



January 28, 2022

Tribute to Thich Nhat Hanh by the US Embassy, Vietnam

This tribute was delivered by Thomas Lyons, a diplomat and First Secretary from the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi, at Tu Hieu Temple, Jan 28, 2022.

Good evening, and thank you for inviting me here and allowing me the honor and privilege of sharing in the memorial service for the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh. On behalf of the United States Mission in Vietnam, the American people, I would like to offer my sincere condolences to the Plum Village Communities and Tu Hieu Temple, all the disciples, and all of the followers of Master Thich Nhat Hanh on the event of his passing. It is a truly sad occasion, but I am humbled by the opportunity to come and pay my respects on behalf of my government and my fellow citizens.

Thay's passing will be mourned throughout the world, but his passing will be especially felt in the United States, where throughout his life, Thay had a great impact, touching lives with his teachings and forging close ties with political and religious leaders for more than sixty years. Thich Nhat Hanh met with many U.S. officials during his life, including our former Ambassador to Vietnam and current Assistant Secretary for East Asia and The Pacific, Daniel Kritenbrink; Senator Patrick Leahy, former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and others. In all these interactions Thay was a fearless advocate for peace and compassionate social action. He leaves behind in the United States a strong and respected legacy of non-violent activism and spiritual engagement, including three U.S.-based monasteries in the Plum Village tradition, located in New York, California, and Mississippi. Thay's message of peace also played an instrumental role in bringing about personal healing for thousands of veterans of the violent war between America and Vietnam who suffered PTSD and mental stress, and in bringing reconciliation between our two nations – a reconciliation that just last year marked the milestone of 25 years of formal diplomatic ties. Finally, Thay was also one of the first people to bring to

America the gift of the Zen practices of mindfulness, which have since become ubiquitous in the fields of healthcare, psychology, and education; and in the daily lives of thousands of Americans.

Thich Nhat Hanh will be most remembered for his tireless championing of religious freedom, human rights, non-violence, and his message of mindfulness in daily life. Although Thay's influence spread well beyond the realm of religion, he leaves a legacy as one of the most influential religious leaders in recent history. Thay is probably best remembered as a leading light in interfaith and inter-religious dialogue. In his book, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Thay wrote that "Christians and Buddhists who are both living deeply into their contemplative lives do not think those in other traditions are going the wrong way. Religious experience is a human experience. It has to do with human consciousness, individual and collective." Through his extensive dialogue and relationships, people from all religions have learned much from one another.

Thich Nhat Hanh's compassion for interreligious harmony was probably most visible in his relationship with Dr. Martin Luther King. At their first meeting in 1966, Thay recognized the Buddha nature in the Baptist minister, and told King he was a Bodhisattva. In nominating Thich Nhat Hanh for a Nobel Prize, Dr. King reciprocated the honor, calling Thay "an apostle of peace and non-violence." As I reflect on the totality of Master Thich's life and influence, another title I believe describes Thay is "prophet." The term "prophet" in the biblical sense is not, as commonly misunderstood, one who predicts the future, but rather one who communicates with the Divine, and then proclaims that messages to other people. Prophets speak with authority and proclaim truth. But oftentimes, the truth they bear, while necessary, is uncomfortable. And though Thay spoke the truth, and spoke it with utmost compassion, his words, like those of his brother Martin Luther King, were not always received in the compassionate spirit in which they were offered.

Thich Nhat Hanh thought deeply, pondering the eternal questions of life, existence, and meaning. He caused us to ponder them too. He invited us to consider the way of others. Following in the footsteps of Jesus and Martin Luther King, Thay said, "to love our enemies, we must practice deep looking to understand him. If we do, we accept him, and we love him. At the moment we accept and love him, he ceases to be our enemy."

Our world today is filled with animosity. Distrust. Anger. Vitrol. This acrimony exists between people of different religions, between people of no religion and people of faith, between people with different political beliefs. Between different nationalities, or even between people with different opinions about current events. But prophets like Thich Nhat Hanh tell us, all of us – people, institutions, and governments – to love one another. To have compassion for our enemies. To seek to understand them. And ultimately, to love them. And that is very hard for some people to hear. It is even harder to do. Rather than understand our enemy, we much prefer to fear them.

Thich Nhat Hanh's prophetic voice calls us to compassion. To tolerance. And to and understanding and acceptance of those with whom we disagree. In a talk about life after death, Thay once noted that our lives are like candles. Even as the candle grows shorter, we emanate light, heat, and energy. That light, heat, and energy go out into the world, touching the lives of others – providing warmth, light to read by. He said that even after our physical bodies are no longer here, our true self has been offered to the world, and that is our continuation. That energy also returns to us, sometimes immediately, sometimes well after we are gone. It is not only my wish, and my prayer, but my firm belief, that Thay's message of compassion, non-violence, religious freedom, human rights, and the ability to live in love and peace with our neighbors, will continue to emanate throughout the world, and will return to us, and onward to future generations.

Thank you.

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