

THE BODHISATTVA & THE PROPHET

Part One: Thich Nhat Hanh

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THICH NHAT HANH: MAN OF MANY NAMES

His birth name was Nguyen Xuan Bao.

His Vietnamese name "Thich" means "of the Shakya clan." All Buddhist monks in East Asian Buddhism adopt this name as their surname, implying that their first family is the Buddhist community.

He also has a lineage name, received when a person takes refuge in the 3 Jewels (the Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha). His lineage name is Trung Quang.

He also has a Dharma name - Phung Xuan.

He also has a Dharma title - "Naht Hanh." "Naht" means "of first class." or "of good quality." "Hanh" implies "right conduct," or "good nature."

Thich Nhat Hanh is also affectionately referred to as "Thay," meaning "teacher."

I think a lot of folks today think of Thich Nhat Hanh as the gentle Buddhist monk who leads retreats and writes books on mindful living - how to practice mindful meditation, walk mindfully, eat mindfully, deal with anger, fear, power, how to live in spiritual community, how to promote non-violent solutions to conflict. Thay has written at least 100 books. Their gentle, peaceful message is deceptively simple.

Thay is a great moral teacher, but his greatest teaching is his own life.

I want to share this morning some of his story from his early life, before he became well known around the world. His early life is what forged his character - that sent him on a particular way of life, the path of the Bodhisattva.

THAY & DAN

On February 21 I will talk about Daniel Berrigan. Today mostly about Thay.

Both Thay and Dan are poets. Both are products of highly disciplined spiritual traditions (Zen Buddhist and Jesuit). Both have sought over the years to apply their respective traditions to the crucial issues of their day, particularly war and peace issues. What brought them together in the early 1960's was their shared preoccupation with the agonizing war in Vietnam.

In his peace work Thay drew on the teachings of Buddha. Father Berrigan drew on the peace message of Jesus and the the Old Testament prophets. Thay is the Bodhisattva. Daniel Berrigan is the Prophet.

FIRST - A FEW WORDS ABOUT FATHER BERRIGAN

Along with Dorothy Day and her Catholic Workers, and the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, Berrigan was among the earliest Catholic critics of the war. At the time most Catholics in the States (including all my Catholic relatives) viewed the war through the lens of anti-Communism, unaware of the tradition of Catholic pacifism. Berrigan's stand was controversial inside the Catholic Church (as well as outside) and his writings and actions earned him ecclesiastical censure and even exile for a while in Latin America.

In 1968 Daniel and his brother (Philip¹) became the most notorious priests in the US when they were arrested with 7 others for burning draft files in Catonsville, Maryland. (their actions inspired many, not necessarily to protest in the same way, but to protest more courageously). One of the iconic photos of that time is one of the Berrigans, in clerical garb and handcuffs, surrounded by grim looking federal marshals, smiling and flashing the peace sign from their manacled hands. Their trial ignited heated discussion of the war and debates over various forms of protest².

As a result of the Catonsville protest, Father Berrigan was sentenced to three years in prison. Instead of going to prison Berrigan went into hiding, became a fugitive, was eventually caught, and served eighteen months in jail, released in 1972.

Prison life took its toll on his health, and he welcomed the opportunity, after his release, to travel to Paris for reflection and writing, to stay with his Buddhist friend, Thich Nhat Hanh, in the Paris suburb of Sceaux. Berrigan writes: "Each

¹ Philip Francis Berrigan (October 5, 1923 - December 6, 2002)

² Trial began October 1968.

See <http://ada.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/catonsvilleEdited.pdf>

morning I would pack a few books and walk to the magnificent Parc de Sceaux, there to spend the day reading, meditating, writing. Every evening we prayed together in silence, 'for the space of of candle,' at Nhat Hanh's gentle leading....It was the sweetest of homecomings...."

Thay and Berrigan first met in the 1960's.

In 1975, while both were living in France, a book of their conversations was published, The Raft Is Not The Shore³. At the time Thay was hardly known in the US - except for a small circle of religious pacifists. Dan Berrigan was much more widely known in the States, and he had published several books, including a popular play based on the transcript of the Catonsville trial.⁴

Thay's poetry circulated in Vietnam in the form of mimeographed pamphlets, which were frequently confiscated by the South Vietnamese government.

PERSONAL NOTE

I first time I met Thich Nhat Hanh was at a Body and Soul Conference in Crystal City, Alexandria. The conference had an environmental theme. The irony was that all our meetings were in the lower level of this hotel where there were no windows. Walls were our environment.

What impressed me most about this first encounter (besides what he had to say) was his manner of talking with us. He would talk about about 10 minutes on a theme and then a monk who travelled with him would ring a bell, and Thay would pause for a while, take a few breaths in silence, and then resume his theme or start a new one. This style of delivery was surprisingly refreshing - not rushed, thought-encouraging, giving the listener a chance to keep up. One other person who invokes this technique is the poet David Whyte (who is part Buddhist.) David will be talking and suddenly pause - and the pauses are long enough that you wonder - did he forgot what he wanted to say? is he alright? or is he just thinking about what he wants to say next. It's a wonderful technique to stop the rushing that so much characterizes our modern way of life.

³ Topics covered: Memory, eucharist, death - religion in the world - exile - priests and prisoners - self immolation — government and religion - economics and religion - Jesus and Buddha - communities of resistance.

⁴ Published 1970, by our own U.U. publishing house, Beacon Press.

That first meeting with this Vietnamese Zen priest was around the time we invaded Iraq (2003). There was a lot of anxiety and frustration in the audience, and I admired the way Thay handled the Q&A session that followed his message. He listened very carefully to each question, took time with his response, and always showed respect for the questions and the questioner. Thay was not the person I had gone to the conference to work with⁵, but he was the one who impressed me the most, whose message and manner lingered in my mind long after.

The second time I was in Thich Nhat Hanh's presence was when Maia and I went for a stay at Plum Village. Maia wrote the folks at Plum Village and asked if they would stretch their rules a bit so we could visit and stay at Plum Village when we would be in France. She's very persuasive, and they agreed to permit us to come before the Summer Retreat. Summer Retreat can mean 800-900 visitors. When we were there there were only 12 visitors and 60 monks and nuns.

To get to Plum Village (Thay's home in exile) from Paris you catch a train to Bordeaux, getting off a station before Bordeaux called Sante Foy la Grande. Then you can take a taxi for a 25 minute ride to Plum Village, which is not exactly a village but a farm hamlet, one of about 4 or 5 hamlets that Plum Village had purchased over the years.

There aren't that many taxis in Sante Foy la Grande. The one we caught that day - the driver had lived in Philadelphia for a while and spoke English. As we drove through the beautiful countryside of vineyards and gorgeous rolling fields of sunflowers, the driver would point out a vineyard and tell us it had recently be bought by a British gentleman, another by an American, another by some other nationality. It left us with the impression that most of the vineyards in the area are no longer owned by the French. The French work them, but they no longer own them.

We asked our taxi driver, could we call him for a ride when our stay was over. He said, "It all depends." If someone in Sante Foy la Grande was sick and needed to be taken to the hospital, "No!" he couldn't take us because his taxi served as the village ambulance. And "No!" he couldn't take us if someone died, because his taxi (with back seats removed) served as the village hearse. (As it turned out we got a ride from Plum Village back to the train station with Sister Simplicity, who loved to drive fast on the back, country roads)

⁵ That was James Hillman.

THICH NHAT HANH'S BIO

Thich Nhat Hanh was born in central Vietnam on October 11, 1926⁶, near the ancient capital of Hue. This October he will turn 90. In November 2014 Thay suffered a severe brain hemorrhage. It was only earlier this month, on January 8th, that he had recovered enough to return to his home in Plum Village. But his public teaching career may be over.

Thay entered Buddhist monastic life, at age 16, (in 1942),⁷ against his parents' wishes. At the time the Japanese occupied parts of Vietnam⁸, and the war of liberation from French colonial rule had begun. Thay recalls,, "French soldiers would raid our temples, searching for resistance fighters or food, demanding we hand over the last of our rice. Monks were killed, even though they were unarmed."

At 23, in 1949 Thay took his full vows and received the name we know him by today. Finding what he was learning in his local Buddhist seminary too narrow, he decided to study at the University of Saigon. There he studied world literature, philosophy, psychology, science and Buddhism. And he is said to be one of the first monks to ride a bicycle.

By the 1960s Thay was among a number of young monks and nuns who believed Buddhism must become "engaged" in their times, must apply Buddhist principles to real world suffering caused by social injustice and political oppression. He coined the phrase, "engaged Buddhism."

Engaged Buddhism was opposed by conservative Buddhists and Thich Nhat Hanh was accused of sowing seeds of discord. So in 1957 (age 31) he sets up his own spiritual hermitage Phung Boi (Fragrant Palm Leaves Hermitage).⁹

In 1960, three years later, the South Vietnamese government raided Fragrant Palm, in order "to protect it," the government said, and Thay was forced to flee to Saigon.

⁶ Born in the city of Qu'ng Ngaio. Birth name: Nguyen Xuan Bao. He entered Tu Hieu Temple.

⁷ Ordained in 1949.

⁸ In September 1940, the Japanese invaded Vichy French Indochina to prevent the Republic of China from importing arms and fuel through French Indochina.

⁹ In the Vietnamese Highlands.

In 1960, in Saigon, he establishes a new NGO, called the School of Youth for Social Service. More than a thousand youth applied for 300 positions in the program.

Later in 1960 (age 34) Thay accepted an offer to study at Princeton University, and stays in the States for three years, at Princeton and later lecturing on Buddhism at Columbia.

Meanwhile the war in his homeland is escalating, dramatically with the involvement of the United States. The Roman Catholic South Vietnamese president, Ngo Dinh Diem steps up the government's suppression of the majority Buddhists. This is the time of the self-immolations, of Thich Quang Duc and others. After the US ousted their own puppet president (Diem) Thay returned to Vietnam for a couple years, but then in 1965 he received an invitation from Cornell University to return to the States to share his view on the war with US citizens and government officials. He speaks with people in Washington such as McNamara, Fulbright. He also meets with the Trappist Monk, Thomas Merton, and with Martin Luther King. He urges King to come out publicly against the war. He told King that the Vietnamese Buddhists consider King a Bodhisattva. King later nominates Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize.

While still in the States, Thay becomes a voice in the anti-war movement. Around this time, 1965-66¹⁰, some of Thay's poetry appears in the NYRB with an introductory piece he wrote explaining his literary, religious and political convictions. This preface became an important anti-war document. Thay's statement made it impossible for him to return to Vietnam. Thereafter he took up residence, at first in Paris, and then in in a Buddhist retreat in Sceaux, a suburb of Paris, where he lived throughout the war, where he continued his writing and anti-war activities and was the spokesperson for the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation.

This was the time period Thay and Daniel Berrigan became close friends.

By the time he was 45, Thay had become the editor of Vietnam's most popular Buddhist Weekly, The Sound of the Rising Tide.¹¹ He had founded the School of Youth for Social Service, and founded¹² a new Buddhist Order called the Order of

¹⁰ The poems and preface were published in the NYRB, June 9, 1966.

¹¹ In 1964.

¹² In 1966.

Interbeing. "Interbeing" is a central concept/ or way of looking at the world in Thay's thinking, akin to our U.U. Principle of the "interdependent web."

While Thay is in the States the South Vietnamese government tried to put the School of Youth for Social Service out of business, but failed in this first attempt.

Thay was granted asylum in France. In Paris he established the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation, to speak out for peace. He also established a Unified Buddhist Church in France.

His long exile from his homeland had begun: 1966-2005, and it is still not really over in spite of finally being allowed to visit his homeland briefly in 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008. (Interesting statistic: More than 50% of today's Vietnamese population were born after Thay was forced into exile in 1966.) Like the exile of the Dali Lama, exile is a mixed blessing. Exile is difficult but, can make the exiled person world-renowned.

The war ended in 1975. From 1978-79 Thay and his followers bought boats and crewed them, and helped the so-called "boat-people" fleeing Vietnam.

When, in the early 80's, the retreat Thay and his followers had established in the suburb of Sceaux became too small, they purchased a 50 acre farm in the Bordeaux region. One of the first things they did was plant an orchard of plum trees, and called the farm Plum Village. Today Plum Village (and the additional hamlets they have bought) is the largest and most active Buddhist monastery in the West. Thank goodness for that, because today in Vietnam no training center for Thay's "socially engaged Buddhism" has been permitted, but he does have an underground following.

BACK TO OUR VISIT TO PLUM VILLAGE & SOME OF MY IMMEDIATE THOUGHTS ABOUT LIVING IN SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY

Living in spiritual community can really give you a "high." One of the things I took away from our visit was how different it is from congregational life, even in the most caring of congregations. Being in a monastic setting, makes one realize how deeply people can live in harmony together. Not that it is ever perfect harmony among people, even in a monastery. But if you soak in enough of this kind of rare communal experience, at times you long for it.

I'm not a morning person. I never thought I could enjoy rising at 5:30 in the morning for 90 minutes of mediation, day after day, Zen style, facing a wall of

stone, first in total darkness, and then, as the sun rises through the windows, watch the individual stones in the wall come alive.

Some of the crazy things I loved about our experience in Plum Village:

During the entire day - if you heard the sound of a bell - you stopped whatever you were doing - walking, talking, eating - took in 3 deep breaths, then resumed your activity.

I loved meal times - cafeteria style - you went through the line, sat down and waited till everyone had served themselves and had taken their seat - then you could begin to eat - no conversation for the first 15 minutes of the meal, paying attention to the needs of others by silent observation - then, after 15 minutes, you could converse. Carrying your plates into the washing area to clean the plates you had used. (The suggestions for chewing each bite at least 20 times were a little harder to follow.)

I loved the mindful walking with Thay - the community meals with all the monks and nuns - the dharma talks - Thay would talk in French or Vietnamese and other monks or nuns would simultaneously translate in English, German, Dutch.

Loved the lotus gardens and the leafy music of the bamboo groves.

I loved the way - when leaving - we were asked to "prepare" our room for those that would be in it after us - which makes you think about more than just straightening up the bed and emptying the wastebasket.

Monastic communities, unlike congregations, follow a very detailed set of behavioral rules. Think for example of the Benedictine rules. In Buddhism, the book of behavioral rules for their spiritual communities is called the Pratimoksha. There are rules for men. There are rules for women. And they cover everything imaginable - literally! I won't go into details.

Buddhists have had some 2,500 years to "go into the details."

Not too many years ago the Plum Village folks, dared to release a revised version of the Pratimoksha. This was the first complete revision of Buddhist monastic code in 2,500 years. From looking at the old standard version - there was definitely a need for a new, revised version. Plum Village took a lot of criticism from other

Buddhists for their revision, but it was worth it. Particularly for the sake of gender equality - which Thay is much in favor of.

Sometimes I think U.U.s feel our congregations lack enough spiritual depth as communities. But a congregation is not a monastic order. In Plum Village the nuns, monks and visitors share their daily meals at their respective hamlets, and gather for a full community meal once a week. They practice mindful eating which is not our normal way of eating. They take time to meditate together at least twice a day. They gather once a week, or once a month to recite the Buddhist 5 Precepts¹³ or the 14 Steps of Mindfulness Training. Congregations usually do not do these things. We don't eat, or meditate together every day. We don't recite our complete U.U. Principles more than a few times each year...You get what I'm saying: we shouldn't be too hard on ourselves.

Buddhists, Christians, people of the Jewish faith, Islamic folk - really have it a easier than we do. Because, in spite of the diversity you find among Buddhists, Christians, Jews and Muslims - they each are following one basic spiritual path. The paths U.U.s are following these days are much more complicated. We're not all liberal Christians anymore. We're not all theists. We're not all atheists. We're not all Buddhists. Many of us are following combinations of several paths - pagan, humanist, Taoist Christians, progressive Christian Buddhists - you get the idea.

Does this rich religious pluralism of ours prevent us from ever developing a deeper sense of spiritually community? Some would say "Yes." The comparative religionist, Huston Smith said "Yes." The liberal Christian, Marcus Borg said "Yes."

Only time will tell. Some U.U.s aren't even looking for or craving a very deep level of spiritual community. Others are. I don't think our religious pluralism necessarily hinders our achieving deeper levels of community. We just may have to be more innovative.

¹³ The 5 Buddhist Precepts:

I will help to protect life rather than destroy it.

I undertake the training to share and give, rather than take.

I undertake the training to be sensitive and respectful in matters of sexuality, rather than engage in the manipulation of another person or persons.

I will bring awareness to speech so that what I say is accurate and beneficial.

I will practice to keep my mind calm and clear and refuse any substances that affect my state of mind.

These were some of my immediate thoughts after the experience of Plum Village.

CONCLUSION

Like the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh has become one of the world's most renowned spiritual leaders. He has changed the way we think about Buddhism, and its role in the world. His talks and books have spawned a new generation of peace activists and environmentalists. In addition - he will leave a legacy of more than 600 monks and nuns, and probably tens of thousands of lay students and followers from all around the world - including a number of them here in San Miguel.

Thich Nhat Hanh's life of courage, compassion has set a high ethical example. In truth - his greatest teaching is his life.