experience to be as it is, to be accepted.

Active transformation is achieved through the recycling of energy, through positive cultivation, through the practice of building a new perception, a new view of reality. It is essential to look deeply into our perception.

If I want to transform the block of pain it is important to ask myself what the perception of life was when I got this block. And then it is important to find the opposite perception.

For a moment I am going back in time. I remember very clearly that I was running so fast until the day of the accident in 2009. I felt that I had to do everything fast in order to be successful. My perception of life was "live as fast as possible". I remember that when I was a young girl, my father told me to stop running and to start living life more slowly, to take time for the things, for people, for him. He told me that he had a friend, who ran as fast as I did and he died at the age of 40. I ignored my father's advice until his death, which has happened in February 2017.





Interestingly, that I also discovered mindfulness practice in 2017. I came to the summer retreat and for the first time I realised that I was running terribly in life. Everything I was doing in my life was with a spark of rushing. And here at the EIAB, I have stopped for the first time.

And I now stop more often.

I realised that the practice of yoga and meditation was a passive transformation of my neck pain. What I was not doing was: active transformation or active cultivation. I understood that the mind was playing a trick on me. While my neck was already healthy and healed, the mind was running on its habit energy. And, as soon as a mental stress came

into my life, my mind would direct me to the deeply familiar neck pain. So I would focus on the neck pain in order not to feel the mental stress.

The new reality was that the accident had happened a long time ago. My neck was now healthy. This was an active cultivation. The way out of the pain was to recognise the old thought pattern and to cultivate a new way for my brain: "The accident is over now. I am safe. My neck is healthy".

For the last 3 weeks I have had almost no neck pain and when it visits me in a moment of stress I say to it: "Welcome, my dear neck pain. I am fine now. The accident is over. I am safe. My neck is healthy now".

### Message from the neck

*You are doing so well,  
But I want you to excel.  
Live awake and smile to me,  
I am a voice inside your body and mind  
"tree",  
Asking you to stop and to look deeply at  
me.*

*Move slowly, slowly in your life  
Enjoy every step – you are alive!  
Beauty lives at your doorstep..*

*Write and walk,  
Eat and talk,  
Look and see.  
We are one, you and I.*





## Transformation 2. The friend

A few months ago I went on a retreat with the beautiful theme: “The Inner Child”. I came with a friend who was coming to the EIAB for the first time. She was excited and hopeful that we would have a good and relaxing time here.

But the experience of “meeting the inner child” was different, heavy and emotional. She told me that she had done a lot of therapy and she thought that she was healed. But after a day here she was deeply confused. The silence in the evenings and during meals did not help her to relax. In silence our inner radio speaks louder. The next day she told me that she was leaving.

She was struggling. She couldn't sleep well. She felt alone here. She admitted that this experience was the opposite of what she had expected.

I listened to my friend and felt sad that she had decided to leave. And I also felt shame and guilt for forgetting my first visit to the EIAB, for not helping her, for not telling her that it can be hard work “to meet the inner child”, for not talking to her, for leaving her alone with this experience. I apologised and asked her to do one thing before she went home: to talk to Sister Song Nghiem.

She agreed.

An hour later I saw her with a sweet smile on her face. I asked her when she was going to talk to Sister Song Nghiem and she told me that she had already talked to her.

“What did she tell you?” – I asked. “I don't remember. I think I know much of what she told me. But the way she listened and spoke was so touching, compassionate and contagious that I could no longer be sad and angry. I finally smiled and relaxed. I have arrived”, – my friend said.

“I am so happy that I stayed until the end of the retreat. After talking to sister Song Nghiem, I slept well and felt more joyful and relaxed. I think I will come back here with my children” – said my friend on the way back.

## Transformation 3. Myself.

2017 was a special year for me. I was extremely angry. I was angry about many things: about the recent death of my father, about failing at work, about failing to communicate with my sister who lives in Russia, about failing to be a kind and compassionate mother. I remember coming back from a two-week holiday in Spain with my daughter and feeling angry, unhappy and tired. How is it possible to have so many wonderful things in life, like a child, a house, a job, my living mother, a wonderful holiday, and still to feel empty and unsatisfied? I did not understand myself at that time. What did I want from life and where was the happiness?

My daughter wanted to help me and asked Google for help using 3 keywords: vegan, teen programme and relaxation. It seemed that Google knew what we needed and directed us to the EIAB website. I took an extra day off at work and came to the mindfulness centre in Germany.

I remember being angry here too. I spread my anger all over the registration room. Here I was not happy with the room.

Apparently, I was not the only one complaining. I discovered it on 31<sup>st</sup> of December. Sister Song Nghiem was giving a Dharma talk. I remember, she was very sad. She shared that almost all the senior monastics were ill. She was the only senior sister who was healthy at that time. New young brothers and sisters had just recently arrived from Vietnam. Their English was not good yet and they had no experience of giving a retreat. And now they had to do all the work. They had to take care of more than 300 people. They did their best, they were kind, compassionate, they worked very hard, but people kept complaining.

And she did not know what to do but to share it with us, to share what was in her heart. She stood in front of us and she shared her love for the brothers and the sisters, her love for people, her love for mindfulness practice. She shared how difficult it was for the young brothers and sisters to organise this retreat. She shared about her pain, her suffering, and her wisdom.

I have never experienced such a deep sharing. It was deep, sad, honest and powerful. I could not stop crying. I was not the only one. I did not know what was happening in the background of the retreat. I felt so much compassion for every brother and sister. And I was deeply grateful for the sharing. It changed me. Immediately. I stopped complaining and I made a vow: to be kind, compassionate and to choose my words carefully when I speak.

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Olga Eliseeva



# Looking Deeply

*Eyelids sink  
Trust  
in the flow of the breath  
Sinking  
into stillness*

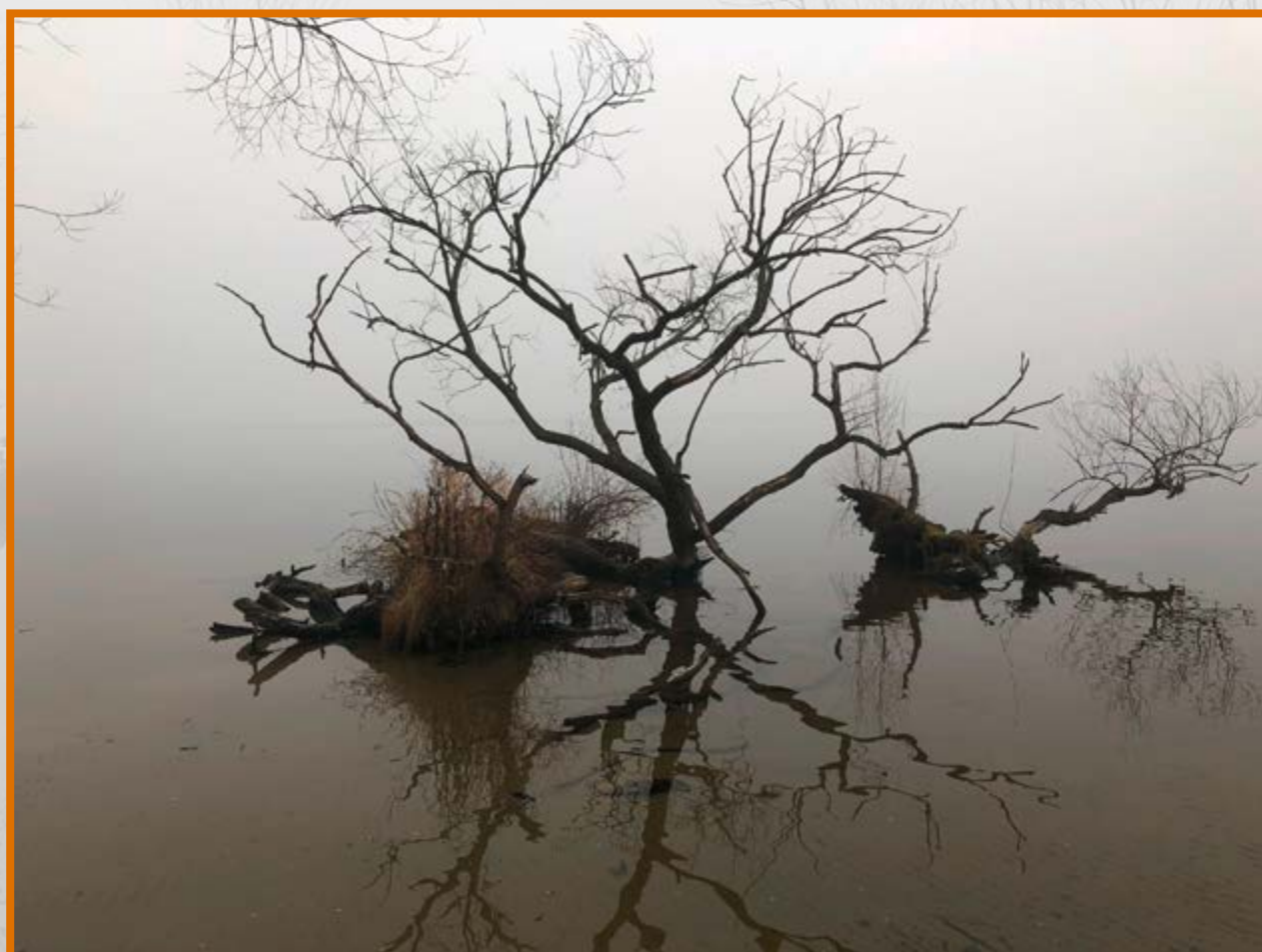
*In-sights  
arise  
light, dark  
this is because that is  
Revelations*

*When pictures are seen  
the seer  
remains  
at the centre*

*Peace*

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**Bettina Romhardt**





# Travels in Vietnam 2023

In the middle of our three-week holiday to Vietnam, we travelled by car to Hue, the old imperial city, which turned into a special highlight of the trip. I have been visiting the EIAB in Waldbröl for eight years and wanted to visit the Tu Hieu Pagoda monastery in Hue, the place where Thích Nhất Hạnh grew up as a monk and where he died. With the loving help of Sister Song Nghiem, I had been able to prepare the trip before leaving Germany. She helped make contact with a Vietnamese friend of the EIAB (Ngo The Anh) who lives in Germany but has contact with Buddhist brothers and sisters in Hue. This ultimately, via WhatsApp, brought me into contact with Kien, a Buddhist friend who for a long time provided Thay with medicine.

Kien organised a special one-on-one tour by a nun who had lived in Waldbröl in Germany

a few years before. The monastery had a very special atmosphere. The circle closed when I celebrated the Buddha's birthday, the Vesak festival, in Waldbröl on 11 June 2023, and the 60th anniversary of the death of the monk Thích Quảng Đức, who set himself on fire to oppose the murders and persecution, and the oppression of the Buddhist majority. He also lived/worked in Hue and there is a memorial to him there.

I played my version of "I breathe in, I breathe out" on the guitar for the nuns as a thank you, it was very emotional. After which we ate lunch mindfully in silence.

In the afternoon, Kien then gave us a tour of the treasures of his city. A friend of his showed us around the region on the back of his motor scooter. I spoke English with

the friend, but with Kien communication was primarily through Google translation, a very helpful tool. I am so grateful for the hospitality; we were blessed in many ways. He showed us wonderful vegan Buddhist restaurants (An Hien Garden House; the owners are connected to Thay's teachings and PlumVillage, Thay Ph ap An has also been there), and I got to taste cafe mui, a delicious, regional salty cream coffee, as well as the best soup I ever had in the early morning. A big thank you from the bottom of my heart to him and everyone who made this possible.

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## Dr. Manfred Göhler

*has been practising meditation in the Buddhist Tradition of Thich Naht Hanh for ten years and feels particularly connected with the EIAB. He studied psychology, is a pantomime and variety artist, yoga-teacher and a passionate guitar player.*

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# "This is, because that is"

## Thoughts from the beach – not just about singing

The day before leaving on holiday, we received an email from Sister Bi Nghiem asking us if we would like to contribute to the EIAB magazine. We gladly accepted the invitation.

But what should we write about? Last time we had already written about the beneficial effects of mantric chanting and how it can touch us inside and lead us into meditation. Then again, "last time" was some years ago, and so we could take the earlier article as a template and publish it again in the same or similar way.

After all, Thich Nhat Hanh has also reformulated the same thoughts again and again in his lectures and books. For example, the image of the cloud that can never die because it is part of the eternal cycle of life and eventually ends up in Thay's tea.

I'm sure there were people at every lecture who heard this thought for the first time. For others, perhaps hearing it repeatedly led to deepening insights. And still others - including myself - may have experienced boredom and realised that their minds always want to hear something new.

Another idea was to write about how Susanne and I ended up giving courses at the EIAB. A story about coincidences and how one thing led to another. And yet another possibility was to tell about the genesis of individual songs that were written and composed in Waldbröl.

So, there were enough ideas, but they just didn't want to flow onto paper. Today is deadline day, and still nothing has been written. But on a long walk on the beach, a multitude of thoughts suddenly formed into

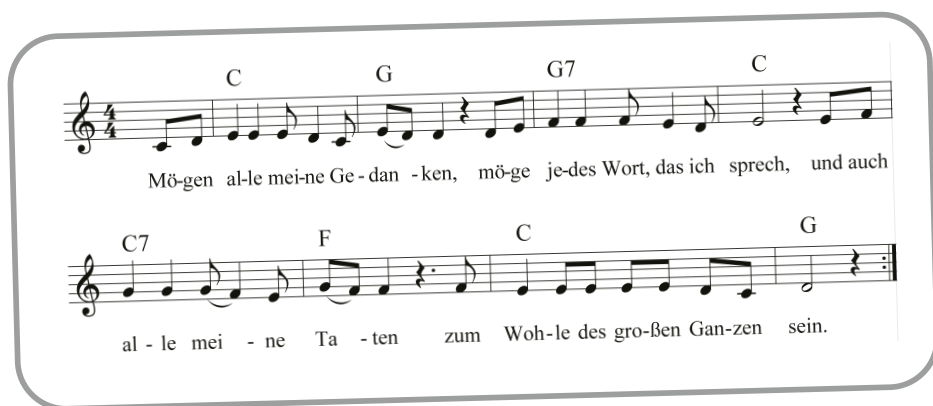
the finished picture. Now the article "only" needs to be transferred from my head to the paper or computer keys. And that is what I would like to try now ...

Once again, we are spending our holiday in a holiday flat in southern Tuscany, in a beautiful pine forest directly by the sea. Having been here several times before, we don't have much fear of missing out on any of the sights in the area. So, we let ourselves drift through the days, from moment to moment. We read a lot, have long conversations, look into the trees or at the sea and let thoughts come and go. Almost every day we start with an online meditation, followed by conversation. This morning, the conversation led to the question of the meaning of life.

Later on the beach, the question still preoccupied me and the thought arose: does







me a while to understand that it was not only about being silent, but above all about allowing inner silence to arise.

This misunderstanding, however, led me to talk to the teacher there, Karl Riedl, and I told him about the healing mantric singing and the course activities of Susanne and myself. Karl then invited us to participate in the upcoming weekend celebrating the 10th anniversary of Intersein.

a drop of water ask itself the meaning of its existence (if it could ask)? Its task is obvious. The drop is a tiny part of the sea and thus of the earth's water cycle. Without this water, there would be no life on this planet. The task of water and thus of every single drop is to make life possible. And already Thay's image of the cloud and the tea came alive in me.

Why do we humans ask ourselves about the meaning of our existence so often? Isn't it just as obvious? To live as a human being, and to make life possible. The fact that I exist and am sitting here by the sea today is the result of an incomprehensible sequence of events. And if even one of them was missing, I wouldn't be here. "This is, because that is. This is not, because that is not. This is born, because that is born." - this too is a thought of Thay's that I have often heard, and which now comes alive in me on a deeper level.

In 1883, a woman in New York died of malaria at the age of 34. Only two years before, she had come to New York from Bremerhaven with her husband and (presumably) three boys. She belonged to the group of about 3 million people who (according to Wikipedia) emigrated from Austria-Hungary to the USA in the years 1876 to 1910. Today one would probably speak of economic migrants. The youngest child, who was born after arriving in New York, was not even a year old when her mother died.

The woman who died was my great-grandmother and the little girl was my grandmother, my father's mother. My great-grandfather saw no possibility of raising this little girl on top of his three other children, so he sent the baby back to Europe, where she grew up with childless relatives. Thinking further: if my great-grandmother hadn't

died so early, my grandmother wouldn't have grown up in Europe, and I wouldn't be here today either. "This is, because that is".

Just as a drop of water is part of the sea, every human being, and I too, are part of an infinite stream of life. A product of creation as well as a creator myself. No more, but also no less. I have an effect with everything I do, as well as with everything I do not do. I have an effect solely through my being. I cannot escape this mode of action. What I can try to do is to shape the way I work and contribute.

So many thoughts and insights have arisen and grown during this holiday. And even though I have formulated some of them here and they have come together in my mind, they have been influenced by a variety of factors. For example, impulses from books and lectures that I have read or heard now or at some point, conversations with Susanne or the meditation group and much more. And it took the quiet time and doing nothing here for a deeper insight to emerge from things I perhaps already knew in my head. Here too, "This is, because that is".

This could be the end of the article. But maybe someone is interested in the events that brought Susanne and me to Waldbröl. Ultimately, one could say, it was the result of a misunderstanding. Susanne gave me a meditation week at Intersein Centre in the Bavarian Forest as birthday present in 2009. I took my guitar with me, as I had heard that there was also singing there. The fact this was a "silent retreat" did not stop me from singing a song for myself on the guitar or sitting at the piano during breaks. Singing during a week of silence did not seem to me to be a contradiction at all. After all, singing is not talking, and the songs could support my meditation process wonderfully. It took

One evening there we sang a single song for 20 minutes, then sat in silence for the same amount of time immediately afterwards. "May all my thoughts, may every word I speak and all my deeds be for the good of the greater whole." - so says Susanne's song (sheet music and audio sample at [www.soviellhimmel.de/#Moegen-alle-meine-Gedanken](http://www.soviellhimmel.de/#Moegen-alle-meine-Gedanken)). Sister Bi Nghiem, who was also at Intersein that weekend, then invited us to Waldbröl.

Since then we have often been to Intersein and the EIAB in Waldbröl. Also at some of the big German retreats with Thich Nath Hanh, where we were allowed to participate as "singing stuff". This was a great gift for us because it brought singing and meditation together. Something that, in our eyes, is wonderfully fruitful and mutually reinforcing. At the same time, we came into deeper contact with Thay's teachings. This in turn inspired us in many ways in our lives, including writing new songs. And finally it brought me to the thoughts that formed on the beach over the past few days.

Tonight another song emerged from all this, which will surely find its way into our courses soon. Here are the lyrics:

*"This is, cause that is. This is not, cause that is not.  
This is born, cause that is born.  
This dies, cause that dies.  
All is connected, nothing can be without the other.  
All is connected, nothing is ever alone."*

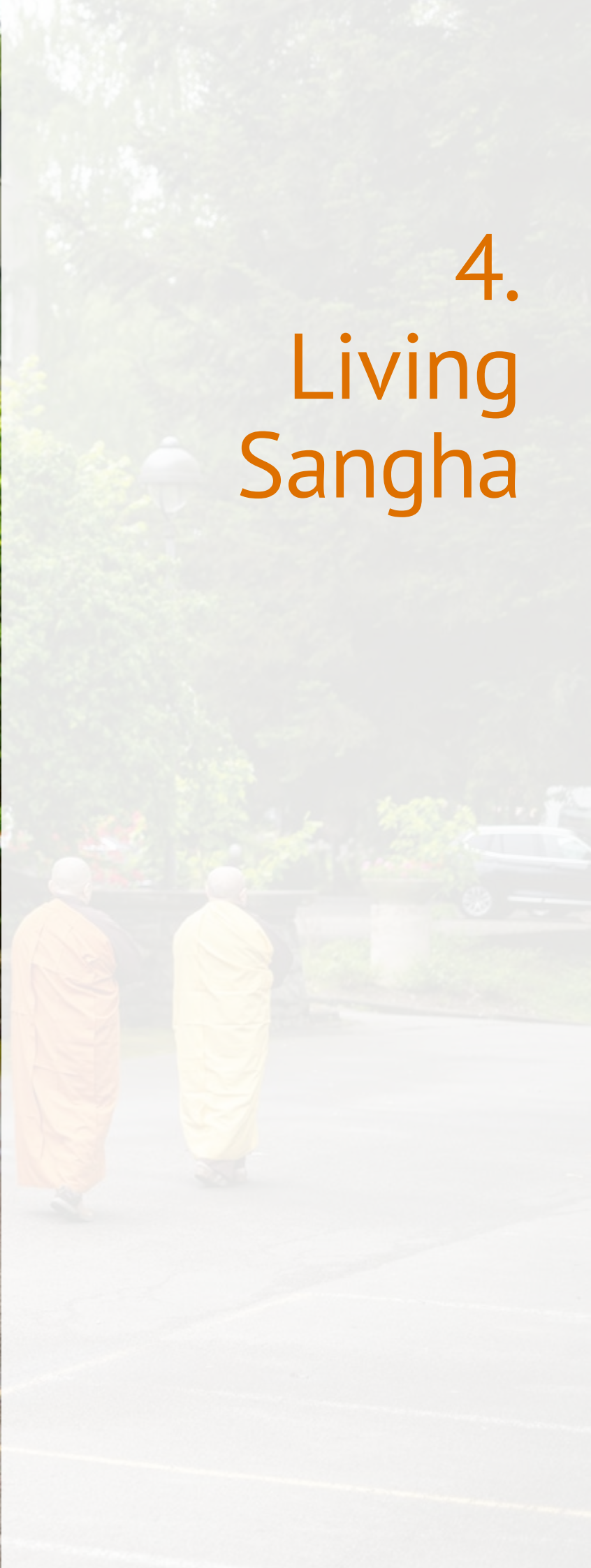
**Klaus Nagel and Susanne Mössinger (Tutzing)**  
song writers and course leaders, offer regular courses at, amongst other EIAB and Intersein Centre, which allow participants to experience the power and joy of mindful and healing singing.  
[www.soviellhimmel.de](http://www.soviellhimmel.de)







# 4. Living Sangha





# Taking Care of our Relationships – The Wisdom of the Dharma

From 31 March to 3 April 2023, Thay Phap An and Sister Song Nghiem led a course on „Taking Care of Our Relationships“, which examined our relationships with people, with the world around us and with the whole cosmos. In the guided meditations and Dharma talks, we were able to explore, deepen and feel all the different facets of interbeing. The guided meditations opened the way to physical relaxation and mindful

awareness to help us open our minds and hearts to the teachings of the Dharma. The primary aim was not to grasp, understand and implement the teachings intellectually; rather, the meditations led us into a deep bodily experience, of sensitivity to and resonance with the inner silence present in all of us, even if we often lose sight of it in everyday life. Inner peace and balance could arise, allowing us to open to insights

and transformation. In meditation, we first turned to our relationship with our mother. We visualised her – her face, her voice, her hands, her movements.

We called all her good qualities to mind and smiled gratefully. We also learned how to recognise these qualities in ourselves, to feel the continuation of our mother in us. With compassion and gratitude, we also





reminded ourselves of her difficult qualities – do we also see them in ourselves? With self-compassion we can accept them. We did the same exercise with our father – his physical presence, the memory of him. His good and his difficult qualities, and how they are present in us. With gratitude and compassion, we smiled at him. Then we focused on someone important to us. Perhaps we have come to the course because of this relationship? What good, what difficult qualities do we see in the person? What triggers affection and gratitude, and what leads to irritation, insecurity, anger, fear? We follow these feelings with compassion. Now we return to our body, focus on the breath and the lower abdomen. We imagine a tree in a storm, blowing to and fro, its trunk stable and its roots grounded. And we too are securely anchored in our body, our breath. We let go of all images, relax and breathe.

## Taking Care of Our Relationships (Summary of the Talks)

In interpersonal relationships, formations gradually accumulate from countless interactions. Misunderstandings can arise that are triggered by seeds in our subconscious („store consciousness“) or that of the other person. Formations from previous interactions are stored there; behaviour patterns learned in life or copied from others can be activated. We have all suffered wounds when life did not go according to our plans or needs. Expecting others to fulfil our (unexpressed) needs or projecting our desires onto them is what the Buddha calls confusion or ignorance. We all harbour expectations about some aspect of our lives, and when our wishes and hopes are not fulfilled, we react with frustration, with automatic habit energies.

Such programming already determines our reactions in our relationships with our parents, usually without us being aware of it. We need to learn to calm these habit energies by stopping, practising stillness and mindfulness. Then we can learn to notice and control our automatic impulses. When we gradually learn to understand where our impulses originate, we can accept them with compassion. This protects us from further hurt and from feeling that life is not giving us what we need. So, the ability to pause and reflect on our reactions is very important. Relationships can never be „perfect“, i.e. completely in line with our expectations and desires. But if we nurture our relationships by learning to control our impulses, we will discover how much happiness they can bring. We will recognise how others can also be triggered by seeds in their store consciousness and be able to accept this with compassion. How can we get there? By practising mindfulness, opening our hearts to life with all its difficulties, but also all its beauty. By learning more and more about life, we can develop and become more mature adults. Some Buddhists, thanks to their practice, want to enter the realm of Amitabha Buddha, the Pure Land, after they die, and then return to save all beings. But how can we do that without the experiences of life, both good and bad, which enable us to grow? So, we should look at our relationships with mindfulness, with inner peace and compassion, and become aware of the good memories in our store consciousness so we can begin anew in our relationships.

## Store Consciousness

What is store consciousness, what effect does it have on us and others? The Buddha defines consciousness as the act of being conscious. Simple as it sounds, its meaning is profound. An object falls to the ground because it is conscious of the earth. Both stand in a gravitational relationship to each other, based on their own mass and position. The sun and the moon revolve around each other and thus stand in a relationship of consciousness. Everything that exists manifests in acts of consciousness. Modern physics provides us with many examples of this. Whether we consciously notice it or not, we are aware of another person's behaviour in all its many facets. All our perceptions,





whether positive or less positive, enter store consciousness. First, we perceive something, then we evaluate it – do we like it or dislike it? If the evaluations are negative, resistance gradually arises. If we continue to accumulate negative impressions, then delusions, false ideas (manas) take hold. But our judgements

are based on our own subjective ideas, which have also accumulated in store consciousness. The fixed self becomes our frame of reference. These habitual evaluations or judgements are, however, a delusion, because they are themselves based on the idea of a fixed self, which is nothing

more than a product of our development and itself subject to impermanence. Over time, we judge others according to our own illusory constructs and ideas. When we stop, return to ourselves and practise mindfulness, we gradually recognise the habitual patterns at work in perceiving and judging others,





and the illusion dissolves. We allow other people to be as they are and become a mirror that depicts reality without distortion. We know that their behaviour and traits are impermanent too. This is how wisdom and non-discrimination arise. We learn to transcend the narrow frame of our illusory

self. Things and situations manifest when the conditions are sufficient („conditional arising“), as do our feelings and impulses, and those of other people. Everything that arises, does so because the conditions are sufficient. In our relationships we must therefore learn to continually return to ourselves and take root in ourselves, to look deeply and to understand. This is how compassion for others and ourselves arises. But if we are attached to a certain image of ourselves, we will be unhappy and incapable of compassion; instead, we become trapped in a corset of delusions. It is only when we return to ourselves and practise mindfulness, learn to let go and develop self-love, that we can introduce compassion into our relationships.

### The Three Layers of Perception

We have seen that everything is deeply related to everything else in the universe. Everything is aware of everything else. Within consciousness, we can distinguish three layers or three natures of perception:

1. The nature of mental fabrication: for example, when we do not like the behaviour of someone in a particular situation and immediately relate it to ourselves. This is a projection that comes from our store consciousness. We react as a fixed self, controlled by the imprints in our mind, and view the other person as a fixed self, and quickly impose this act of momentary behaviour (or our view of it) on them as a fixed characteristic.
2. The nature of suchness (relative nature): That which has just manifested and which we have become aware of has arisen due to certain conditions. It has appeared to us in a particular way, yet we are aware that this is only one way of seeing it. We do not know or judge the reasons and conditions behind it. We allow the perception to remain as it is.
3. The nature of true emptiness: With awakened consciousness we know that everything that arises is by nature empty, has no solid substance that we can attribute to it. We can then reflect what we perceive like blank mirrors.

When we practise distinguishing these layers of perception, we attain freedom, we are no longer like puppets hanging on the strings of our habit energies and controlled by them. We are protected from responding automatically to impulses. The practice that allows us to do this and makes this development possible is the act of stopping and practising mindfulness. We become aware of the situation and if we are not able to act calmly and with inner freedom, we can, for example, withdraw from the situation and explain why to the other person. We withdraw to give our thoughts and feelings space, and calm our inner impulses so we can then act more skilfully. Usually, however, we view our relationships from the perspective of mental formations, or fabrications, i.e. our automatic judgements, which in turn lead to feelings of guilt, anger, neediness that become entrenched and grow and grow. The ego becomes more and more rigid. At the time of the Buddha, those in search of enlightenment distanced themselves from overly close relationships and became itinerant monks/nuns who practised dissolution of the rigid ego. In the Christian monastic tradition, too, there are precepts that are practised with the same goal in mind: poverty, chastity, obedience. Thay has given us the practice of beginning anew to help nurture our relationships, and become aware of our mental formations. All negative thoughts, words and actions have consequences. Every unkind utterance enters the store consciousness of both parties and can result in unkind effects. They can activate negative seeds and have unfortunate consequences. For example, if a person is regarded as completely unfriendly, and all the goodness in the relationship is ignored. This is because our brain tends primarily to store the negative. But when we gain an insight into the nature of true emptiness, then compassion and freedom develop. It is important to always express and address the good in a relationship. Then we can weaken the bad karma accumulated by resolving to cultivate and prioritise the good from now on (bodhicitta).

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Gabriele Gassen





# We Have Found the Path

## – How the “Source of Compassion” came to manifest –

It was an evening in Lower Hamlet during the Winter Retreat 2001-2002. I was sitting on my bed in a five-bed room with a Buddhist sutra book in my hand, silently reciting the sutras to myself like a prayer. I was excited, troubled, but also somehow immensely happy and hopeful of a bright and wholesome future.

That morning I had visited Thay. I was still a lay woman then. Thay had described his vision of a centre in the middle of a city. Thay said: “People need a quiet place to sit, to come back to themselves, and relax after a stressful day at work before they go home, so they don’t take the stress and tension home with them.” This centre should be easy to get to. It

does not have to be large, but it should have enough space for about 20 people to practise sitting meditation. A kitchenette should be provided so people can make a cup of tea. People can meditate there after work or enjoy a cup of tea in peace. And my job was to set up just such a practice centre in Munich.

I was so happy that Thay had entrusted me with his vision or his wish and that I had the chance to realise something beautiful and meaningful in my life.

At the same time, I was still occupied with questions such as:

“How do I set up a centre like this in an expensive city like Munich? Where do I get the money from and find the time to

take care of this centre? I already have a very demanding and responsible job and a family as well! Up to now, with difficulty, I had managed everything to some extent: family, job, practice with the Sangha and occasionally organising Vietnamese retreats for Plum Village.

I tried to find an answer, no, rather a blessing, a kind of prayer in the Buddhist sutra book. I think it was about 9pm when I became absorbed in my prayer. Suddenly, the other woman in the room turned around and asked me if I could turn off the light so she could sleep, as she had had a very long journey. There were only the two of us in the room at the time. I mumbled an apology, turned off the light and continued to call Avalokiteshvara’s name until I fell asleep.







The next morning after breakfast, the woman came into the room and apologised as the time to turn off the light was not until 9.30 pm. I apologised as well. And then I started telling her why I had the lights on so late yesterday, that I was praying because of Thay's request to me. It just poured out of me. I would normally never tell the story of what passed between me and Thay to a complete stranger. But for some inexplicable reason, I told her everything.

The woman looked at me intently and listened with great interest. When I had finished my story, she said very firmly, "I'll help you!" I looked at her incredulously. She didn't even know me, and surely a lot of money would have to be invested in this centre! Why was she able to speak so clearly and so firmly about it, as if it was all so easily doable? I asked again to be sure and maybe also to see, in a way, whether she was really serious. Then I said that we should go to Thay now and tell him. I was amazed. Wow! Just yesterday Thay had asked me to start a centre and now,

not even 24 hours later, I have already found someone to help make it happen.

To be honest, I doubted she was serious. By then I knew her name. But she wants to remain anonymous, so we can call her Verena. I have always been a spontaneous person, so I went to the phone in the dining hall in Lower Hamlet, called Sister Chan Khong and asked her to meet Thay and Verena to tell him the good news and get further instructions. Sister Chan Khong is also a very quick person – like me. She agreed immediately and made an appointment with Thay that day, after Thay's Dharma talk in New Hamlet. Thay then had a break of about 30 minutes before walking meditation. When I told Verena about our upcoming meeting with Thay, she was very calm and composed with a Mona Lisa smile on her face that showed no excitement or nervousness.

And then we were with Thay in a very small room in New Hamlet. Thay was sitting on a cushion on the floor preparing tea for us.

In front of him was a small low tea table with an Ikebana flower arrangement on it. Thay enjoyed the flower arrangement and explained to us in Vietnamese the art of flower arrangement according to Zen tradition. Thay paid no attention at all to Verena. He kept talking to me in Vietnamese and didn't even look at Verena. I thought Thay must have known from Sr. Chan Khong why we had come, and that Verena was the person who wanted to help us start a centre. Why didn't Thay talk to her at all? Verena, on the other hand, was quite calm, just sitting and enjoying Thay's presence, his room and his tea.

Finally, Sr Chan Khong approached Thay about the centre. Now, finally, Thay said something to Verena about the requirements for a centre in the middle of a city; in particular, it should be easily accessible by public transport. Thay had only spoken for a few minutes when the bell rang for walking meditation. Thay stood up and we all followed him. I was undecided and felt a

bit unhappy about Verena. Why had Thay not paid any attention to her at all and even perhaps ignored her?

Later I shared this with some older monks and nuns and asked them for advice. They suspected that Thay wanted to test Verena and her character, whether she was boastful or stuck-up, whether she needed recognition or attention. And Verena showed Thay her modesty, her unobtrusiveness, her stability, calm and sincerity.

Back in Germany, we were both looking for a location for the centre. I was looking in the Munich area and Verena in Berlin. In Munich I also told Karl Schmied about Thay's wish. Together with Karl Schmied we looked at some properties. I was undecided and hesitated for a long time before making a decision because I didn't have the money myself. After about half a year, Verena found somewhere in Berlin and sent Thay pictures and descriptions of it. By mid-July 2002 the first group of nuns from Plum Village had already moved into Heidenheimerstr. 27 in Berlin. The centre was inaugurated by Thay in October 2002 as the "Source of Compassion".

In Munich, the German and Vietnamese Sangha had continued to organise a Day of Mindfulness just once a month and abandoned the plan for the centre.

From 7 October 2002, the German Sangha GAL – founded by Karl Schmied – held its Sangha meetings in the BMW Neighbourhood Forum.

Prior to 1999, the Vietnamese Sangha had met irregularly in Moosburg for special events. Then they found a room in the parish church in Neu Perlach and used the Chân Không (True Emptiness) Centre in Agnesstr. 4 for their Sangha meeting. From 2001 until today, the BMW Neighbourhood Forum has been their spiritual place of practice.

### – Founding of the Vietnamese "Blue Sky" Sangha in Munich –

In 1989 a change of job brought me to Munich. And what's the first thing you do in a strange city? I looked for my Vietnamese compatriots,

for a Vietnamese community. And where can you find them? Of course, you can find them at the Buddhist Centre. I didn't have to look for long, I found them easily.

The centre used by the community at that time was called "Niem Phat Duong Tam Giac" (Temple of the Awakened Mind) and was at Rotkreuzplatz in Munich. Here I and my family immediately found a spiritual home: helpful, friendly and very nice people. Here I met not only older people, but to my amazement many young Vietnamese, school children and students, and they were really very nice, very sweet, just like all spiritual people.

I became more and more active in this Buddhist community. I was very happy to take on tasks and responsibilities here and there.

I attended almost all their Buddhist events. I met Thay and Sister Chan Khong in 1990 at an evening event for the Vietnamese. Thay always stressed the importance of living together in harmony in the family. Thay spoke about relations between partners and the relation between parents and children. His words were directed more at the parents, and he was more protective of the children. Thay and Sister Chan Khong seemed so pleasant and likeable. I didn't even know how wonderful they were at the time, they just seemed so humble, so simple and approachable.

And I was lucky enough to meet Thay and Sister Chan Khong personally when they stayed at Sister Thuc Quyen's house for an event organised by Thay in the Munich area.

Inspired by Thay's teaching and his message about peace in the family, I got even more involved in organising things so that monks and nuns from Plum Village could come to Germany and give retreats here.

There were a lot of very active young people who were very open to the Plum Village practice, and we organized many retreats for them in the Plum Village tradition. As a result, a core group slowly emerged from 1999 onwards, which met more regularly. From then on, the Vietnamese Sangha developed strongly in Munich.

I also visited Plum Village in France and heard Thay say that not many Vietnamese are aware of the Plum Village practice. So, I thought about how to bring as many of my Vietnamese friends to Plum Village as possible and decided to organize a coach departing from Munich and picking up friends from cities like Stuttgart, Karlsruhe, Frankfurt etc on the way. I still have very vivid memories of the last two bus trips to Plum Village for the Vietnamese retreat (27.04.–04.05.2002 and 12.04.–19.04.2003).

Travelling together, we were practicing in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition of using the big vehicle to transport as many people as possible to the other shore. We were able to connect many local sanghas with each other, help them get to know and support each other. Along the way we shared food, sang Plum Village songs and shared our stories. We hadn't even reached Plum Village, but already we felt fulfilled and happy. Trips like this brought us closer together. It was not just a spiritual journey, but like taking a holiday together, full of joy and happiness.

For the Vietnamese retreat in Plum Village from 12.04. – 19/04/2003 we rented a big bus with 87 seats, and we managed to fill every seat and bring 87 people to Plum Village. Thay was so happy that he allowed us to visit him at his hermitage in Lower Hamlet. Thay's room was very small and we could only squeeze in about 20 people. Thay first praised us and encouraged us to continue walking and practicing together as a sangha. Then, to our surprise and supreme joy, Thay gave each of us his blessing. One by one we knelt before Thay in reverence. Thay put his hand on our head and asked us to follow our breath. Thay gave each of us so much time, at least three breaths. We were so excited and overjoyed that some of us trembled so much that Thay, in his soft voice, had to remind us to come back to our breathing. Some of us even said afterwards that when Thay put his hand on our heads, it felt like an electric shock passing through the body. I was so excited and tense that I felt nothing but my stiff, tightly-held breath. I wondered what Thay was doing during this blessing. Was Thay also just concentrating on his breathing or was Thay praying for us and invoking the name of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara to transmit his spiritual merit to us? Later, Thay



taught me that Thay's blessings had helped many people to alleviate their suffering and free them from their sickness. Thay said many people with great faith in Thay had been cured of cancer.

Even now I still love to prostrate myself in front of the altar of Thay with all my love and reverence and visualize Thay putting his hand on my head and I say to him: "Dear Thay, send me your blessing and give me the power to transform and heal my pain and suffering."

Three lotus flowers bloomed from the Vietnamese Sangha in Munich; three sangha members became Thay's students:

- Bruder Phap Can (ordained 18/05/2000),
- Bruder Phap Luong (ordained 28/06/2001),
- Schwester Song Nghiem (ordained 30/08/2004).

Since 2012, the Vietnamese Sangha in Munich has been called the Blue Sky sangha, a name

received from Thay Phap An during a retreat in May 2012.

On Sunday, June 25th, 2023, the Blue Sky Sangha celebrated its 22nd birthday with around 60 participants and a festive talk by Thay Phap An on the Avatamsaka Sutra. So, the Sangha has received plenty of blessings! Congratulations, dear Blue Sky sangha!

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**Sister Song Nghiem**





## Meeting Thay

At the weekend I accompanied my husband Thomas to a retreat in Weyarn with Thay Phap An and Sister Song Nghiem. Even now I still feel completely fulfilled by these days together. Buddhist philosophy and meditation made them beautiful, challenging and enlightening. I feel richly blessed and happy.

I met Thich Nhat Hanh for the first time in 1994 in Garmisch at the Congress of Healing Practitioners. Thomas said to me: "We have to meet this very special Zen teacher"; he had read one of Thay's books, which had left a lasting impression.

Karl Schmied introduced Thay and his lecture, and the moment he stepped into the room I was overwhelmed. I had never met someone so present, so gracious. I can't remember what Thay said, but he has been present in my life ever since. Less so during the years of my intensive yoga training, then more and more until today. After being in Plum Village and taking refuge, I have also now fully arrived in the loving, generous Munich Sangha.

I am infinitely grateful to Thay. He has made so much difference to my whole family. Our stay at the EIAB with my son Wolfram and

his brother-friend Tobi for the family retreat in August 2011 was unforgettable. The two were sixteen years old and in the middle of wild puberty. At the family retreat they were usually opposed to everything and tested the young sisters to their limits when they wanted to do handicrafts with them or had other plans. But playing chess and football with the monks, in their long robes, delighted them both. After a winter retreat in Plum Village, my son ended up staying for another year. Tobi has also arrived in his life as a compassionate carer for young refugees.

Thank you dear Thay for your teaching and help on my family's path. After the retreat in Weyarn, my own path is also clearer to me, thanks to the lecture on the Lotus Sutra with Thay Phap An and touching the earth led by Sister Song Nghiem. Many thanks to both of you.

**Best wishes  
and a lotus blossom,**

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Eva Barth  
(Munich Sangha)





# My Path to the Plum-Village Tradition

## A Philosophical Memoir

Looking back, I can't say exactly how and when I came to Thay's practice. However, I will try to remember and complement it with other experiences.

### Curiosity for "more"

Looking back with hindsight, I would say that at the beginning there was something I would call curiosity. A curiosity that may have its origins in various circumstances that cannot be fully understood in isolation: a transition from one phase of life to the next, the end of a partnership, as well as reading Hermann Hesse's *Siddharta* all seem to have had a peculiar effect that awakened this curiosity. However, this curiosity cannot be reduced to a single, specific question. Especially as there was no real crisis to set this curiosity in motion. There was never an explicit question, but rather a peculiar form of interest, which paradoxically had no real reference point. For how can I speak of interest if I cannot say anything about what interests me? However, from today's perspective, it does not seem necessary to identify the exact circumstances that aroused this curiosity. Such a list would probably never be complete. That is why I speak of curiosity.

I would describe my curiosity as a turning towards a "more". This still directionless "more" contains at least two levels. On the one hand, it is determined by the circumstances of that phase of life in which I found myself: an everyday life that increasingly resembled the structure of "copy-paste" and was determined by an ever faster

running clock. I often experienced myself as a "mechanical component" reduced to a function as meaningfulness receded into the background and a feeling set in that could be translated with the question: Can't I do more? Is this what I need to do? On the other hand, this 'more' also contains a worldly element. My everyday routine seems to make my environment (world) smaller and smaller. We get up at the same time and walk the same paths. Mostly see the same people, who usually consume the same news, talk about similar problems. I had the impression early on that the "worldly" topics that determine our everyday life in politics and society have no depth. For me, they did not address what really mattered. The essentials remained unilluminated. The appropriate question for this would be: isn't there something more? Is my life limited to these kinds of encounters and experiences? Now I realise that between the lines of what I am saying, it might seem like a crisis was brewing. But since I have never lacked for anything and have always enjoyed good health, I would perhaps describe my situation as a kind of search for meaning, which probably everyone experiences at least once in their life. In my case, it happened rather unnoticed and undramatically.

### Meditation and Stillness

I think there is a danger that if you have not had any contact with a meditation practice, it can become overly charged with attributes that it does not have or only partially has. For example, I have heard reports of practitioners

being able to leave their bodies, feeling weightless or speaking of transcendent phenomena. In addition to these reports, there are countless guidebooks that praise meditation as a relaxation tool or even as an alternative to antidepressants. I don't want to deny the truth of all these experiences and statements, but this probably also leads to expectations that will be disappointed – or at least will have to be corrected by our own experiences.

Meditation, as silent attention to oneself, can lead to confusing questions. What exactly is this self and how can I recognise it? What does paying attention to my own breath have to do with it and is the breath really reducible to "just" the movement of my body? All practitioners probably realise early on that being free of thoughts, as a



goal of meditative practice, is very difficult to achieve and even more difficult to maintain. That's why I would say for myself that relaxation cannot be achieved straight away, because mental exertion has to be combined with physical exertion, which often leads to feet falling asleep or a burning back. In my view, however, both are necessary evils for a successful meditation practice, which I like to understand as constant exercise.

Walking meditation in particular has helped me to see meditation as something that is not exclusively bound to a specific and structured environment. I could perhaps also speak here of a meditative attitude that can be integrated into everyday life and be practised by anyone and everyone in the form of mindfulness, which makes it possible to experience the fullness of every moment. That which surrounds us penetrates us in its entirety and thus becomes more than just a self-referential object outside ourselves; it is also part of us, since we are the ones perceiving. A meditation and mindfulness practice understood in this way is anything but mythical, magical or detached; it is profoundly mundane. It allows us to see things as they are and not what our worries, fears and opinions have made of them. If we go to a forest, for example, it can be very relaxing. The silence and the fresh air make us feel calm. On the other hand, we may be afraid. Maybe we get lost or lose track of time as night falls. A mindful eye can help recognise what the forest is and what my accompanying emotion is. In meditation, we can learn to distinguish one from the other

or borderline areas. Mindfulness can thus be an attempt at an unimpaired view of the world, where past and future are thought of as spheres that limit rather than expand our experience. In short, the mindful gaze reveals more.

## Sangha

When I first meditated in a group, I often found the togetherness unpleasant. Everyone tries to be quiet and such silence is not always soothing. A scratchy throat or a coughing fit can be torture. So, at some point I asked myself what distinguishes meditating alone from meditating in a group? Finding a quiet place where I can meditate in silence, undisturbed by external influences probably works much better for me than with a group. For a long time, I did not find a satisfactory answer to this question, but I noticed that meditation in a group seemed to add something special to the practice. Today I would say that the silence that surrounds us during solitary practice does not "speak" to us. When we are surrounded by practitioners, the space is filled with their presence. We may not know the meditators around us very well, or perhaps we have never seen them before. But nevertheless, we know and feel that they are there. We are addressed by their presence in silent togetherness.

Perhaps it is a bit like moving to a new city. Of course, we will explore our new surroundings and discover a few things about the new place. But we will probably only really arrive and feel at home when we

meet other people. So, we could say that we feel at home in cooperation with other people. At first, these can be unrelated conversations that, over time, become connecting stories. References that allow a world to emerge in our togetherness. Here too, a familiar look or the thought that I have already met someone in a different context is enough. A net is created which I am part of, and which I can engage with, because it not only enriches my world, it is also my world. In other words, through the Sangha, we are given more world.

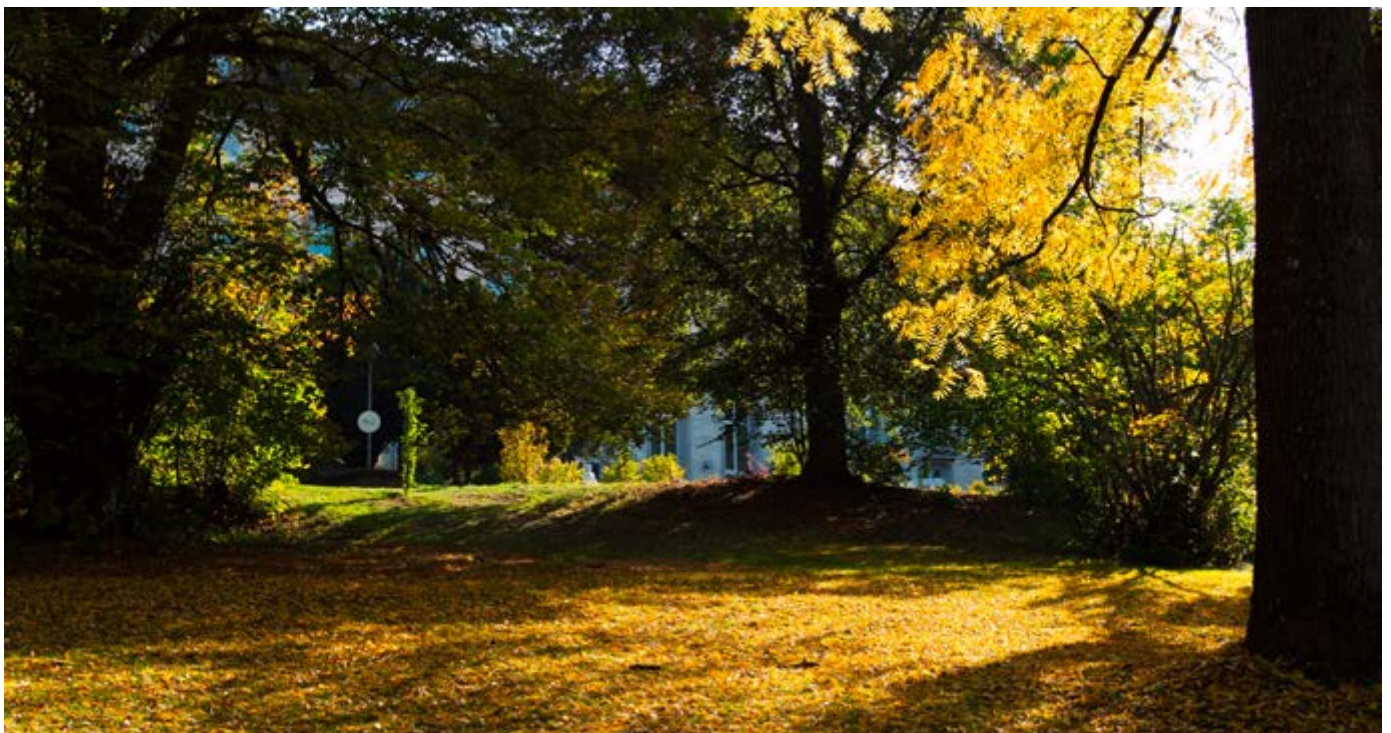
## What I wish for myself

This "more" of which I spoke is difficult to grasp and even more difficult to describe in words. Perhaps it can also be described as a clear view that allows us to recognise more of what always surrounds and permeates us. An attitude of openness and compassion towards the world. It is not just encounters with other people that can lead to more, but also mindfulness towards nature. A forest or just a single tree can be an inspiration for something still undreamed of.

My wish is to keep this openness and mindfulness so that my view of the world may become clearer. It has so much to offer if we approach it in this way. Thay's practice is for me the way that satisfies my curiosity on the one hand, but also encourages me to remain curious. Thank you dear Thay!

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**Martin Mühlich**





# Meetings with Thay

How did I get to know Thay? Firstly, of course, through his books, the first of which was “For a Future to be Possible” about the Five Mindfulness Trainings. But I also had some brief but intense personal encounters, which I would like to share here.

At one of the first big summer retreats with Thay at the EIAB, mobile toilet blocks were set up outside the building to cope with the large crowds. I had just visited one of them, walked through the narrow door and down some wobbly steps, when suddenly I was standing right in front of Thay! A thousand thoughts rushed through my head, “What should I say now?”. Should I tell him my life story and how he helped me? Or ask a question? Or at least bow deeply with folded hands? But would he perhaps be annoyed by this if a thousand people all forced their stories on him? So I instinctively did what he had so often recommended – I smiled!

Before his talks, I often saw him as he walked from the entrance of the lecture tent to the stage, the bystanders bowing deeply to him, and I had the impression that this made him uncomfortable. However, once when he walked past a table where his calligraphy was on sale, two boys called out, “Mum, there’s Thay, can we touch him?” And before their mother could get a word in edgewise, he reached out his hand to the boys and they grabbed it enthusiastically.

Another time I was late for the lecture and hurrying to get a good seat, when suddenly Thay literally came out of the bushes – he lived in the big building, and the directions were a bit unclear at that time, and stood right in front of me again. He walked with his companions to the tent just as he had written in his books, in walking meditation, slowly, very slowly – and I followed him like his shadow. I counted my breath: inhale two

steps, exhale three steps, always evenly the whole way. I feel deeply connected to Thay, as I walked with him, like a slow river, putting one step in front of the other.

As at that time there weren’t so many rooms, I camped in my tent in the large camping area next to the apple grove. The camping area was divided into three sections: the lower slope for women, couples in the middle and the upper slope for the men. Because the terrain was quite uneven, I had looked for a place at the upper edge of the men’s area where I could pitch my tent halfway level. In the afternoon, I spent my free time there. That’s when I saw Thay walking up the hill with a companion and coming towards me. Again, thoughts ran through my head about what he might want to ask me and how I could answer as skilfully as possible, as I had read in books about Zen masters with their disciples. But he didn’t come to me at all, but to an apple tree





very close to my tent. There he settled down in the shade of the tree, enjoyed the view and continued to do – nothing! I too could now relax and enjoy his presence, without words or action, just being there in the here and now and feeling connected to Thay. He used to come to this place every day and I looked forward to it. Today there are some life-size Buddha statues there and the tree blossoms more beautifully than any other.

Thay also liked music: at that time it was customary to sing songs before he started his talks, but as soon as he was visible in the tent entrance, the singing abruptly stopped. Once I was standing with Klaus Nagel on the big staircase in front of the Ashoka building, Klaus was singing with the crowd waiting



for the walking meditation. We were just at “I have sun in my heart ...” and had already sung “joy”, “love” and some other things in our hearts when I saw Thay coming out of the building. Then he stopped in the doorway, unnoticed by the crowd, to listen to our singing. Only when I then suggested “I have Thay in my heart ...” did he continue, and the singing stopped.

Since then, I have always carried these encounters with Thay “in my heart” and feel connected to him, whether walking slowly, singing or in nature.

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**Arno Elfert**

Source of Deep Trust, Breath of True Awakening, practises with the Sangha in Augsburg and Munich as well as the online Sangha of the GAL.





# Allow yourself to be happy (independent of external conditions)

After the first retreat I attended, this became my guiding principle. At that retreat we had a meditation to embrace painful emotions. I cried and my body trembled and shook deep inside.

Thay became my teacher during a very difficult time in my life. I had a very strong desire to have children, which remained unfulfilled. Year after year, every month was a silent drama, full of hoping and worrying and trying to make all the conditions right.

At some point a friend gave me a book by Thay, which I read. Then I heard the chant “Avalokiteshvaraya” on the internet with Thay’s introduction and the tears flowed. I

found a talk where Thay answered a young woman’s questions on the subject.

His answers: so loving, so generous and touching.

At some point I understood how much I wanted to force my body to do something, forcibly and with no understanding for myself.

These two sentences helped me to let go of my despair, disappointment and feelings of inferiority:

This body is not your body, it’s a continuation of all your ancestors.

This body is not yours alone, it’s a continuation of all your ancestors.

Don’t invest in hope. It might be an obstacle.

I am so grateful to Thay for showing me how to live a happy life. His talks and his answers to so many people’s questions are an inexhaustible treasure for me.

Each of his Thay’s students reflects Thay in his or her own wonderful way, and I love his students’ talks too. A beautifully diverse, broad picture emerges..

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**A friend** of the GAL Munich



# How Thích Nhất Hạnh's Teachings came to Germany

– Karl Schmied was the Gardner –

The year was 1988.

**Karl Schmied** returned to his company office from a trip and said:

*“Yesterday I met my new Buddhist teacher.”*

New because Karl had been a member of the Tibetan Order in the tradition of Arya-Maitreya-Mandala, whose teacher was Lama Anagarika Govinda, for about 10 years, practising and travelling as a Dharmacharya. Anagarika Govinda had died in 1985.

On that evening, when Karl first met Thầy, Thầy's talk left such a deep impression that Karl felt it was his task to ensure this small, humble but extremely charismatic monk from Vietnam reached a wider audience as a Buddhist teacher in Germany, especially in southern Germany. At that time, Karl was already living and working in Upper Bavaria with a small meditation group.

After this first meeting, there was lively contact with Sister Chân Không in Plum

Village. The Vietnamese nun had been Thầy's companion since 1964 and was responsible for all coordination activities.

**Karl** travelled a lot in Germany on business and wherever a forum offered itself he would give Buddhist lectures. He was very knowledgeable and had immense enthusiasm for the teachings. He was able to fascinate and “reach” people with his talks and impress with the authenticity of his own Buddhist practice; and Thầy's books, which were by then being published by German publishers, also meant there was great degree of curiosity about his teachings.

Karl was already in contact with Silviu Dornier, the publisher of Theseus Verlag. Many of the Thầy's first books were translated from English into German (by Ursula Richard) and published.

They were joined by other German publishers such as: Herder, Goldmann, O.W. Barth; Kristkeitz and Aurum. All of these contacts were initiated by Karl and the contact details of Karl Schmied's office could be found in each book.

## The first walking meditations with Thầy

As a small circle of friends in southern Germany, we had had the chance to get to know Thầy better between 1990 and 1992. For example:

- The meeting of psychologists in Bad Wiessee;

- A Christian-Buddhist dialogue between Prof. Dr. M. von Brück and Thích Nhất Hạnh in the Protestant Academy in Tutzing on Lake Starnberg.
- An inspiring weekend with Thầy giving lectures and leading walking meditation in the House of Anthroposophists in Söcking on Lake Starnberg.
- A day of mindfulness in Fischbachau/Obb.; 12 friends were accepted into Thầy's Order of Interbeing.

**In October 1993** the circle of friends became the “Gemeinschaft für achtsames Leben e.V.”; called GAL for short. (Community for Mindful Living).

**In the summer of 1994**, Karl received transmission of the “Lamp” from Thầy in Plum Village. He became a Dharma teacher for the second time, now in the tradition of Thích Nhất Hạnh.

In November, the first major six-day retreat with Thầy took place in Wertach in Allgäu, in a Catholic rest home for mothers and children, organised by the Friends of the GAL. The conditions were good and about 250 friends came from Germany, Switzerland and Austria. Thầy then gave a talk in the Kreuzkirche in Munich to an audience of 650.

**In November 1996**, Thầy spoke to about 800 people in the Evangelical Lukaskirche in Munich. The church was filled to overflowing as the pastor allowed those waiting outside to come in, even though it exceeded the legal limit.





Young people sat on the stone floor, and wheelchair users were pushed up to the nave where Thầy and his Vietnamese nuns and monks, dressed in brown robes, were seated with great composure.

All those gathered were so happy that everyone could hear his words.

The priest enjoyed Thầy's teaching and was thrilled to have a full house. His comment: "I would love to experience a full church like this in my services sometime."

**In 1997**, a GAL Sangha member decided to go to Plum Village after graduation before starting work as a doctor. However, Miriam never returned to her Upper Bavarian home, and was ordained as a nun by Thầy in 1998. She stayed in Plum Village for a few years before moving on to Indonesia as a nun.

**In November 1998**, a long and arduous journey through Germany, Austria and Switzerland was planned and undertaken with the support of Austrian and Swiss friends.

The **second large retreat** in a **hotel in Regensburg** with 450 participants, mostly from the psychotherapeutic "camp", filled the hotel and the extra tent specially put up for the occasion.

Thầy's topic: "*The 50 Verses on the Nature of Consciousness*."

Because the demand for this retreat was so great and we could not accommodate everyone, we managed to organise an additional programme of Thầy's talks in southern Germany.

At the Congress for Humanistic Medicine in **Garmisch-Partenkirchen**, Thầy gave a talk to 1000 participants on the topic: "Take the whole of life in your arms".

A few days later there was an evening lecture in the **Zirkus Krone building in Munich**. The "tent" held 1800 people.

Thầy spoke on the topic: "Steps to Healing and Transformation."

A few days later, there was a day of mindfulness at the **Grünwalder Sportschule in Munich**. In between, Thầy travelled with Karl and a delegation of GAL friends to Zurich, Salzburg, Graz and Vienna.

**Sangha building** has already taken off all over Germany.

Berlin, Hamburg, Oldenburg, Cologne, Frankfurt, Regensburg, Munich, just to name a few. There are now about 90 communities in Germany in the tradition of Thầy.

#### **1999 a new seminar house**

For a long time, Karl's vision was to found his own centre in Germany to promote Thầy's teaching. With the support of Helga and Karl

Riedl, it was possible to open this in Hohenau (near Passau) in the spring of 1999.

#### **It is the year 2000.**

Thầy came to the Intersein Centre in Hohenau in July to lead a day of mindfulness. Hundreds of people flocked to Lower Bavaria to practise together in the large white tent set up for the occasion in the beautiful countryside.

Now a brief anecdote about something quite innocuous, yet special that happened afterwards:

A few days after the visit to Hohenau we had a lecture in the **ICM – International Congress Centre, Munich**.

Two years before, the ICM had been equipped with the latest technology, and

when I was preparing this evening lecture, an employee of the trade fair management asked me if he could superimpose the arrival of Thích Nhất Hạnh in the scroll tape running above Munich's eastern bypass. This was something special for the time and I thought it was great and agreed.

On their way from Hohenau, Karl and Thầy were sitting in the car on their way to the ICM in Munich, and lo and behold, in big shining letters they saw:

- **Thích Nhất Hạnh is speaking at the ICM today** – Thầy was visibly pleased; he was amazed and smiled.





In 2003, in spring, Thay visited southern Germany again for a public lecture at the **Circus Krone in Munich**, in front of almost 2,000 people. They all sat quietly in peace and listened to the chanting of the nuns and monks, the invocation of “Avalokiteshvara”, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, before Thay spoke on the topic: “Being free wherever you are”.

This was followed by a day of mindfulness at the **Intersein Centre in Hohenau** with about 600 friends and with a walking meditation through flowering meadows led by Thay.

In 2004 **Thầy inaugurated our new meditation hall in Schliersee**, at Annabelle Zinser’s house, and practised together with the Munich friends for a whole day.

In 2005 there was another evening talk at the **Circus Krone in Munich**.

Again, the house was filled to capacity and 1900 people listened to his words. Afterwards, as a few years before, a day of mindfulness was held at **the Intersein Centre in Hohenau** in the big white tent with about 600 Dharma friends.

Wherever Thầy spoke he filled churches, congress halls, lecture halls, auditoriums and tents.



This look back over the “Dharma Journey” is only possible because **Karl devoted 15 years** to generating and releasing unimaginable energy and resources in all forms, time, money, ideas and above all enthusiasm, to spread Thầy’s teachings.

At this point it is important for me to mention that other friends in the north of Germany also made efforts to spread Thầy’s teaching and organised retreats and lectures for him. (e.g. in Berlin, Oldenburg/Oberlethe, Düsseldorf, Cologne, Neuss, Lautzerath, etc.). A large network developed over the years.



#### **Karl’s last flower meadow ...**

During the preparations for the last big retreat in St. Englmar in the Bavarian Forest, which we had planned **for 2007**, Karl was only able to assist from the sidelines. He was already visibly marked and weakened by his serious illness. He did not live to experience this retreat with 400 people; it would have pleased him so much.

“**Gardener Karl**” died on 7 May 2006 – entered the great transformation -.

A few weeks before, his highly revered and beloved teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh had said goodbye to his “master student” in Upper Bavaria.

There was great mutual appreciation and love.



Thank you, dear Karl, thank you, dear Thầy. I bow to **two great Bodhisattvas** who watered my positive seeds, allowing flowers to grow and bloom that I had not known were there.

*With lotus greetings*

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**Visakha-Ingeborg Krieger**  
**Maitreya-Fonds e.V. – gemeinnütziger Verein**  
[www.maitreya-fonds.de](http://www.maitreya-fonds.de)





# 30 Years Maitreya-Fonds – and every bit as active...

– Karl Schmied, companion with a compass –

“Once upon a time...” - that’s how many fairy tales begin, but this is a true story: A German businessman and visionary, **Karl Schmied**, a socially committed Buddhist nun from Vietnam, **Sister Chân Không** and the Buddhist **Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh** - they are the main characters.

The year was 1992. Karl Schmied returned from another meeting with the Thay and Sister Chân Không and shared with his company about Sister Chân Không’s social commitment to the war-ravaged people in Vietnam: about children without hot meals, about the old and sick without medicine and

human care and about the general misery in the country. Karl was so fascinated by this great work that he decided to support it.

For years it had been customary for companies to give gifts to their business partners at Christmas. Karl had always done this with pleasure and generosity. But that was about to change. Instead of a gift, his customers received a letter:

*“Dear Mr...,*

*... I intend to support people in Vietnam in extreme need in the future. To this*

*end, I would like to set up a relief fund. As starting capital, I will bring in the money that I would otherwise have spent on Christmas presents for my business partners. I ask for your understanding and at the same time invite you to support me in my project.*

*Yours sincerely,  
Karl Schmied”*

Some really did answer his call. The Maitreya Fund was launched in 1992 with a starting capital and initial budget of about **fifteen thousand Deutschmarks**. Since then 30





years have passed and the annual budget today is about 300,000 Euros.

Over these three decades, many friends have supported the Maitreya Fund on a voluntary basis and, with a great deal of commitment, have made it what it is today: a stable and reliable partner **“For the love of life”** for people in Vietnam; an indispensable, successful, socially committed relief organisation!

Thanks to Thay’s presence in Germany from the 1990s onwards (until 2014), we were able to establish direct and personal contact with those attending his retreats and talks. After each retreat or talk, Sister Chân Không spoke about the Maitreya Fund and the work for

the people in Vietnam and touched many people with her stories, as well as with her wonderful singing. This created a loyal and long-standing community of donors with whom we are still in close contact through letters and reports.

Ever since the EIAB became the focus of Thay’s retreats and activities in Germany, finding new donors has become a little more difficult. However, we continue to see how the seeds Thay planted have taken root in all those who met him.

The Maitreya Fund has grown further thanks to the involvement of the Buddhist community in the Netherlands **“Leven in Aandacht”** and the Buddhist community

**“Essere Pace”** in Italy, who entrust their donations to us. From our local partner association **“Hiếu và Thương”** we receive concrete information about where the need is greatest and use the money accordingly.

**The greatest part** of the money raised goes to **kindergartens** for about 2000 children in South and Central Vietnam. Lunches are prepared for the children so the parents can go about their work knowing their children are cared for. However, we do not just look after their physical well-being; we also offer them a spiritual perspective of community life.

We pay **preschool teachers** wages on a pro-rata basis so that they remain in the







countryside amongst the poorer parts of the population and do not migrate to the cities or take up another profession where they could earn more money.

We give **younger people** from poor families a financial allowance for school education or studies.

We help **older people** to have a more dignified retirement, mainly with financial support, but also by providing care and support.

In the event of unforeseen environmental disasters, the Maitreya Fund has always been able to provide people with emergency aid. In such situations, our donors have shown their generosity and provided us with unexpected funds.

In addition to long-term projects, we also support infrastructure projects in the countryside. For example, a **new bridge** or a **new road** to allow farmers direct access to

markets to sell their agricultural products, or to provide children with a more secure route to school and reduce the time it takes the sick to get to hospital for treatment.

**Wells** are being drilled to ensure irrigation for agricultural land. The feedback from Vietnam is deep gratitude, joy and the courage to take matters into their own hands.

Many **houses** not fit for human habitation were renovated and restored to protect families from heavy monsoon rains and storms.

**For 30 years now**, we have been helping, and over the years we have developed solid and reliable partnerships for the benefit of needy people in Vietnam. We owe this to our teacher and great role model Thích Nhất Hạnh, who, as an engaged Buddhist, trained social workers in the dark years of the Vietnam War to assist people in war-torn areas with the difficulties of their daily

lives. This support for rural areas was then continued after the end of the war. Today, some of the former social workers are still working in “Hiếu và Thương”, which helps us and ensures that the money reaches the right place.

We are very grateful for the initiative of Karl Schmied (d. 2006): for his drive and great compassion, which have remained alive and visible in the Maitreya Fund to this day. Thanks also go to our long-time and loyal donor friends and to our partner associations.

All these positive karmic conditions keep our benevolent society going under the motto:

*“30 years of Maitreya Fund  
and every bit as active...”*

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**Ingeborg Krieger**  
1st Chairperson of the Maitreya Fund

# Celebrating the 22nd Manifestation Day of the Blue Sky Sangha



Today we, the Blue Sky Sangha, are very happy to celebrate the first manifestation day of the Sangha, in the presence of Thay Phap An, Sister Song Nghiem, Sister Quan Nghiem and Sister Trang Huyen Dieu from the EIAB. Actually, we do not know exactly when the Sangha was founded. Sister Song Nghiem remembers there was already a Vietnamese Sangha in Munich when the Intersein Centre was founded in Hohenau in 1999. Ms Chan Dieu remembers that it was around 2001 when the Sangha started to meet regularly and was relatively full, and when the Sangha began to use a room in the church community in Neu Perlach to practice. If we take 2001 as the start, then in 2023 the Sangha has already manifested for 22 years, and so we write on the celebration cake: 22 years of the manifestation of the Blue Sky Sangha. The name Blue Sky Sangha is the name suggested by Thay Phap An during a retreat in May 2012: Blue Sky represents the true nature of

all things, the Buddha essence in each person, our practice goal. We wrote to Sister Chan Khong in June 2012 asking her to consult Su Ong (Thich Nhat Hanh) regarding this name and to have it approved by Su Ong. So, for the first 11 years the Plum Village Sangha in Munich did not have its own name and since 2012 it has had the name Blue Sky.

We are very grateful to Sister Song Nghiem that we have the Sangha as it is today. In the early days before she was ordained, she put in a lot of effort to build up the Sangha. No one in the Blue Sky Sangha can forget her sacrifices and enthusiasm when she hired buses with money out of her own pocket for us to attend Plum Village retreats in Darmstadt and in France, or organised retreats at the Intersein Centre. No one will forget how she took the time to encourage Sangha members to participate in the mindfulness days and cooked great quantities for us. Many friends

said that sometimes they were hesitant about attending mindfulness days but couldn't bear to stay at home when they saw how enthusiastic Sister Song Nghiem was. Without her great sacrifice and love, there would be no Blue Sky Sangha today.

The Sangha is also very grateful to Mrs Chan Dieu for all the work she did for the Sangha after Sister Song Nghiem was ordained in 2004. We still remember the Chân Không (True Emptiness) Centre at 4 Agnes St., initially located in the basement, which later moved to the ground floor. Chan Dieu put a lot of effort into creating this centre, working virtually alone to take care of the altar, the bells, the sutras, the mattresses, the cushions and chairs etc.... Without the efforts of Chan Dieu, there would be no Blue Sky Sangha today.

We are very grateful to Eckhard for finding a place for our Sangha to practise in. This



is the BMW Neighbourhood Forum, which we still use today. It is an ideal location and extremely convenient to reach in Munich.

During the Covid epidemic, the BMW-Neighbourhood Forum only allowed a maximum of 8 people to practise. We are very grateful to Father Liem for being very supportive and allowing us to use the rooms in his parish. To be able to physically meet again after such a long period of online practice is very fortunate for us and extremely valuable.

And the most important thing we would like to talk about today in celebrating Manifestation Day is our deep gratitude to Su Ong. The Plum Village practice, Su Ong's simple, easy-to-understand books and Dharma talks have helped us to understand Buddhism better and have clearly shown us the spiritual path. This is the path of understanding and loving, of stopping and looking deeply.

## Good News from the Day of Manifestation

(poem by Ms Pham Thi Thanh Thuy, Hai Phong)

*A clear morning  
Good news about baby's birth  
Strangely, the baby does not cry  
But smiles so brightly  
like a little flower  
Blossoming in the morning sun  
The baby just needs to manifest  
Offer its presence  
Clear and pure  
A shimmering smile  
A happy face  
A healthy body  
A leisurely step  
A sincere word  
Sitting quietly  
Listening to the voice of the sky  
and the earth  
of the birds and the leaves  
of the wind and the bell  
Welcome, the baby is here  
Wonderful world*

Chan Duc Tu Tri



Vor der Hütte von Thay im Intersein-Zentrum mit Karl und Helga Riedel

We are extremely grateful to Thay Phap An, Sister Song Nghiem and the brothers and sisters of the EIAB for always taking care of us, organising an annual retreat for Vietnamese people in Waldbröl so that we can practise intensively and restore our wavering energy. Thay Phap An, Sister Song Nghiem, the brothers and sisters of the EIAB also regularly visit our Sangha twice a year and give Dharma talks which helps us to better understand the Dharma practice of Plum Village and to gradually clarify the questions and problems in our hearts.

Now I would like to offer a brief overview of our Sangha. As Thay Phap An and the sisters also know, most members of our Sangha are between 40 and over 70 years old. There are not many young people under 40 and we would like to see more and more young faces. More than half of our members have been practising together for about 20 years, so we get along very well. We are very happy to have such harmony in the Sangha and the team spirit is excellent. We take turns to look after the Sangha and often rotate facilitation of mindfulness activities, so many people have the opportunity to lead a ceremony, offer incense, ring bells, choose Dharma talks and lead Dharma sharings. We only focus on Plum Village practices and in general there is not much difference between our understanding of Buddhism and about Plum

Village practice. Of course, we also have experienced and solid members on whom we can always rely.

Our Sangha has many members who have been accepted into the Order of Interbeing, and also many who are not yet part of the Order of Interbeing, but are also pillars of the Sangha. We believe that with the current number of solid members and good brotherhood and sisterhood, the Blue Sky Sangha will continue to manifest and make our small contribution to the continuation of Su Ong's work. Our Sangha offers an online German course for Vietnamese Ukrainians, who are currently living as refugees in the Munich area. The German course is led by Mr Cat and administered by Ms Dung. In addition, Mr Hanh continues to help the EIAB improve the registration software for those attending retreats at the EIAB. Our Sangha has good relations with the German Sangha GAL in Munich and the Maitreya Fonds. Every year we donate to this foundation and enjoy being together with the friends of the Maitreya Fund during the Vesakh Festival.

I would like to thank Thay Phap An, the sisters and the dear friends for reading.

Chan Duc Tu Tri (Vu The Cuong)  
Münchner Sangha „Blauer Himmel“

# There is no Way to Happiness. Happiness is the Way.

The practice of mindfulness according to the teachings of Thay, Thich Nhat Hanh, has enriched our family life in many wonderful ways over the past 20 years. We have reaped many fruits of this practice, including deeper inner contentment, deeper meaning of life, peaceful coexistence with other people and the environment, as well as serenity and joy in the here and now.

When, ten years ago, our family moved abroad for two years for professional reasons, we were confronted with many challenges. Both professionally and privately, we had to reorganise our lives and find our way in a foreign country. During this time, we often fell into frustration and despair.

To find a way out, every Sunday we decided to dedicate ourselves to the practice of

mindfulness. We read sutras, practised meditation, and spent a lot of time recharging our batteries in nature. I used my 45-minute drive to work to recite the sutra of the highest wisdom, the Heart Sutra, over and over again. At first, I didn't understand much about the sutras and the concepts of emptiness, the world of dependent arising, non-self and impermanence.

But by constantly repeating the sutra while driving, one day I came to a realisation – everything we experience is a matter of definition. Happiness or unhappiness, good or bad, difficult or easy, all these are formed in our mind. The way we look at things determines our experience.

With this realisation, we were able to overcome our frustrations and gain a new

perspective on our challenges. I started to accept things as they are. Instead of complaining and complaining, I learned to accept things in all their diversity. We practised together in our small “family sangha”, enjoying the beauty of nature and being together. This time became one of the most beautiful in my life.

Another practice I have integrated into my daily life is walking meditation. After eating, I regularly take 20 to 30 minutes to walk outside. This habit has not only helped improve my health, but also helped me find inner peace and serenity. We practice walking meditation together every day, and it is becoming easier and easier to cultivate mindful walking. It is no longer just an “exercise”, and I enjoy the feeling of being empty and relaxed inside.

I used to think that constant thinking and ruminating were necessary, especially while walking, to find good ideas and solutions to problems. Today when I walk, I try not to think. My mind has time to rest, and I can be consciously aware of the environment and nature around me.

I have also realised that I put a lot of effort into my work, which has brought me success. But in the process, I have formed many expectations about what I want from my surroundings and other people.

Now I have learned that if I constantly have expectations, I will always experience suffering and disappointment. Therefore, I now practice accepting what is possible and doable, and what is beyond my control. Things happen because of natural laws and often







don't turn out the way we want. Through this acceptance I live more peacefully, calmly and happily. It is amazing how solutions to my tasks and difficulties manifest at the right time when the conditions are right.

Thay taught us another valuable practice to reduce stress and keep a clear mind. When my head is full of thoughts and I feel tired, I like to do a relaxation meditation. After 30 minutes of deep relaxation meditation with the help of YouTube videos by Sister Chan Khong or other sisters and brothers, I feel refreshed and awake. The body scan exercises, and mindfulness meditation help me to calm my body and mind and reach a state of deep relaxation.

At the EIAB we can recharge our energy every year. By attending Easter retreats

or New Year retreats, we can understand and practise Buddhist wisdom thanks to the Dharma talks by Brother Phap An, Brother Phap Xa, Sister Song Nghiem, Sister Doan Nghiem and other brothers and sisters. After a retreat there, we feel spiritually reborn and return home with new fresh energy and motivation.

Here at home in Munich we have our "Blue Sky" Sangha. The sangha friends are very kind, loving and helpful. Together we practise the mindfulness exercises Thay taught us. We walk together like a river, living according to the insight that understanding is love, and each of us benefits greatly from the Sangha.

There are other experiences that I cannot list here. I am deeply grateful for life and the opportunity to have learned about the

practice of mindfulness according to the teachings of Thay and to have integrated it into my life. This practice has helped me to improve my life, find inner peace and experience happiness in the present moment. It is a wonderful path of mindfulness that teaches us to live with compassion, love and understanding.

May our experiences inspire others to integrate mindfulness practice into their lives and reap the rewards. By being present in each moment and acting compassionately, we can contribute to positive change in ourselves and in the world around us. Let us discover together the beauty of life, inner peace and joy in the here and now.

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**Chan Duc Tu Dang (Pham Gia Khanh)**  
The Blue Sky Sangha in Munich



# A Journey to Inner Fulfilment

My first experience of Sur Ông's, or Thích Nhất Hạnh's, teaching was during a retreat at the Intersein Centre in 2003. The first retreat with Thích Nhất Hạnh himself in 2010 at the EIAB touched me deeply and taught me how to integrate his teachings and practices into my daily life. At the time, Sister Song Nghiêem offered me an important insight: she advised me not to practise alone but in a sangha, a spiritual community. Her advice motivated me to participate regularly in the mindfulness days organised by the Munich Sangha.

A year after this insight, I received the Five Mindfulness Trainings at the EIAB from

Brother Pháp Ấn. These Trainings have now been part of my life for 12 years, protecting and helping me through all life's ups and downs.

Mindfulness practice has brought about a positive change in my life. It has helped me recognise my true nature and develop compassion and love to better understand and accept my fellow human beings.

During Corona, my husband and I discovered hiking in the mountains. In the process, I gained an important insight: It's not only about reaching the top of a mountain, but

also about enjoying the long path and the time it takes to get there. This realisation also applies to life in general. It is not just about reaching a certain goal, but about valuing and enjoying the journey itself. Just like in walking meditation, on a mountain hike I can allow the ground to absorb all the strain of my steps and take in the fresh energy of the earth while enjoying the beauty of the landscape and the view. I feel closely connected to nature, free and light.

The practice of mindfulness has also changed how we take our meals. Before eating, my husband and I quietly recite the Five Contemplations. We give thanks for the food before us. This not only makes the food taste better, it also gives the act of eating a deeper meaning. Now we are happy to eat simple meals that are good for our bodies and minds.

Twenty years have now passed since my first encounter with the teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh, and today I am much happier, able to appreciate the uniqueness of my fellow human beings, especially my family members and Sangha friends. They enrich my life in countless ways, and I am grateful for every time we meet.

I now look forward enthusiastically to every Sangha meeting with my spiritual family. I look forward to sharing loving meals and experiences, where I can learn a lot from my Sangha friends.

Sister Song Nghiêem was absolutely right. Without the Sangha, I would not be the person I am today. Without the mindfulness practice of Thích Nhất Hạnh, I would not have found my life's calling. For this I am deeply grateful and happy.

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**Chan Duc Tu Ai (Nguyen Anh Van)**  
Munich Sangha "Blue Sky"





## The way!

Yesterday I went walking and I just let my feet took me, wherever it took me, I would just enjoy it. I learnt happiness is the way and not the destination. Breathing and counting the steps, then I found myself standing on a small walking path between corn and wheat fields, the fields ran wide as far as the eyes can see. It was before sunset. On the sky, there were beautiful white clouds with the orange sun behind it, so mesmerizing and at the same time breathtaking beautiful. I looked down to the ground and saw the young green and light yellow wheat field. They look so happy, as if they were singing the song of life. The breeze touched my skin slightly, so alive. The world before my eyes just expanded endlessly, so rich, full of life though very tranquil. Then I realized that the sun, along with the wind, the air went into the wheat itself, and the wheat was made into the cereal I ate this morning. So I already had the sun, cloud, rain, wind, the universe inside of me. The realization is so real that struck me to the core, I can feel the happiness, the joy and peace in every of my cell. I felt so nurtured at that moment and that moment nurtures many other moments of mine. The lesson of living deeply has been often taught by Su Ong Thich Nhat Hanh and that was one of the moments that I have been living, experiencing in my everyday life.

Looking back how much of a quick temper and boisterous person I was, always busy with something and doing things fast, I would never imagine that I would live this slow and have this deep taste of life like this. I have learnt to live every moment deeply and fully. I have changed from some one who is always fast and rush, to someone who just enjoy the process. I was lost and now I found my way. The transformation has been slow and taking long time. It has been 6 years since I knew about Su Ong. Looking back, it was such a long way but very revealing and enlightening. It's full of enlightening self-discovery and with a lot of joy, no doubt. The way of Su Ong is not a painful or tiring, as when one

has to learn day and night, struggling hard to get a degree or a price. The way of Su Ong brings every moment joy, calmness and is full of knowing. He showed me how can discovered myself, getting to know who I am and why I am through different methods. He has a way of making complicated Sutra easy to understand and to practice. The way he showed me, how my feeling controls me, without me being aware about that, is

so revealing, eye opening. I came to Plump Village in 2017 as a lost and desperate person, I came out a week after as a new person, with understanding about myself and with perspectives. From that moment on, I was forever a changed person. I have never met Su Ong in person, only through his books, videos, his continuation, the nuns and monks at Plum village, but I know he is with me everywhere and all the time.





Then I met my Sangha in München. I found my spiritual family. Sangha 'Blue Sky' was created by Students of Su Ong and we are holding ourselves together, walking together, smiling together flowing as a big river to the sea together. We have just celebrated our 22 years of Manifestation with the presence of Brother Phap An and sister Song Nghiem. The Sangha has been the backbone of its members. We help each other who are in emotional needs, support EIAB when needed and we work on social and charity event together. That connect us, bring us joy and happiness. That's where I feel belong.

I keep practicing every day, integrate meditation and mindfulness in my everyday life, that bring meaning to my day. I discover a sea of knowledge from the books of Su ong, from his teaching. I listen to his teaching video almost every day. They are my daily companion, his teaching are always

applicable in one way or another of my life. Buddhist psychology is such a sea of knowledge that one can never know enough. It's not the kind of knowledge that one can learn with merely intelligence, it's the kind that one have to learn with the whole self, beyond all the scientific bases. Su Ong has opened many doors in me. He gave me the key of 'understanding is love'. So simple but extremely powerful. I found myself living with ease and in harmony with everyone I encounter. I understood my family much more, found love which I thought I can never find it again, see people from different sides. I learnt to see the whole picture and not just a small part of it anymore.

I didn't believe in miracle but now I firmly believe in it. I was fortunate enough to attend the Vietnamese Retreat in September 2022 in EIAB. The Dharma teaching of Bruder Phap An about Lotus Sutra brought me to the

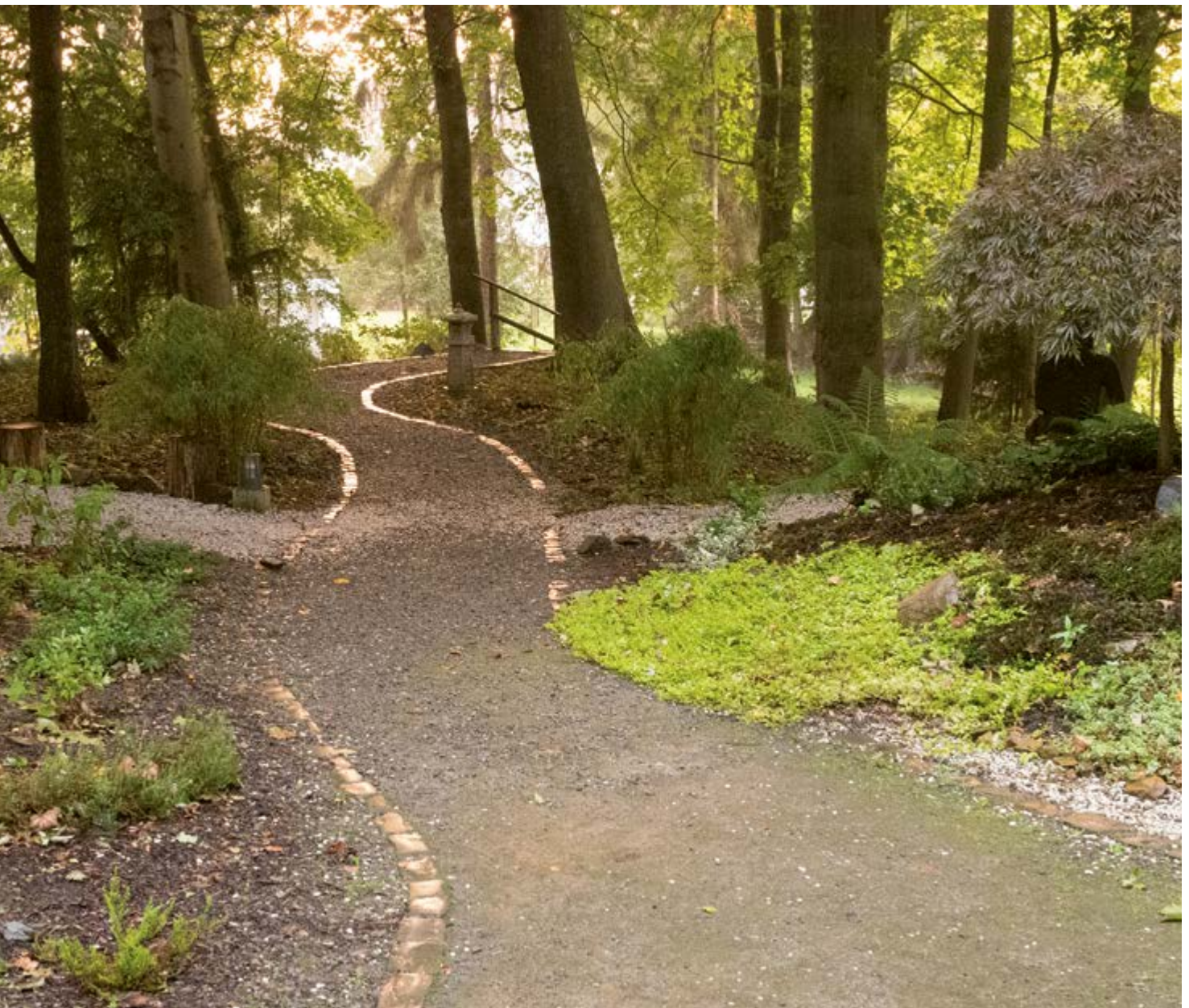
whole new level of Enlightenment. I know that every moment is a miracle but that's just through my knowledge, with Lotus Sutra and the way how Brother Phap An tell the story, I can feel it with all my heart and soul and I am living it. I am just being so thankful every moment for the luck that I have found Su Ong. Though Su Ong has physically gone, but just like Buddha, he never cease to exist. I saw him in Brother Phap An, Sister Song Nghiem, all other nuns, and monks, in my Sangha and in me, myself and in my children....

It seems to me that what I have learnt is a lot, but I know that it is just the beginning step of a very long enlightening exploratory journey .....

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**Kim Dung Han**

Munich Sangha "Blue Sky"





# An Inspiring Meeting with Thay Thich Nhat Hanh and the Path of Mindfulness

This morning I woke up as usual and checked the Facebook group “Phamily” (my family group “Pham”) to get news about my siblings and my children. Suddenly, I discovered a page I had never seen before. The page is called “Phú Thọ Quê Minh”, and someone has shared “10 Timeless Quotes from Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh”. According to the description, it seems to be a page from Phú Thọ Province, and I was surprised to see the Venerable Master’s teachings coming from there too. The 10 quotes very succinctly summarise the themes of pain, happiness, deep listening and understanding, love and compassion, living in the present moment and stillness. This content has probably inspired someone to share it, as I did almost 23 years ago when I first met the Venerable Master, heard his teachings and came into contact with the Làng Mai community.

Before that, my life was full of pain and despair, and I was often in a bad mood or depressed. After I graduated, I built my life, made plans for myself – for 3, 5, 10 years. I was relatively successful in my job, got married and now have three children with my German wife. Together we take care of family life and the children. I was happy and content. My plans and ideas seemed to work. On the outside, everything seemed fine, but there were internal conflicts that I didn’t notice at first and that slowly affected my life – for example, cultural differences, ideas about family relationships and the children’s development. Things were going in directions I hadn’t foreseen, causing me pain. When my sister-in-law saw this, she recommended that I explore Buddhism to find my own path. She gave me some books on Buddhism and on the sutras. At the time I found them

difficult to understand and thought they wouldn’t really help. A close friend from the US recommended that I read books by Thich Nhat Hanh because they would be easier to understand. Previously, I had only known Thich Nhat Hanh through the short prose poem “A Rose for your Pocket”. When I was 19 or 20 years old, a friend had given me this little book. After reading it, I was very moved and filled with admiration for the author.

In October 2000, Thich Nhat Hanh came to Munich with the Sangha to give public lectures. Afterwards he went with the Sangha to the Intersein Centre in Hohenau. My friend Cát attended one of the lectures and afterwards called me to enthusiastically tell me about it. Before that, my friend Ngọc, who lives in Stuttgart, had sent an email to me and some other friends in Munich inviting us to participate in a day of mindfulness with Thich Nhat Hanh, which would take place the next day at the Intersein Centre. We met at the train station and went together by bus to Hohenau. On the bus I met Sister Quyên for the first time and Sister Phương Chi, who is now Sister Song Nghiê. For the first time, I sang a meditation song on the bus:

*Breathing in, breathing out  
I am blooming as a flower...*

For the first time I felt a gentle calm. When I sang, when I paid attention to my breath, my heart united with the music and the words.

When we arrived, the others had already gone to meditate with Thich Nhat Hanh. It was a warm autumn day with golden leaves, and everyone was sitting outside on a lawn around Thich Nhat Hanh, singing meditation

songs together. Sister Chan Không was giving instructions. We were quietly invited to sit together, listen and sing together. It was a warm atmosphere. Sister Chan Không spoke about her awareness of the beauty of nature and the importance of returning to the breath, living in the present moment and appreciating life around us. I still remember her words, “Any tree can take on the form of a bodhisattva.” I remember this because I love nature. Whenever I am sad, I like to go for a walk in the forest, to the lake, take a swim in the lake. It’s like a natural reaction to relieve the sadness, to calm my depressed mood. Yes, exactly! The trees and plants are the bodhisattvas who saved me.

Afterwards we listened to Thich Nhat Hanh give a talk. The topic: “How can we learn to avoid fears and worries in daily life, in marriage, between parents and children or when dealing with other people?”

Thich Nhat Hanh entered the meditation room so simply, but with such dignity. His words were so simple, but something in them touched my heart. I listened attentively to every word, every letter. Often, I was so moved I cried. His words touched my mind and my heart. Thich Nhat Hanh seemed to know what I needed and what I should do. Thich Nhat Hanh gave me a new outlook on life. When I heard Thich Nhat Hanh speak about worries about children, tears flowed as if they were flowing down a river. Thich Nhat Hanh awakened love in me, my heart opened, it was no longer limited by prejudices that made me and the people around me suffer. Even worries about my career, my future plans became a key to open the path ahead. In the Dharma groups, many people shared





how they practice breathing to maintain mindfulness at work. These experiences later helped me to be calm in my work, achieve better results and have a good relationship with my colleagues.

Since then I have been enthusiastic about reading Thich Nhat Hanh's books, exploring

Buddhist teachings, learning breathing and laughing exercises. I participated in mindfulness events organised by the two sisters Chân Diệu and Phương Chi, and later I became a member of the Sangha in Munich. The impermanent life has its challenges. Sometimes I think that I am like a boat on the river of life, that there

are storms and heavy waves, but the boat does not sink, thanks to Thich Nhat Hanh, thanks to the revered teachers and sisters, thanks to the Sangha..

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**Chan Duc Tu Quang (Pham The Hanh)**  
Munich Sangha "Blue Sky"



# How Siddharta became Buddha

In 2017, for the first time, I saw pictures and stories in the media about Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. Then my friends told me about him, about his love and his resistance to war and violence. In those days, I was facing my own difficulties and hurt in life. In my lostness, I was searching for something that could fill the void.

I began to explore the life and teachings of Thay. I started with “Old Path, White Clouds” and watched films about the path of the noble Buddha on YouTube. The images and sublime teachings of the Buddha left a strong impression on my mind. I felt that this world was different, very different from anything I had experienced before. It was filled with peace, tranquillity and unconditional love.

Once again, I felt a great affection for Thay and longed to meet him. He had written “Old Path, White Clouds”, a wonderful work that

planted seeds of hope and love in my heart. I want to thank him for inspiring me to visit the Plum Village practice centre.

In the summer of 2017, I finally had the opportunity to go to Plum Village in France. The feeling when entering this place was of peace, warmth and love. Although I had never met Thay personally, I felt his presence there in the monks and nuns. At that time, I didn't know Thay well, I had only heard a few Dharma talks. But I felt I had found a part of myself here.

After returning from Plum Village, I used the time to learn more about Thay through his talks and interviews. I discovered his energy of inner peace, his gentle smile and his slow, careful steps. I realised that Thay had a deep understanding and loving kindness for human suffering. He gave everything he had to pass this on to the monks, nuns

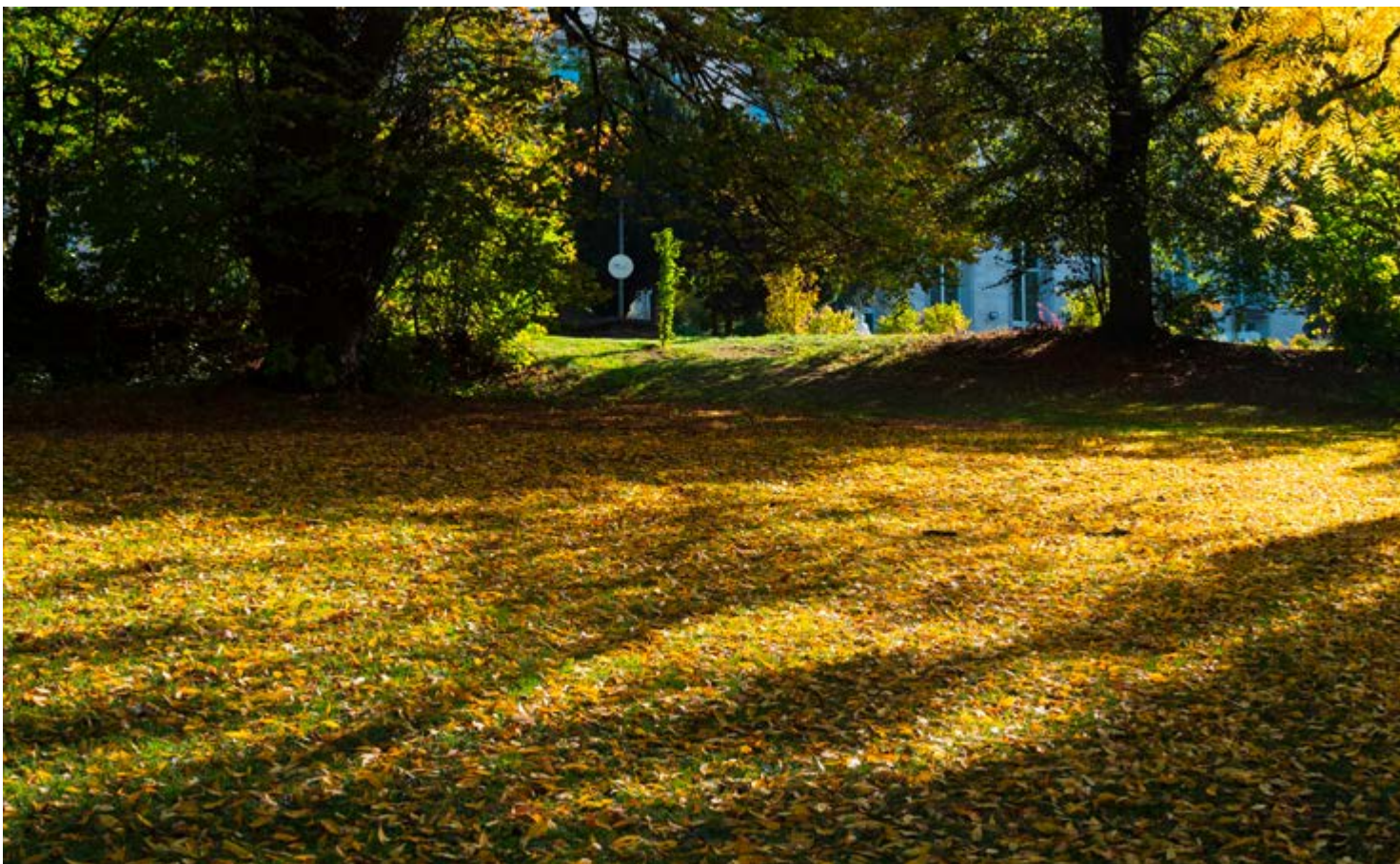
and lay students. It was an energy of inner peace, a deep and profound understanding, compassionate love and unconditional acceptance.

Thanks to the monks and nuns in Plum Village, I also got to know the EIAB Institute and the Sangha Bau Troi Xanh in Munich, where I now live. I am truly grateful that past suffering has given me the opportunity to discover this path of peace.

I am infinitely grateful for the support and nourishment the monks, nuns, Sangha and spiritual friends have given me on this path of transformation. Every moment of mindfulness gives us the chance to realise that this is also the moment in which we meet Thay.

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**Kim Nguyen**  
Munich Sangha “Blue Sky”





# Movement Meditation – A Happy Life through Meditation and Qi Gong/Tai Chi

The Buddha teaches us that our body and mind are one, and that our mind or psyche has an immense influence on the state of our health. To bring our body and mind into harmonious balance and to heal our wounds and blockages, we should therefore engage in daily meditation, deep relaxation and physical exercises. Today we know that even in the womb the mental well-being of the mother has an influence on her child's immune system. So, to enjoy a peaceful and well-balanced mind and body, we should learn to treat other people with respect and love, to help ourselves and the living beings around us, and to value our human nature.

This wisdom has guided our family, and we always try to include Buddhist teachings

in our lives. Even when we lived in China, alongside our passion for the traditional health teachings, Kung Fu, Tai Chi and Qi Gong, we were always aware of the parallels with Buddhism. The Chinese art of movement, as well as meditation and traditional Chinese medicine, have the potential to support people, nurture their health and remind us of our mindfulness. For this reason, we quickly found a way, which has since led us from China to Austria, to pass on these traditions to people in Europe. One thing is very clear to us: learning the art of movement goes hand in hand with the teachings of the Buddha.

As early as the 1980s in China, we had already heard about the highly revered Thích Nhất Hạnh during our visits to Buddhist temples

and through conversations with the monks and nuns living there. They told us about his teachings, which had spread in our homeland to the smallest villages in southern China and were highly valued. What we remember most from that time is his meditation on mindful walking, which we know today as walking meditation. From that moment on, we studied the teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh with great respect and care and integrated them into our lives.

Buddhism has always been important to our family, and in our daily life we practice the teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh, such as loving speech, deep listening, mindful cooking and eating, and especially reverence for all living beings and nature. And Zhang Xiao





Ping, the father, and Zhang Zhi, the son, have incorporated these important teachings into their lessons. The experiences and insights we receive through our Buddhist practice are a constant companion in all areas of our lives. As students of Thích Nhất Hạnh and his teachings, we receive joy and inspiration which we wish to pass on to others. The teachings are a valuable foundation to support other people and the virtues we learned from Thích Nhất Hạnh are an important basis for our togetherness, which is why our family decided to come to Europe to pass on this knowledge, combined with our passion for the art of movement and Chinese medicine.

When Austria became our new home, we had the chance to hear and experience Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings even more intensively. In 2004, we had the great fortune to participate in a retreat by the revered teacher Thích Nhất Hạnh and the loving brothers and sisters in Lower Bavaria. Although the retreat was attended by several hundred people, it was such a wonderfully peaceful atmosphere, an intense sharing, and a deep sense of getting to know each other. It brought a special feeling of happiness to know we could continue and even deepen our Buddhist path outside our usual environment. The teachings on



mindfulness in daily life, which have helped so many people in the world, touched us and became our life practice.

However, we could not do all this authentically if we did not practise the Buddhist teachings ourselves. Since their respective youths, both Zhang Xiao Ping (father) and Zhang Zhi (son), have attended Buddhist classes, and for more than 20 years our family has organised an annual trip for our students to a Buddhist monastery in China so that they too can learn about Buddhism and deepen their practice.

In addition to Tai Chi, Qi Gong and Kung Fu, we also teach meditation and the interpretation of Buddhist sutras, such as the "Heart Sutra" or the "Diamond Sutra". In the "Diamond Sutra", for example, it is said that we should not differentiate between living beings, between the good and the bad, but that all living beings deserve the same kind of love and appreciation. Therefore, it is important for us to pass on this knowledge to others, and possibly help them put down roots in this tradition.

On one of our first visits to the EIAB to get to know the Institute many years ago, we

witnessed the dedication of the brothers and sister to living the teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh in all areas of everyday life and to conveying them to others who are interested. On his journey from India to China, the great Zen master Bodhidharma had already recognised that the monks in the monastery should not only cultivate the mind, tranquillity and peace, but must also take care of their bodies to cultivate good health. For this reason, it was important for us to pass on our expertise in the arts of movement to the brothers and sisters of the EIAB, so that they can keep their bodies healthy with Qi Gong and Tai Chi and have more energy for all their important activities.

Even today we still think back to the first moment in our old homeland, when we started to study and practise the teachings of the Buddha and the wisdom of Thích Nhất Hạnh. The harmonious flow of movement and mindfulness that will accompany us throughout life.

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**Family Zhang**  
**Zhang Xiao Ping**  
**Zhao Jun**  
**Zhang Zhi**  
**Zhang Chao**



# Poems

## Treasure Chest

*Jesus got a heart  
Baby Buddha got a cross  
Fountainhead of joy*

### Schatztruhe

*Jesus hat ein Herz  
Baby Buddha hat ein Kreuz  
Quelle der Freude*



## Yes, Yes

*Hot house of the heart  
Out of gunky, mucky silt  
Transformation sprouts*

*Gewächshaus des Herzens  
Aus klebrigem, schmutzigem Schlick  
sprießt Verwandlung*



## enjoy

*these cloudy days  
4 they are here 4 u 2  
cultivate your yen*

### genieße

*diese bewölkten Zeiten  
4 they are here 4 u 2  
kultiviere dein Yen*



## River of Metta

*Christ displays his breast  
Baby Buddha shows his cross  
Spring of compassion*

### Metta-Fluss

*Christus zeigt seine Brust  
Baby Buddha zeigt sein Kreuz  
Quelle des Mitgefühls*



## Phases

*Quarter Moon has gone  
The New Moon is coming strong  
Time to plant your dreams*

*Der Viertelmond ist verschwunden  
Der Neumond erstrahlt  
Zeit, deine Träume zu pflanzen*



## Fading

*Outside a great storm  
Inside a fading candle  
Fending off the dark*

### Phasen

*Draußen ein starker Sturm  
Dinnen eine schwindende Flamme  
Bastion gegen die Dunkelheit*



### Schwinden

## Signs and Wonder

*Heart of compassion  
Beat an iron cross into  
The wheel of Dharma*

### Zeichen und Wunder

*Herz des Mitgefühls  
schlägt ein Eisenkreuz in  
das Dharma-Rad*



## students

*teacher always does  
what the master says, students  
though are different*

*der Lehrer folgt stets  
den Weisungen des Meisters, schüler  
dagegen sind anders*



## Twining

*In this fading world  
The strength of tears is strongest  
Twining together*

### schüler

### Ineinander fließen

*In dieser schwindenden Welt  
ist die Kraft der Tränen am mächtigsten  
Ineinander fließend*





**Little Raft**

*Battered little raft  
How far can it carry me  
To the other shore*

**Kleines Floß**

*Gebeuteltes kleines Floß  
Wie weit kann es mich tragen?  
Zum anderen Ufer*

**A Cup of Tea**

*The art of serving  
Intent and Humility  
Balancing yin and yang*

**Eine Tasse Tee**

*Die Kunst des Dienens  
Absicht und Demut  
Yin und Yang in Harmonie*

**patience**

*I can't help myself  
One cup empty, one cup full  
Hoping you will come*

**Geduld**

*Ich kann nicht anders  
Eine Tasse leer, eine voll  
In der Hoffnung, dass du kommen wirst*

**Jihad**

*Praise the holy war  
The only war worth fighting  
Is in your own heart*

**Jihad**

*Gelobt sei der Heilige Krieg  
Doch nur der Krieg in deinem Herzen  
Ist des Kampfes würdig*

**Jihad 101**

*Fighting the holy fight  
Be not meek and take to arms  
Rid your heart of pride*

**Jihad 101**

*Im heiligen Krieg kämpfend  
Sei nicht sanftmütig, greif zu den Waffen  
Befreie dein Herz von Stolz*

**Jihad 201**

*Each Man fights his own  
Inner war of rectitude  
Respect Allah's gifts*

**Jihad 201**

*Jeder Mensch kämpft den eigenen  
inneren Krieg der Rechtschaffenheit  
Respektiere die Geschenke Allahs*

**Jihad 301**

*Time for listening  
Destroy all preconceived thoughts  
About God and Man*

**Jihad 301**

*Zeit zuzuhören  
Zerstöre alle vorgefassten Gedanken  
Über Gott und Menschheit*

**Jihad 401**

*Final battle cry  
Purge your heart of prejudice  
Live in peace with all*

**Jihad 401**

*Der letzte Kampfruf  
Reinige dein Herz von Vorurteilen  
Lebe in Frieden mit allen*

**This Magic**

*This magic dissolves  
Into that magic  
Into the next magic  
From magic to magic  
Nothing but magic*

*Savor your  
Karma  
With a  
Smile  
After all  
It is yours  
And it's paid for*

**Dieser Zauber**

*Dieser Zauber löst sich auf  
In jenen Zauber  
In den nächsten Zauber  
Von Zauber zu Zauber  
Nichts als Zauber  
Genieße dein  
Karma  
Mit einem  
Lächeln  
Denn schließlich  
Ist es deins  
Und bereits bezahlt*

**So many Reasons for Tears**

*So many reasons for tears  
So many reasons for smiles  
My body is filled with laughter  
My soul with gratitude, humility  
And everlasting joy  
Let the tears flow*

**So viele Gründe für Tränen**

*So viele Gründe für Tränen  
So viele Gründe für Lächeln  
Mein Körper ist voller Gelächter  
Meine Seele voller Dankbarkeit, Demut  
Und ewig wählender Freude  
Lass die Tränen fließen*



### Don't miss out

*Don't miss a chance  
To sing and dance  
To weep and cry  
To sit in silence  
To laugh and laugh  
And laugh some more*

### Don't miss out

*Versäume keine Chance  
Zu singen und tanzen  
Tränen zu vergießen  
In Stille zu sitzen  
Zu lachen und lachen  
Und noch mehr zu lachen*



### How to Do a Good Deed Or The twelve Steps of Becoming a Butterfly

*Forget the idea of good deeds  
Purifying the heart  
Forget purification  
Practice compassion  
Purify some more  
Become silent  
Purify action  
Be silent  
Grab the moment  
Be like the wind  
Leave no traces  
Let go*

*Goal orientation means  
Pressings our ideas and  
Our wants on to the world  
Dana is no different*

*When we follow the Li  
(grain in jade) we follow  
The movement of the universe  
Clinging to no thing  
Fulfilling natures design  
Like the clouds of the vast sky  
Or the butterflies of the fields*

### Wie man etwas Gutes tut Oder Zwölf Schritte, um ein Schmetterling zu werden

*Vergiss die Vorstellung guter Taten  
Reinige dein Herz  
Vergiss dabei das Reinigen  
Übe Mitgefühl  
Reinige weiter  
Werde still  
Bereinige die Taten  
Werde still  
Nutze den Augenblick  
Sei wie der Wind  
Hinterlasse keine Spuren  
Lasse los  
Zielorientierung bedeutet  
Dass wir unsere Vorstellungen, unsere  
Bedürfnisse  
Der Welt aufdrücken  
Dana ist genauso  
Wenn wir dem Li folgen  
(Korn in Jade) folgen wir  
Der Bewegung des Universums  
Ohne Anhaftung  
Den Plan der Natur erfüllend  
Den Wolken des weiten Himmels gleich  
Oder den Schmetterlingen auf den  
Feldern*



### The ABC's of Becoming a Rhopalocera

*Sweep before your door  
Quietly go with the flow  
And never look back*

### Wie man ein Rhopalocera wird – die Basics

*Kehre vor der eigenen Tür  
Schwimme ruhig mit dem Strom  
Und schaue niemals zurück*

David Lewis Schenker





# My “personal note” from Thay

It was the summer of 2022 when I heard about Thich Nhat Hanh for the first time, on a dog meadow in Cologne. There I met another dog owner, who told me about an author who wrote wonderful, practical Buddhist guides to life. His name was impossible for me to remember. The one thing I couldn't forget was the fact that an author with a complicated name was writing books that took readers\* by the hand and guided them through life.

A few weeks later, I was coincidentally (or not coincidentally, possibly through some fault of my own?) diagnosed with breast cancer.

My world came apart at the seams. “What’s going to happen next? Will my life go on? How long before things go badly? Did they find it in time, or too late?”

It felt like my comeuppance. For too long, I had been pushing things to the limit. Being a single parent, self-employed, and COVID had taken a big toll financially, and without the help of friends, the situation would have been almost impossible to cope with even before the illness, and I counted myself lucky for all this great help.

“Pride comes before a fall,” called the strict correctness and hopelessness in me in chorus.

But hadn't I been living life for so long with good intentions: no alcohol, no smoking, lots of yoga, no television. I had dutifully and diligently borne all life's ups and downs. Everything as well as I could, without complaining. True to the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Being helpful at all times.

And in return life had given me the right gift at exactly the right time. Whatever little things I had needed, life had delivered them: through food rescue and “give away – boxes” in front of houses.

And yet: Life brought me breast cancer.

What should I do?

Meditate, visualize, keep toxic things at bay? But how do I do it properly? So I can recover and survive.

YouTube, by now a well-used source of information, offered me first aid. There it was, the complicated name. I had found my new YouTube star, and immediately taken him to heart.

Thich Nhat Hanh. Morning, noon, and night. I also remembered a tip from a neighbour about a monastery in Waldbrohl.

“...founded by Thich Nhat Hanh.” “Not possible?”

“Yes, it is, and be sure to go to a course by Thay Phap An and Sister Song Nghiem.”

And then it all went very quickly. The course began immediately after my surgery and radiotherapy, with the appropriate title: “Return to Yourself, Heal in Mind and Body!”

The title alone gave me reason to hope.

The second course followed a month later, “New Year- New me.” This, too, sounded tailor-made.

I had perhaps – please, please – a real chance to heal.

The last day of the course coincided with the first anniversary of Thay's death.

I was very grateful to be in the place where so many people had come to honour Thay. There was a sense of excitement throughout the Institute. Sister Song Nghiem would

pop in throughout the morning to see how the preparations for the midday festivities and ceremonies were coming along. We newcomers, unfamiliar with the tradition and its customs, listened carefully to the strange, almost stern-sounding instructions. We should sit where our urge to move and unfamiliarity with the correct way to behave wouldn't disturb too much.

The festivities also included burning handwritten notes with our promises to Thay in a brazier.

With the help of Sister Song Nghiem, we prepared these very thoughtfully as part of the course.

Each course participant filled his or her piece of paper with very detailed intentions and promises. The atmosphere was very focused, conscientious and serious. It was not a quickly written promise to ourselves, but to the great teacher Thay. It felt like a special challenge, as well as a wonderful opportunity to have a special personal “meeting” with Thay.

But then a nun gave us the news that the fire was cancelled due to the rain. We were a little disappointed. I decided to take my note home, and put it in my luggage.

Adapting to the weather, we took our umbrellas to take part in the memorial walking meditation in honour of Thay. For peace in the world. It was very special.

The rain subsided and we were able to light the fire to burn our notes after all.

Many guests carried their slips of paper to the brazier with great mindfulness. I was a little taken aback to suddenly see that other course participants had pushed into the long queue ahead of some of the nuns and monks and were actually burning their notes. At

first, I was indignant and a little disappointed to feel my obedience had been taken advantage of. But I was comforted by a wonderful song the community was now continuously singing. It was also a song I didn't know. It was probably sung in Vietnamese. Over and over

again, until all the people had put their slips of paper into the fire and bowed. The melody became more and more beautiful and at some point, I dared to sing along.

Namo Avalokiteshvara

It was one of the most beautiful experiences.

I was so grateful to be part of this special moment.

I could hardly tear myself away and stayed with a friend at the brazier until the whole community had disappeared back into the monastery to continue the celebrations.

And then I asked the friend if he thought I could burn my note too. I had the familiar feeling that I was not invited.

The friend reached into his jacket pocket and took out his note. He hadn't dared either. So, I took out my note and were able to light our notes on the remaining embers. We bowed and felt the preciousness of this moment. After the first few steps towards the monastery, the friend turned back to the bowl to see if the embers could be left like this and discovered my note, which was not completely burnt. The friend said, it was still possible to read some of the words. The embers were too hot to get close enough to see what they were.

That was how this photo came to be taken. To my amazement and joy I was able to decipher my most ardent wish:

- I am going to be healthy -

Dear, dear Thay,

I thank you from the bottom of my heart for this message from you, which I would like to hold in my heart, and which gives me hope and confidence.

Thank you.

A cloud never dies.

No coming, no going.

I would not have had these wonderful experiences and found this new direction in life without my illness.

I would also like to mention how, after receiving my diagnosis and during the therapy, I was miraculously carried by my friends, acquaintances and strangers (all heroes) and by life itself, through what was for me the most difficult time.

I wanted to share this with Thay and you, the widely scattered Waldbröl Sangha.

Thank you.

*A thousand thanks,*

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**Cordula Hordt**





# The new Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh Great Hall of Peace

Frank Jungjohann-Feltens in and on the “MIDDLE WAY”  
Nümbrecht, 16 June 2023

To be involved in the planning of this new meditation hall together with Thay Phap An, the director and spiritual leader of the EIAB, is a great blessing and possibly part of a greater plan for my work in this life. The EIAB building is in fact my birthplace and the fact that I now work with the EIAB is down to a series of serendipitous events, or “coincidences”.

I have seen Thich Nhat Hanh, also affectionately known as Thay, give Dharma talks a few times. He impressed me with his deep inner peace and clarity. I was even more impressed by the love his students show for Thay, especially Thay Phap An and Sister Song Nghiem, with whom I have very lively discussions. They live and work for Thay’s vision in Waldbröl (in the building where I was happily born) to run, and continue the development of the European Centre for Applied Buddhism. My love for the monks and nuns of the EIAB, especially Thay Phap An, has become the motor and fuel for Thay’s vision, which for some years has also been my vision. Here love knows no limit, has no beginning and no end, no coming and no going. This is certainly also the core of the idea of interbeing, which was cultivated and lived by Thay. Everything else is impermanent, it comes and goes, it is constantly changing.

The history of the EIAB’s historic building, the Ashoka Building, is similar. First a sanatorium, then a construction site for a Nazi “Strength through Joy Hotel”, primarily initiated by the then head of the German Labour Front, Robert Ley, who put his own very clear stamp on the building both

energetically and with regard to its exterior and interior design. The building then served as a military hospital for the war wounded, later as a hospital until 1967, and then as the Bundeswehr Academy for Strategic Studies and finally as a monastery with a teaching and research mission for applied Buddhism in Europe.

So this building has always seen change and transformation. We will see what changes and transformations are still to come. But one upcoming transformation is the addition of the new meditation hall.

I would like to return to the formative influence of Nazi architecture. The building looks imposing from the outside, especially the entrance hall on the ground floor. The main corridor on the ground floor alone is about 150 metres long. At that time, and certainly today, there were only a few buildings in the Oberberg district that could boast such dimensions. The large flight of steps that lead up to the building, then continue inside up a further six floors, plus an attic, also makes a striking impression on visitors. This is in stark contrast to the very small rooms on the upper floors. The Nazis’ intention was to overawe visitors with the power and might of the state, expressed in the dominant architecture of the building, and to make them feel small in comparison. I never experienced it that way. I have always enjoyed, for example, the almost “infinite” length of the corridor on the ground floor, which is an excellent place to practise walking meditation. Slowly walking the full length of this corridor can take a very long time.

## What am I trying to say?

The extension to the meditation hall is along similar lines. It extends over two floors. Each meditation hall has over 900 square metres of floor space. The practitioner’s gaze can wander through the very large and high windows out into the landscape. It was always important to Thay Phap An to put this space to good use, and create an impression of size and space, that can lead to an awareness of our own inner size and space. These are experiences that I was already able to enjoy as a child. Then, as now, I saw myself as part of an infinite cosmos, a cosmos in which I am both very small and as large and infinite as the cosmos itself. I can humbly bow before this vast inner and outer space and enjoy it as an expression of my love for this cosmos with all its beings. This is living and enjoying interbeing, just as Thay taught it and as Thay Phap An still teaches and lives it today. In Thay Phap An I can very clearly and touchingly see this love for the infinite, which we ourselves embody. This is exactly the reason why Thay’s vision is Thay Phap An’s own vision, as well as mine. We are who we are and no one else or as Jesus said, “I am who I am who I am”. This also means we are all one and we can never be anything else. That would be an illusion. Ultimately, we all have a vision: lived love, which, in our lives and beyond, also means applied love. The new “Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh Great Hall of Peace” is an expression of this love for ourselves and all beings. In the near future, we will have the chance to bathe in this love in the new meditation halls.

At the Vesak Festival this year, Thay Phap An spoke in his Dharma talk about entering the empty space, a space within us and around us that is infinitely vast in all directions. The new meditation hall is both an expression and an invitation to enjoy this vastness within and around us.

The extension is on three levels. On the lower level the existing technical centre has been extended outwards to the Old Hospital Way. Its sole function is to serve as a foundation for the two floors above.

### **Saddarmapundarika Dharma Hall or Lotus Flower Dharma Hall**

The meditation hall on the first floor, located directly above the technical centre and its surroundings, can be accessed via the large entrance hall of the main building, as well as from the old hospital path, which the EIAB was fortunate enough to acquire. This meditation hall is called Lotus Flower Dharma Hall and will mainly be used for physical exercises and for Dharma talks.

### **Avatamsaka Buddha Hall or Flower Adornment Avatamsaka Buddha Hall**

This meditation hall is on the second floor and is also accessible from the large entrance hall of the main building, the Ashoka building. The interesting thing about this name is its meaning, which is not entirely clear to

me. According to the entry in Wikipedia, part of the Avatamsaka Sutra contains the “Book of Entering the Dharma Realm”. So here, indirectly or directly, we encounter the infinite cosmos once again.

### **Particular Challenges Posed by the Design of the Meditation Halls**

To begin with it should be mentioned that Thay Phap An had a definite influence on essential aspects of the planning. The design for the meditation halls therefore clearly bears his signature.

A particular challenge was creating a superstructure in the technical centre to provide the foundation for the two meditation halls above. In addition, the column clearance within the meditation halls of over 32.35 metres is very ambitious. I spent several weeks preparing preliminary measurements to check whether this was even feasible. For this I had constant discussions with several engineers and test engineers. This process has not yet been completed. But I believe it is feasible as architecturally planned.

### **Vision and task**

That Thay chose to locate the EIAB in Waldbröl, my birthplace, is possibly also a sign of part of my life’s task. The deep friendship with Thay Phap An is definitely a sign. It is very clear that this vision is a challenging task. In my dreams I receive

answers to partial questions. Accessibility to the Ashoka building has to be designed very carefully. This is no easy task. It represents a great challenge for me and for the people who implement it. It challenges us to rise to the occasion, while maintaining an attitude of humility, and to complete the task for the benefit of all of us.

May we give our all and, trusting in the whole that unites us, our interbeing nature, receive the support we need for this. This task is a task of the Sangha, the monastic and lay Sangha. Together we are one Sangha body, one whole, and together we are infinitely strong. Together we can enjoy this infinite space within us and in the whole universe and be free within it, just be. Together we can realise the sacred space of the two meditation halls within us and within the EIAB. Let us walk this path together, step by step.

May love, which unites everything, bless and accompany you in every second. We are one whole.

In this sense 1 + 1 is more than 2. We are “Love in Action”.

*With respect and affection  
Your friend and brother  
Frank Jungjohann-Feltens.*

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**Frank Jungjohann-Feltens**





# The Joy of Missing Out...

## or: Just being there is enough!

In April 2023, we had a wonderful trip to Plum Village. The Munich Sangha allowed us, friends from Tyrol, to accompany them and we had an unforgettable time.

However, in the run-up, I had a lot of doubts, obstacles and excuses. Looking back with hindsight, I was probably quite exhausted at the time and was seriously questioning my social skills in larger groups. Exhaustion often manifests itself in great tiredness and my stay in Plum Village was accompanied by a daily, inner monologue:

*"I can just stay in bed, rest, I need distance from so many people, I don't have to participate in everything...do I even have to go out to eat? Maybe I'm not hungry at all? And where are my earplugs?"*

*"Oh how wonderful, so many people here that I love, when is the next meditation, and the food is fantastic, did I actually hear the big bell, great --- mindfulness day with hundreds of people... and this beautiful landscape!"*

In the bookshop I got into conversation with Nurit from the Sangha Sinai/Israel and she told me despairingly that she normally likes to get up so early in her everyday life yet in Plum Village she only manages to get to the big hall at 6am with the greatest of difficulty. I immediately assured her that I feel the same way, my day usually starts at 5am and in Plum Village I have never even been near the big hall at 6am. She congratulated me on my huge learning curve, as I no longer force myself to participate, and we laughed very loudly bringing a look of reproval from Sister Mountain at the cash desk for our loudness.

In the sharing, the topic of "fear of missing out" (fomo) and "joy of missing out" (jomo) came up. The fear of missing out and the joy of missing out.

And I realised quite quickly that I have actually been in the "jomo area" for many

years. I know deep down that I can rely on being in the right place at the right moment and that sometimes there is simply nothing to achieve or do.

Practice has been teaching me this for years.

Then on our trip I read Thay's book *Zen Battles*, which discusses, among other things, Master Linji's teachings of the "businessless person". It is the person who has nothing to do, who is not greedy for anything, who stays in the present moment. He or she participates in life, interacts with her environment and is present, but at the same time unimpressed. The person who has nothing left to do is liberated and authentic and a true blessing for all beings.

The circle closes, body and mind begin to relax.

Back home, the annual retreat of the Munich Sangha took place in Weyarn. A Dharma brother with many years of practice told us in the sharing that he can now tick off the subject of morning meditation for himself: this time of day does not correspond to his biorhythms. Nurit from the Sangha Sinai would heartily congratulate him on this realisation...and so would I.

By the way, I recently came across an exciting new topic:

ROMO---The relief of missing out!

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**Sabine Nimz**

Sangha Phù Đồng Thiên Vương, Hall in Tirol



# Sometimes Happiness Arrives Unexpectedly

One beautiful morning at breakfast we saw a duck in front of the glass door leading to the rooftop terrace. Or more precisely, the head and neck of a duck, that kept disappearing only to reappear to take a good look at us. Nicola had already mentioned seeing a pair of ducks on the terrace, who came and went. I found it difficult to imagine here, in the middle of a big city, and found myself suddenly a little bemused to be looking straight at a duck.

Then the duck vanished again, only to reappear every couple of days. We were curious whether the duck would turn up regularly for a spot of wellness or relaxation. The rooftop terrace is fully enclosed and so lovely and quiet. Nicola told me a couple of days later that by chance, when watering the flowers, she had discovered a nest with four eggs and the duck, who looked at her a little tensely but trustingly, behind two flattened lavender bushes.

The fire brigade's animal rescue service told us to get in contact with the duck helpline. The elderly lady at the other end promised to come and pick up the ducklings and mother as soon as they had hatched, to look after

them for a couple of days and then release them back into the wild.

Nicola began feeding the duck with oats, boiled potatoes, bananas and apples. To our astonishment the carefully saved salad was completely ignored. The duck didn't eat much at all in any case, just a few polite mouthfuls.

The lady from the duck hotline had asked us to familiarize the ducks with people a little, so when she brought food, which she placed very close to the duck, Nicola tried to announce her presence with a mantra. In Buddhist literature this mantra is recommended to help living beings relax in stressful situations. Obviously, this duck hadn't received that particular teaching and was simply irritated, only relaxing when we returned to normal language.

We knew that ducklings hatch more or less at the same time 28 days after the first egg has been laid. However, we didn't know exactly when the first egg had been laid. We soon took the duck to heart and felt like grandparents awaiting the arrival of their first grandchildren. Nicola looked every day before and after work, to see if the ducklings

had arrived. The rooftop terrace was made 'duckling-safe', the drains were covered with stones and a crack between the flower boxes, where the nest was, was also covered. Then came a few frosty nights and we were worried that the eggs might freeze. And the Rheinbahn began to lay new rails in the street, with the machines making a terrible noise and the vibrations shaking the whole house. The brave ducks put up with it for two weekends.

Then the moment arrived. After 28 days, or was it really 30, it occurred to Nicola that there was another crack in the flower box that a duckling could fall into, so she quickly grabbed a cloth to cover it with. As Nicola lifted the flowers to lay the cover, a little duckling gave a heart-rending shriek and ran back to the mother duck for protection. Deeply concerned Nicola began to worry about the duckling. But the ducks seemed to have forgotten this first encounter very quickly, as the next morning the mother duck stood proudly in the middle of the terrace to show us her eleven ducklings.

So, time to ring the duck help-line. The lady told us that she couldn't possibly take the ducklings, as she was already taking care of two duck families. She asked us whether she could come and collect the duck and ducklings and let them out in the nearby park. However, the park has dogs, cats, foxes, carrion crows, joggers, cyclists and other dangers. Then she asked if we could look after the ducklings for six weeks. Given the dangers in the park we quickly decided to keep the ducklings, and the next day we were given food for the duck mother and her ducklings. Later we realized that the ducklings can only fly at eight weeks and are completely defenceless at six weeks. So, we decided to keep the ducklings until they could fly.

Eight weeks with the ducklings. We know that one day the ducks will die just like all





other living beings. I also start to worry whether at eight weeks old the ducklings will make it to the next park over the busy streets and crossroads on their first flight. Even though the universe doesn't offer anything that lasts forever, we want to help them have a long and happy duck life. Even though the ducks and ducklings have grown close to our hearts, we know what began so wonderfully will end in eight weeks.

As we didn't have enough food, we had to find alternatives. We had no experience with ducklings. We knew of course that birds need bird sand. Other than that, we made a variety of attempts, as ducks have differing preferences. What worked was boiled potatoes, eggs, and later grated cucumbers, salad and spinach, dried meal worms (ordered on the internet) and lots of potting soil. Nicola and I, as well as Nicola alone, had an almost daily pilgrimage to the discount store opposite to buy sacksful of potatoes, at the beginning eggs too, and later four cucumbers a day and endless quantities of potting soil. Then we cooked the potatoes and eggs, mashed it all up to make duck food.

This was the start of the real adventure. At our age we suddenly found ourselves in a type of new parent phase with loss of sleep and stress. Every morning the duck mama and her ducklings would wake us punctually at 04:50, as the ducklings wanted breakfast and needed fresh water. I can barely imagine anything more delightful than little ducklings. How often did we hear each other say "Aren't they sweetest." Our compassion and affection for the ducklings helped us over the coming weeks. They grew very quickly. Often we just stood there in amazement at how quickly those tiny little things transformed into ever larger beings. They seemed to grow overnight, as did their digestive systems. Of course, what goes in at one end has to come out the other. It doesn't smell too nice and needs to be disposed of. In the third week the 'little ones' had a real growth spurt and needed feeding every 2-3 hours. The little ones' wings are getting larger and larger and they are already starting to flap their wings. We're curious how it will continue.

---

**Thomas Edion**  
from Düsseldorf



## Encounters

On a Tuesday at the end of June 2023, a small group of travellers consisting of Brother Thấy

Pháp Ấn, Sr Song Nghiem and the younger sisters Sr Quan Nghiem and Sr Trang Huyen

Dieu suddenly appeared at my door. Brother Pháp Ấn had led a small retreat in Munich





with talks on the Avatamsaka Sutra. Now the tour group was on their way back from Munich to the EIAB and had kindly stopped over for a short visit with me for an hour. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them once again.

Our conversation began with the mutual expression of our great appreciation of the bodhisattva path, which is so impressively and beautifully described in the last part of the Avatamsaka Sutra, the Gandavyuha, in the quest of young Sudhana and his

encounters with many male and female bodhisattvas.

Then our conversation turned to my own search and encounters with the many Buddhist teachers who are so important to me, beginning in 1971 with Nyanaponika Mahathera and his great Pali Sutta translations, then via Shree Rajneesh and Lama Anagarika Govinda to my Tibetan root teacher Lama Chime Rinpoche, in parallel the profound Vipassana retreats with Fred von Allmen, Ursula Flückiger and Carol Wilson, and finally in 1990 the first encounter with Thích Nhất Hạnh and Sister Chân Không. Our dear Dharma friend Amoghavajra Karl Schmied had invited Thích Nhất Hạnh to Munich for the first time and after a four-day retreat I had thanked Thích Nhất Hạnh with the following poem:

*Rain is falling  
And leaves let go  
My eyes fill with tears  
Remembering  
the kindness of the master*

My path to the Order of Interbeing then led to the founding of the Buddhist Meditation Ulm (BMU) group in 2001, which has since become a beautiful spiritual home for numerous friends.

In later years I became ill with MS, in addition to long-standing heart problems, which are now known to be due to a Long-EBV disease. In the beginning, the MS-fatigue (ME/CFS) was so strong that I could only work for half an hour a day on my favourite project at that time, the translation of practical instructions of the Chinese Chan Master Hongzhi Zhu. Chan master Hongzhi Zhengjue (宏智正覺, jap. Wanshi Shōgaku, 1091–1157) with the title:

*Cultivating the Empty Field*, Kristkeitz Publishing, 2009.

During this difficult time, I was greatly helped and always inspired by the memory of an impressive encounter with Steven Hawking during my work as an assistant at the Institute for Theoretical Solid-State

Physics at LMU Munich. Steven told us in relation to our physics research, as well as in relation to his own illness (slow-ALS): “You just never, never, never give up”.

So I am very grateful for the many beautiful encounters with many wonderful people.

The last word should belong to Chan Master Hongzhi (see above p. 51):

*Wander and play in Samādhi  
with total confidence*

*Empty and desireless, cold and bare, simple and true, this is the way to overcome and end the lingering habits of many lives. When the stains of old habits are exhausted, the original light appears, shines forth in your skull without anything else beside it. Wide and spacious, just as sky and water merge in autumn, just as snow and moon show the same colour, so this field is without boundary, beyond every direction, a radiant unity without corner or seam. And when you then turn inwards and let go of everything completely, realisation occurs. At that very moment of complete detachment, all thought and inner dialogue are a thousand or even ten thousand miles away. And yet no principle is discernible, so what could one point to, or explain? People for whom the bottom has fallen out of the bucket find perfect confidence. So, we are taught simply to recognise and explore interdependence, and finally to turn around and go out into the world. Wander there and play in Samādhi. Every detail appears perfectly clear before you. Sound and form, echo and shadow appear instantaneously and without leaving a trace. The outside world and I do not dominate each other because no [conceptual] perception (of objects) separates us. Only this [conceptual] non-perception encompasses the empty space of the majestic ten thousand forms of the Dharma realm. People with the original face should realise and explore (the field) without neglecting a single part [of it].*

**Munish Bernhard Schickel**

Ulm, 01.07.2023

Homepage: <https://www.mb-schickel.de/>



# Climate and Environmental Awareness in Southeast Asia in the Face of the Global Systemic Crisis

## A visit to the Engaged Buddhists in the Tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh in Thailand

From 1 to 20 December 2022, my university head of the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, Prof. Antweiler, my wife, Anne Wichtmann, and I were in Thailand to explore the possibilities of a research project on the state of current climate and environmental awareness in Southeast Asia. As part of this we visited various universities, towns and monasteries. The latter because I was interested whether ecologically committed

Buddhism was experiencing a renaissance in view of the growing climate crisis. I also wanted to find out whether an increasing awareness of global interconnectedness was developing in this regard.

In this context, I asked Sister Song Nhiem and Abbot Thay Phap An from the EIAB in Waldbröl, with whom I have had friendly contacts for a long time, if they could arrange

a contact for me in the Thai Plum Village in Pak Chong District near Nakorn Ratchasima. Soon after my request, I received a friendly email offering us the chance to visit the monastery outside of regular course and visiting hours.

My wife and I travelled from the small town of Nan to Bangkok airport, where a taxi organised by the monastery was already







waiting and took us to the monastery in a good three-hour drive. After a short time, we found ourselves in separate dormitories for male and female visitors: the simple bunk beds, equipped with enough blankets for the rather chilly nights and small cupboards and hooks for personal needs radiated monastic simplicity. Already on the first afternoon, we were able to have conversations with various monks and novices, some of whom even knew German, either because they came from here or had studied and lived here. Many of them had an academic background or had had a professional career, which enabled them to talk to us in English. We would also have liked to get in touch with the other nuns and monks, who always smiled and waved at us in a friendly manner or motivated us to eat more, but the language barrier stood in the way.

In the evening, we were allowed to participate in meditation in the large hall. The quiet sitting did us good after the exhausting and busy travel. After a short time, we felt at home in the Sangha and began to relax. From 21:30 onwards, we surrendered totally to “Noble Silence”.

The next morning, we got up with the sisters and brothers at about 4 am and joined in with the walking meditation through the beautiful garden-like grounds. Unfortunately, my wife fell ill later that morning and had to stay in bed. As a result, the day was also somewhat marked by worry and limitations. But I was reassured that the nurses and a visitor from the USA were taking good care of my wife in the same room. So, I was still able to have other conversations that day: with the

visitor’s husband, long-time students of Thay, the abbot of the monastery, and a Thai monk currently living there, Phra Pittaya.

My questions were all very kindly received, and I felt a genuine desire to help. I was amazed to hear how actively Thay’s students were already engaged in ecological issues. It was not the fact that the monastery itself was trying to live in an environmentally friendly way that made a difference from other Thai monasteries, but rather the fact that the global dimension of the multiple crises of today was seen and being addressed. Probably because the community has been internationally connected and engaged for decades. There are well-networked followers of Thay almost everywhere in the world. But I was also impressed by the global commitment that goes beyond monastic life, e.g. when I heard that some sisters and brothers were actively involved in the climate conference in Glasgow with lectures and workshops. Again and again, I heard the argument that it is not the core task of Buddhist nuns and monks to become politically active in the outside world in the short term, but rather to change the inner attitude of people through teaching and example, so that the root problems of greed and confusion can be eradicated in the long term allowing a different attitude to nature, the environment and the world around us to emerge.

The abbot of the monastery repeatedly pointed out the educational role of the nuns and monks, as well as the lay followers, in providing an example and saw this as the main concern of his lineage. Only with a peaceful and calm spirit could a fundamental

change of the world be achieved. And it was highly questionable whether this would succeed. In the worst case, he suggested that humans could well destroy themselves, but that life and the Dharma would continue to exist in another form. A thought that shocked me as much as it fascinated me, but which I rediscover in the serenity with which nature accepts what we are doing to it, in the “knowledge” that life in which everything is interconnected will go on and continue to awaken.

Overall, the awareness and level of education of the monks we were able to talk to was impressive and different from what we had otherwise experienced in the village monasteries of Thailand, where it was often “only” about very concrete help and projects around the village. This was confirmed by the well-travelled Thai monk Phra Pittaya with whom I was able to speak last. What we regretted was that there was no opportunity to talk to nuns of the monastery, as the English-speaking nuns were currently travelling.

Early in the morning, my wife (halfway recovered) and I drove back to Bangkok with many impressions in our minds and hearts and grateful for the helpfulness and openness we experienced in Thai Plum Village. The visit there was a gift and once again opened up a completely different perspective on the issues we brought with us.

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## A TRUE MIRACLE

“Dear Sangha, I would like to share my life story with you, a story deeply connected to the practice of Thich Nhat Hanh:

### A TRUE MIRACLE.

In 1981, at the age of three, as an orphan in South Korea, I was adopted by a family in Münster. For the first months in my new home country I was very confused and often sad, but unable to speak about it in the new language. The stability, loyalty and attention of my adoptive family helped me face the enormous difficulties of being adopted in a foreign country. Nevertheless, my heart was broken, and I often felt lonely, strange and inferior. In 2007, I began to look more deeply into myself, the story of my adoption and Korean culture. Among other things, the

book “Peace is Every Step” by Thich Nhat Hanh and visits to an extraordinary healer who embodied deep compassion, peace and love helped me.

In 2009, for the first time since my adoption, I travelled to South Korea with two friends. I was now ready to seek contact with my birth family and to get to know the country of my birth, but clear that I didn’t want to exhaust myself physically, emotionally or financially. It was also important to me that any reunion with my birth family should be consensual, as, for example, my mother could have remarried, and a forced reunion could cause further unhappiness in the family.

My first port of call was the adoption agency HOLT in Seoul, who were polite but

unhelpful. There I was told it would not be possible to find my birth family based on their data, as they have no information about my birth family and furthermore the little information HOLT had about me in their files was either inaccurate or wrong.

The non-governmental organisation G.O.A.L. supported me with sound advice and a volunteer travel companion. Among other things, G.O.A.L. advised me that it might be useful to have the Korean police take a DNA sample from me, as there was a slight possibility that my parents might do the same and find me that way. I followed this advice, but never received any further notification from the police.

In years that followed, with the help of meditation and Buddhist psychology, among other things, I began to develop deep compassion for myself and to view my life story with equanimity. The practice that Thich Nhat Hanh teaches is so subtle and gentle that with peace and love I was able to touch and patiently transform even deep layers of pain in my heart. I had resigned myself to not seeing my birth family again in the flesh.

Between 2016 and 2019 (until the birth of my son) I visited South Korea many times and offered workshops for contemporary dancers. During this time, I developed an understanding and love of Korean culture, history and society. I have found most Koreans I have met to be warm, respectful, generous and appreciative. It is painful for me to see how South Korea has not yet come to terms with the deeply traumatic experiences of the long period of Japanese occupation, the division of Korea, the Korean War, the subsequent military dictatorship, and many years of poverty. South Korea has broken many sad records in the recent past: stress, depression, loneliness and exhaustion permeate all levels of society



It is true happiness to be able to hold my mother's tender hands after more than four decades.





At the Buddhist monastery "Sinreuksa" in her hometown of Yeosu, we practised touching the earth together.

and lead to alcoholism, gambling addiction, media addiction, a very high emigration and suicide rate, the highest rate of adoptions abroad and the lowest birth rate worldwide. Socially vulnerable people, women and especially single mothers still experience many disadvantages and do not receive enough support.

In July 2022, I went to a family retreat in Plum Village in the South of France with my partner and my son. On the last day of the retreat, I opened my emails and read a message from G.O.A.L. telling me the Korean police were trying to contact me. My potential birth mother had contacted them and left a DNA sample there. This would be very similar to my DNA sample from 2009. However, the police needed an additional DNA sample from me to prove the relationship beyond doubt.

In January 2023, I received the news that the second test was also positive. What followed was a mixture of different emotions, joy, compassion, pain, excitement, confusion and intense uncertainty.

With the generous and professional help of the Korean institution N.C.R.C. (National Centre for the Rights of Children), I was able to contact my mother and able to write to my brother using a translation app. For the first time, I was able to reconstruct my past and the (very tragic) history of our family. I now

know things that others take for granted: my real date of birth, my place of birth, my birth name, the names of my close relatives.

Out of respect for my family I don't want to share all the details of our tragic past. What I can share: as homeless migrant workers my parents were extremely poor, on top of which my mother was forced to leave the family when I turned two due to severe difficulties within the family. My father suffered from progressive blindness after an accident in his youth and was in increasingly poor mental health. My father had no access to a practice or community that could help him overcome his difficulties. It dragged him into a quagmire of grief, hatred, confusion, alcoholism and gambling addiction.

When I was two and a half years old, my father took me on a bus trip to visit an aunt and lost me at a bus station in Suwon. I was found by someone I didn't know and handed over to the nearby Suwon Citizen's Office. From there I went to the municipal orphanage. My father did not tell my mother about this until seven months later. After only five months in the home and at HOLT, I was adopted. For legal reasons, this made it impossible for my mother to find my whereabouts. A year later, my father died in a traffic accident.

In March 2023, I was able to travel to South Korea and hug my birth family peacefully and happily for the first time in 43 years.

As I held my mother in my arms, I practised hugging meditation, feeling deep peace and happiness.

My mother doesn't speak English and I don't speak Korean, but we share a deep joy at being present together in silence.

During our walks we hold each other's hand lovingly and tenderly. The beauty of these wonderful moments together remains alive in our hearts as joy. After learning of my father's severe suffering, I felt an intense stabbing pain in my right shoulder, which only eased after many loving prayers of forgiveness for my father and loving kindness and compassion for my family. Shortly after my flight home, I travelled with my partner and son to my adoptive family and then to the EIAB. The time at the Easter retreat helped me relax physically and process my intense experiences. I could feel my father in me coming to rest. All the members of our family now have a special chance to make peace with our tragic past and dwell happily in the present.

In the coming days, I would like to invite you to hold the hand of a loved one in deep presence and love – like a son who is allowed to hold the hand of his dear mother after 43 years of separation. In this way you can together touch the miracle of life in the present moment. "We are all a true miracle."



#### Benjamin Joon

Benjamin works as a mindfulness teacher and life coach in German-speaking countries, offering individual sessions, workshops, retreats and a year-long training. He has been practising for many years at Plum Village, the EIAB, Sangha Zehlendorf and is the founder of Sangha Potsdam..

# Dear Sisters and Brothers of the EIAB,

## *Dear Sisters and Brothers of the EIAB,*

I don't know if words can do justice to my experiences of the last few days or those of earlier retreats at the EIAB. I feel rather that words limit the fullness of the experience and yet I have a need in my heart to express my gratitude and share a few special memories that have touched me. I ask for your understanding that with so many precious moments, I can only mention a few.

### **"I have arrived – I am home".**

Since my first visit to the EIAB in 2018, this feeling comes alive as soon as I set out to visit you. The car journey is in itself a mindfulness exercise, and I consciously enjoy it. I still remember the first walking meditation. When we arrived at the sign with Thay's calligraphy I was so deeply touched that tears flowed. Never before have I felt so connected to myself. This weekend, when I arrived in my room for the "Time for Myself" course and saw this calligraphy on the table in my room, the feeling came alive in me again and brought a smile to my face.

On each of my visits, whether a retreat, course or Mindfulness Sunday, I have felt the healing benefits of stillness and presence. I look back on many loving and joyful encounters and feel, especially when writing, that I cannot really express this fullness. There are so many moments stored in my heart that pass as pictures before my inner eye and give expression to the feeling of deep gratitude.

Eating in mindfulness with an awareness of Mother Nature and of how many living beings have contributed to this delicious food in my bowl is indescribable. How often I eat the gifts of nature unmindfully. It is not natural – it is a gift. Everything is a gift – only I don't always notice it in everyday life.

There is so much love and joy of life in the way you are and what you do that I feel

welcome as I am right now. I decided to take the "Time for Myself" course because I have the feeling that I am following many different approaches to the practice without really coming any closer to myself. It's as if I get lost in the variety of possibilities and go around in circles. Coming back to the essentials of mindfulness has shown me that everything is already here if I look deeply and consciously take one step at a time.

I leave with a colourful bouquet of unique moments, as well as impulses and reminders to deepen my meditation practice. May I integrate the daily practice into my life and be more peaceful and compassionate with myself, all living beings and everything that happens.

I found the forgiveness meditation and touching the earth in the evening particularly intense and profound. Being able to give up the experiences and burdens of the day to Mother Earth with a prayer, then going to bed with more ease, made me softer. It was like taking off a heavy cloak, or a tight shell around my body so that I could fall asleep peacefully. It's a ritual I would like to continue practising at home. It is a wonderful feeling to start the day refreshed and with the awareness of BEGINNING ANEW.

I also take many impulses from the Dharma lectures of Thay Phap An. A beautiful image that we are all connected as part of a shining net and that how we shine has an influence on the whole net, as does every negative feeling and every negative thought. We all bear responsibility for our inner peace, which in turn has an influence on the peace (or lack of it) in the world beyond. Bringing body and mind into harmony through conscious breathing in the here and now makes me aware of what I am doing and how I am doing it. These are valuable memories that I hope will take deeper root in me.

I am also very grateful for the morning Qigong exercises with the whole community.





This moving in togetherness, in wonderful weather to boot, was a great start to the day and a good preparation for the body for sitting meditation. It introduced me to a lot of new movements, and I am already looking forward to seeing the recordings.

I found the deep relaxation with the gentle voice of the sister very healing. I also thank her for the wonderful singing, which came from a very deep connection to the practice. I feel so very blessed.

The great compassion and the strength you show in practising to create harmony and peace also touched me very much, although my head rebelled a little at first. In a time when fear and “wanting to be right” create more and more separation, this shows awareness, compassion and love.

I thank Thay, Thay Phap An and all the brothers and sisters of the EIAB for your big open hearts and the love you give us. I thank the Sangha for the moments we share and the

warmth of their hearts. As I said, my words cannot really express the fullness of the gifts my heart has received.

*Heartfelt greetings from Bonn  
A lotus for you*

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**Marion**





## Sangha „Casa Felicia“

We are very happy to share that a precious seed germinated in the Sangha of Palermo thanks to the teachings of Thay Phap An and Sister Song Nghiem, who have been offering retreats in Southern Italy in Puglia and Sicily for some years.

Sicily is known worldwide for its extraordinary natural, archaeological, historical, artistic and anthropological beauties, but also for the “mafia” – a criminal organisation that has killed hundreds of people over many years and continues to sow violence, fear and injustice in the Sicilian society, with psychosocial and cultural consequences that are in dire need to be transformed.

Inspired by the story of the place chosen for founding EIAB by our beloved master Thich Nhat Hanh and the thirteenth Training of the Order of Interbeing, a new Sangha in Cinisi was recently established. This small community of local practice has recently begun to meet every week at Casa Felicia,

a country house confiscated by the Italian state from mafia boss Gaetano Badalamenti, one of the most violent Palermo mobsters of the “Cosa Nostra” and instigator of the killing of Peppino Impastato, a young militant from Cinisi who rebelled against the mafia power. We are happily and freely hosted in this farmhouse by the Casa Memoria Felicia and Peppino Impastato association, which every day is committed to sharing the example and courage of Peppino and his mother Felicia with many young people from all over Italy.

Dharma teachers Thay Phap An and Sister Song Nghiem warmly invited us to

practice in this place to transform suffering into compassion and to take care of interpersonal relationships. Supported by these noble aspirations and by the stability offered in the retreats by EIAB’s beloved monks, we have decided to establish a Sangha that is committed to social work, with the aspiration that it can be of service to many living beings who also suffer from the

violence sown in the collective consciousness by the mafia system.

The Sangha of Palermo has grown a lot over the years and with its headquarters in the historic center it offers many people a constant opportunity for practice and a space of peace in the confusion and frenzy of the city. The Sangha of Cinisi is a natural ramification of the Sangha of Palermo but thanks to the place where it meets, it represents a special opportunity to knowingly enter into contact with the suffering of the local population. Sitting together to meditate in silence, listening to the breath and the body in the house where the boss “Don Tano” lived, thought, planned and carried out actions of immense cruelty and violence is a revolutionary experience of collective healing and transformation. The local population is deeply grateful to Thay’s teachings, because they offer a concrete possibility to encounter the suffering that has been denied by a code of silence for years. “The best word is a word not said” is a mafia proverb that describes this mentality of silence. In this new-born community of practice, the spirit is that of opening the heart, sharing experiences through loving speech and deep listening.

With the practice of mindfulness in this place, we also keep alive the memory of Peppino, his mother Felicia and all the mafia victims who fought with their lives against violence, oppression and environmental exploitation, thus planting the seeds for a better society, free from all organised criminal organisations.

We are deeply grateful to Thich Nhat Hanh, because without his teachings rooted in engaged Buddhism all this would not have manifested, and to Thay Phap An and Sister Song Nghiem, because they continue to







commit themselves to support and develop the Sangha in Sicily.

In the attached picture you can admire the large meditation room, with a sunset view over the sea where, amidst the songs of blackbirds and the lowing of cows, a thundering silence falls which allows us to feel our being together in the path of love and transformation.

Around Casa Felicia, the Garden of Memory and Commitment was recently established where each tree is linked to the names of mafia's victims and to people who are committed to social justice and peace.

On the occasion of the next retreat of the EIAB monks here in Palermo – which will be held at the end of October – it is our aspiration to plant a tree in this garden, together with Thay

Phap An and Sister Song Nghiem, in the name of our beloved master Thich Nhat Hanh..

*With love and deep gratitude,  
the Sangha of Cinisi and Palermo*

## Meeting Thay

Like many people, I 'met' Thay in a bookstore, more than 20 years ago. I well remember the book that caught my attention: *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, a small book that has remained in my heart. Of course, I did not arrive at Thay's books by pure chance, since I was a boy I had felt a strong inner urge to look for different ways of being in the world, but my spiritual search had remained mostly at an intellectual level, I seemed to be circling around something without really getting into it. Instead, what struck me about Thay's

words was their ability to resonate directly with a very intimate and deep level of my consciousness, somehow overcoming the conceptual barrier and reaching straight to the heart. In 2005 I participated in the first retreat in the Plum Village tradition and thus began a process of transformation and healing that has given me so much joy and openness and allowed me to find a different posture in my life, which I now feel is healthier, more stable and harmonious. I believe the most beautiful fruit of the practice, however, is

that I have learnt to relate differently to the people around me, bringing listening, kindness and understanding into family and social relationships. I am immensely grateful to Thay, it was a blessing to have met him, and I am equally grateful to the Dharma teachers and all the practitioners who help to carry his message of peace forward.

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