

## 11 ZEN BUDDHISM: WHO EVER SAID “RESILIENCE” WAS EASY?

### Part I. Thich Nhat Hanh: Zen master, poet, pioneer, engaged civil activist.



Simple, gentle, peaceful, wise. That was Thây, the teacher, called Thich Nhat Hanh with his formal name. Buddhists would call him a Bodhisattva with a capital “B”. That is, for starters, “*anyone who has taken a vow to put others first*” (therefore, a path open to us all!). Then as “*one who seeks awakening*” (bodhi)—thus, an individual on the path to becoming a buddha. Again, conceivably anyone *can* embark on this path although few *do*. He *DID*.

**“Conscientious objector” beginnings.** Thich Nhat Hanh, ordained in his native Vietnam as a Buddhist monk at 16 years of age, had a long and committed “dharma” path before him, most of which he could never have foreseen! At the outset, it seemed he would spend his life “hidden away in a monastery tending to matters of the spirit” ... but that was not to be. A burning idealist, it didn’t take him long until his country’s arch conservative Buddhism got on his nerves. He had pictured it as far more “engaged” with the people—an approach he would later formalize. But first, the wars.



*The naked Vietnamese “napalm girl”, 1972 Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph*



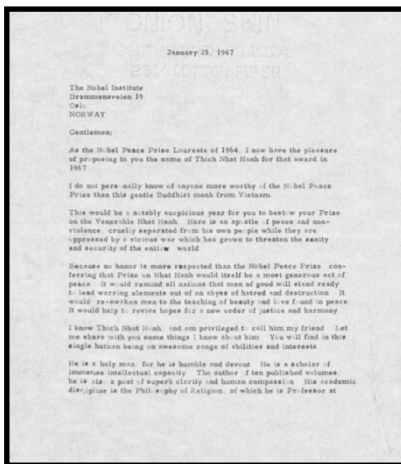
**War, War and MORE WAR.** The Vietnamese needed “engagement” to endure almost a half-century of the “Indochina Wars”—three of them—that spanned 45 long years, from 1946 to 1991! BTW, the term “Indochina” originally referred to French Indochina, which included the current countries of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. (For details, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indochina\\_Wars](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indochina_Wars).) Suffice it to say that this never-ending carnage was untenable for the peace-loving, young Buddhist monk who had to choose either obedience or his conscience. What would he choose?

**A “Courageous Warrior” Heart ... in the cause of Peace.** Thich Nhat Hanh reached his decision—he chose **both!** Obedience to his conscience. Not only did he “valiantly oppose his own government during the Vietnam Wars,”; he also mobilized to help simple villagers who were suffering and being slaughtered from both sides; first the French, then the Viet Cong and the Americans in the 1960-70s. Nhat Hanh’s decision to do **both** is what gave birth to his signature brand of “**Engaged Buddhism**”—a movement involving peaceful activism for the purpose of social reform.

But the South Vietnamese Government was anything but “amused” at his conscientious objection; whereupon it did what corrupt governments sometimes DO: in 1966 while he was on his peace mission to America to oppose the war, they kicked him out! EXILE! He was banished for what turned out to be 39 long years (until 2005)!

Martin Luther King, Jr. called Thich Nhat Hanh a “an apostle of peace and non-violence”.

**Resilience to withstand the blows.** As an ironic “reward” for his pacifism, Thich Nhat Hanh was exiled from South Vietnam in 1966 after expressing opposition to the war and refusing to take sides. Especially power-obsessed politicians didn’t understand his stance.



But some people saw it. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1964 Nobel Laureate) was one of them who did and, as a result, nominated the young Thây for the 1967 Nobel Peace Prize. Here are some of the most touching excerpts from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 1967 Nobel Peace Prize nomination letter for Thich Nhat Hanh:

The first page of Dr. King’s letter, courtesy [The King Library and Archives in Atlanta](#)



### Noteworthy Excerpts:

*The Nobel Institute, Oslo, Norway*

*January 25, 1967*

*Gentlemen:*

*As the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate of 1964, I now have the pleasure of proposing to you the name of Thich Nhat Hanh for that award in 1967. I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize than this gentle Buddhist monk from Vietnam ... an apostle of peace and non-violence, cruelly separated from his own people while they are oppressed by a vicious war which has grown to threaten the sanity and security of the entire world.*

*... conferring the Prize on Nhat Hanh would itself be a most generous act of peace. It would remind all nations that men of good will stand ready to lead warring elements out of an abyss of hatred and destruction.*

*... I know Thich Nhat Hanh, and am privileged to call him my friend ... He is a holy man; he is humble and devout. He is a scholar of immense intellectual capacity. Author of ten published volumes, he is also a poet of superb clarity and human compassion. His academic discipline is the Philosophy of Religion ... (and yet...)*



Dedication ceremony for the sculpture of Thich Nhat Hanh and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at Magnolia Grove Monastery. Photo by Paul Davis

*Thich Nhat Hanh today is virtually homeless and stateless. If he were to return to Vietnam, which he passionately wishes to do, his life would be in great peril. He is the victim of a particularly brutal exile because he proposes to carry his advocacy of peace to his own people. ... The history of Vietnam is filled with chapters of exploitation by outside powers and corrupted men of wealth, until even now the Vietnamese are harshly ruled, ill-fed, poorly housed, and burdened by all the hardships and terrors of modern warfare.*

*Thich Nhat Hanh offers a way out of this nightmare, a solution acceptable to rational leaders. He has traveled the world, counseling statesmen, religious leaders, scholars and writers, and enlisting their support. His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity.*

*... the Nobel Peace Prize of 1967. Thich Nhat Hanh would bear this honor with grace and humility. Sincerely, Martin Luther King, Jr.*

(*Nota bene*: Allegedly because King did not follow the correct nomination protocol, in 1967 the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to ... *no one!*)

Sister Chan Khong, Thây's close confidante in his later years, has asserted that "*despite all the adverse conditions he encountered over the years—including war, exile, betrayal and ill health—he never gave up. Thây is a survivor.*" (*The Art of Living, Foreword, p. ix*)

Starting from his earliest works—"Fragrant Palm Leaves" and beyond—Thich Nhat Hanh often "waxed poetic". Here just one example about "*Inter-being*":

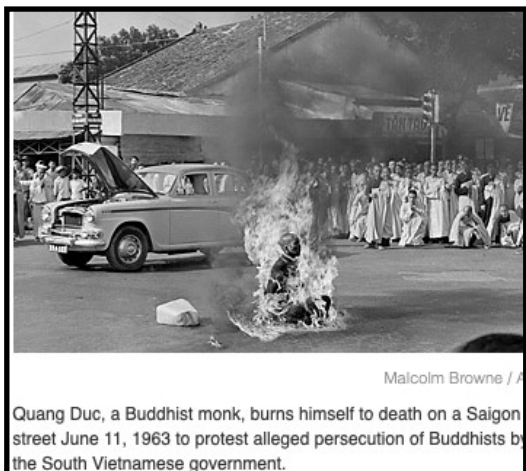
#### *You Are Me*

*You are me and I am you.  
It is obvious that we inter-are.  
You cultivate the flower in  
yourself so that I will be beautiful.  
I transform the garbage in myself  
so that you do not have to suffer.  
I support you, you support me.  
I am here to bring you peace  
you are here to bring me joy.*

According to the 2015 article on "The Extraordinary Life of Thich Nhat Hanh" ("<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/earshot/the-extraordinary-life-of-thich-nhat-hanh/6358880>"), despite his humble beginnings, Thich Nhat Hanh has emerged as "one of the most influential religious leaders of the last 100 years".

Unassuming South Asian Buddhist monk that he vowed to be at 16 years of age, who later in America became a contemporary and close friend of Martin Luther King, Jr., Thich Nhat Hanh exerted an immense impact on the Vietnam anti-war movement of the 1960s and 1970s. He was not always welcome; on the contrary. Stories abound of fiery attacks by Americans on this gentle spirit who never responded in kind and, indeed, never failed his whole life long to speak out against violence in all its forms.

## "Engaged Buddhism"—Extreme!



Before he had launched the mission that led him into exile, Thich Nhat Hanh was known as a sensitive poet and scholar who had helped found a Buddhist university and a social service corps for youth in Vietnam. *Soft* version. But "Soft Buddhism" couldn't cut it. So a *harder* version emerged.

**From self-immolation...** In June 1965, Nhat Hanh wrote Dr. King, saying that Buddhist monks and nuns he personally knew had burned themselves to death—self-immolation—in public protests against policies of the South Vietnamese Government. They were acting from a spirit of self-sacrifice, he said, symbolically taking on the

sufferings of the larger population.

**... to punishing exile.** According to a 1999 New York Times article<sup>1</sup>, "*In 1966, he (Thich Nhat Hanh) had embarked from his homeland on an overseas **peace mission**, meeting with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Pope Paul VI and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, to whom he appealed for an **end to the American bombing of Vietnam**. It was then, without warning, that the Government of South Vietnam barred his return, as did the Communists who later took control.*

Almost **four decades** were to elapse before he was allowed to return in 2005, partly so that the Vietnamese regime could avow to the world that it was now more inclusive, progressive and deserving of economic investment. Still, this switch got Thây back home after 39 painful years in exile, "wandering the world, preaching peace" as some are wont to do.



In addition, there was that unanticipated "silver lining". It is now widely acknowledged that, during those long decades, war and revolution in East Asia had an indirect, yet profoundly positive impact on both Buddhism and other world religions. Best examples: venerable though exiled Buddhist leaders and scholars, like the Tibetan Dalai Lama and Vietnamese Thich Nhat Hanh, emerged on the world stage as important teachers, writing, lecturing and *peacefully* spreading the knowledge of Buddhism to other cultures.

And thus Buddhism—with only ca. five million adherents and so "only" #5 amongst world religions by population—obtained increased "clout". Thây was propelled to the forefront and, in America, became a well-known if contentious figure. This slight, humble, brown-clothed monk became a "media star"!

<sup>1</sup> "A Monk in Exile Dreams of Return to Vietnam", The New York Times, By Gustav Niebuhr, October 16, 1999.

## Oprah meets Thây: In their own Words



One of the more accessible interviews of Thich Nhat Hanh that I've ever come across is the one done by Oprah Winfrey in her "O" Magazine issue of March 2010. Here, each of them opened themselves to the other. Oprah excerpts:

- *"The moment I meet Thich Nhat Hanh, I feel his sense of calm. A deeply tranquil presence seems to surround this Zen Buddhist master.*
- *"His "engaged Buddhism" is also what led Martin Luther King Jr. to nominate him for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1967.*

- *"In denouncing the violence inflicted on his countrymen, Nhat Hanh founded a relief organization that rebuilt bombed Vietnamese villages, set up schools and medical centers, and resettled homeless families.*
- *"He also created a Buddhist university, a publishing house, and a peace activist magazine—all of which led the Vietnamese government to forbid him, in 1966, to return home after he'd left the country on a peace mission. He remained in exile for 39 years."*

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**Suddenly, a world stage!** Despite this—or precisely *because* of it—a young, unpretentious Buddhist monk was catapulted onto the world stage! Yet ... he kept his "balance" and humility there. He eloquently "engaged" on behalf of peace and urged the practice of mindfulness meditation. He established dozens of monasteries around the world, the largest in Plum Village in southwestern France where he himself lived and taught until his return to Vietnam in 2018. He invested his life and wisdom into helping others, starting with the children.

### “Inviting” Wisdom and Compassion: The back story

MY idea was to give my then seven-year-old granddaughter a vacation in the summer of 2015 after she had lived almost two years together with me. To introduce her, not only to lyrically beautiful southern France, but also to the “Children’s Village” in Thich Nhat Hanh’s “*Village des Pruniers*” (Plum Village), a place that had meanwhile become world famous.



I wanted her to meet and make friends with kids from various countries and cultures and simply to see and feel the joy and beauty of the place. The “légumes lumineuse” food, the lotus pond, the laughter. But, alas, thanks to all-too-prevalent power plays, ignorance and distrust, it was not to be. In the last moment, I had to go there alone although I invited her in spirit—just like the buddhists “invite the bell” and stop whatever they are doing for a moment simply to give thanks—and hope she got a bit of this lovely presence. **Living** the wisdom is a rare thing.

**Walking the talk.** Thây (Vietnamese for “teacher”) had long taught and lived his concept of “Interbeing”, saying that all living beings are inter-connected. He went further though, saying that a more “**engaged Buddhism**” would be vital to actually manifest this in our discordant world. Such Buddhists would need be active, **socially, politically and environmentally**.

Thây “walked the talk” quite literally; but he also wrote the words. Author of some 100 books, 75 of them in English, he launched this aspect of his “Interbeing” campaign in going to the United States in 1961 (at age 35) to study, then teach comparative religion, first at Princeton, then at Cornell and Columbia University; then continuing from his French base.

**"The Way Out  
is IN."**

- Thich Nhat Hanh

Bodhisattva or not, everyone who came there could not help but feel it, sense it, there in the nature-surrounded southern French "villages" they had created. For starters, sitting in the meditation hall at dawn you could gaze out the panorama windows and take in the vast golden-blooming sunflower fields; and beyond them, the ripening vineyards. So comforting, this sensation of life eternally resurrecting itself.

That's how the blessing of gentle refuge kept me alive. It *amounted* to that. Were there perhaps some dear-if-

unseen angels at work? I'd say YES in retrospect; but there I perceived them rather in the form of those mild-smiling Vietnamese nuns who were silently ever-present. Their respectful gentleness. The supple, swaying bamboo stalks outside our thatched huts. The children.

And, of course, the overarching presence of the very person who was *nearby* ... but not *there*. Just in November of the year before (2014), the 88-year-old Thây had suffered a severe brain hemorrhage and the following summer (just when I was there) was being belatedly flown to the United States to see if the specialists there might help him restore basic physical functions, such as speech and movement. They *waited* too long. By 2018, seeing his bodily demise clearly but calmly before him, he requested to return to his Tu Hien "root temple" in Vietnam where he lived another frail four years. Still, his 2015 presence permeated the four scattered French "plum villages" he had created and to which he had brought many of his landsmen-and-women from Vietnam.

**Personal connection.** As for me, not unlike the Vietnamese "boat people", I sought refuge in Plum Village as a "refugee" of sorts, excommunicated from my own extended family through a painful "convergence of negatives" involving my daughter and only grandchild. The poem below addresses the extreme psychological pain that I felt then when it seemed I had lost my granddaughter for good. Here it IS. I just by chance FOUND the original version in my journal; this version was printed out and I read it at the Farewell Ceremony back in 2015 in Thây's Plum Village: *Being there was a blessing; it saved my sanity, revived my hope.*



"Please do not build a stupa (shrine) for me. Please do not put my ashes in a vase, lock me inside and limit who I am. I know this will be difficult for some of you. If you must build a stupa though, please make sure that you put a sign on it that says, 'I am not in here.' In addition, you can also put another sign that says, 'I am not out there either,' and a third sign that says, 'If I am anywhere, it is in your mindful breathing and in your peaceful steps.'"

- Thich Nhat Hanh

**No Mud, No Lotus (Format in two columns, one full page)**

Adrea Mach

*Covered in “mud” I came  
All strength spent, panting  
in the breathless summer heat,  
too tired to even move.  
Sleeping at every moment  
Even nodding off during  
the Dharma talks I longed to hear.*

*When awake, my head spun  
My joints ached and I realized I was  
not just LISTENING to my body,  
I was FEELING it again at last—  
But how it HURT!*

*It rained PAIN  
Sharp little pellets of pain  
stung my body, also my mind  
Like hailstones hitting me.*

*But I kept the path,  
I kept the promises  
Staying in the present moment  
Pain, suffering and all*

*Only after many long days  
did the hail stones of pain  
start to melt, ...  
melt into raindrops  
soft, incessant, interior raindrops*

*Rain droplets that, together,  
softly covered that brittle,  
congealed lava of molten rage,  
that slimy sludge of deception,  
and mistrust,  
that mud of mindless grieving*

*Luckily, I am not alone but surrounded by tiny Asian “sisters”  
I **SEE** them gliding back-and-forth  
in their brown habits, with their  
shorn, dark-stubbled heads  
and soft mindful smiles.*

*Befriended by these new friends from near and far,  
all on the same subtle path.*



Slowly, slowly, tiptoe-soft,  
my listening ear opens I **HEAR** their stories  
that awaken in me kindness and caring.

Senses awakening,  
I **SMELL** the tart lavender,  
the ginger tea. I **TASTE** the soy-sauced brown rice,  
sharing its bowl full of mysteriously savory vegetables—"légumes lumineuse"

Imperceptibly, I **FEEL** the spiritual spring rain continuing to fall  
Slowly, the lily-pad pond of my mind begins to fill with gentle drops of kindness, wise  
words, smiling faces, finally even shy-bright laughter!

FULL now, the pond! Its surface full of graceful,  
green oval leaves, slender stalks standing sentinel,  
topped with tiny tulip-like buds.  
Not tulips though ... but ivory-pink lotus flowers.

Now, in the pre-dawn stillness,  
I seek out my lotus pond, all alone.  
Only the doves coo, the birds twitter.  
Suddenly, a frog croaks - Harrumpp!

The first shy lotus blossom opens  
her delicate petals to the new day.  
I approach the pond's edge.  
I bow to her, this pristine princess.  
I bend to her too and breathe in DEEPLY  
for the first time her multi-faceted fragrance,  
inhaling it straight into my heart.  
She smiles at me, Princess Celestina's lotus flower,  
and I smile back,  
Blessed.

Small wonder that it works  
even despite great distances  
But just as Thich Nhat Hanh—  
Beloved teacher, Thây—said,  
**"No mud, no lotus"**.

(July 2015, Village des Pruniers,  
Gironde, France)

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## Thäy's "Right-hand Woman"



As Fate would have it, just when I was *in* Plum Village in July 2015, Thäy was **not**.

Following his grave brain hemorrhage in November 2014, he was unable to speak, much less carry out his famous meditative walks. But if everyone was deeply concerned, no one showed it. The Sangha (community) drew together and, if anything, was even closer-knit than before. That was when I got the chance to meet Sister Chan Khong.

Coming into that present moment, heat and all, I scribbled haiku poems:

roosters, fuchsia hydrangeas  
wheat and sunflower fields  
silent spires at dawn

baked earth, broken twigs  
scorching skies and  
dark warning thunder

Then one day in the ever-sizzling summer heat, I fell asleep, exhausted, on the mulberry tree lawn. One of the sweet Vietnamese nuns came to wake me and ask if I wanted to speak with Sister Chan Khong. Of course, I groggily said "Yes" but had to wait another 1.5 hours until it actually happened. But happen, it *did*.



And the wise-and-*street-wise* Sister Chan Khong shared some *wonderful* one-on-one tips with me. Taking them right now from my original notes from eight years past, I vividly recall her kind face as she said, "*Looking **deeply** is Vipassana, In order to transform suffering through mindfulness, you must understand the **roots**. Here just a tip or two.*"

- *Seek a skillful, dynamic balance between 'holding on ... letting go'.*
- *Tell your young granddaughter, "No matter how blocked it seems, I am **here** for you. If there are troubles, **tell me**."*
- *Writing is even better than just telling. Save everything: the message, the envelope, the stamp and the postmark. Keep these letters for the court. And one more strategy:*
- *Behave **as if** you had given up! But **don't**. Instead, water the fragile flower so that it will bear fruit. Cultivate the patience of 'peaceful resistance'. It may take time ... "*

It HAS. Eight years have passed. I myself am now almost eighty. But I have neither forgotten nor given up. And so ...

Contact was *finally* reestablished last year when my granddaughter turned fifteen and was legally able to reclaim more power over her own life. Now, after all these years, we can

meet again regularly, together with her mother/my daughter. She, this young Virgo, is blooming beautifully, like some delicate flower. Just looking to see, I learn that one Virgo flower is the ...

**Chrysanthemum**, “a symbol of loyalty, honesty, and friendship. An astrological earth sign, they have high morals, loyalty, and honour to friends and partners.”



**Our “Dharma” pulls us forward.** That “hitting bottom” moment now lies in the fast-receding past. Life *does* go on, and we follow what/whom we dearly love. In this case, it was my granddaughter who helped pull me forward. This book is in tribute to her and, not to forget, my daughter who has been far-and-away the greatest challenge of my life. The Buddhists would say she is here as my daughter, *inter alia*, to **teach** me; I would say, that I am here as her mother to **love** her, whatever. In the end, that’s what it’s all about.

In conclusion, this chapter is primarily in tribute to the wisdom of Zen Buddhism and its practitioners. Although my particular Zen practice has been mostly in the Japanese Rinzai tradition (see Part II of this chapter), I keep a special place in my heart for the gentler Vietnamese version perpetrated by Thich Nhat Hanh. And he had some words of wisdom for us, too, that I would like to use in gradually exiting this earthly stage.

**LETTING LIFE GO/FLOW GENTLY ...**  
**Thầy’s “Zen for Oldies”**

*“When I was eighty years old, a journalist asked me if I ever planned to retire as a spiritual teacher. I smiled and explained that teaching is given not by talking alone but by the way we live our life. Our **life** is the teaching. Our **life** is the message... (and is continued in others). So when you look at your son, your daughter or your grandchildren, you can see that they are your continuation... if we see our continuation body while we’re still alive, we’ll know how to cultivate it to ensure a beautiful continuation in the future. This is **the true art of living**. Then, when the time comes for the dissolution of our physical body, we will be able to release it calmly.” (The Art of Living, pp.70-71).*

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## Readers' Interactive Workbook

Whatever your age or current stage of life, interacting with these historic or contemporary profiles can spice up your own life, calling up comparisons with the figures featured here. Take a vivid “walk down Memory Lane” and recall challenges that you faced—whether you overcame them or just barely survived with bruisingly useful “lessons learned”. This can help you rev up your right-now resilience. *Explore* with Thây’s Zen master soul!

1. Thich Nhat Hanh was a gentle soul, according to all who knew him. Martin Luther King, Jr. called him “*an apostle of peace and non-violence*”. **Do you know any people in your own inner circle who are like this? Or in your readings? What do you think of them? What do you feel? Are they on the right track? ... or not? Why?**
  
2. Buddhism is not even a “religion” according to the Tibetan Dalai Lama (who ought to know since he is the acknowledged “head” of it!). Instead, he asserts that “*Ethics is more important. We don’t arrive in this world as members of a particular religion. But ethics is innate.*” **Do you have a religion? Even more, do you have a conscience? A “moral compass”? What does that look like (in less than 500 words if you can!)**
  
3. From a young age, Thich Nhat Hanh was a “conscientious objector” against the Vietnam war(s). What did that *mean*, in action? **Have you ever objected against the rules/policies of your own government? Would you? Against what or whom? Why ... and what would you DO about it? (Be as specific as you can.)**
  
4. Exile can be the heavy price one pays for “speaking truth to power”. Thich Nhat Hanh was exiled for 39 years; the Dalai Lama now for over *sixty* (exiled in 1959 after China’s annexation of Tibet). **Is there anything, any “cause”, that would prompt you to risk exile from your home country?** (Source article: <https://www.readersdigest.co.uk/inspire/life/the-dalai-lama-ethics-is-more-important-than-religion>)
  
5. “Thây” (Vietnamese for “teacher”) believed in “Inter-being” ... that is the idea that all living beings are intimately connected to one another; what one does affects all the others. **What’s your take? If I kill somebody, does that impact you? Or vice versa? (Heavy question!)**