



Remembering the Thay with many true names...

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Thich Nhat Hanh 12 (cropped2)" by Duc (pixiduc) from Paris, France. is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

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“When we walk like (we are rushing), we print anxiety and sorrow on the earth. We have to walk in a way that we only print peace and serenity on the earth,” so said a sentient being named Thich Nhat Hanh, who taught humans to walk as if they were kissing the earth with their feet. For many he was the father of mindfulness, for some he was a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk-cum-peace activist, for some he was a prolific contemplative writer and poet with more than 100 books to his credit, and for few others he was their beloved ‘Thay’ (Vietnamese word for ‘teacher’), who would teach them the concept of interdependence or interbeing – not regarding ourselves as separate entities, but as interconnected parts of the fabric of life – by holding up a

sheet of paper and explaining how the tree, the logger who cut down the tree and the rain cloud that showered on the tree were all in the paper.

Born as Nguyen Dinh Lang in a war-torn Vietnam in 1926, the boy’s parents permitted him to become a Buddhist monk at the age of sixteen, and Thich Nhat Hanh was born. The journey from becoming Thich Nhat Hanh to being Thay, however, was paved with many thorns – an exile of forty years for not choosing sides of North or South Vietnam in the Vietnam war, an escaped assassination and bouts of malaria to name very few. But Thay, with the help of Mother Earth, transformed those thorns into fertilisers as echoed in his words ‘no mud, no

lotus'. Furthermore, his reflection 'if I could not be peaceful in the midst of danger, the peace I might realise in easier times would not mean anything' found itself as one of the core principles of Engaged Buddhism – the practice of applying the insights derived from meditative calm and Dharma teachings to alleviate environmental, social or political suffering.

His genuine concern and readiness to take necessary actions for sustainable development were visible right from his early days. Teaching about sustainability, Thay emphasised the importance of being sustainable as humans for a sustainable civilisation and sustainable peace that comes from mindful consumption. So, when the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam did not offer full support to Thay's proposal regarding teaching the leaders to act with tolerance and training social workers to help bring social change in a nonviolent way, he went ahead and established the first experimental village in 1964, where the villagers were encouraged to develop and provide for their local economy, educational and healthcare system. The young people of the village were trained to become self-dependent by helping

them learn ways of modern farming and improving public sanitation.

Wonder if he knew then that this experience of setting up experimental villages in Vietnam would help him in France, the country he sought residence in after getting exiled. In 1971, an almost uninhabitable house in Paris served as his residence along with his small community of Vietnamese students. By 1975, this house was transformed into a pleasant retreat centre and was named 'Sweet Potatoes', which eventually grew too small to accommodate the ever increasing influx of students. This led to the establishment of the now-famous Plum Village in 1982 on two parcels of land in the Dordogne region known for growing the world's most delicious plums. Thay's sangha established its first monastery in the United States in 2000 and named it 'Deer Park', followed by Blue Cliff Monastery in New York in 2007. The fact that even the names of all these monasteries had some elements of Mother Earth in them testifies to the deep connection Thay felt with nature. He based life in these communities on the principle of interbeing and encouraged living in harmony with humans, birds, plants,

trees and all other elements found in the environment.

Thay, however, did not like using the word 'environment' as a separate entity. He firmly believed, or rather knew, that Mother Earth was so much more than the environment, that we *WERE* the Earth, and that we all carried Her within each one of us. "Look around you – what you see is not your environment, it is you," he always urged. He opined that it was only this non-dualistic way of seeing and not just 'do not cut the tree, do not pollute the water' approach that would help the environment by preventing greed, anger, hatred, fear and separation from arising. He also attributed the rising modern sickness to being alienated from Mother Earth and knew from his own experience that a consistent mindfulness practice would help people heal by helping them touch Mother Earth inside of the body.

Though Thay's actions were directed towards the welfare of 'others', he never once neglected the importance of having a compassionate heart within one's 'self', for which he considered mindfulness to be the bedrock on which all revolutions should be based. He said, "activists have to have a spiritual practice in order to

help them to suffer less, to nourish the happiness and to handle the suffering so they will be effective in helping the world. With anger and frustration, you cannot do much."

What drew the world to Thay's teachings was perhaps their sanctity that lay in the strength of his open heart with which he could easily see the casting of the reflections of the way nature worked on the way with which humans worked... and of course, his poetic fluidity in articulating these reflections that would open up readers' eyes to see the obvious but often neglected principle of interbeing the world has ever been working on. The depth of his understanding of interbeing became visible through his arguably most famous poem 'Please Call Me by My True Names', which he wrote in 1978 while helping the Vietnamese people sailing around in boats (or the 'boat people' as history remembers them) to find refuge in Singapore. In this poem, he urged the world to call him by all his true names, since he had many.

"I am the mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.
And I am the bird
that swoops down to swallow the
mayfly.
"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.

“Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart
can be left open,
the door of compassion.”

But I wonder with what name can we
call him by in the present time, since
he passed away in 2022, at the age
of 95.

What do we call you now, Thay?
Are you now a name, the sky or a
memory?
Are you your footprints or your
ashes?
Are you your poems or those actions,
that you devoted your life to
and offered to the world as
remedies?
What is your true name now, Thay?
Which door are you talking about
when you have defeated delusion,
and have now yourself
become compassion?

Let us pray together to call him by
his true name now. But how do we
do that? In Thay’s words, having real
communication with Mother Earth
based on the insight of interbeing
is the highest form of prayer. Let us
do that. To walk on the path shown
by Thay, to deepen his footprints of
peace and serenity that he has left
on earth...let us do that, together.

