



Thich Nhat Hanh leads alms rounds in Bao Loc, Vietnam. Traditionally, nuns follow the last novice monk in a procession, but Thich Nhat Hanh insisted that the nuns walk beside the monks.

I Am Home

Filmmaker VELCROW RIPPER reports on Thich Nhat Hanh's historic trip home to Vietnam, where tens of thousands gathered with him to revive Buddhist practice and to heal the wounds of war.

The mind can go in a thousand directions, but on this beautiful path, I walk in peace. With each step, the wind blows. With each step, a flower blooms. —THICH NHAT HANH

DEEP IN THE HEART OF DARKNESS, in a time of napalm, carpet-bombing, and Agent Orange, a flower bloomed in the form of a young Buddhist monk named Thich Nhat Hanh. Instead of closing his heart to the horrors of the Vietnam War, he did the opposite: he opened up to the ultimate source of strength. He opened up to true love, and in doing so, he inspired what has become a worldwide movement of politically engaged Buddhists.

Thay, as he is affectionately known, recognized that true love begins with looking deeply, with emptying the heart of preconceptions and allowing spaciousness to occur. With this empty heart, empty of all illusion, comes compassion, comes courage, comes joy, comes wisdom. Comes true love.

With a lived understanding of how all life interconnects—what he calls “interbeing”—Thich Nhat Hanh went beyond mere thought or contemplation and took action. In the midst of the Vietnam War, he founded the Order of Interbeing, started an important peace magazine, and launched Youth Social Services, a group of committed practitioners who saw the Buddha's teachings as a truth that required them to be “lotuses in a sea of fire.” He



Thich Nhat Hanh, 1964

PARALLAX PRESS



PHOTO BY KATE CUMMINGS

Thich Nhat Hanh addresses an audience in a Saigon temple during one of three Grand Requiem Masses he conducted to heal the wounds of the Vietnam War.

gave birth to Engaged Buddhism, a movement that would spread around the world from its small base in Vietnam.

In 1966, at the age of forty, Thich Nhat Hanh was exiled from his beloved Vietnam. His crime was to see the suffering of the Communist and the nationalist, the soldier and the civilian, the victim and the perpetrator as interdependent. He was considered a traitor by the power brokers on both sides for acknowledging the humanity of everyone entangled in that awful web of war.

During his four decades of exile, Thay did not rest. He traveled throughout the world, offering his message of reconciliation and peace. After the war's end, he brought together Vietnam War vets and Vietnamese refugees to help them find reconciliation and healing. He worked in prisons, led peace walks, and spread the dharma, going wherever his wisdom was needed. Once, when Thay was returning from his first visit with prisoners at the Maryland Correctional Institution (which would become the basis for his book *Be Free Where You Are*), he said he would much rather be in prison than in the Pure Land, because it is in the places of the greatest suffering that the greatest opportunities to practice compassion exist.

But in the long years away from his beloved Vietnam, as he rose to worldwide prominence as a Buddhist teacher, Thay always heard the call of his homeland. Again and again he asked for permission to return but was denied. Finally, in 2005, Thich

Nhat Hanh was allowed to go home. He and members of his sangha traveled throughout Vietnam, working to reinstate the Buddhist monastic tradition that had been fractured by years of war and Communist rule.

In the spring of 2007, Thich Nhat Hanh brought members of his community with him on a second tour, and I accompanied the party as a filmmaker and chronicler of this historic return. While I was there, I had the good fortune to interview Thich Nhat Hanh, who talked at some length about his reasons for returning to Vietnam and what he was doing there.

"The tour is an opportunity to go back to Vietnam and practice with people," he told me. "For forty years, I was unable to offer teaching and practice to the people of Vietnam. So my only purpose is to be with the people, to meet with them, and to offer them retreats, days of mindfulness, dharma talks, and walking meditation. Most of the people who participate were born during my absence. Yet when I see them, I can recognize their patterns. They are the continuation of their parents and they continue the practice. The younger generation is very inspired by the fact that Buddhism has been able to be renewed, so that they can receive the teachings, understand the practice, and take it up."

But Thay said there was something else he wanted to do on this visit: make a relationship with the war dead and help heal

the wounds that people still suffer from the war. “We will conduct ceremonies to pray for victims of the war on both sides,” he said. “This is the first time such ceremonies have been allowed. They are very traditional rites, but they are also like a festival, in a way. The people who are still alive come together and think of the dead people. They pray for them and reconcile. The war has left many wounds within each person, and there has been no chance to reconcile the warring parties. This is a collective practice of healing. If we don’t transform the suffering and the wounds now, they will be transmitted to the next generation. They will suffer and they will not understand why. It’s better to do something right away to transform the suffering and the injustice that we have experienced.”

What follows is the story, as I experienced it, of Thich Nhat Hanh’s 2007 return to Vietnam.

HO CHI MINH CITY

Thay has a packed three-month schedule of retreats, teachings, and ceremonies, talking to crowds in temples filled beyond capacity, leading groups of up to 10,000 on meditation retreats, and bringing those of us blessed to be around him on a journey into the depths of mindfulness. Although restrictions on religious freedoms have recently been relaxed in Vietnam, one can still be considered anti-Communist for worshipping at a Buddhist temple. But the walls are slowly coming down, and Thay is stepping into the opening by focusing on reconciliation, on helping to transform the lasting suffering of war from pain into love.

I land at Tan Son Nhat airport on the day the tour begins and find Thay seated on a bench surrounded by smiling monks and nuns, looking very happy. A bespectacled monk named Thich Phap An, one of his senior monks, approaches, and I explain that I am the Canadian filmmaker who has been invited on the tour to gather footage for my feature documentary, *Fierce Light: When Spirit Meets Action*, which chronicles the rising tide of spiritual activism across the globe. I am three months into my journey, searching the world for contemporary stories of what Gandhi

called “soul force,” what Alice Walker calls “the human sunrise,” and what Thich Nhat Hanh calls “love in action.”

I began this leg of the voyage in New Zealand, visiting a Maori peace village whose early nonviolent civil disobedience inspired Gandhi. In Kenya, I attended the World Social Forum, the largest gathering of grassroots change-makers in history. In South Africa, I visited the Phoenix Ashram, where Gandhi’s *Satyagraha* movement was born. In India, I visited with the Dalits (formerly, “untouchables”), who are in a period of change and empowerment similar to the American Civil Rights movement, and in Sri Lanka, I filmed the Sarvadayan community, the largest contemporary Gandhian movement in existence. And now I find myself in Vietnam, with the monastics of Plum Village and Deer Park (Thay’s monastery in southern California), along with a collection of international sangha members, stepping into the heartland of Engaged Buddhism.

Our first stop is Ho Chi Minh City, renamed after what could be called either “the fall of Saigon” or “the rise of Ho Chi Minh,” depending on your perspective. It always comes down to perspective. Ho Chi Minh City’s wide streets are lined with red banners and swarming with mopeds and pedestrians. Crossing the chaos seems impossible at first, but watching the locals at work, I can see the buzzing bikes part like a school of fish in the face of a pedestrian. All that’s required is trust.

After a silent, meditative breakfast with the other international sangha members in our hotel restaurant, we take a bus to the Phap Van temple, the base for Thay’s Engaged Buddhism back in the sixties. A swarm of cameras greets the stately arrival of Thich Nhat Hanh, who leads us on a slow, calming, walking meditation. Then we gather in the dining hall to receive our robes and alms bowl. I’ve always been drawn to the simplicity and focus I’ve witnessed in monastics, particularly in the joyous Plum Village sangha, and I’m thrilled with this opportunity to be a semi-monk for a month. I look around at my new traveling companions—seventy foreigners from around the world—all dressed up in light blue robes, tentative and slightly awed by this sudden transformation. We are no longer civilians.



Left: A ceremonial bridge constructed at the Saigon temple for the Grand Requiem Mass, symbolizing a route for departed souls to pass from suffering. PHOTO: KATE CUMMINGS
Right: Thich Nhat Hanh arrives at Tu Hieu, the temple where he became a novice monk. PHOTO: DEAN NELSON





PHOTOS BY VELCROW RIPPER

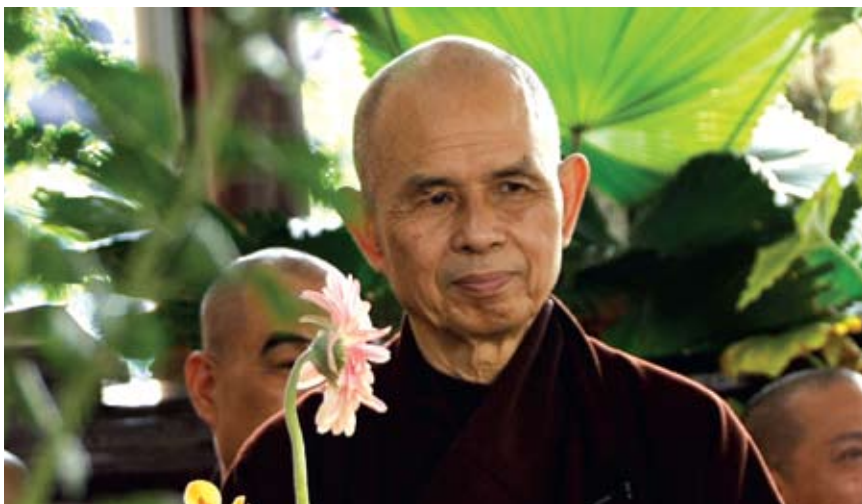
Clockwise from top left: a boulder at Prajna Monastery adorned with the calligraphy “I have arrived, I am home” by Thich Nhat Hanh; a formal lunch in the meditation hall; Sister Chan Khong leading a discussion group; Sister Chan Khong (sitting) is interviewed by Velcrow Ripper.

For the Vietnamese people, the presence of the international sangha is very important. Many Vietnamese have rejected their traditional Buddhist culture, partly because of the religious repression under Communism but also out of a lack of self-esteem. The West is considered a paradise, as seen on satellite TV—a world of big cars and flashy products and seemingly endless wealth. The sight of a large group of robed Westerners practicing Vietnamese Buddhism offers them a sense of pride in their own culture.

After a delicious vegetarian lunch, eaten out of our new monk’s bowls, we slip off our shoes and gather under a canvas awning set up in front of the main temple. There we are greeted by Sister Chan Khong, who has long been Thay’s closest assistant. As a fourteen-year-old, Chan Khong (“True Emptiness”) was struck by the unfair gap between rich and poor and began going from door to door in her neighborhood, saying, “Consider me like the bird pecking at your rice pot. Give me one handful of rice, that’s all, for those who don’t have enough.” Early on, she knew that her role in life was to express her love in action. She became the St. Clare to Thich Nhat Hanh’s St. Francis.

Sister Chan Khong was one of the first six members of Thay’s Order of Interbeing, and during the war she worked fearlessly for peace with Youth Social Services. This group of courageous young people stepped into the fray to offer support and solace on the front lines, resettling homeless war victims, rebuilding bombed-out hamlets, moving through the wreckage with profound grace. There were times when bombed villages were rebuilt, only to be bombed, only to be rebuilt, only to be bombed—again, and again, and again. Many of these young spiritual activists were killed or wounded, but still they refused to hate, they refused to take sides, they refused to give up.

Although Thay is credited with coining the term “Engaged Buddhism,” he believes that all Buddhism must be engaged or it’s not Buddhism. He explains that “when you practice sitting meditation in the temple and you hear the bomb victims crying outside, you have to go out and help, because to meditate is to be aware of what is going on in yourself and also around you. In a situation of war, you have to be engaged to be true to your tradition of compassion and love. But if you are so busy doing the work of relief, you may lose your practice and you will be



PHOTOS BY VELCROW RIPPER

Clockwise from top left: Temple at Prajna Monastery; Thich Nhat Hanh hugs the abbot from the temple in Dalat; a statue at Prajna Monastery; Thich Nhat Hanh gives a dharma talk at Phap Van temple, his first stop in Vietnam.

exhausted. You'll be burnt out. That is why you have to find ways to maintain your practice, maintain your solidity, your freedom, your peace while you are doing the work.

"Nonviolent action," he continues, "is an expression of your love. Society has so many social ills as a result of development and globalization. If you have true love, you see what you can do to transform the problems of drugs, alcohol, violence, and the breaking up of families. There are so many, many ways for you to express your love."

TEN THOUSAND HEARTS

Following his first visit back to Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh established the Prajna Monastery, near the town of Bao Loc, about six hours south of Saigon by bus. It is a beautiful complex of temples, meditation halls, and dormitories, perched on a hillside surrounded by groves of pine trees and coffee plantations. The valley below is laced with soft, meandering, red-dirt trails that are perfect for walking meditation and dotted with small pagodas for quiet sitting. At one end of the valley, a giant white Buddha sits under a tree, and at the other end there is a giant white Avalokiteshvara,

the bodhisattva of compassion, her soft countenance glowing. A graceful temple with sweeping arches and cool tiles for devotion and meditation is flanked by lions on each corner, dharma protectors of fierce compassion. A sign carved in stone at the foot of the hill reads: "I have arrived. I am home."

Originally, there was only a single temple here. The abbot was a strong supporter of Thich Nhat Hanh. All through the years of Thay's exile the abbot maintained contact and helped with the Plum Village social-work projects that spread throughout this region. When Thay came back to Vietnam for the first time three years ago, he inaugurated a new monastery on the surrounding lands. In the brief time between the visits, this enormous center of peace has sprouted. Three hundred new monks and nuns live here, and more are being ordained all the time. This represents a reinvigoration of the Buddhist sangha in Vietnam, in the Plum Village tradition.

After a "Lazy Day," a day without responsibilities, we begin a formal meditation retreat, along with ten thousand Vietnamese participants. No one anticipated such a turnout, but it's evident that there is a great hunger for the teachings here. We sit together, ten thousand hearts, taking in the soft radiance of a teacher return-

ing to his homeland, revitalizing a religion that had grown stale.

Thay says that religion is like the skin of the jackfruit. We must go for the juice inside. We need to return to the original teachings. The Buddha taught “signlessness”—not to be trapped by signs. Sister Chan Khong tells me, “In the time of the Buddha, there was no Buddhism. You must touch your own peace, your own light, your own deep understanding. That is the Buddha in you. You can call it God, you can call it Allah. Don’t try to put it into a box called Buddhism, Christianity, or Judaism. Use the tool of signlessness offered by the Buddha. Then you can touch the reality of beauty, of greatness.”

INFUSED WITH LOVE

By the middle of the trip, I am in love. I can barely contain myself during the mindful walking meditations—it feels like mindful skipping. Fortunately, being with the Plum Village sangha is a safe place for a lover. No one thinks I’m crazy if I smile a little too widely. It feels like everything is in sync. To me, every chirp of a bird is a love song right now.

When I watch Thay as he leads the morning walking medita-

tions, I sense that his heart is blown wide open. His brand of Zen Buddhism is far removed from the stick-thwacking, koan-churning stereotype of Zen. His is a practice infused with love, in all its dimensions. You can see it running through his students. The sangha beams with love and smiles. Even when Thay is not around, I am still imbibing his teachings, transmitted with authenticity by his students. This is not a grim, repressed bunch of monks and nuns, fearers of life hiding out in the security of the monastery. These people are engaged; they’re living fully, in this moment, freely sharing their findings with the rest of us.

Phap An, one of Thay’s senior monks, says that before he met Thay he spent years meditating on a deceptively simple koan: *Who am I?* It became an obsession: *Who am I lifting this arm? Who am I taking this step? Who am I moving through space?* Then he met Thay and discovered meditation in action. He dropped the philosophy and started living, being fully alive. There is some formal meditation at Plum Village, but not a lot. More important is how you live life. How you fully show up. It’s not about analyzing yourself into enlightenment. It’s about being, now. Now. Now. Now.

The Cradle of Compassion *How Thich Nhat Hanh’s call to mindfulness got* SISTER

DURING THE WAR with the French, Thay had contracted malaria and dysentery, and, during this trip to the remote mountain areas, both diseases recurred. Despite that his presence was very inspiring for our whole team. Thay reminded us to be mindful of everything—the way Thay Nhu Van, a high monk who was very popular with both sides, talked to the officers of both sides; the way Thay Nhu Hue organized the local Buddhists; and the way the rowers of our boat ate in mindfulness. We observed the steep canyon of the Thu Bon River and were aware of the icy mountain wind and the homeless victims of the flood on the verge of death. The atmosphere of death permeated our whole trip—not only the death of flood victims, but also our own risk of dying at any moment in the ever-present cross fire.

As we were leaving the area, many young mothers followed us, pleading with us to take their babies, because they were not certain the babies could survive until our next rescue mission. We cried, but we could not take these babies with us. That image has stayed with me to this day.

After that, as I went to Hue every two months to lecture on biology, I never failed to organize groups of students, monks, and nuns to help people suffering in these remote areas. We began with the daylong journey from Hue to Da Nang, where we would sleep in a temple and then travel to Quang Nam and Hoi An. In Hoi An, we rented five midsize boats to carry nearly ten tons of rice, beans, cooking utensils, used clothing, and medical supplies.

One night, we stopped in Son Khuong, a remote village where the fighting was especially fierce. As we were about to go to sleep in our boat, we suddenly heard shooting, then screaming, then shooting again. The young people in our group were seized with panic, and a few young men jumped into the river to avoid the bullets. I sat quietly in the boat with two nuns and breathed consciously to calm myself. Seeing us so calm, everyone stopped panicking, and we quietly chanted the Heart Sutra, concentrating deeply on this powerful chant. For a while, we didn’t hear any bullets. I don’t know if they actually stopped or not. The day after, I shared my strong belief with my coworkers, “When we work to help people, the bullets have to avoid us, because we can never avoid the bullets. When we have good will and great love, when our only aim is to help those in distress, I believe that there is a kind of magnetism, the energy of goodness that protects us from being hit by the bullets. We only need to be serene. Then, even if a bullet hits us, we can accept it calmly, knowing that everyone has to die one day. If we die in service, we can die with a smile, without fear.”

Two months later, while on another rescue trip, bombs had just fallen as we arrived at a very remote hamlet, about fifteen kilometers from Son Khuong Village. There were dead and wounded people everywhere. We used all the bandages and medicine we had. I remember so vividly carrying a bleeding baby back to the boat in order to clean her wounds and do whatever surgery might be necessary. I cannot describe how painful and desperate

When I ask Phap An about the meaning of love, he says, “When your eyes open, then love happens. Love is a state of mind where you are very bright, very clear. There is connectivity between you and the rest of the universe. It is a source of energy that makes you dissolve among things. Slowly a process of opening begins, your mind begins to expand, and you begin to see things much more clearly. You hear the sound of the bird chirping and you see the green on the bamboo. You feel a lot of energy to be alive. That is love. It gives you the energy to serve. You feel your life is very wonderful. That is a spiritual love.”

I love asking about love, now that I’m in love. I ask Sister Chan Khong what love is, and her response is so beautiful I am in tears. She speaks from such a deep place of knowing, with a sweet, soft, strong voice. Sweet as a flower and strong as a lion. She says that we need to love a person the way we love a tree—not just the surface, not just the branches or the trunk, but also the roots. We need to know all of them—their ancestors, their family, their friends, their dreams. This is all part of who they are. What is it that really matters to them? A lover always offers joy and eases suffering.

And there is plenty of suffering to ease in Vietnam. As Thay says, “The war created so many victims. There has been so much injustice, for the North Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese, the hundreds of thousands of boat people who died at sea, the people who died in prisons and in re-education camps, the soldiers of both North and South who died in the battlefield in the mountains and rivers, many of whose bones have never been found.”

A SIMPLE DINNER WITH THAY

After a few weeks at the monastery I’ve gathered all the shots I need, all the slow-moving images of walking monks and nuns, of bubbling brooks and giant white Buddhas, of towering bodhisattvas of compassion and roaring dharma protector lions, of rows of robed humanity seated in the majestic temple with soft faces and eyes closed in deep meditations.

I have it all, save for my interview with Thay. I want to ask him about the real meaning of love. We postpone our departure for Ho Chi Minh City and go into a holding pattern. Every day, Sister Chan Khong gives us an update, saying, “Maybe tomorrow!”

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CHAN KHONG through some hard days in Vietnam

it was to carry a baby covered with blood, her sobbing mother walking beside me, both of us unsure if we could save the child.

Two years later, when I went to the United States to explain the suffering of the Vietnamese people and to plead for peace in Vietnam, I saw a woman on television carrying a wounded baby covered with blood, and suddenly I understood how the American people could continue to support the fighting and bombing. The scene on the television was quite different from the reality of having a bleeding baby in my arms. My despair was intense, but the scene on television looked like a performance. I realized that there was no connection between experiencing the actual event and watching it on the TV screen while sitting at home in peace and safety. People could watch such horrible scenes on TV and still go about their daily business—eating, dancing, playing with children, having conversations. After an encounter with such suffering, desperation filled my every cell. These people were human beings like me; why did they have to suffer so? Questions like these burned inside me and, at the same time, inspired me to continue my work with serene determination. Realizing how fortunate I was compared to those living under the bombs helped dissolve any anger or suffering in me, and I was committed to keep doing my best to help them without fear.

Excerpted from Learning True Love: Practicing Buddhism in a Time of War by Sister Chang Khong. © 2007 Unified Buddhist Church. Reprinted with permission of Parallax Press.

PHOTO BY CHAN YODER



Sister Chan Khong with Thich Nhat Hanh

Thich Nhat Hanh

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As the days of waiting pass, it begins to feel like the film *Waiting for Fidel*, about a documentary crew that goes to Cuba to interview Castro. They're always told, "Tomorrow for sure." The crew turns the camera on themselves, and they slowly start to go crazy, drinking way too much Cuban rum, arguing all the time, combusting in real time. They never do get their interview, but they wind up with a hilarious and an instructive film. Something always emerges. We're not hitting the booze here, though on occasion we do sneak out of the monastery for an ice cream.

What emerges is a time of quiet reflection and gentle patience. A chance to let the teachings soak in. There is a monastic retreat on, all soft and silent, a sea of endless smiles. All month I've been smiling and bowing like crazy. If I keep doing this back home, people will think I'm nuts.

One morning, as I am walking up the path from my favorite little valley, who should I run into but Thich Nhat Hanh, alone with his two attendants. I stop and bow, and he gives me a great big beaming smile. I am a little awestruck, because normally when I see him he is sitting in front of 10,000 people or leading a walking meditation with thousands behind him. I beam back and am about to continue on, but he says, "I think today we can do the interview. I'll let you know." "Thank you so much!" I eagerly reply.

We bow, trade smiles, and I continue down the path. A few hours later, the interview is confirmed. I go down to the kitchen and meet Sister Chan Khong.

"Are you ready? Do you have your camera?"

"Right here." I pat my monk's bag, camera stowed away inside.

"First get some food and bring it down with you."

So we are having dinner with Thay first. My producer, Cher, and I fill up our bowls with the simple vegetarian food—rice, jackfruit, a little tofu, and some steamed water spinach. Sister Chan Khong leads us down the path to Thay's house, a simple,

lovely little house, like a miniature version of one of the temples. We slip off our shoes and step inside. Thay is seated behind a low wooden table with a tray holding small bowls of vegetables, red rice, and fresh herbs. Two meditation cushions are laid out for us.

He smiles. "Come in, sit down."

We sit down, along with Sister Chan Khong.

"I saw you down by the creek today. You were filming the waterfall?"

That morning, when I was on the path above Thay, I had filmed him walking along the stream. He looked up at me while I was filming. I was afraid that he felt I was invading his privacy, but by his smile I could see that he was happy I was capturing the beauty of Prajna Monastery.

"Yes, it's so beautiful down there. So peaceful."

Thay gestures to our bowls.

"Please, begin..."

Out of respect, we wait until he has taken the first mouthful, and then we begin to eat. He reaches into a small bowl of lemongrass shoots with chopsticks and offers me a piece.

"Try this. It tastes so nice." I put my bowl out and he drops it in.

"It is delicious," I say. "The gardens here are so beautiful. Can you grow all year?"

"Yes, every season," Thay says.

We eat in silence for a while, and then chat about the laypersons' retreat. I tell him that I think it's incredible how many people the monastery can handle.

"We don't have enough facilities, in fact," he says in his soft voice. "People are sleeping everywhere. And not enough toilets. We'll have to build more. Here, try this. Do you know what this is? I don't know the word in English."

He offers us another tasty leaf.

"It tastes like cilantro," I reply.

Thay takes a piece himself, tasting it carefully, taking such a simple delight in the sensation. The sensual pleasures of a monk. He offers us another herb.

"A good laxative," Sister Chan Khong says, which is a little too much information. As she eats, she leafs through a Vietnamese magazine with an article about the tour.

Sister Chan Khong seems very comfortable; she and Thay have been on this path together for more than four decades.

"Vegetarian meat," Thay explains, laughing gently as he hands us a plate of fried mushrooms. "And how has your experience been here with us?"

"It has been wonderful," I say. "And it has really enhanced my filmmaking practice. I always say that filmmaking is about being aware, about truly seeing, but here, surrounded by so many mindful people, I have been even more mindful. Even if I wasn't directly participating in the walking meditation, I was moving very mindfully from shot to shot. Every moment has been a meditation. Thank you for that."

Cher adds, "The lay delegation wanted us to let you know how happy they are to be with you, Thay. They asked us to pass that on."

He bows with his hands joined together. Sister Chan Khong talks about her visit to the free Buddhist-inspired schools they have set up in places where the children have no access to education. It is always sweet to see her with children—she seems to be the youngest of them all. She describes to Thay how she had to go on the back of a motorcycle to get to the more remote schools, bumping along the red, dusty roads through coffee plantations and up the sides of mountains. She laughs uproariously as she tells how the motorcycle driver tried to reassure her by saying, "Don't worry, if you crash, I will too!" She's vibrant and feisty, quite a contrast to Thay's quiet joy.

After dinner, Thay offers us cookies for dessert, and then we set up the camera for the interview. "If you ask good questions, you'll get good answers," he tells me.

He looks deep into my eyes, holding me in his powerful yet gentle gaze as he answers my question about the meaning of love. "Love in Buddhism has very specific meanings," he says. "First of all, it is loving-kindness, the capacity of offering joy, offering happiness, relief. The second element of true love in Buddhism is compassion. Compassion is the capacity of removing the pain and suffering in the other person. The capacity of helping him or

her transform something inside. And the third element of true love is joy. So true love should have the element of joy.

“And the last element of true love in Buddhism is equanimity, inclusiveness. You do not exclude anyone. No discrimination. This is the very element of true love. If you love in that spirit, you remain free. You will not suffer and you do not make the other people suffer. And when you have that kind of love within, everything you say, everything you do, expresses that love.”

THREE REQUIEM MASSES

The greatest expression of Thay’s love is the Grand Requiem Masses for the three to five million people who died in the war. They are held in three cities for three days each, in the north, center, and south of Vietnam, three acupuncture points on the psyche of Vietnam to heal the wounds of war. Thay notes that the liturgy and chanting is quite different in each place, reflecting the qualities and traditions of Vietnam’s various regions. People around the world are also invited to join in the ceremonies, to say their own prayers in whatever way they like. Even the non-religious can take part, and Thay suggests that Communists read from their texts that celebrate humanity.

Thay explains, “This is really a therapy practice. It is something very ancient and deep in the Vietnamese tradition. Most of us believe that the spirit of the deceased responds to our invitation to eat with us during the ceremony. We will offer them food, drink, and especially the dharma, so that they can listen to the dharma chanting and transform their suffering and feel that they can be reborn in good places.”

The first of the healing ceremonies is held a month into the tour at a large temple in Ho Chi Minh City. The complex is alive with banners, altars, and subterranean rooms filled with sheets of paper listing the names of the dead. Thousands of people stay throughout the three days of elaborate processions and rituals. The monastics travel to the graveyard of those deemed “anti-Communist,” which has been closed to all, even family members, for decades. They invite those neglected dead to join us—everyone is welcome. Flickering

paper-lotus-flower boats are released on the dark river. Incense offerings are made. The chanting goes well into the night.

Thay opens the ceremony in Ho Chi Minh City with a powerful dharma talk. He sits before us, calm, open, and bright-eyed. He asks us to consider where our loved ones who have died have gone. One needs to look deeply, he says, to see that they are present in us. Just as the cloud becomes the rain, and then the rain becomes tea, so our ancestors continue on in us. If we are well, light, and free in our mind and body, then the ancestors in us will be too. Our loved ones only change shape and form—there is no coming, no going, no birth, no death. All those who died unjustly during the war need the collective energy of the country to heal.

As we sit through the long hours of the ceremony, the full weight of what happened to this battered land comes rushing in. My tears begin to fall, the rain of ancestors. I welcome these tears. Since I opened my heart to love, I’ve found that I am no longer afraid of tears. Sister Chan Khong tells me that when they bombed Hanoi, Thay wept because his people were dying. And when they bombed Afghanistan and when they bombed Iraq, he also cried with the same depth of concern. He made no distinction. They all deserved our tears. Thay wrote a letter to George W. Bush, wishing that the president could open his heart enough to feel for the people he was bombing. He said, “I wish that you could cry like me. You would suffer, but then you would make all the best decisions.”

There is nothing weak about Thich Nhat Hanh, even though he has such an open heart. He is a living testament to fierce compassion. As our time together draws to a close, he looks at me with a strong, clear gaze and says, “In the Buddhist tradition, love is born from understanding. In order to understand, you have to take the time to look deeply and to listen deeply. If you have that kind of love, every word you say, everything you do, will be nonviolent, not as mere tactics but as an expression of your love. Understanding the suffering of the other person brings true love.” ♦