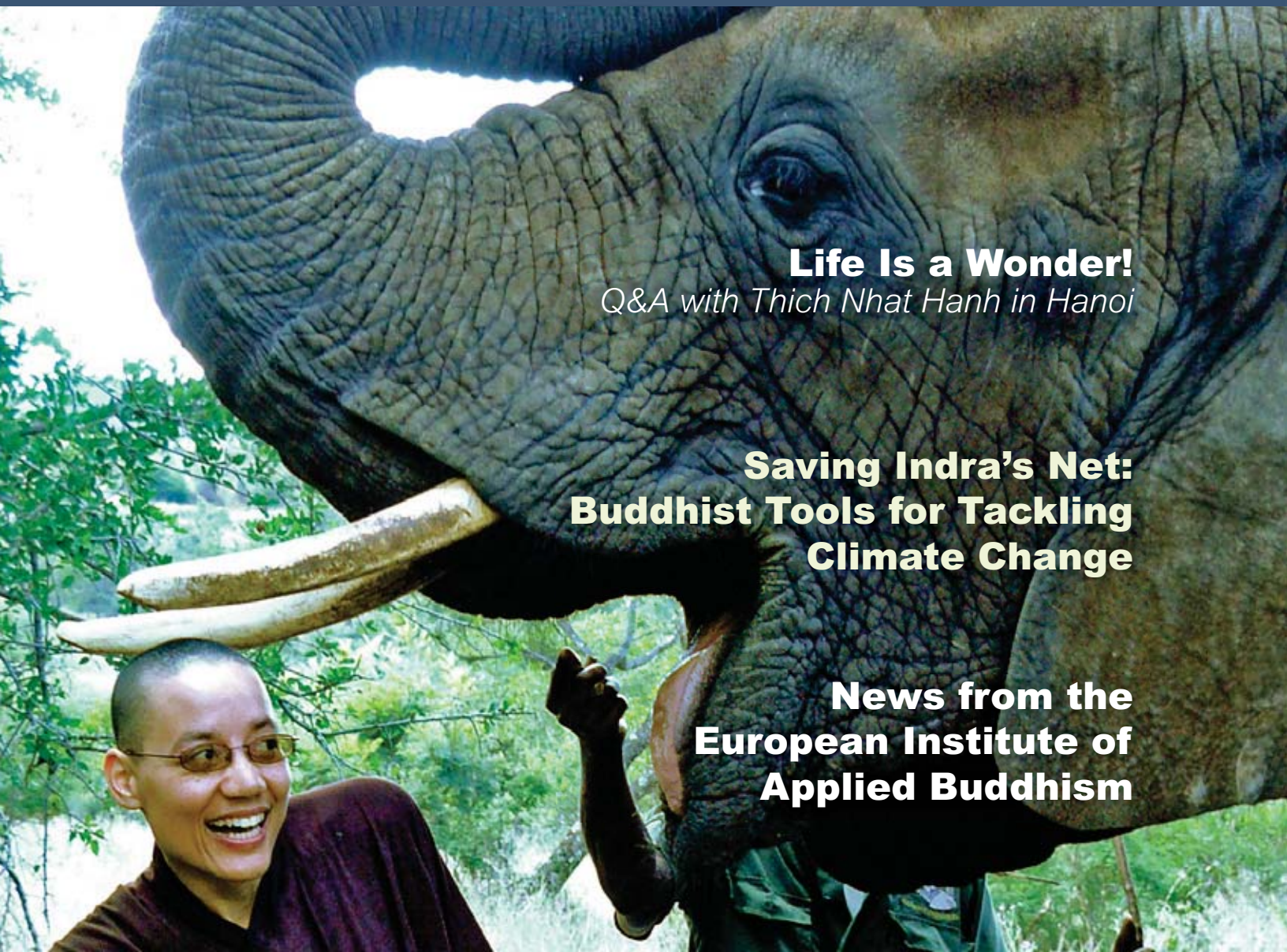


the mindfulness bell

Winter/Spring 2009

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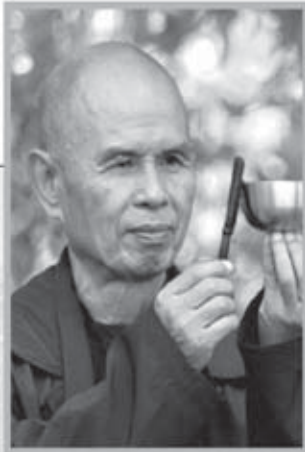


Life Is a Wonder!

Q&A with Thich Nhat Hanh in Hanoi

**Saving Indra's Net:
Buddhist Tools for Tackling
Climate Change**

**News from the
European Institute of
Applied Buddhism**



2009 U.S. TEACHING TOUR

ZEN MASTER ~ THICH NHAT HANH

*"Only understanding and
compassion on a collective level
can liberate us."*

— *The World We Have*, Parallax Press 2008

MASSACHUSETTS EVENT

Stonehill Retreat:
Be Peace, Be Joy, Be Hope
August 11-16
Stonehill College, Easton, MA

COLORADO EVENTS

Retreat:
*One Buddha is Not Enough -
Awakening our True Potential*
August 21 - 26
Estes Park Center, CO

Public Talk:
*Daily Enlightenment -
Waking Up to Life*
August 29
Buell Theater, Denver, CO

CALIFORNIA EVENTS

English Retreat:
*The World We Are - Planting
Peace, Harvesting Happiness*
September 8-13
Deer Park Monastery, CA

Public Talk:
*Our True Agenda -
Tending to the Space Inside*
September 19
Pasadena Civic Auditorium, CA

Vietnamese Retreat:
September 23-27
Deer Park Monastery, CA

NEW YORK EVENTS

Blue Cliff Retreat:
Enlightenment is Now or Never
October 2 - 6
Blue Cliff Monastery, NY

Beacon Theatre:
*Building a Peaceful and
Compassionate Society*
Public Talk
October 9
Day of Mindfulness
October 10
Omega Institute
New York City, NY



visit: www.tnhtour.org

families with children and teens are welcome to the retreats
for more information and registration contact us, starting January 7: 760-741-CALM or info@tnhtour.org

Deer Park Monastery
in the great hidden mountain

upcoming retreats 2009

April 24 – 26

MEDITATION & EDUCATION

- for students and educators (former College Retreat) -

May 20 – 24

WAKE UP – YOUNG ADULT RETREAT

- Another way of Being - 21 - 35 years old -

June 17 – 21

TEEN CAMP

- annual retreat -

July 1 – 5

FAMILY CAMP

- annual retreat -

Web: www.deerparkmonastery.org - E-mail: deerpark@dpmail.net - Phone: (760) 291-1003 x100



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the mindfulness bell

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in the Tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh
Published by Plum Village

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Dear Thay, dear Sangha,

Today is Martin Luther King Day here in the United States. Tomorrow we inaugurate a new president, the first black man to serve in that post. Along with what seems to be the whole world, I rejoice in the dawning of a new era.

Perhaps we are truly approaching what Thay mentions in his New Year's letter (see the Mindfulness Bell website), what Martin Luther King called the "beloved community." At least I dare to hope so, though I know that much will be required of each one of us for it to become a reality.

In my own life the political excitement of the last few months has been overshadowed by the illness of my sister-in-law, dying of ovarian cancer. For much of that time she lived in our home and we were blessed with the presence of many angels, including hospice staff and volunteers and friends. Now she has moved to a nursing home where she receives better care. By the time you read this, I suppose, her body will be ashes.

How can it be that the person I know and love will no longer be here? Of course, in the ultimate dimension, she's not going anywhere. As Thay says in this issue's Dharma talk, "We know that the disintegration of this body does not mean the end — we always continue!" I have been with other loved ones as they died, and a palpable energy is released that fills the room with love and enters the heart like grace. Still, the wrenching away, the physical loss of a loved one is ever so painful and the grief is as sharp as a sword.

In this issue Lauren Thompson shares her transformation as she journeyed with a Sangha sister during a terminal illness. She writes that "through her dying, I caught a glimpse of our fundamental interbeing."

Glimpses of interbeing can not only guide us through personal loss but may be critical in solving global issues. "Unless we are aware," said Angela Tam in a powerful talk at the Vesak Conference, "of the connection between our habits and the planetary problems we have, nothing will change." Her solution: interbeing, mindfulness, Sangha. Brother Phap Lai similarly points to a spiritual solution for the complex problem of overpopulation: "We need to learn to live in a sustainable way, embracing simple living and focusing on community."

As Martin Luther King wrote fifty years ago, "Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives."

May the vision that Martin Luther King lived and died for become reality here on earth. May the Buddha-to-be that Thay has foreseen be born in each of our hearts. May we practice with diligence, wisdom, and compassion so as to bring about the beloved community of all living beings.

Blessings to you all,

J E Combelic

On the cover: Sister Chau Nghiem is greeted by an elephant at the Mokolodi game reserve in South Africa; photo courtesy of the monastic sangha

Letters

Dear Ones,

I was very inspired by the letters from people who are incarcerated that were in the Autumn 2008 issue of the *Mindfulness Bell*. Those letters jogged my memory of visiting the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in Bedford Hills, NY, as a law student over twenty years ago. It is a maximum security prison for women. I vividly remember how sad the inmates seemed to me. The crimes committed by the women were very serious. But such crimes were often provoked by the need to defend themselves in a life-or-death situation. I also learned that many of the women had young children who were now being raised by others. I remember feeling heartbroken by the circumstances of these women.

My dear teacher, Lyn Fine, was having a birthday in November. I decided to send a subscription of the *Mindfulness Bell* to the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in Lyn's honor. I feel so grateful to be able to share the Dharma through the joy of the *Mindfulness Bell* with the women at the prison in Bedford Hills.

There are many opportunities for us readers of the *Mindfulness Bell* to share the precious gift of the practice with others. I wanted to share my experience of the ripple

effect of reading the *Mindfulness Bell*, to wanting to celebrate the birthday of a very special person, manifesting in a subscription of the *Mindfulness Bell* going to the shelf of the library of a prison that I visited for a day many years ago.

*Kathleen Cahill
New York NY
U.S.A.*

Dear Janelle,

My mother passed peacefully on October 19th. We were joined in complete oneness in a tunnel of gold, with eyes locked. I was smiling hugely and nodding at her, with my head on her chest, and my hand on her heart as it beat for the final time. I want to express to you how amazing it was to get the *Mindfulness Bell* a few days later with your article and the one on the still Christian mind. I was able to use the bell meditation for Molly's witnessed cremation, as she was an engaged Christian. Many members of Plum Blossom Sangha were there, and we sent Molly's body into the flames with New Baby and Sandy, the stuffed dog in her arms. Thank you Thay, Thank you Janelle.

*Carlene South
Austin, Texas
U.S.A.*

Dear *Mindfulness Bell*,

I really enjoy reading the *Mindfulness Bell*. I only recently became a subscriber, but since then have also collected all the back issues I could find. And have read them cover to cover. I have especially enjoyed features on Thay's trips to Vietnam. Something I missed, however, was a general overview or summary of these trips. A letter like the one attached [about the India trip] might offer this kind of information to readers.

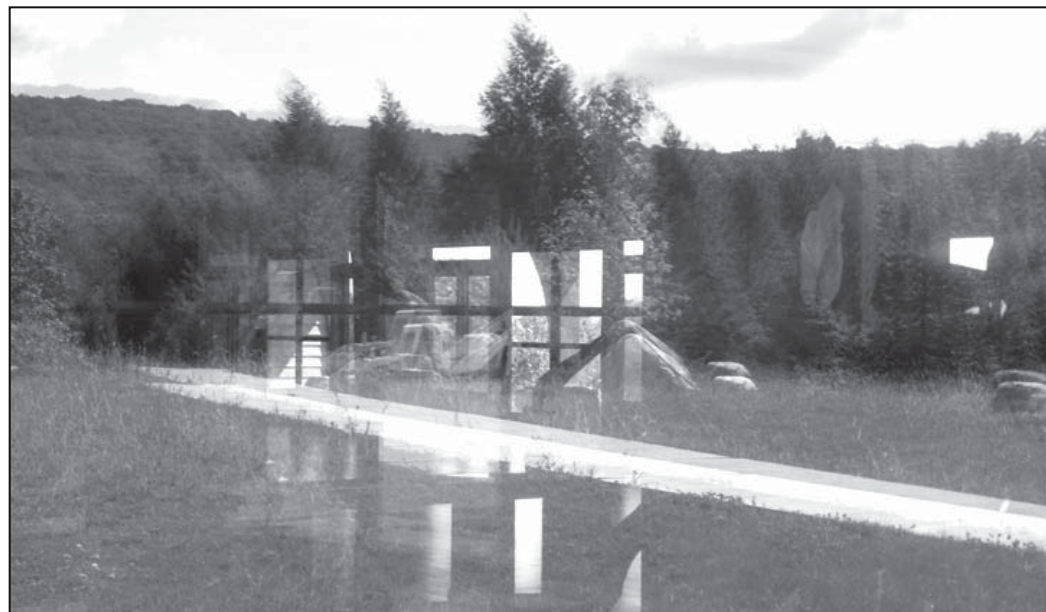
*Claire Venghiattis
Mannheim
Germany*

Editor's reply: *Thank you for the suggestion. Your letter is printed in the Sangha News section, and we've also included an overview of Thay's retreats in Vietnam last year, in an essay by Loan To Phan on page 11.*

We love to receive your letters and suggestions.

Please e-mail editor@mindfulnessbell.org or write to *Mindfulness Bell*, c/o David Percival, 745 Cagua S.E., Albuquerque NM 87108, U.S.A.

In this issue we feature photos of the newly finished Togetherness Meditation Hall at Blue Cliff Monastery by Tasha Chuang, *Peaceful Calling of the Heart*, who practices with the Morning Star Sangha in Queens, NY. She writes about one day being "completely astonished with the beautiful reflections of the sunlight diffused through the meditation hall, which morphed into interesting layering images with colors, shapes, and texture, from the forest and the architecture interweaving. They captured the essence of how I feel sometimes when I meditate in that spacious meditation hall surrounded by nature."



A Jewel in the Forest photo by Tasha Chuang



Thich Nhat Hanh in India

photo by Bonnie Wiesner

Life Is A Wonder!

Dharma talk by Thich Nhat Hanh

Not only is the rose wonderful, not only are the clouds and the sky wonderful, but the mud and the suffering are also wonderful.

On May 10, 2008, during the “Engaged Buddhism for the Twenty-First Century” retreat at the Kim Lien Hotel in Hanoi, Thich Nhat Hanh answered questions from retreatants. Here are a few of those questions and answers.

A Beautiful Continuation

A written question: My father is retiring after fifty-five years of leading companies. He has decided that unless he can remain a very important person by having a high position or being affiliated with a prestigious institution, he is “irrelevant.” As a result he does not want to live. He has said he cares about no one and has no interests left in life. I’ve tried watering his good seeds and spending time with him. But his anger is very deep and his *manas* is 72 years strong [laughter]. How can I help him?

We might help him by telling him to learn to look deeply into his own person, to understand himself. We are usually caught in our notion of self. We are not aware that a self is made only of non-self elements, just as a flower is made only of non-flower elements. Sometimes we notice that we have certain talents and skills, but we should know that these talents and skills have come from our ancestors. When you know that your own talents, as well as your suffering and your happiness, have come from your ancestors, you are no longer caught in the idea that all these things belong to you.

In the Buddhist tradition when we Touch the Earth we make the gesture of opening our two hands to show that we have nothing in us. Everything has been transmitted through our ancestors. There is nothing to be ashamed of, nothing to be proud of. We inherit many things from our ancestors. In that light we can release everything very quickly. The insight that self is made up of non-self elements can be very liberating. Then it will be possible for us to see ourselves in our children and in our friends.

We know that the disintegration of this body does not mean our end — we always continue! We continue beautifully or not so beautifully, depending on how we handle the present moment. If in the present moment we can produce thoughts of loving kindness, forgiveness, and compassion, if we can say inspiring words, if we can perform beautiful acts of compassion, then we will have a beautiful continuation. We have sovereignty over the present moment.

If your father has access to that kind of insight he will change and he will suffer less. He will have joy in living. He will see that he is in you and that you will carry him into the future. All his talents and experiences are not lost — you will continue to have them, and you will do your best to transmit these qualities into the future through your children and grandchildren.

A Deep Grievous Longing

A lay woman asks: My husband and I have been trying to conceive a child for a long time. My sister and her husband have recently had a pregnancy loss, so we’ve both been experiencing a lot of suffering. One of my highest aspirations is to experience the miracle of having a child. Sometimes it’s very intense emotionally, the intensity of life wanting to continue itself, it causes a deep grievous longing. I work in a clinic that practices Chinese medicine to help couples with infertility. So it’s very difficult not to water those seeds of suffering. It is my most sincere intention to nourish my healing practice and my patients’ healing from the heart of my own experience. It’s from here that I ask for your guidance.

Someone said that happiness is something that you don’t recognize when it is there. You feel that, once it is gone, you have lost it. Happiness can occur in different forms. We might focus our attention on one thing and we call it the basic condition for our happiness. If we don’t have that thing then we don’t have happiness. But there are many other conditions for happiness that are present in the here and the now, and we just ignore them. We think that only the other object is a true condition for happiness, which now we don’t have.

Someone looking at you may recognize all the conditions of happiness that he does not have. That person may wonder why with plenty of conditions for happiness like that you do not enjoy your life and you are looking for something else. So the practice is first of all to say that happiness can be found in many forms.

Looking deeply into the human person we see that the human person wants to continue long into the future. We want to have children and grandchildren; we want to last a very long time. That is also the nature of animals and vegetables. Every living thing wants to be continued long into the future, not just human beings.



photo by Bonnie Weisner

Someone like myself, a monk, also has the desire to last into the future, to be continued. That is very normal — every human being wants to be continued, and to be continued beautifully.

We know that there are those who have children but who are not happy with their children. They say if they had not given birth to these children they would be happier. You have to take into account all these things.

I myself do not have blood children but I have a lot of spiritual children and they make me very happy. They carry me into the future and I am very satisfied! I do not need to have a blood child.

Transmission can be done in many ways. You want to transmit the best thing you have into the future. You can transmit yourself genetically or spiritually. When you look into my disciples and friends and spiritual children you can see me.

We are not blood children of the Buddha but we feel that we are real children of the Buddha because we have inherited a lot from the Buddha. He has transmitted himself to us not genetically but spiritually. If you take into account these different modes of transmission you will see that we need not suffer because we cannot transmit ourselves genetically into the future.

But who knows?! Enjoy the conditions of happiness you actually have and one day you may enjoy that happiness also. But I think that if you enjoy this you may be completely satisfied. Every door is open. Good luck!

Treating Depression

Sr. Tung Nghiem speaks: Dear Thay, we had a few friends who wrote to Thay after Thay spoke about depression and how nothing can survive without food. They wrote either

Someone like myself, a monk, also has the desire to be continued. That is very normal — every human being wants to be continued beautifully.

from their own experience or the experience of a loved one or a client if they wrote as a psychotherapist. They shared their belief that there's also a physiological aspect causing depression and some people truly need to take medication. The friends who wrote were concerned that Thay's teaching could be misunderstood by the people who still need to have medicine and who may stop taking their medicine if they think they only need to stop consuming those things that are harmful to their mind and that's enough. So they ask Thay to clarify.

In the teaching of the Buddha the biological and the mental inter-are. They manifest based on one another. Our emotions and feelings are very connected to the chemicals in our bodies. Our emotions and feelings can produce chemicals that are toxic or that inhibit the production of certain chemicals like neurotransmitters, and create an imbalance in your body. The mental can create the biological and the biological can have an effect on the mental. We don't reduce the importance of one side.

All of us have the seed of depression, all of us. All of us have the seed of mental illness. We have received these genes from our parents and our ancestors, and we know from science that genes

don't turn on by themselves. They are turned on by our way of thinking, our feelings, our perceptions, and our environment. It is the environment that helps turn on the negative and positive genes. The genes are equivalent to the *bijas*, the seeds that we talk about in the teachings of the Buddha.

Neuroscientists ask the questions: Is it true that the brain produces the mind? How could the activities of neurons bring about the subjective mind? But the brain and the mind inter-are. *This is because that is; this is not because that is not.* It's not that the body produces the mind or the mind produces the body, but mind and body are two aspects of the same thing. The mind always relies on the body to manifest. It's like a coin — there is the head and the tail. Without the tail the head cannot exist and vice versa.

The seed of depression that now manifests may have been transmitted to us by many generations of ancestors. There may have been generations when that seed did not manifest. But now, because of the new environment, that seed has a chance to manifest. That is why we have to take into account the element of environment.

The environment is an object of consumption because elements of the environment touch and turn on the genes in us. That is why the teaching of the Buddha on food is very important. We consume not only edible food but also what we see, hear, feel, and touch; sensory impression is the second kind of food. The third kind of food is intention, our volition, the deep desire in us. The fourth kind of nutriment is consciousness; we consume consciousness. If we live with a number of people around us, we consume their collective way of thinking and perceiving. For instance we may see something as not beautiful but because everybody around us sees it as beautiful, slowly we also come to see it as beautiful. We are influenced by the collective thinking around us and that is also consumption. Our depression has to do with all these sources of nutriments.

Medication can help but don't rely on medication alone. You have to change your way of life and your environment, and one day you'll be able to stop taking medication. If you don't change your way of life and you continue to use the medication, at a later time it will not work because your body gets used to it.

Scientists know full well that it is our environment and our attention that turn on the seeds in us. There is a practice called *yoniso manaskara*, appropriate attention, where we focus our attention only on things that turn on the good seeds in us. For example, when we hear the sound of the bell, if we are a practitioner we naturally stop thinking and go back to our breathing and enjoy the present moment. The sound of the bell helps with appropriate attention, to turn on the good seeds.

We should create an environment where the good seeds and genes in us have many chances to turn on. If you are in a bad environment you know that even if you are taking medication it will not be a long-term solution. So go on and take the medication that you need but you should do something more. Change your way of life. Look at the source of nutriments you are using to feed yourself. Look at your environment to see if it is turning on the negative things in you. And if possible, just change your environ-

ment — even if you need to live in a smaller house, drive a smaller car, have a meager salary. If you can move to a better environment do not hesitate to do so because your health depends on it.

Why Are We Here?

A lay woman asks: What is the purpose of life?

That is philosophy! [laughter]

No, but there must be a reason! Why are we here?

This is a chance to discover the mystery of life. Very exciting! [laughter] You have something to discover, something very deep, something very wonderful. That practice of looking deeply can satisfy your curiosity, and that is one reason to be alive — to discover yourself, to discover the cosmos. This is a joy.

You might like to focus your question on “how” and not be caught always in the “why”. Life is a wonder! We are here to experience the wonder of life. If you have enough mindfulness and concentration, you can have a breakthrough and get deep into the reality of the wonder.

Life is a wonderful manifestation. Not only is the rose wonderful, not only are the clouds and the sky wonderful, but the mud and the suffering are also wonderful. So enjoy touching life; discover the mystery of life. And don't spend your time asking metaphysical questions! [laughter]

Defusing the Bombs in the Heart

A lay woman asks: Dear Thay, dear Sangha, before I came to Vietnam I had the privilege to spend several weeks in Laos where I was able to meet with many people who had been affected by the war. As I stood in fields that still had a lot of unexploded ammunition, sometimes forty or fifty bombs in a small field, I felt overwhelmed with sadness and anger. Speaking to people who continue to be affected, whether it's friends or family who are killed by the unexploded ammunition, or a poor farmer who had his arm and his leg blown off at a young age, plunging his family into further poverty, I felt very sad. This young farmer said to me that this experience was his luck. I find it hard to accept that such experiences can be luck! Is this karma? And is this a time when we can be righteously angry? What is the mindful way to deal with these intense emotions?

Many social workers we trained in the School of Youth for Social Service died because of bombs, guns, and assassination. Some lost one foot, one arm. A young lady got more than 300 shards of metal in her body, from a type of bomb called anti-personnel bomb dropped by the American bombers. The doctors helped to extract many pieces of metal but there are still hundreds of them in her body. When she was in Japan for treatment she could not use an electric blanket because of these pieces of metal in her body. And they are my own students, my disciples.

I know that there are many unexploded land mines and bombs in Vietnam and in Laos, that continue to kill people. We need to get the attention of people in the world and ask them to help remove these engines of death. There are dedicated professionals

who are helping. What is essential is to learn how to do it with compassion because that amount of violence is part of our legacy, our heritage. We should make the strong aspiration not to repeat that kind of action from now on.

But the bombs are not only embedded in the land, they are in the hearts of many people today. If you look around you see that many people, even young people, are ready to die and are ready to punish others.

How to defuse the bomb in the heart of man is very important work also, how to remove the hate in the hearts of so many people. So far the war on terrorism has not diminished the number of terrorists. In fact it has increased the number of terrorists, and each of them has a bomb inside his or her heart. Terrorists want to die for a cause, they want to punish others. That is why cultivating compas-

sion, to Buddha, to Jesus Christ and all our spiritual ancestors to support us in this compassionate action. We should think of our children and their children, and we should clean the Earth and our hearts, so that our children will have a better place to live.

Thank you for reflecting on this.

An Inoculation of Suffering

A lay woman asks: Dear Thay, dear Sangha: Yesterday you taught us that we should never give the negative seeds a chance. I agree with just 90% of that. [laughter] Ten percent of that is this question: there are young people who grow up in a very loving and supportive environment but when they go to big cities or other countries to study or to work, they will face some really negative pressure and the challenge is



photo by Ton Boelens

sion and helping these people to remove their hatred and anger is also very important work. That is also to defuse the bombs.

You can see that the situation in the Middle East is very difficult. Not only are there bombs that explode on the land but there are bombs in the hearts of very many people. Compassion is the only answer.

As we help to defuse the bombs, whether in the land or in the heart, we should keep our compassion alive. I admire those of us who continue to help removing those death engines from the soil, but I also urge my friends to practice in order to defuse the bombs in the hearts of many people around us. We pray to the

so big that they cannot deal with it. My suggestion is that we should vaccinate their mind and we should give them a bit of challenge when they are still young, so that their immune system is ready. What do you think of this? [laughter]

Thay says sometimes that each of us needs a certain dose of suffering. Remember? Suffering can instruct us a lot and help us cultivate compassion and understanding. So the art is to give each person an appropriate dose of suffering. [laughter] With too much suffering people will be overwhelmed and their heart will be transformed into stone. That is why parents and teachers have to handle this with care and intelligence.

Suffering can instruct us a lot and help us cultivate compassion and understanding.

In fact we cannot grow without experiencing suffering. When we say we should not give the negative seeds a chance we are referring to the teaching of Right Diligence. This means first of all that when positive seeds are present we should keep them alive as long as possible. One example of a positive seed is compassion. We should keep the seed of compassion alive in our hearts and our minds. One way to keep this seed alive is to be aware of the suffering. The practice of Right Diligence secondly means that we do not give negative seeds like hatred and anger a chance to increase by watering them everyday. If you are experienced in the practice of mindfulness you can complete the practice of Right Diligence by the practice of embracing strong emotions.

From time to time there is a mental formation that refuses to be replaced, like a CD that plays over and over. Even if you have a strong intention to replace it, it is too strong. If you are a skillful practitioner you will not try to change the CD. You will say, "You want to stay? It's okay!" [laughter] You accept the CD; you accept the feeling, you embrace it tenderly and look deeply into it. That is also the teaching of the Buddha, to recognize the painful emotion, not to fight it but to recognize and embrace it in order to get relief. Look deeply into its nature in order to find all the roots of that feeling or emotion, because understanding is the way of liberation. Mindfulness and concentration lead to insight that is liberating.

Suffering exists in the context of family and school. There should be collaboration between parents and teachers, between parents and children, between teachers and students, to teach them how to handle their suffering. This is very clear in the tradition of Asia. When you come to learn from a teacher, what you have to learn first is how to behave – how to behave with others and with the teacher. You learn ethics first. And then after that you learn to write, to read, to study literature, history, mathematics, and so on. It is possible for us to do that in the context of family and school.

Making a living is important but that is not everything. Parents should show their children that although they are busy making a living for the whole family, they also devote enough time to make sure that harmony and happiness exist in the family. You can bring home a lot of money but that is not enough. You have to be there for your partner, your spouse, your children.

Their happiness depends on your way of being around them. The same must be true with school teachers. Not only do they need to transmit technical knowledge so that students will get a job later on, but we have to transform school into a family, into a Sangha. We should devote enough time to just being together. If there is deep communication between school teachers and children, the atmosphere of school will be pleasant. This helps the learning process to happen easily. So we have to offer retreats to parents and school teachers so they can take better care of their families and their students.

And that is part of Engaged Buddhism.



Transcribed and edited by Janelle Combelic, with help from Barbara Casey and Sr. Annabel, Chan Duc.

photos by David Nelson





photos courtesy of the Lang Mai website

Return to Vietnam for Vesak

May 2008

“Life is every step. Healing is every step. Miracle. Freedom.”



In the Autumn 2008 issue of the Mindfulness Bell, we published several articles on the biannual United Nations Day of Vesak, which was held for the first time in Vietnam. We are pleased to continue our coverage of that historic event.

Inspired by Thich Nhat Hanh's lifelong teachings on Engaged Buddhism, the conference explored "Buddhist Contributions to Building a Just, Democratic, and Civilized Society." Five thousand Buddhist monastics and laypeople from all over the world participated. Thich Nhat Hanh was the main keynote speaker and many of Thay's students made presentations on various panels. Four of those talks are reproduced here.

Before the conference Thay gave a series of retreats, culminating in a seven-day retreat in English at Golden Lotus Hotel in Hanoi. Four hundred people attended; in this issue we offer reflections from two of the retreatants.

From Vietnam several monks and nuns traveled to Hong Kong, where a strong Sangha has developed in recent years. Sister Hanh Nghiem shares her thoughts about the Buddha's Enlightenment Retreat, where "Mindful breathing was our peace, joy, and freedom."

I am a Vietnamese-born Australian citizen. While attending a winter retreat at Plum Village in November 2007, I got in touch with my ancestral roots on a level that over the last twenty-three years has been unacknowledged and unexplored, almost foreign. “*Boi dap goc re, khai thong suoi nguon*” (nourishing our roots, clearing our streams) were the themes at Plum Village that awoke a deep gratitude and curiosity about my blood ancestors. I realized that my existence came from a life force that runs through my parents, grandparents, and continuing back and back through many generations before them.

Growing up in a generally individualistic society has distanced me from my roots. Ironically, this has created a blank space that allows me to bring a beginner’s mind to explore and understand myself through knowing my ancestors. What better way to find answers to these questions than a trip to Vietnam?! And what better conditions than Buddhist retreats — with opportunities to deeply contemplate myself and hence my ancestors in me?! It was particularly meaningful to be able to do this with my parents.

Dharma Rain at Bat Nha

The first retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh or Thay (Vietnamese for Teacher) was a five-day retreat at Prajna Monastery in Bao Loc, Lam Dong province. The spacious monastery and temperate weather of the green highlands near central Vietnam were ideal conditions for practice. In total there were approximate 3500 people of all ages attending this retreat. I was surprised to see so many young people there, some as young as fifteen — students and young people working in business, film industry, social work, health, etc. They all shared a search for meaning as well as relief from the difficulties faced in their increasingly demanding and pressured environment.

Vietnamese people really enjoy socializing; in particular they like to be lively and vocal. However, during meals together and walking meditation all one could hear were the click-clacking of plastic cutlery and crockery, or the melodies of bird songs and rustling of leaves.

Thay spoke lovingly to the young people about having ideals and purpose in life, recounted funny love stories, and explained how having values or guiding principles as outlined in the Five Mindfulness Trainings can help restore and improve the quality of our relationships. He urged the young people to be determined and diligent in their practice of returning to the present moment by focusing on their breathing as they go about daily tasks. He explained how to listen deeply to cultivate understanding and Beginning Anew, a practice of reconciliation and expressing hurt in a constructive way. Brother Phap An gave a compelling account of his personal experience in dealing with a block of suffering he had gained during his childhood as a result of the war. Brother Nguyen Hai’s explanation on the Five Mindfulness Trainings contributed to inspiring about a third of participants to take the commitment to study and practice the Mindfulness Trainings and take refuge in the Three Jewels.

The regular afternoon exercise time came to life with traditional Vietnamese games such as bamboo stick jumping and Vietnamese hacky-sack, singing songs of meditation and joyful practice, or just walking around the beautiful gardens of Prajna.

Retreating to My Roots

By Loan To Phan



Loan between her parents at the Sangha’s Parents Appreciation Day

Together we listened and shared deeply our inner suffering, challenges, and experiences in living the Buddhists teachings.

The question-and-answer session contained some queries about forming and maintaining a Sangha for young people.

As a *Viet-kieu* I was impressed at the openness, depth and wisdom my young Vietnamese friends had drawn from their experiences. For some, Thay’s Dharma talk was a confirmation of their hard-earned life lessons, while for others the retreat planted a seed of curiosity about what it means to live engaged Buddhism.

The pouring monsoon, symbolising Dharma rain, came down generously as we shared deeply our experiences of life’s challenges

and successes during Dharma discussion groups. The tents that we slept in became soaked but it didn't dampen our spirits. We just rolled up our sleeping mats and joined the snoring choruses of the "young at heart" participants in the main meditation hall. In fact, the hard floor, lack of sleep (because it was colder than expected so some of us could not get good sleep) actually made our memories of the joy and peace in newly found friendship even more memorable!

Retreat for the Young People of Hanoi

Continuing their tour to the north, Thay and the Plum Village delegation held another four-day retreat for the young people of Hanoi, at Bang Temple, Hoang Mai province. Bang Temple was still under construction when over a thousand people crammed into its grounds, overtaxing its already limited accommodation and sanitary facilities. I was particularly moved to see elderly women bent over from their hard laboured life as well as young people from well-to-do families determined to receive the Dharma

Thay spoke lovingly to the young people about having ideals and purpose in life.

so much that again, the wet weather, hard floors, simple meals did not deter them from fully participating in the mindful practices.

My Dad, who only attended the last session and lunch, was moved to tears by the collective energy of the four-fold Sangha eating mindfully. The walking meditation through the narrow local streets brought curious faces to the doors, preschool children offering their joined palms in respect and bright smiles as the river of Sangha flowed past, silent and reverent.

A highlight of this retreat was the session between young people and young monastics of Western and Vietnamese background. There was lively singing that accompanied eager questions about monastic life and faith. These questions illustrated the young people's collective responsibility through concerns about their future as a generation facing the challenge of living in a society with increasing materialism and consumerism, corroding morality, and where Buddhism is a religion rather than a way of life and practice. The question-and-answer session with Thay was also dominated by questions from young retreatants about monastic aspirations and how to deal with the tribulations of romantic love.

Busy Hotel to Tranquil Monastery

There couldn't be more of a contrast between the last two retreats and the twelve-day retreat titled "Engaged Buddhism for the Twenty-First Century" held at the Kim Lien Hotel in central Hanoi. This included the UN Day of Vesak 2008 and a three-day conference on the theme "Buddhist Contributions to Building a Just, Democratic and Civil Society."

I went from a traditional incense-perfumed, spiritual environment with austere facilities to a relatively affluent, Western, secular hotel in downtown Hanoi. From sleeping on the floor and using squat toilets to serviced beds in air-conditioned rooms — I realised how attached I am to Western creature comforts! I am amazed at how in both of these environments the mindful practices can create wonderful and joyful energies, which confirms the universal nature of the Buddha's teachings.

I am blown away at how a few simple collective practices of over four hundred participants from forty-one different countries can transform a busy worldly hotel into a tranquil monastery (not that there are any real differences in the ultimate sense!).

This retreat was special in that there was an ordination ceremony for the Order of Interbeing with over fifty people committing themselves to living the Fourteen Precepts, and close to one hundred taking refuge in the Three Jewels and Five Mindfulness Trainings.


After a week of solid practice one young person felt glad to call the hotel "home" after spending a day out in the hectic streets of Hanoi. Other under-thirty-five-year-old participants reported that their discussion groups provided an open, safe, and honest context where young monastics were accessible to lay friends, and together we listened and shared deeply our inner suffering, challenges, and experiences in living the Buddhist teachings. These were precious moments where we felt connected and supported to express ourselves; we could practice being the change we want to see in our lives and relationships with others.

The whole Sangha really flowed and practiced as one body as we did walking meditation around the beautiful Hoan Kiem (Returning Sword) Lake. Physically we must have looked quite impressive, all wearing the uniform grey robes or brown of the monastics, walking with each step contemplating the gatha: "Life is every step. Healing is every step. Miracle. Freedom."

We ate together in silence and stayed within the hotel compound to preserve the wonderful collective energy, which was contagious as the hotel staff reciprocated our calm and respectful manners.

In his Dharma talks Thay warmly and humourously talked about the Four Noble Truths, Seven Factors of Enlightenment, Four Practices of True Diligence, and Three Doors Liberation. His presentation was always captivating, down to earth, and relevant to the current times, so that we could see daily applications.

Equipped with a week's solid practice and new-found friendship and connectedness we attended the UN Day of Vesak 2008 with a strong and wonderful collective energy that moved and inspired other conference participants.

May all find a Sangha and flow as a river of clarity and freshness. 

Loan To Phan, Tam Tu Hoa (Loving Harmony of the Heart), lives with her parents in Brisbane, Australia. She practices with the Solid and Free Sangha (Vung Chai Thanh Thoi) while working as a psychologist in a mental health service.

The Journey Home

By Van Khanh Ha

I thought after living in the U.S. for most of my life, I had lost touch with my own roots but the first step in Hanoi, I know I'm home, with my own brothers and sisters.

In May, Van Khanh Ha traveled to Vietnam with her daughter Lauren and her friend Karen Hilsberg. Here are excerpts from the journal she wrote to her loved ones back in the United States.

3 May — Returning Home Again

Yesterday morning our plane landed in Hanoi smoothly. My heart was filled with joy and peace. As I walked out, I was welcomed by so many sweet familiar faces and warm and humid air. The memories of war and its destruction are fading. Hanoi today is alive more than ever.

I stopped and breathed deeply to the fact that, *yes, I'm returning home again*, after thirty-seven years.

5 May — A Dream Come True

Hanoi impresses me with its beauty and wonderful culture. I'm taking each step, each breath with deep gratitude to the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Lauren and I are happy here. Everyone is wearing the temple robe — *ao trang* — Lauren is so cute in this outfit.

We continued to explore the historical sights of Hanoi: Chua Tran Quoc, Den Ly Thai To, the botanical garden, and the water puppet show. As I listened to the classical opera, I felt as if Papa



photos by Karen Hilsberg

was there listening with me and embracing me with his tender love.

This was a promise that I made to him before his death — that some day I would return home to his beloved village of La Chu, to visit his ancestors' tombstones. And now this is it. My dream has come true for myself and for my dear Papa.

Last night we had our orientation with Thich Nhat Hanh. There were four hundred retreatants from more than forty different countries. I looked around the room filled with people, as this small, simple, and humble monk talked. His Dharma talk was deep, lovely and with a great sense of humor. He gave wholeheartedly and I received his words with gladness, with joy and tears. The theme was "dwelling happily in the present moment."

9 May — Peace in Ourselves, Peace in the World

The Golden Lotus Hotel where we are staying has 450 rooms and only two computers for guests to share. So it's a challenge and we are learning to be very skillful with our time.

The retreat here with Thich Nhat Hanh is wonderful. Early every morning, we start our day with walking meditation. They walk mindfully with each step and we follow him with our breath and

This was a promise that I made to Papa before his death — that some day I would return home to his beloved village of La Chu, to visit his ancestors' tombstones.



our smiles. Outside of the hotel, the streets are crowded with people going to work. The sound of silence is mixing with the sound of cars and motorcycles to become an orchestra of real life.

After breakfast is the Dharma talk. Imagine a big room filled with hundreds of people and it's quiet except for Thay's voice. His voice is gentle, yet his message and his mission for peace are very powerful: "With deep listening and loving speech, we can transform our suffering. Peace in ourselves, peace in the world."

Last night Lauren woke me up to say: "I love Hanoi, I enjoy Vietnam so much. Thank you, Mommy." At that moment, I knew deep inside my heart that I've made a good decision — for both of us to return to our roots, to our ancestors, and to discover Vietnam together. We are very grateful to be here and to receive the beautiful teachings of love and compassion from Thay with many of our friends.

12 May — Friendliness to Foreigners

The retreat ended, leaving a great impression on me and many others — looking at this gentle monk in his eighties who puts out so much energy for mankind with one simple wish: that the world be a better place to live for all beings.

Today is the beginning of the UN celebration of Vesak, the Buddha's birthday. The theme this year is "Buddhist Contributions to Building a Just, Democratic and Civilized Society."

Yesterday Lauren, Karen, and I went to the One Pillar Pagoda, Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, the Temple of Literature. Again, we went to our favorite Indian restaurant. We also had a chance to have *ao dai* [the traditional long silk tunic] made at the tailor shop; they are going to be so beautiful!

Despite the crowds and noise, Lauren and I embrace Vietnam with the connection to our ancestors. This trip has made me appreciate even more the old values and virtues of Confucius. I still see the happiness of the people, and the friendliness they offer to foreigners, even Americans. Life is difficult for most of the people here, but they accept and find peace in their lives.

16 May — Wholesome Seeds of Compassion and Peace

Today is the conclusion of the United Nations Day of Vesak Celebration 2008. The last three days have been so amazing. Being here helped to water and cultivate the wholesome seeds of compassion and peace in me. Many representatives and guest speakers from over sixty countries came together for one purpose — to promote peace in the world. We are united as one to bring happiness and love to all beings on this Earth.

I feel so blessed to witness such a sacred event. This is the first time for Vietnam to host this special event, and the organization did a wonderful job. Every meal, we were served with a banquet of delicious foods, desserts, and fresh fruits. The entertainments were excellent — a combination of old and new — from traditional music and songs to modern dance.

Tomorrow we go to the Avalokiteshvara Cave, Chua Huong and then to Ha Long Bay for two days.

18 May — Ha Long Bay

Today we went to Ha Long Bay. It's so beautiful. We visited the caves and walked up to the mountain, the scenery is unbelievable. Every moment living in Vietnam made me appreciate the beauty of this land even more. Lauren and I are sharing a room with ocean view.

People here are simple and so loving. They are glad to know that I'm Vietnamese. I thought after living in the U.S. for most of my life, I had lost touch with my own roots but the first step in Hanoi, I know I'm home, with my own brothers and sisters.

20 May — Proud to Be Both

We are in Hue now. It is much more quiet and tranquil, even though our hotel is located in the heart of downtown. Meals are served with many types of special dishes. The dining area is on the balcony of the top floor overlooking the city and the Perfume River. It's so nice, especially at nighttime.

Yesterday we went to Tu Hieu Temple. Thay with his gentle steps on the ground of his root temple brought tears to my eyes. This trip is more meaningful for us because of the practice and of his teachings. I'm forever thankful.

In the afternoon we visited preschools in the remote areas of Hue. The children sang songs and danced for us. They live on small boats or on stilt homes by the river. The living conditions are very poor but they are full of laughter and big smiles.

Last night we went on a boat to celebrate Vesak. We chanted and then released fish back to the river under the light of the full moon.

This trip continues to nurture my deep connection to my homeland and its beauty. I treasure my time here and just like Papa said: "You should be proud to be an American, but never forget your roots and your values." He's a wise man and I know in my heart that I'm proud to be both.

24 May — Visiting Ancestors

Yesterday Lauren and I went to visit my parents' birthplaces near Hue with my relatives Chu Phu and Cu Chau's children that I have not seen for over forty years. We went to La Chu, my father's village, then later to Vi Da where my mother was born ninety-three years ago. Being by my grandparents' and great-grandparents' graves, I felt the deep connection to them, even those I never met.

Early in the morning we walked on a narrow dirt road leading to my grandmother's last resting place. Both sides of the road were rice fields ready to be harvested. The wet roads were so slippery, Lauren almost fell into the ditch. We burned incense and touched the earth three times to each of the tombstones.

Later, we went to Nguyen Khoa cemetery where my maternal grandparents are buried. I knew that Lauren and I are the continuation of our ancestors. There is no birth and no death. They are in us, in our every cell, and in every breath we take. And I could feel their love sent to us from above.

Central Vietnam is hot, with humid weather, and we were dripping with sweat. But we looked forward to being with our ancestors, so we just smiled and embraced the moment.

Today we visited the Emperors' tombs and the Forbidden City. When Chi Hoa, Mu Chuc's daughter, found out that we were here, she came to visit us in the hotel. She told us many stories about my family and she warmly greeted us with deep true love.

1 June — Memories and Gratitude

After Hoi An we went to Da Nang, where I spent most of my childhood and where I finished my education from elementary to high school. It brought back many warm memories — of family, friends, and the beautiful beaches. My Papa often took us to the ocean so my sisters and I could play in the water.


Lauren and I took a tour to the Cham Museum. It has artifacts that are thousands of years old. Then we visited my beloved math teacher's home — Mr. Bui passed away years ago but his lovely wife welcomed us warmly. I sat there holding her soft hands, and her heartbeat and mine became one. We did not say much, but deep inside our love was interconnected. It was a hot, humid day, and our visit was sweet. I was touched by her tranquility and her kindness.

After that, we stopped to see my high school, Phan Chu Trinh. I used to walk with my friends to class; we shared our teenage years with so much laughter and silly jokes. Another stop was the courthouse where my father worked as a judge for twenty years. I could not find our old home in Da Nang because it's now an office building.

The last stop in Da Nang was My Khe beach. Lauren and I were so happy when our feet touched the white sand and warm water. It was a perfect day, the sky was blue with patches of white clouds. Warm summer breezes caressed our faces softly. I picked up some seashells and feathers on the beach. I took a few deep breaths to treasure my youth, and my presence in the here and the now.

We arrived in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) three days ago. It's a lovely break: we called our time here are our "lazy days" — great food, and nice times spent with my brother's family. We also visited with Uncle Tu's children, Aunt Dieu Phuong's daughter, and my dear friend Thuy Anh that I have not seen for forty-five years.

Lauren and I feel very fortunate to be able to take this trip together. Vietnam has helped us to open our hearts and our souls, to be touched by the kindness of many people and to be proud of my homeland's natural beauty.

I'm looking forward to being back in America soon. May all beings be at peace. 

Van Khanh Ha, True Attainment of the Fruit of the Practice, left Vietnam in 1971 to study in the United States, where she married and had a daughter, Lauren Mai. Her father, who had been a federal judge before the war, and her mother were able to come to the U.S. and live with Van in their old age. Van practices with Sanghas in Maryland and Virginia.

Deepening Dharma in Hong Kong

By Sister Hanh Nghiem

*The mind can go in a thousand directions,
but on this lovely path I walk in peace.
With each step, a gentle wind blows.
With each step, a flower blooms.*

This is a gatha, a practice poem that was sung in the hearts of the monastic and lay practitioners at the seven-day retreat in Hong Kong. The Buddha's Enlightenment Retreat took place May 24 to 30, 2008 with Brothers Phap An and Phap Trach, and Sister Hanh Lien and myself from Plum Village, along with Brothers Phap Tu and Trung Hai from Vietnam.

We came to the retreat, held at the Kadoorie Agricultural Research Centre of Hong Kong University, to learn about Buddhist psychology. (From the program: "Zen Master Thuong Chieu of Vietnam in the thirteenth century said that our practice would become much easier once we had a better understanding of its process. The teaching of Master Vasubandhu on consciousness will be used as the foundation for the retreat. We will briefly investigate the philosophical atmosphere in the pre-Buddhist period in order to understand and fully appreciate the enlightenment of the Buddha. We will ... then trace the historical development of the Yogacara School, which leads to the teaching of Master Vasubandhu as given in Ch'eng Wei-Shih Lun. The key teachings of the Thirty Verses will be discussed and applied to the daily difficulties of modern life. The basic practice of sitting meditation, walking meditation, and other practices will also be emphasized as foundation for a deep transformation.")

We wanted to have a better intellectual grasp, but we came home with a practice to heal our hearts and understand our mind. We were given the tools to live with freedom, more mindfully, in our daily life.

In a city that hustles and bustles from the moment it awakes till it falls asleep, it wasn't easy for people to get off seven days

Sr Hanh Nghiem with friends in Hanoi

photo by David Nelson



to come to practice as a Sangha, study the Buddha's teachings, and realize the Dharma of his or her life. Each of us figured out a way to be present at the retreat or what was called camp. Some of the eighty retreatants had to leave for a night to go work and then they would return to the retreat. Others couldn't leave their families, so they had to commute every day in order to be able to attend the retreat.

We knew our priority was to learn, study, and practice the Buddha's teachings, so that is what we did. Most of the retreatants were older in age because the topic for the retreat was quite advanced, but the few young folks sure did bring character and spice to the retreat!

The first few Dharma talks by Thay Phap An were dedicated to the basic practice and a brief history of Buddhism, and then remaining days were devoted to Buddhist psychology. Still, the basic practice was highlighted to take home.

The retreat was organized by the local Hong Kong Sangha from A to Z. The monks and nuns made the schedule and helped lead the activities, but the smooth flow of the retreat was thanks to the Hong Kong Sangha. Every morning we heard the mini-bell invited to wake us up and the bell was also invited before each activity by the lay practitioners. We also had other bells of mindfulness to bring us back to the beautiful environment surrounding us, such as the croaking of the bull frogs, the buzzing and biting of the mosquitoes, the luscious green vegetation, and the peace and quiet. This particular section of H.K.U. was donated by a family with the intention to promote more understanding of the environment and a way to preserve and develop the vegetation that already existed in the area.

The heavens treated us well because every day it rained, but nonetheless when it was time to do walking meditation, the sky cleared up for us. In the East rain is an auspicious sign that heaven is happy and the celestial beings are coming down to hear the Dharma being pronounced.

We also had the opportunity to practice *chi qong* every day for nearly two hours led by Thay Phap An. It was a great success and very healing for a number of people.

The Beginning Anew presentation and practice were carried out very elegantly by Brother Phap Trach. The contribution of the retreatants brought much enlightenment to our being together. They would go into the center of the circle to pick up the flower and then bring the flower to the person they wanted to share with. Many people shed tears of happiness because they were so touched by the kind calm words that were being spoken to them.

One unusual occurrence during the retreat was that the chief cook hurt her arm and couldn't cook, so they ordered us pizza. The misfortune allowed us all to enjoy a very pleasant picnic dinner together outside and to bond a little closer before the retreat ended.

We left the retreat with an understanding of how to live our life rather than bury ourselves ten feet underground with the question, what is the meaning of life? We could breathe, because we are alive. Mindful breathing was our peace, joy, and freedom. 🌸

Many of us understand the Buddha as a doctor who shared and continues to offer his medicine of the teachings and practice to us. This great offering is to help us in healing and transforming our individual and collective suffering. One can say the medicine of Buddhism is truly deep and lovely. It is the medicine of waking up the good within our hearts and minds.

Something today is different. And I'm kind of slow so it takes me a while to figure things out. What I finally realized is that for thousands of years the question of salvation has been "What must I do to be saved?" This is the central question of our spiritual traditions. But you and I live in the first moment in history in which this question is now expanded to "What must we do to be saved?" And by "we" I mean the whole planet. I mean every person, every race, every tribe, every nation, every organization and wholesome spiritual tradition. I am aware that this is a challenging way to describe the salvation question. However, it does not leave behind the question of individual liberation but dares us to remember our deep Bodhisattva vows.

It is not only humans and institutions who are asking this question of salvation. The snow-capped mountains and the deep blue oceans are asking the question. The trees and the land itself are calling to us: "What must we do to be saved?"

Opening Dharma Doors

We have been experimenting in the Plum Village Sangha with ways of opening Dharma doors in response to this question. I want to name a few of the doors for you so that you might get a fresh idea on a door you might open where you practice, where you live, and where you serve the Dharma.

Recently I was involved in leading a retreat for an organization in Canada that is committed to working with AIDS in Africa. The retreat was designed to help those involved in the aid work to be nourished and not to burn out or to be overwhelmed by the grief they experience every single day that they give their lives to the service of the children and the women and the men suffering from AIDS.

A few years ago we had a wonderful retreat for individuals involved in law enforcement and criminal justice — police officers, lawyers, parole officers, and social workers. We engaged that group of people in exploring what it means to be a Bodhisattva, what it means to engage mindfully in their work in the world. We offered the Five Mindfulness Trainings to many who desired to practice them in the context of their daily life and work.

I can tell you that the retreat, which was attended by several hundred people, was a transformational experience. I am sure that the communities and institutions they went back to serve found that the quality of kindness and thoughtfulness and compassion had been nourished and grown.

We've offered a retreat for individuals connected to the entertainment industry — filmmakers, artists, writers, and poets. It was held at Deer Park Monastery in Southern California, not far from Hollywood.

In the fall of last year we participated in a conference for people who are therapists and psychiatrists, called Mindfulness in Psychotherapy; 1800 people showed up at UCLA. Their capacity

The Buddha's Medicine

By Larry Ward



Larry Ward with Renita Woo in Hanoi

photo by Karen Hilsberg

**The new society that is just,
democratic, and civilized can only
take place on the ground of a new
spiritual sensibility.**

to embody mindfulness while they care for and serve their clients increased in wholesome ways.

We now offer annual family retreats for couples and for families with children. Young people are getting together for camps — songs, art, poetry, yoga, and meditation practice; this is a very successful annual gathering of young people. Students have had special retreats designed to introduce them to the benefits and principles of mindfulness practice.

Over the last few years we have offered “people of color” retreats in the United States for minorities to support these individuals and groups in the practice of mindfulness. This effort is enabling the teachings to go with people back to the neighborhoods, communities, and local institutions. I can report to you that there are schools in the United States where the classroom morning begins with the sound of the bell. I can report to you that there are young people in difficult situations who come to class and enjoy meditation and the tea ceremony.

Thay has already mentioned the work at Plum Village with Palestinians and Israelis, but you should also know that many of our colleagues are creating special initiatives on their own that are taking place every week, every day, to build peace and to foster reconciliation.

We have had gatherings of business people to talk about mindfulness and ethics and what it means to be a business person who practices mindfully. This includes mindfully developing products and mindfully managing their profit. The Buddha did not complain about business people, the Buddha only wanted to make sure that we made money the right way, without causing suffering, and that when we made it, we spent it the right way, without causing suffering.

We’ve had veterans’ retreats in the United States, for many years offered by Thay and the Plum Village Sangha. You may have already encountered the tremendous transformation and healing of some of the veterans of many wars, including the Vietnam War.

What We Are Learning

What we are learning through the process of offering so many different kinds of retreats and mindfulness days to so many different people and professions is three-fold. First, the post-modern mind or soul is seeking an experience of transformation and healing more than an explanation of transformation and healing. If an explanation comes along after I’m healed, or while I’m getting healed, it’s deeply appreciated.

The second thing we are learning is that offering the medicine of our tradition is not a matter of conversion. It is not a question of religious roots but rather a question of generating authentic aspiration. This is a matter of offering the Buddhist teaching with clarity and practical relevance through humble sincerity.

The third aspect is that this way of transmitting the teachings is about application and translation. Depth scholarship is certainly important but we must find new ways it can be applied to the suffering that is pervasive in our time and space. This is crucial if we are to untie the internal and social knots that block us from our best selves and best societies.

Seeds of a New Society

So the true value of the teaching is not trapped in the form of its delivery. Skillful means is one of the fundamental teachings the Buddha has given us to help living beings to relieve their suffering. The practices that we have been given by the Buddha and all of our teachers after him can be applied in every kind of situation — if we apply them without attachment to form.

In the midst of these very concrete retreats and mindfulness days we have found that sometimes the Dharma Gates of Liberation open wide. While sharing the practices of sitting, walking, eating meditation, deep relaxation, Dharma talks and discussion, deep listening, and loving speech, people find themselves not only healed but transformed.


If you look and listen closely, you will see that we are in the midst of a new kind of society. But the kind of society that you and I would be happy living in, and most people I know on this planet would be happy living in, is not yet here. The seeds of it are here. However, the new society that is just, democratic, and civilized can only take place on the ground of a new spiritual sensibility. And, brothers and sisters, we are that ground — the ground of that fresh spiritual sensibility of the post-modern age.

You may ask where the Buddha is in all of this. Master Lin Chi reminds us that the Buddha is not a statue. Other ancestral teachers remind us if we are going to find the Buddha we should look close, close to where we are, close to our heart, close to our own mind, or we will not find him, or we will not find her.

In closing I offer you a poem from this week’s experience:

*We engage through our love,
opening 10,000 Dharma Doors
with a true mind and a true heart.
What do we call this urgency, this Buddhism?
It matters not.*

*The sun rises and the moon shines without confusion.
Listen to the frogs — do they remind you of anyone?
The bamboo chimes dance in the wind without clinging.
Our chants sing out beauty
like the birds greeting the morning sun.*

*We are here to be engaged, to remember the promise
we made, many lifetimes ago,
the promise not to leave anyone behind,
the promise not to ignore the suffering of any being.
The promise to remember our noble calling —
It has not changed.
It is still: Wake up, wake up, wake up.* 

Larry Ward is a Dharma Teacher in the Order of Interbeing and he is currently pursuing a doctorate in Religious Studies (Buddhism) from Claremont Graduate University in California. He is co-author with Peggy Rowe-Ward of Love’s Garden: A Guide to Mindful Relationships (Parallax Press, 2008).

According to the first of the five precepts (*panca sila*) given by the Buddha to his lay disciples (*upasaka*):

“Lay students of the Buddha refrain from killing, put an end to killing, rid themselves of all weapons, learn humility before others, learn humility in themselves, practice love and compassion, and protect all living beings, even the smallest insect. They uproot from within themselves any intention to kill. In this way, lay students of the Buddha study and practice the first of the Five Mindfulness Trainings.”¹

Even though all religious and spiritual traditions agree to condemn the destruction of life, and although the precept “do not kill” is one of the most universally recognized ethical rules, war and violent conflicts remain an ever-present reality in the history of mankind. For this very reason, it is of utmost importance to reflect on ways to prevent conflicts, to alleviate suffering once conflicts have occurred, and to facilitate reconciliation and healing in post-conflict situations.

The Preamble to the Constitution of UNESCO declares that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.”

The objective of this presentation is to show how the practice of Engaged Buddhism can contribute to the construction of the defenses of peace in the mind.

Developing the Great Compassion

I work in the field of humanitarian action; I train young people to help civil populations, war prisoners, the wounded and the sick in situations of war, armed conflict, and natural catastrophe.

Although neutrality and impartiality are the very guiding principles of true humanitarian action, it is often difficult to maintain this attitude when confronted with the harsh reality of violent conflict. To refuse to take a stand and to maintain an attitude of neutrality can be perceived as a lack of courage or lucidity. Indeed, how not to take sides for the weak against the strong, for the victim against the perpetrator?

I will argue that meditation on the universal law of interdependence, on non-self and on the nature of suffering, is the foundation of the Great Compassion which allows us to develop an attitude of neutrality which is not cowardice and of impartiality which is not indifference.

In the current world situation, characterized by the confrontation of cultures, religions and civilizations, it is more than ever necessary to develop non-attachment to opinions and to wrong perceptions. The Buddha teaches skillful means allowing lifelong learning, and an attitude of tolerance and authentic opening.

I recently acted as a mediator in a dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, and one of the participants explained:

“Our problem is that there are two competing narratives for one and the same situation.”

Not only is there a competition over land and resources, but there is a competition over the interpretation of reality. Each party is convinced, and wants to convince the world, that his story is the true story.

War, Conflict and Healing

A Buddhist Perspective

By Ha Vinh Tho

The demonizing of the other side is a recurring phenomenon in any conflict; otherwise, how would it be possible to kill and maim the so-called enemy?

Each time one is confronted with violent conflicts, one can observe this phenomenon — the two sides have competing narratives, competing stories. And each side sees itself as the “the good guys” versus the other side perceived as “the bad guys.” Most armies are called “Defense Forces”; for instance the German army during the Second World War was called “Wehrmacht,” German for “Defense Force,” and on the buckle of the belts of the soldiers was written “Gott mit uns”: “God with us”, or “God on our side.”

I don’t know of any state that calls its army “Aggression Forces” — the aggressor is always the other side. The demonizing of the other side is a recurring phenomenon in any conflict; otherwise, how would it be possible to kill and maim the so-called enemy, if each one was fully aware that the other is just like oneself?

To give another example, during the Rwandan genocide, the actual physical violence had been prepared through intense radio propaganda by the “Radio Télévision Libre de Mille Collines” (RTLM) that was broadcasting slogans like: “Kill all the cockroaches,” referring thus to the moderate Hutus and to the Tutsis.

These few examples show clearly that “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.”

But how can we build these defenses?

The Reality of Suffering

In his first teaching, “The Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma,” Lord Buddha began by explaining the Four Noble Truths, and the First Noble Truth is the truth of suffering (*dukkha*). Because of this, some people who do not understand the deeper meaning of the Dharma think that Buddhism is a pessimistic world view that emphasizes suffering over joy, and only sees life as a burden best gotten rid of. But this is a very superficial view; the Buddha acknowledges suffering in the same way a doctor acknowledges illness: in order to cure it.

Meditation on the universal law of interdependence, on non-self and on the nature of suffering, is the foundation of the Great Compassion which allows us to develop an attitude of neutrality which is not cowardice and of impartiality which is not indifference.

Suffering can be a powerful way to develop compassion and in the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing, the Fourth Training addresses this reality:

Awareness of Suffering— Aware that looking deeply at the nature of suffering can help me develop compassion and find ways out of suffering, I am determined not to avoid or close my eyes before suffering. I am committed to finding ways, including personal contact, images and sounds, to be with those who suffer, so I can understand their situation deeply and help them transform their suffering into compassion, peace and joy.²

I would like to share an experience that I had some years ago, and that helped me understand in a more concrete way the reality of this Mindfulness Training. During a peace conference, I heard a lady from Northern Ireland tell how her sister had lost her son in a terrorist attack, and how, soon after, the man who had killed her nephew had also been shot dead. The mother of the young man who had been killed decided to visit the mother of the one who had killed her son, not in order to seek revenge, but to console her. She said:

“Only a mother who has lost a child can understand another mother who has had the same experience.”

These two women started a powerful peace movement in Northern Ireland that was instrumental in bringing about the Good Friday Peace Agreement that stopped a violent conflict that had been raging for decades.

In the same way, in Israel and Palestine there is a movement called the Parents’ Circle; all members of this circle have lost a son or a daughter in the conflict. I have had the privilege to facilitate meetings of the Parents’ Circle. It is a deeply moving experience to see how these people have transformed suffering into compassion. They have been able to overcome the natural striving for retaliation and revenge and to come together, united by their common experience of a terrible loss, to share a message of peace and reconciliation. When they meet, they share their stories, the memories of their lost children, but out of this grief they draw strength, energy of love and compassion, and a strong will to bring an end to war and to violence. Whoever listens to them can only be deeply moved because they speak from the depth of an experience that no theory or abstract ideal can match. They have discovered through their own suffering the reality of the Buddha’s saying:

“Hate is not overcome by hate; by love (*metta*) alone is hate appeased. This is an eternal law.”

The Realization of Interdependence and Non-Self

From the point of view of conflict prevention and peace building, interdependence and non-self are the most important tools that Buddhism has to offer. What I have called the problem of competing narratives is always based on the false assumption of a radical, unbridgeable difference between me and you, between my community and your community.

At first sight, good and evil, right and wrong, victim and perpetrator seem to be completely separated realities; we may think that if we get rid of the negative, only the positive will remain. But interdependence or, as Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh calls it, interbeing, is the realization of the interconnectedness of all life. The more we become aware of the reality of interbeing, the more we realize our shared responsibility for the state of the world. On one hand, this can seem like a burden; on the other, it makes us conscious that we are not passive onlookers, but that we can do something to bring about transformation and healing. I would like to quote venerable Thich Nhat Hanh who shared a powerful example of this insight:

“One day we received a letter telling us about a young girl on a small boat who was raped by a Thai pirate. She was only twelve, and she jumped into the ocean and drowned herself. When you first learn of something like that, you get angry at the pirate. You naturally take the side of the girl. As you look more deeply you will see it differently. If you take the side of the little girl, then it is easy. You only have to take a gun and shoot the pirate. But we cannot do that. In my meditation I saw that if I had been born in the village of the pirate and raised in the same conditions as he was, there is a great likelihood that I would become a pirate. I saw

that many babies are born along the Gulf of Siam, hundreds every day, and if we educators, social workers, politicians, and others do not do something about the situation, in twenty-five years a number of them will become sea pirates. That is certain. If you or I were born today in those fishing villages, we may become sea pirates in twenty-five years.”³

If we awaken to the reality of interbeing and non-self, we awaken to the wisdom of non-discrimination. This is the wisdom that can break the barrier of individualism; with this wisdom we see that we are the other person and the other person is ourself. The happiness of the other person is our own happiness, and our own happiness is the happiness of the other people, plants, animals, and even minerals.

This is not only true on a personal level; it is also true for communities, countries, religions, and civilizations.

“Buddhism is made only of non-Buddhism elements. If we look deeply we can see that the elements of non-Buddhism have made Buddhism... It’s exactly the same as a flower. A flower is made from non-flower elements; the sun, the clouds are not flower, soil is not flower, water is not flower. The self is made of non-self elements. It is the same with the other religions.”⁴

The more this insight can become not a mere theory, but an actual experience, the more we can realize that the so-called enemies are always part of a common interdependent reality. And if we strive for the freedom, the peace and the happiness of our own community, the only way to achieve it is by protecting the freedom, the peace and the happiness of the other community. This is true between Israelis and Palestinians, between Americans and Iraqis, between Tutsis and Hutus, between Tibetans and Han Chinese.

This is also the key insight that helps us to be neutral and impartial without being indifferent. I have personally struggled with this dilemma more than once, and I would like to share an experience that had a transformative effect on me.

The first time I visited a detention center, I went to meet with security detainees in a military prison. I spent most of the day having interviews with the detainees and met with dozens of men. I was listening to one story after the other, stories of violence, of fear, of injustice, of hatred, of despair. Taking all these stories in my heart, it was easy to feel a lot of compassion with them and, on the other side, to feel anger arising against the soldiers who had all the power, the weapons, the authority. At some point, I was taking a short break in the courtyard, resting from the intensity of the encounters, from the stench and the claustrophobic atmosphere in the prison cells, when a young soldier came to sit next to me. I felt he wanted to talk to me. He was very young — most soldiers are very young, war is always about elder men sending out young men to do things that they would not do themselves. I asked his age and he was several years younger than my own son. He began to tell me about his life before the military, he told me about journeys he had taken, countries he had visited, and he also said that he was active in his community, helping teenagers who had problems with their families. He told me that after the army, he wanted to study education and do something useful for the youths. I felt he wanted to show me another side of himself, he needed me to see beyond the uniform he wore and the machine

gun he carried. After we had talked for a while, he suddenly asked me: “Do you think I am a bad person?”

The question touched me deeply. I realized how easy it is to perceive only the soldier, the one having the power and oppressing the prisoners. In a flash, I realized that if the causes and conditions had been different, I could have been the one with the machine gun and he could have been the humanitarian worker. And I could not be absolutely sure that if I had been the one with the weapon, I would have not been more cruel and harsher on the prisoners than he was. So I told him very sincerely: “No, I don’t think you are a bad person, I understand that you are in a situation that is not easy, just try to do the best you can.”

Meditation and Mindfulness

True insight into the nature of suffering, interdependence, and non-self can bring about peace, reconciliation, and healing, but it cannot come from intellectual reasoning alone. It needs to be nourished by life experience, by mindfulness in everyday life, by meditation.

Meditation is not about turning away from reality and dwelling in an illusionary inner peace, ignoring the suffering that so many people and other living beings experience day after day.

Meditation is looking deeply into reality as it is, both in us and around us. It is training ourselves not to react immediately with sympathy or antipathy: I like, I dislike, I want, I don’t want, I grasp, I reject.

But rather to create an open space, free of judgment, free of notions and preconceived ideas, allowing reality to unfold and reveal itself in our heart and mind. By doing this, insight and compassion arise naturally, effortlessly, for they are the very nature of our deeper being.

1 Upasaka Sutra, Madhyama Agama 128

2 *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism*, Thich Nhat Hanh, Parallax Press

3 *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*, Thich Nhat Hanh, Bantam, 1992

4 Dharma talk given by Thich Nhat Hanh on December 4, 1997 in Plum Village, France

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Saving Jndra's Net

Buddhist Tools for Tackling Climate Change and Social Inequity

By Angela Tam

**Unless we are aware of the
connection between our habits
and the planetary problems we
have, nobody will change.**

We had some sort of good news last December, when government leaders met at the Bali Summit on Climate Change. They agreed to make “deep cuts” to carbon emissions, albeit without specifying how deep. They also agreed to transfer clean technologies to developing countries and reward those countries for protecting their forests.

It looks like governments have responded to the UN’s call and mustered the political will to take action. What’s more, even businesses appear to have come round to the need to protect the environment: they are recycling paper, planting trees, participating in carbon trading. And citizens and NGOs, of course, have been at the forefront of the call for action.

But let’s put all this in perspective.

The issue of climate change has been around for some time: if we go back about half a century, we would find the *New York*

Times editorial entitled “How industry may change climate,” dated 24 May 1953, that environmental scientist David Keith of the University of Calgary has referred to in a talk.¹

Earth Day has been around since 1970, but if we think back to Henry David Thoreau and the Transcendentalists, then the environmental movement has been around for even longer. Unfortunately, despite the long-standing awareness of the threat and the persistent call for action, nothing much has been done, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change had to issue a dire warning², telling us that, effectively, we now have just seven years (eight when the report came out in 2007) to sort it all out before it’s too late.

So now the world’s suddenly woken up to carbon trading, hybrid vehicles and technological solutions that include sending some kind of sun-shading device into space to cool the planet.

Is It Enough?

Here’s some food for thought:

- Suppose everyone switches to energy-saving lamps, but also buys new, big plasma TVs along with various electronic gadgets. Would the outcome be an increase or decrease in energy use?
- Suppose car manufacturers all start making electric hybrids to Euro V standard, but millions more take to the road. Would the outcome be an increase or decrease in oil consumption?
- Suppose we switch to biofuels, would we have the land and water resources to produce enough for both our cars and us?

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Hong Kong commissioned a survey on climate change³ and the results are set out below:

- 92% of the people interviewed state that they are “very” or “somewhat” concerned about climate change
- 87% agreed that individuals share a great responsibility to act and over 90% said they would buy energy efficient lamps (94%), turn off standby appliances (91%) or adjust the temperature of air-conditioning (91%); but
- 69% didn’t agree that utility tariffs should be raised to discourage wastage

You see, the way the world economy works is predicated on an externalization of costs that makes it possible for goods and services to be sold at remarkably low prices. And unfortunately, those of us in the developed countries have become so accustomed to this that, as much as we want to do our bit for the environment, we don’t want the effort to cramp our style. We don’t want, for instance, to lose the convenience of using disposable cups, chopsticks, and take-out lunch boxes, even though they create waste and pollution everywhere, not to mention the energy and resources required to make them, to be used just once before being thrown into a landfill.

The market is very smart; it knows that if it can come up with disposable alternatives that are “green,” we wouldn’t think about

changing our habit at all. I was at an eco-expo recently where someone was selling disposable lunch boxes and mugs made from corn. He was very happy about the high oil prices, because they made his products more attractive to potential buyers, but I couldn't help thinking about all the water and land that are used to make disposable lunch boxes rather than grow crops to feed people. So do we want food for everyone, or do we want disposable lunch boxes?

dramatic: they see for themselves how all the waste stacks up and they swiftly stop using plastic bags, for example.

Unless we are aware of the connection between our habits and the planetary problems we have, nobody will change. Unfortunately, even landfills show very little of the impact our consumerist lifestyle imposes on both people and the environment. Let's try to picture this: somewhere in an Asian village a piece of farmland is cleared to make way for factories where migrant workers are



photo by David Nelson

The Root Cause of Climate Change: Craving

Efforts to protect the environment have failed in the past and will continue to fail as long as we are blind to the interrelated nature of all the issues and remain ignorant of our interdependence — that we are all in this Indra's Net together. Living in cities where we function only as consumers, with little knowledge of the impact of the processes that bring food to the table, clothes on our backs, and PlayStations in our children's bedrooms, it's hard to see how our whole way of life is hurting the planet and ourselves. Green NGOs take people to visit landfills because the experience allows them to finally put two and two together and the effect can be quite

paid a small wage to churn out the shoes, toys, and gadgets wanted by consumers around the world. Crops are lost to the factories, and suddenly the villagers are sick and the remaining farmland poisoned by the polluted rivers.

In the meantime, consumers in the developed world who have lost their stable jobs in manufacturing are getting by on part-time or poorly paid contract work while relying on credit to pay for the cheap imports — which won't be cheap for much longer because the prices of raw materials and transportation have gone up due to climate change. Many countries make-believe that they have attracted foreign investment, but other than the meager wage paid to the migrant workers, what else have the host countries of these

factories gained other than pollution, loss of cropland and depletion of natural resources that, once lost, will never be available again? A few attain material affluence, and certainly the top managers in the companies selling these goods — and their financial backers — make lots of money out of this, but for the majority, do their wages and long working hours compensate for the loss of contentment and the sense of community that grounds them? Is this really how we want to see the world come full circle?

All this has been happening for a while, but we have not been aware of the bind we're creating for ourselves because we are too busy wanting this, buying that. Buddhism, however, gets right into the heart of the matter because it tells us that, actually, no, the real cause of climate change is not high levels of greenhouse gas emissions, but our craving. It is because we crave all these goods and services that so much energy and resources are devoted to their production, which, in turn, lead to the release of so much greenhouse gas as well as a widening wealth gap.

And Buddhism doesn't just tell us what's wrong; it gives us the tools for tackling the problem as well, in the form of the precepts and the Noble Eightfold Path. That's elaboration of the five precepts is particularly useful because they are made relevant for the modern world. The Fifth Mindfulness Training is particularly relevant for the modern consumer because it reminds us to be mindful of not only what we traditionally regard as "intoxicants," but also of what we see on TV, read in magazines, and so on. After all, advertising, whether subtle or not so subtle, is responsible to a great extent for the craving that's causing so much difficulty for us.

The environmental movement has been slow to make headway because, most of the time it is, as the saying goes, "preaching to the converted" or up against stiff resistance. It owes its success of recent years to the fact that different elements of the movement have been co-opted by consumerists; look no further than the craze over the "I'm not a plastic bag" campaign.

Skillful Buddhist Means

Buddhism, on the other hand, stands a better chance of reaching people of different persuasions because, whether we know it at this moment in time or not, we all want to be happy and find meaning in life. Three Buddhist concepts are of vital importance:

1. Dependent origination
2. Mindfulness
3. Sangha

We need people to understand what the concept of dependent origination means for them, in a language that everyone can understand. When I talk to architects and surveyors about sustainable building, I like to use a technical term they can relate to — 'life cycle cost'. But really the idea is no different from that of the clouds, the sun, and the soil contributing to the growth of a beautiful flower. Bringing personal experience to bear, like the green NGOs taking people to see landfills, is even better. We need to find ways to make the ancient idea relevant to a modern audience.

Mindfulness, of course, underpins our appreciation of our interdependence. So how about teaching mindfulness meditation in schools? Make it as natural as learning to read and write. There's

a reason why food companies in the U.S. are now forbidden from advertising sugary foods to children under twelve; advertising is so powerful, adults fall for them as well, all the time. By making us aware of the root of the problem, from moment to moment, mindfulness meditation is a powerful antidote against the advertising that we don't currently realize is responsible for causing so much craving.

In his book *One City*⁴, Ethan Nichtern mentions a fashion magazine designer who, after taking up meditation, became more and more aware of the deeply manipulative nature of her job, and began to wonder whether it was right livelihood. That's how meditation can help us and the world. Like the designer, some of us may be led to question whether our current work represents Right Livelihood; it is a necessary question and only by having the courage to face it will we stand a chance of coping with climate change and social inequity.

Finally, we need to widen the Sangha, in the sense of a supportive community. Recent research⁵ demonstrates something very interesting: many people are obese not because they eat the wrong food or do not exercise, but because their social networks consist of people who are heavier than the average. That's how powerful social networks are. We want to belong; we do what our friends do. If our friends are always shopping for designer clothes and the latest mobile phones, we do too. If our friends recycle and avoid disposable cutlery, we eventually do as well. So if we can cultivate mindfulness Sanghas, we will be able to create social networks that reinforce earth-friendly behaviour.

Upaya, the Buddhist concept of "skillful means," will need to be applied for the other three to work. Exactly what these skillful means might be is a topic for another day, but I hope we all give them serious thought and set things in motion. We only have seven years.

1 Keith, David: "A surprising idea for 'solving' climate change". TED. <http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/view/id/192>

2 *Climate Change 2007: Synthesis Report*. See table on page 67, which indicates carbon emissions must peak by 2015 if average global temperature is not to rise beyond the manageable limit of 2.4° C.

3 WWF Hong Kong: "Air Quality and Climate Change Study", May 2007.

4 Nichtern, Ethan: *One City: A Declaration of Interdependence*. Wisdom Publications. 2007.

5 Aubrey, Allison: "Are Your Friends Making You Fat?". NPR. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12237644>

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It's humbling to stand here in the presence of so many whose compassion and dedication have touched the hearts and lives of so many people. In comparison to your kindness, your practice, and the fruits of your efforts, I am a very small fish indeed. But it is so much better to be a small fish swimming in the stream of compassion than a small fish frying in the pan of anger.

I speak to you as an Israeli, American, adopted citizen of the city of Rome, Jew, Buddhist, poet. As a musician, student of politics and of religion, teacher, friend, partner, ex-husband, enthusiastic motorcyclist; as a former infantry soldier who to this day still feels his automatic assault rifle like some amputees feel their missing limb, pressed against my shoulder and with the smell of sweat and grease. I speak to you as a brother, a son and some day perhaps a father. I would like to offer you the following reflection on my limited understanding of Applied Buddhism in the context of the Middle East.

You may think that in the Holy Land there is a conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. This is not the truth. There is great suffering, yes. Fear is all pervasive: not just the fear of army incursions,

Applied Buddhism & the Israeli - Palestinian Conflict

By Bar Zecharya

assassination, terrorist attacks, the call to report to reserve duty, or of nuclear annihilation, but fear of exploitation, fear of economic insecurity, fear of loss, of not producing enough, not being strong enough. Conflict is rife in every sector of society, from the schools to the government, the murderous traffic, the family, the army; public and private spheres, religious and secular. There is



You may think that in the Holy Land there is a conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. This is not the truth.

tremendous violence against women and against children, abuse of power in the workplace, corruption, wholesale neglect and destruction of the natural and human environment.

All of this violence is the result of confusion, misperception and wrong views. The suffering is great, but if we misinterpret that suffering as the result of a conflict between two nations we are ignoring its real roots and will only perpetuate them. Using the Buddhist tool of looking deeply into the emptiness of an independent self, we can see a different reality. We Israelis and Palestinians may not be the same, but we are not different either. We are united in our fear, bound by our anger, intimately connected by our inability to listen with an open heart, and identical in holding the mistaken notion that our suffering is the result of a national conflict.

Please Don't Join Us

This is not to say that there are no machines of war, no suicide attacks, checkpoints or existential threats. But by looking deeply into the reality we can see that the physical war is a reflection of the one in our hearts, an attempt to control our suffering by projecting it onto a clearly identifiable external enemy. To cover up the deeper reality of our suffering and its causes, to mask it with a narrative of two characters, is to do a great injustice and to render impossible any real transformation.

In my opinion, understanding the deeper dimension of suffering in the Holy Land is already a form of applied Buddhism. What practical steps can we take to alleviate suffering?

The first step, as always, is to protect ourselves and cultivate compassion. You may live in Southeast Asia, Europe or anywhere else on this planet that so generously provides for us, and often on the television you see images of political conflict. If we respond to those images out of judgment, collapsing the infinite web of social, political institutional, familial and psychological causes and conditions into a simplistic schema of two sides, one victim

and the other aggressor, we are watering the seeds of judgment in ourselves. Anger and hate need no permit or passport to pass through a checkpoint or concrete wall, and just as easily they can pass through our hearts. If we strengthen the seeds of judgment, anger and hate, their fruits will find their way to all aspects of our lives and will damage the relationships with all those around us.

Your partners, your children, your parents and all of your loved ones are precious to you. It would be such a shame if our confusion and ill-being led to even a moment of discord or disharmony in your family and community.

The same television images can be embraced with compassion and deep understanding. Think of someone who launches a Qassam rocket into Israel. Being a militant is not the entire truth. No one is

only a militant. He may be a militant, son, brother, friend, artist, student, and so on, including being a victim of numerous causes on many levels and from many directions — leading to his belief that killing can solve his suffering or the suffering of his loved ones. No one is only a soldier either. The truth of a soldier is just as complex, just as human, whose confusion and whose actions can be seen as the result of many causes, deep and wide, to which he, his commander and general are all victims. Were they able to see deeper they would act differently.

Please, friends, for your own sake, and your own happiness, take this as a meditation on non-duality, signlessness and interbeing, to develop your compassion for those of us who have not yet learned to do so. You will be setting a beautiful example of non-judgment for your children, who will then be able to enrich their lives and those of their loved ones with compassion and understanding. Thus you can turn a rocket attack or a military incursion into love, transforming ignorance into a teaching of the Dharma. I believe that this practice will bring you more joy into your own life, and that is reason enough to practice it.

Removing the obstacle of a dualistic view also presents many opportunities for Applied Buddhism on a wider scale. Just as fear is found in every sector of our society, opportunities can be found as well. We Middle Easterners would do well to learn to appreciate the many conditions of joy and happiness already present in the here and now. This includes our existing friendships, our children, the spectacular natural beauty that surrounds us, and the joy we can find by returning to the miracle of our breath.

Some of these conditions are also the countless projects of peace and development thanks to the dedication and generosity of individuals the world over. Whatever your expertise — be it social work, health care, agriculture, the environment, art and culture, or sport and so on — I believe that any contribution can relieve suffering and slowly water the seeds of joy, if given after having personally deepened the practice of compassion, non-judgment,

and non-duality. Without this practice, I fear that any effort will unfortunately only contribute to further suffering. Coexistence projects are useful and welcome, but focusing solely on coexistence in my opinion risks emphasizing only one result of the underlying causes. Compassion, deep listening, and loving speech can be practiced at any level of society and in any language.

Question from the Audience

How can engaged Buddhism resolve the conflict in West Asia (the Middle East)?

That's a difficult one! My first response is that preferring one political solution over another, from our standpoint outside the Middle East, is to practice the attachment to views, and our practice as Buddhists is to practice non-attachment to views. If we choose one particular political solution, believe that it is the correct view and attempt to enforce it on the rest of the world, we will only be practicing judgment and the inability to listen and will water those seeds in ourselves and in others. What we really need to do to have any positive effect, is the exact opposite. We need to practice the ability to listen without judgment so the seeds of love, even though they may be small, will be watered. First of all we must do this practice in our own hearts and in our own day-to-day lives. Second, we can support projects in Israel and in Palestine at any level of society: the family, government, education, etc, that involve listening deeply and using loving speech. Finally, we could bring Israelis, Palestinians or both, decision-makers and humble citizens, together to simply listen to each other and transform their own suffering. This is the only effort that will have any positive effect.

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Please consider donating to the Scholarship Fund to help retreats on Thay's upcoming US tour be as diverse as possible. Contributions can be made online at www.bluecliffmonastery.org or by check, made out to UBC and mailed to Blue Cliff Monastery. Reaching out to help a wider range of people attend our retreats will build unity and togetherness across many different boundaries in our communities.

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Public Talk: Daily Enlightenment - Waking Up to Life

Buell Theater, Denver, CO, August 29

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English Retreat: The World We Are - Planting Peace, Harvesting Happiness

Deer Park Monastery, Escondido, CA, September 8-13

Public Talk: Our True Agenda - Tending to the Space Inside

Pasadena Civic Auditorium, CA, September 19

Vietnamese Retreat

Deer Park Monastery, CA, September 23-27

NEW YORK

Blue Cliff Retreat: Enlightenment is Now or Never

Blue Cliff Monastery, Pine Bush, NY, October 2 - 6

Public Talk: Building a Peaceful and Compassionate Society

Beacon Theatre, New York, NY, October 9

Day of Mindfulness at the Omega Institute

New York City, NY, October 10



Halong Bay, Vietnam

photo by David Nelson

I never knew Alison K. when she was well. By the time both she and I were regularly attending the Rock Blossom Sangha, in Brooklyn, New York, she was a few months into a diagnosis of inoperable brain cancer. Her tumor was a glioblastoma, the worst kind. According to the statistics, she had a year, at most two years to live. She was forty-one.

This would be my first intimate encounter with the reality of death, with the reality of someone I knew dying. For the Sangha, it would be our time to experience most poignantly what it means to take refuge in Sangha.

Having brain cancer is difficult enough. For Alison, the difficulty was compounded by her family situation. She was living alone; her parents had both died years earlier; she had two sisters, but one was unable to help, and the other was able to visit only periodically. For reasons known best to Alison, she had decided to grant three close friends the medical, financial, and legal powers of attorney. They all loved her and were deeply committed to her care, but even as a group they couldn't meet all of her emotional, spiritual, and physical needs. And so the degree of refuge that Alison sought in Sangha was profound. As her illness progressed and her needs grew more intense, the compassion that arose within the Sangha, both as individuals and as a body, was just as profound. For me, the experience was one of watching a miracle unfold, as beautiful and poignant as a lotus flower.

Like a flower, this bud of compassion unfurled in stages. At first, only one or two members were involved in her life outside of Sangha. For most of us, our involvement consisted of listening deeply to her words during Dharma sharing. She shared all of her pain and confusion, her fear and occasional joy and ease, and for me, as for many, her need was sometimes overwhelming. I felt a strong impulse to close her out, to guard myself from her pain. I felt the discomfort of strong aversion, and also the discomfort of disapproving of my own aversion. Was I really so selfish and weak that I would turn away from a Sangha sister who was dying of cancer? At times I felt such distress that I could barely sit still.

But the practice of deep listening helped me through these storms. Week after week, the instructions for Dharma sharing reminded me to observe my reactions without judgment, to simply bear witness to her truth, to listen for what may not be said

in words, and to attend to everything with great gentleness. After some time, I found that my response had changed. As Alison spoke at length about her life's present conditions, I heard the heart message beneath her words: "I suffer. Please help." And the bud of compassion began to open.

It was then that I was able to reach out personally to Alison, and it was then that our brief but intense friendship began. One fall afternoon we met for tea, and we spent hours in conversation that dispensed with the usual preliminaries and small talk. We connected very deeply. Within weeks, Alison's condition worsened, and through the winter and spring she spent more time in hospitals and hospice than out. Her capacity for language began to deteriorate, so that at times conversation was not possible. Yet our connection remained strong; in fact, it became only stronger. What she needed was for me to be fully present to her, and during my brief visits, often no more than an hour once or twice a week, I found I was able to offer this. Whether that meant laughing over a movie with her, staying with her through times of confusion or distress, or holding her hand as she slept, it was tremendously rewarding to be with her in this way. It could also be draining and upsetting. I learned I had to take care of myself, as well, in order to take care of her. Layer by layer, the petals opened.

Blessed... Blessed... Blessed

As Alison's condition worsened, many others in the Sangha were also drawn to be personally involved. Some offered regular companionship. Others helped to move her belongings into storage when she had to leave her apartment. Some visited as they could, or provided occasional transportation; others offered support to Alison's closest caregivers. Some simply held her in their thoughts.

And Alison expressed her gratitude for it all. A precious memory for the Sangha is a tea ceremony which Alison attended in the fall. Alison began by sharing how thankful she felt for the support she had received, the friendship, the love. Then she sang a song for us all. It was a setting of the Beatitudes, which she sang beautifully in a low, warm, alto voice. "Blessed ... blessed ... blessed are the poor in heart, for they shall be comforted ..." She sang with her eyes closed, her hands crossed over her chest, as if her heart could not contain all that it must hold.

Sangha as Refuge

The Dharma of Caring for Alison K.

By Lauren Thompson

As the months went on, Alison would at times be able only to whisper “Thank you” or “So sweet,” or smile her luminous smile. Even if the most she could do was gaze into our eyes with warm intensity, she found a way to convey her gratitude.

Living in the Moment

We found that, even if we were only marginally involved, caring for Alison required that we shed expectations. Her condition would worsen and then dramatically improve, so we never knew what to expect from any visit. One day, she may be quite talkative. The next, she may be almost comatose, as her heavily medicated body stabilized after a major seizure.

Our sense of how much longer she might live was in constant flux. She moved back and forth between supported independence and hospice, between functioning and incapacity. Each transition felt like the end of one era and the beginning of another, but how long that era might last was anyone’s guess, even the experts’. “Don’t-know mind” was the only frame of mind that could contain this fluid reality. There was no definite future to plan for together – the customary illusion of “the future” could find no fixed mooring under circumstances like these. There was only the present moment.

We in the Sangha all contended with the feeling of helplessness, of having to accept that we could not give Alison what she really wanted, a reprieve from early death. And much as we might wish to offer our comfort, we couldn’t know how she would receive it. She might greet us warmly and ask about ourselves. Or she might barely waken. Or, for others more than for me, Alison might display the impulsive fury of a frustrated child, straining every fiber of her caregivers’ patience. We consoled each other, in person, by phone, and through an e-mail care circle, that our loving presence could be only helpful. We also encouraged each other to take breaks, to give only as much as we could without feeling resentful.

The challenges were many, but the gifts were many, too. I know that for myself, time I spent with Sangha sisters and brothers whose visits happened to coincide with mine often led to long, intimate conversations. Being with Alison awakened in many of us the sense of how precious every moment with another being

truly is. Knowing this, how could we be anything but completely authentic and kind? For me, these encounters provided moments of deep healing of the terrible loneliness that had always left me feeling set apart and unknown. Through Alison’s dying, I had fleeting glimpses of interconnectedness with all of life, of true interbeing.

The Most Beautiful Gift

Certainly the clearest experiences I had of interbeing were with Alison herself. During one visit in early spring, she was alert and eager to communicate, but her speech was confused. Still, her heart intent was very clear. She insisted that I not leave until I had some “Christmas.” She knew that wasn’t what she meant, and after a few moments she landed on the right words: ice cream. An aide brought us each a cup of ice cream, and when she couldn’t

Alison K. on her 42nd birthday



finish hers, she offered it to me. I told her that more ice cream would probably upset my stomach. She held her cup out to me, saying, “Then eat it carefully. I’m giving it to you carefully. So you eat it carefully.”

As I took the cup, I was moved almost beyond words by her offer, which was indeed full of caring. She seemed to be passing to me, not just ice cream, but her life, asking me to enjoy for her the portion that she would not be able to enjoy herself.

“Alison,” I said, “you are a good friend.”

“Yes, but no,” she said. “You don’t understand. I really like you. No, not like. I mean, I don’t want to be ...”

She started gesturing broadly with her hands, and I suggested, “You don’t want to be all lovey-dovey?”

“Right,” she said. “But I love you. I really do.”

“I love you, too,” I said, “I do.”

And for many moments there was only silence between us. There was a communication then that was not really between “Lauren,” with one personal history, and “Alison,” with another. We barely knew each other on that level. It was a connection of our very being. It was a moment of such joy and sadness. It was the most beautiful gift. A “Christmas” gift indeed.


When I was ready to leave, she patted her bald scalp and said, “Next time we have class, I’ll wear my hat.”

I smiled. “You mean next time I visit?”

“Yes, that’s what I mean.”

“You look lovely just like this,” I said. I kissed her forehead, said good-bye, and left. That was our last conversation. Within a week, she passed away.

To the Other Shore

I knew Alison well for only six months. I knew very little about her family or her relationship history, or what kind of music she liked. But through her dying, I caught a glimpse of our fundamental interbeing. Along with others in the Sangha, I felt that I was able to step, now and then, in the footprints of the bodhisattvas, responding with compassion to Alison’s condition, which was, ultimately, the human condition. I sensed, moments at a time, how precious life is. I saw how Sangha can be a boat that carries us safely to the other shore — it carried Alison, and it carries me still. 

Alison K. passed from this life on March 27, 2007, at the age of forty-two.

Lauren Thompson, Compassionate Eyes of the Heart, practices with the Rock Blossom Sangha in Brooklyn, NY. She is a children’s book author, presently working on an adult memoir of her experiences with Alison K.



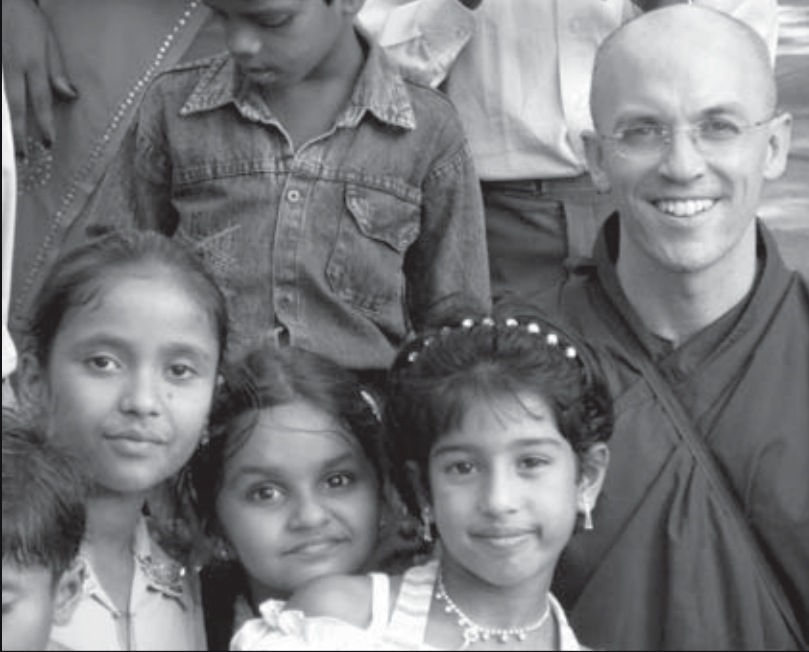


photo courtesy of monastic sangha

Are we willing to change?

Al Gore recently said what is most crucial is a change in the collective consciousness to see the interdependence of all things.

The Question of Overpopulation

By Brother Phap Lai

Question to PV Listening Website —
15 December 2007

Teacher, One of the five precepts asks us not to kill. I am concerned about the effects of overpopulation and historical outcomes such as war. Global warming proponents indicate that the human population is to blame. Some suggest that to achieve a sustainable earth our population must be reduced by as much as four-fifths. The entire earth may be in the balance. If the scientific evidence is accurate what guidance can you give us in avoiding the unthinkable? — Steve

Dear Steve,

Thank you for your stimulating question and for having the courage to ask it. Many of us keep “unthinkable” thoughts hidden away, or we immediately believe in them without questioning their validity. History provides evidence that these thoughts — whether kept in a vault of shame or expressed philosophically to others — will one day be acted out at the collective level.

Overpopulation is indeed one factor that can build pressure for this to happen. The genocide in Rwanda was fueled by tensions that had built up due to pressure on common land and water resources caused by a combination of increasing population and environmental effects of global warming. The situation in Darfur is similar. Sadly there are people willing to exploit tensions to create division, hatred and fear in the desire for personal power and wealth or to impose an ideology. What can be done?

The environmental pressures our planet faces, of which overpopulation is an integral part, are tearing at the very fabric of the complex and diverse life that makes our experience so rich

and beautiful today. Life on Earth is in trouble not in the future but now. It seems we are setting up conditions for a sixth mass extinction event on this planet. In *Heat* by environmentalist George Monbiot we read that foreseeable rises in temperature and carbon dioxide (CO₂) levels are comparable with those that helped trigger the biggest-ever extinction event, at the end of the Permian period 251 million years ago — a period as ecologically diverse as today’s. Computer modeling tells us that with a ninety percent reduction of CO₂ and other greenhouse gas emissions globally by 2030 we have a two-out-of-three chance to prevent runaway global warming and avert this destiny.

Monbiot then sets about demonstrating, by picking on some key areas such as transportation, household energy use, electricity supply, and some example industries that these cuts could realistically be made while maintaining a good standard of living. Of course the affluent minority would have to change their ways. For example we would need to severely restrain our long distance travel habits but this is surely more palatable than an eighty percent reduction in population. Are we willing to change?

Call for a Collective Awakening

Like you I am deeply concerned about the tendency of humankind to resort to war as a solution to our problems. War is the deepest expression of human suffering and represents a failure to face our difficulties and seek healing in us and between us. What is needed is compassion and brotherhood — a “war-like” effort in which we pull together as one people. Al Gore recently said what is most crucial is a change in the collective consciousness to see the interdependence of all things. Similarly Thay says: “We need a collective awakening; enlightenment can no longer be considered an individual matter.”



photo by David Nelson

We need to learn to live in a sustainable way, embracing simple living and focusing on community. Lasting solutions respond compassionately to the real needs of the people.

It seems clear that we are already suffering the unstoppable consequences of global warming and many of us will perish. Remaining in denial is not an option. They encourages us to accept our situation in such a way that we make peace with it in our hearts. Action taken from this place of peace will then be effective — right action — and is our best hope. But in taking on board the reality of what is happening we need to be careful. There is a tendency to fall into despair and become paralyzed. Unable to hold the situation mentally we try to forget what we know and take refuge in our own busy lives again. Once again we simply hand over responsibility to politicians and experts. However, without an informed and active public, politicians of selfish interest will take advantage. Eventually they will force upon us desperate schemes (backed up by “experts”) that will have more to do with seizing power and will undoubtedly make the situation far worse.

Dying a Spiritual Death

In your question you refer to a perceived need among some experts to reduce the world’s population by four-fifths in order for humanity to have a chance to survive. Your reference to the “unthinkable” suggests that war and genocide may actually form part of the solution. This thought if not unthinkable should be unconscionable.

At the intellectual level we can get lost in a maze of complex moral questions and believe we have to do the unthinkable for the greater good. More frequently I hear people, sometimes timidly, sometimes boldly, voice opinions that wars and pandemics such as HIV and TB are necessary because we need to reduce the population of people. If we are to think like this then we must be prepared to die and see our children die in the same manner. We all are brothers and sisters sharing this planet. Perhaps we see disease as mother Earth’s mechanism to balance things. It is true, we cannot predict or necessarily control the course of nature but how sad if we think letting or making it all happen over there will help our plight. Disease, famine, and war cause misery and chaos and that will affect us all. Their stability and happiness is our stability and happiness. We inter-are. As soon as there is an “us and them,” an “over there,” in our minds we have lost touch with this truth — the truth of interbeing.

No one would deny that overpopulation is a major issue we face as a global community. However, the idea that reducing the population by four-fifths will necessarily solve anything needs to be examined.

Suppose that we achieved that goal, either by actively killing people or passively turning a blind eye to genocides, the ravages of civil wars, or disease and famine in other countries. Thinking that

this would favor the physical survival of the remaining one-fifth is to forget something of fundamental importance — namely that in the process we will all have died spiritually. In Buddhism it is clear that the means cannot be separated from the ends. The so-called ends are defined by the means. They makes this clear when he says, “There is no way to peace. Peace is the way.”

Staying Connected

The First Mindfulness Training, as well as asking us not to kill, also asks us to “cultivate compassion.” Compassion here is not simply an emotion but is rooted in the Sanskrit word *karuna*. They teaches us that *karuna*, to be translated properly, needs to convey the meaning of “the capacity to relieve suffering.” Compassion in this sense implies an understanding of the situation, knowing what to do and what not to do to help, along with the willingness and ability to act. Understanding is more than intellectual or practical knowledge.

Ravi Ravindra, Prof. Emeritus of Canada’s Dalhousie University warns us on this point:

The search for truth — when it becomes more and more mental and divorced from deeper and higher feelings such as compassion, a sense of the oneness and the like — leads to feelings of isolation and accompanying anxiety ... Then one wants to control others and conquer nature. Much of our predicament arises from this very dedication to truth in an exclusively mental manner.

True insight is always in line with compassion and the truth of the interdependence of all things. This perspective can only be found when one is stable, peaceful, and connected with the heart.

When ideas to control population come up that at first seem abhorrent I suggest taking a long walk and sitting in nature. After calming the mind and enjoying the connection to life, then we are qualified to look into the situation. First we can see the real consequences of our idea if put into action. And in time insight into the situation will allow solutions not seen before to arise. There are always more creative less violent ways of helping.

Collapse of the American Dream

Looking more closely into the problem of overpopulation we might start by reminding ourselves that the U.S.A. population, although only four percent of the world’s, consumes twenty-five percent of the world’s oil supply. Its per-capita consumption of the rest of the Earth’s material resources similarly outstrips that of other countries. It is clear from this fact alone that how we consume is just as important as how many people there are. China’s

and India's consumption is growing fast, a growth that will soon require more than one planet Earth to sustain us. And yet in the vast majority of countries people are poor and not responsible for these phenomena. Ironically when we think of overpopulation we think of the poor in the so-called third world and yet these people's ecological footprint is virtually zero. If one's goal is to create a sustainable planet, then one must address consumption as well as population stabilization.

As a global society we need to turn in a different direction. We need to learn to live in a sustainable way, embracing simple living and focusing on community — sharing resources as opposed to the individual suburban utopia. In our small monastic community in New York, for instance, the cost of food per person is \$2 a day. We eat vegan and try to eat local produce. Trips out to shop are also reduced because of communal living.

Collective awakening can gain momentum only with individual actions. To this end, Thay, in his public talks, often takes time to encourage us to reduce our consumption of meat. Thay quotes figures that point out the environmental cost of meat consumption. (See Thich Nhat Hanh, *Mindfulness in the Marketplace*, page 72, and the *Mindfulness Bell*, Winter/Spring 2008). If everyone in the U.S. were to reduce their meat consumption by half that would reduce greenhouse gas emissions more than if everyone were to drive hybrid cars. Seeing vegetarianism as a way out is not new. Albert Einstein said: "Nothing will benefit human health and increase chances for survival of life on Earth as much as the evolution to a vegetarian diet."

Collectively of course we can do a lot more — for instance, by morally supporting, inspiring and educating each other; making collective commitments (see the environmental initiative sign-up sheet on the Deer Park website), pooling ideas and resources; and speaking as one voice to industry, the media, and politicians. Ultimately we need the political will to implement national and international legislation that will meaningfully reduce our impact and move us into sustainable living. This requires the people's deep understanding of the situation; politicians of integrity must have a support base.

Sustainable Compassion

Stabilizing human population is one aspect, albeit an important aspect, of the challenge to restore our ecosystem's stability. In his book *Plan B 2.0*, Lester Brown presents a comprehensive and budgeted plan to literally "rescue the planet" under five main categories: (1) eradicating poverty and stabilizing population, (2) restoring the Earth, (3) feeding seven billion people well, (4) stabilizing climate, and (5) designing sustainable cities. He argues that to achieve a stabilized population of a well-fed seven billion is possible; his overall budget for Plan B implementation is \$161 billion. Compare this to the money spent on the Iraq war, estimated to surpass \$2 trillion (*Harvard Magazine*).

Linking the stabilization of population to the eradication of poverty as Lester Brown does is important. Adequate nutrition, good health care, and parental support especially for women, access to family planning services, readily available contraception along with education, these are all affordable and essential to creat-

ing the necessary conditions to empower people to make choices about the size of their family. Interestingly much research (e.g., UNICEF) shows that the most effective way to reduce the number of children born is to educate girls and keep them in school. This is a goal we can all help to achieve.

Draconian methods may achieve short-term results but also have unforeseen adverse consequences. For instance, I do not advocate enforcing fertility control measures as in China. It has caused a huge suffering which will be passed on for generations and has arguably not achieved a reduced impact on the Earth (see *Collapse* by Jared Diamond).

Lasting solutions respond compassionately to the real needs of the people. They come from those who are involved in the actual situation and grounded in love, which cannot be said of either Communist party policy implemented by a police state or IMF capitalist ideology enforced by economic leverage. Lasting solutions usually come from grassroots organizations — from the people themselves. They often require modest funding and only need to be supported by understanding authorities and not be obstructed by them.

Offering Our Gifts

Getting involved in our local community is therefore key. In this way we do not fall once again into forgetfulness or despair but can help inspire hope, especially in the younger generation who inherit our legacy. Finding and building a community of like-minded individuals to work towards this can alleviate our feelings of isolation and fear. In community we find a way to contribute our own special gifts to this cause.

Some reading is helpful. I can recommend the work of environmentalists and social activists Lester Brown, George Monbiot, and Jared Diamond (books cited above), Joanna Macy (*World as Lover, World as Self*), John Seed, and Paul Hawken (*Blessed Unrest*). They help us understand the situation in all its complexity and offer us practical and humane ways to respond to the crisis. Thich Nhat Hanh himself has a wonderful new book on the subject, *The World We Have*.

Ultimately, the crisis we face is a spiritual one. Developing our own practice of meditation and mindfulness, finding and building Sangha — a community practicing the path of understanding and love. These are the important things to do. Personal practice gives us an inner refuge, a place of stability to go back to. The Sangha becomes a boat on which we can navigate the storm together. Practicing together we cultivate the much-needed insight, inner strength, and spirit of non-fear that we need to respond compassionately to our situation.

Thank you again for bringing up this topic for all of us to reflect on and please know that your practice and deepening insight is important to us all.

Brother Phap Lai currently resides in
Blue Cliff Monastery, New York.

Resurrection in the Present Moment

By Sr. Chau Nghiem

March 23, 2008, Cape Mountain Retreat Center, South Africa

photo by Linda Scott

Happy Easter to everyone! Easter is the celebration of Christ's resurrection — resurrection is coming back to life, starting over. We each have a chance to come back to life in every moment. When we come back to our breath, when we really come back to our steps, to the food we are putting in our mouths, to what we are drinking, to what we are saying, we have a chance to come back to life. We can be there in that moment and not be dead to the reality in front of us — not lost in thoughts and worries. The only moment we have is the present moment. It's the only place where we can really be alive and touch life.

So as we celebrate Easter and the renewing of life, we can touch the resurrection of each of our lives. This retreat is a kind of coming back to life, to touch what is really good and true and beautiful in each of us, in our lineage, our ancestors, and descendants.

We can always begin anew and return to the goodness in us. The present moment contains the past and also the future. What is the present moment but a continuation of the past? What is the future but a continuation of this present moment?

What we do in this present moment is extremely important. The past can be healed in the present moment; we don't have to worry about the future if we know how to dwell solidly in each breath, in each step.

(continued on page 36)



Healing Separation

By Sr. Thuan Nghiem and Sr. Chau Nghiem

We held our retreat at the Cape Mountain Retreat Center, a two-hour drive from Cape Town. Thirty adults and eight children came and practiced for three days, many of them for the first time in our tradition. They were professionals, and most were white, though there were a few Indian South Africans, a Burmese woman, and a Xhosa boy, adopted by a white South African mom. The three Dharma Teachers took turns leading the adults' activities as well as the children's program.

We experienced very directly the painful residues of apartheid during the retreat. The retreat center was on land rented from a local farmer. On our way to the large meditation hall was a village of colored people* who worked for the white farmer. We met a number of colored children on our walks there who smiled at us with so much desire to connect. We invited the village children to the bonfire we had planned for Saturday night. They happily agreed to come. They were very poor and we heard there was always a lot of drinking in the village over the Easter holiday, so we wanted to provide them with a more wholesome atmosphere and give a chance for the village children and retreat children to enjoy playing together. When the retreat caretakers learned we'd invited the colored children, they informed the farmer and he insisted that the caretakers let the children know that they couldn't attend the bonfire as there was a farm policy of no contact between retreatants and villagers. We were told that this policy was due to misunderstandings in the past between the Buddhist retreatants and largely Christian colored community, but we also knew it was quite common on South African farms to hold onto traditions of racial separation and inequality. The caretakers went to the village Saturday afternoon and told the children they were not allowed to come.

They either didn't get the message or disobeyed, because at dinnertime, fifteen or so very nicely dressed children came down to the bonfire. We went to greet them and begged the caretakers to let them join us. They were insistent that the farmer's rules be followed as after all, we were on his land, and we wouldn't be there to receive the fallout of our actions, either on the caretakers or the villagers. While we didn't want to be intimidated, we wanted to be respectful of our hosts, but we felt extremely upset and helpless in the face of such blatant exclusion and discrimination. We continued with the bonfire, without the village children, but there was definitely something missing and the energy was dampened.

The next morning, before we transmitted the precepts, I asked everyone to join hands and requested that we send the merit of our transmission ceremony to the village children who had been excluded from the bonfire, to the retreat center caretakers and to the farmer. I asked that we use the merit of the ceremony to water the seed of inclusiveness in each of us and help us to find better ways to create connections with those that are different from us.

One beautiful thing happened after the kids' Easter egg hunt: we invited the village children to share in the bounty of Easter eggs. We got to take pictures all together and enjoy their delight in the Easter eggs. There was a meeting at the end of the retreat in which we decided to draft a letter to the retreat center owners sharing about the painful experience we had and asking that action be taken to remedy this policy of separation. The letter has been delivered and the newly formed Cape Town Sangha is following up with the retreat owners.

* 'Colored' is the term used in South Africa for people of mixed Dutch and African ancestry. They speak Afrikaans and consider themselves distinct from both white and black South Africans.



photo courtesy of monastic sangha

**Racism is a collective emotion
that needs to be embraced —
it is fear of the Other.**



photo by Bonnie Wiesner

The past is not separate from the present. What happened in the past still exists in us — things we have done and said, things that we may not have had control over, things that other people have done or said. In fact our cells carry memories. By dwelling deeply in the present moment, we can massage those things in our body and consciousness and liberate ourselves from the wounds of the past — individually and collectively.

Rediscovering Grandparents

I want to tell you a story of a time when I was able to heal wounds from my past. When I was not yet a nun, I went on a twenty-one-day retreat with my dad, led by Thay and the monastics in the U.S. He had been talking about the Five Touchings of the Earth and explained how we can heal our ancestors in us.

My father married my mother in the late nineteen-sixties. My mother is African-American. You know that my father [Dharma teacher Al Lingo] is European-American. My parents are black and white. My father's parents were very upset. They never met my mother and they didn't want to meet us when we were born (my brother is three and a half years older than me). When my parents divorced when I was seven or eight, my dad made contact again with my grandparents and we were able to visit them in Houston, Texas. I was eight when I first met them, and my brother was eleven. They were lovely and very warm to us. We were their only grandchildren. We visited them every year. Six years later, when I was fourteen, my granddad died. My grandmother passed away ten years after this so I got to be with her for another ten years. They were very kind to us. They helped my dad treat us to trips to amusement parks and they made sure we had all the foods we liked to eat.

I didn't think too much about that experience growing up. I was at that retreat and one afternoon I went to the meditation hall to sit by myself and get in touch with my ancestors, as Thay had been teaching us. I just sat and began to breathe and think about my grandparents. A feeling of deep suffering came up towards my grandparents, a huge anger that they had excluded us from their life for eleven years. I felt a deep sense of rejection. I breathed with it as I had been learning to do. I embraced it; I allowed it space to be there. I cried and cried, and I held it with tenderness.

Healing Ancient Wounds

As that emotion was being lullabied by my breathing and my mindfulness, it began to calm. I began to think, "Well, why were they like that? Why did they close their hearts to us?" I saw that

they were raised in a completely segregated South, totally white. My grandfather was poor growing up and he made it into the upper middle class through his own intelligence and hard work and lots of help from a society that supported him. But he was a product of all the seeds that were watered in him in that time and place. I saw how much he loved my brother and me and how much excluding us from his life had hurt him. I saw that he was stuck, he didn't want to be that way, but he didn't know how to be different. I was also very grateful that he was able to break out of this trap to some extent before he died and have a genuine relationship with his grandchildren.

In that moment, the past was very available to me. I stayed with my breathing, and my grandfather was resurrected in me. I felt so much love for my grandfather. I knew he wasn't gone to me and that we were still very connected. I'm so proud that I am my grandfather's granddaughter! There were so many things he was talented at; there was a lot of gentleness, wisdom, and compassion in him. I benefit from that and I want to carry that on. And I know that's what he wants me to do. I feel a great deal of support and love from and for him now, and my anger and resentment that was buried in me for all those years is completely transformed.

When we really take care of ourselves in the present moment and listen to our own pain and suffering, listen as a mother listens to her child — with tenderness, compassion, openness, acceptance — we can understand our suffering and we can heal our past.

Making Time for our Ancestors

The practice of Touching the Earth can help our ancestors be resurrected in us and help us start afresh, because we have a chance that they may not have had. So when we speak about collective healing — healing the suffering of our nation and our people — we can do that by being very mindful of how we live in this present moment. Our ancestors are us, so whatever we do our ancestors are doing.

One practice that we encourage everyone to do is to set up an ancestors' altar in your home and spend time there every day. In Vietnam, people have an ancestors' altar in their home; and anything of importance they report to their ancestors. When their child has his or her first day at school, the parents come before the altar, light a stick of incense, and let the ancestors know, "Today your grandchild or great-grandchild is going to school for the first time." In many places throughout Africa, people do much the same thing.

It's very healing to call upon our ancestors, because we are so much more than what we think; we are not this separate self. When we can be in touch with this whole lineage of people who care about us, we have some energy. We don't know where it comes from, but somehow we have energy to do things that we didn't have energy to do before. We also have a sense of responsibility because we are aware of the expectations that our ancestors have of us and of the healing that they deeply need. So the choices that we make shift when that awareness deepens in us.

You could put a picture of your parents or your grandparents and just sit and breathe with your ancestors regularly. There is an illness in our society of isolation, loneliness, fear, the inability to connect to other people. When we can heal our connection to our ancestors, we'll find more and more ways to make connections with people in our lives.

At times I can really touch my ancestors and I feel them very alive in me. They have a great sense of humor. They help me laugh at myself and not take myself too seriously. And they are full of love and compassion for me, too, when I am still enough to be available to them. They let me know that I will never be lost or abandoned, and they ask me to spend more time with them, to take more time to connect, to honor and remember them.

When we talk about healing collective suffering, collective trauma, it has to start with our own personal resurrection. To begin anew in history, to make a really different step as a human race, we start with being compassionate with our body, our mind, our ancestors, our family, our relationships.

The Pain of Exclusion

The experience on this retreat of exclusion, of feeling separate from the people in the village, I'm so grateful that it's come up, painful and awkward and potentially volatile as it is. People have been coming here for some time and there wasn't any event that brought the two groups together. Now this occasion of the village children being excluded from our bonfire last night has brought up the real suffering that exists, so we can't go on with business as usual. It's good that it's painful, that this touches some deep suffering and confusion in us. It touches also a deep aspiration for things to change, for us to be able to connect and be free.

We have a chance to apply the practice — to take care of our own feelings, to speak mindfully with each other about it, and to look at how to respond with compassion. We don't want to close our eyes before suffering, we don't want to say "Well, that's their business. We're just here on retreat, why stir things up?"

Just as our own emotions need to be embraced, racism is a collective emotion that needs to be embraced — it is fear of the Other. We're so used to thinking of discrimination as evil, so we don't want to be associated with it. We know we are not like that! But we relate in the same way to our own difficult emotions — we push them away. Racism needs to be acknowledged and tenderly embraced as a collective. We have the compassion and wisdom, the Buddha seed in us, to look deeply at racism, classism, and all the various isms in us that tend to push others away.

We need to wake up together and look at it. People are already doing this in many places so it's not something we have to create

from scratch. The separation that exists in South Africa is no different from the separation that exists in other places. It may be felt quite acutely here, but it is everywhere. Our minds create the world. War and discrimination come from our minds. If we didn't have violence in our minds, we wouldn't create war.

The Grand Requiem Masses in Vietnam

I want to share about the Grand Requiem Masses that we did in Vietnam on our trip with Thay last year.

Thay returned to Vietnam for the first time in 2005. The Communist government thought he would cause an uprising against them, but he was so skillful and loving in his speech that they learned they didn't need to fear him. Thay tenderly expressed the good qualities of the government and spoke very skillfully: "Why don't you open up more? ... You can do better and this will make people happier." Because of his skillfulness, people listened. He gave talks to members of the Communist Party, and Thay said to them, "You know, the monks and nuns, we don't have our own private cars, cell phones, or bank accounts. We're the true Communists!" And they laughed, they weren't angry. He was able in a very loving way to touch the need in the Communist Party to reduce corruption and materialism. So they allowed us to come back in 2007.

One of the main reasons we went was to engage in ceremonies to heal the suffering of the war. The pain had been suppressed, it was not allowed to come up and be expressed. They were three-day ceremonies of healing where people wrote down the names of their loved ones who had been killed in the war or who had been killed escaping by boat. We performed ceremonies in the South in Saigon, in the Center in Hue, and in the North in Hanoi. There were huge altars with food and fruit, and then pages and pages stapled to the altars with the names of thousands of people — where and how they died, some of starvation, some killed in the forest, some from a land mine.

We began our chanting, inviting all these souls who had died violently in the war to be a part of this healing. And they came; we felt their presence. I was crying tears that weren't mine and many of us experienced something coming through us to be released — some pain that had been kept down and was able to be released on a collective level. We were encouraged to practice very uprightly, to really be mindful and kind, to be aware of our speech and actions, during those three days. Everyone had to make a special altar outside of their house, to pray for the healing of their family members who had died, and Thay gave talks every morning. I experienced the healing of my own blood and land ancestors in those ceremonies. On the third day of the ceremony, after quite a heat wave, it rained. It did that at each of the three ceremonies — on the last day it rained.

Transformation of the Collective

We can create spaces of healing and resurrection in our communities, by allowing pain to be expressed but held in a very tender, loving, compassionate container of mindfulness. When I first heard about these ceremonies in Vietnam, right away I thought, "Oh, we need these ceremonies in the U.S." So much

suffering is being passed on from one generation to the next. The absurdity of violence in the U.S., with ten-year-old children shooting classmates and teachers in school, is pain from ancestors that has not been healed. The brutality of this deep separation here in South Africa is pain that has not been addressed from our ancestors. If we can address and release that, our future generations will be free to live a very different kind of life.

I'm thinking about how to do some kind of a spiritual healing ceremony that is appropriate for Americans to address the wounds of Native American genocide, slavery, segregation, the witch hunts, and other deep, national wounds. We can also think about this here. I want to invite us all to meditate together, particularly on the situation that has arisen in this retreat. It is clear that whatever we want to suppress will come up some how, some way. We are asked to walk around the village, but we end up meeting some children from the village on the detour we take to the meditation hall. We are so naturally attracted to them! The urge to separate, it can never win! We want to connect; we want to love each other. It's so natural, so human.

I was very happy to hear some of you share before the walking meditation about how important it is to be skillful and look deeply — not just act out of our goodwill and good intention — but to really think about the best response to this difficult situation.

It's just not true that we aren't connected to the colored people in the village. It's just not true that it doesn't matter what happens, that we can go about our retreat here and not be impacted by that kind of inequality. To see this, that's the practice.

Maybe we can find a way as a community to make a true and deep response to this suffering. We know the farmer feels it, the retreat caretakers feel it, the villagers feel it. Everyone is victimized by this kind of separation. Everyone is crippled somehow by this narrow heart, the inability to include. I hope that out of this retreat, we will have a beautiful, strong Sangha that meets regularly in Cape Town. We have a meeting Monday night to be together and offer our support to creating a Sangha. So we can continue to look at how we can respond to this on Monday night.

I want to close by expressing my gratitude to all of you for being here, for having the courage to come on this retreat — for having the willingness to love, to open yourself up to transformation for yourself, your family, your society. All of us who have come here feel enriched and grateful for this time with you.

Sister Jewel, Chan Chau Nghiem, received the Lamp Transmission from Thich Nhat Hanh in 2007 in Vietnam. She currently resides at the new European Institute for Applied Buddhism in Waldbroel, Germany.



Paint with Light

photo by Tasha Chuang

Letting Go

*The rain that comes from the clouds
Does not belong to the clouds.*

*The sorrow that comes from our ancestors
Does not really belong to anyone.*

*So let's open wide the windows.
Listen. Do you hear the meadowlark?*

— Susan Hadler

The Guest

This being human is a guest house

—Rumi

*I threw open wide the door and every window
Hung out a sign: "Guest House. All Are
Welcome"*

*And they came in unbroken procession,
Tapping my shoulder, hoping for a
conversation*

Or at least a glance, a nod of recognition.

*I did not speak, though well acquainted with
them all.*

*I watched the door, waiting for the guest of
honour*

I sat and waited, waited only for you.

*You arrive as one coming home, familiar with
this place*

*No fanfare, no red carpet, you simply take a
seat*

*Across the table from the place where I have
waited.*

And I look, over the flowers I gathered for you

*And see myself, looking at the flowers I
gathered for me.*

*I build another door that all the guests might
come and freely go*

*But I remain, in this house, the guest of
honour.*

—India Taylor

Sangha News



all photos courtesy of monastic sangha

Buddhist Institute Opens in Germany

The European Institute of Applied Buddhism was opened in September 2008 in Waldbröl, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany. Thay's first visit to the EIAB after it had been acquired by the Unified Buddhist Church was during the second week of September 2008. During this visit some monks and nuns came to stay in the building. There was no heat or hot water, and since the building had been uninhabited for two years, there was a great deal of cleaning to be done. The Mayor of Waldbröl kindly offered the services of the town to clear up the grounds before an important press conference presided over by Thay.

The building was constructed in 1897. It was founded by a local philanthropist, a pastor and doctor from Cologne, Dr. Hollenberg, and three other doctors, for the treatment of the mentally ill whose families were too poor to pay for their treatment. Dr. Hollenberg was responsible for other philanthropic works in the town of Waldbröl and is remembered on the ancestral altar in the Institute. On 14 November 1938, 700 people were removed from Waldbröl, including some from this hospital; they were taken to unknown locations where their fate was uncertain. Many were put to death by injection or sterilized by the Nazi regime. The hospital was turned into one of Hitler's recreational centres. Since the fall of the Nazi regime the building has been a hospital and then a NATO military academy. The legacy of this building is one of philanthropy and compassion as well as ignorance and suffering.

House of Transformation

The large building consists of 400 rooms on four floors. In September Thay visited each of these rooms and sprinkled each with consecrated water. He was accompanied by a number of monks and nuns who chanted the name of Avalokiteshvara. It took four hours to complete this ceremony. The aim of this

visit was to begin the process of healing that the monastic residents of the Institute have been doing their best to continue ever since. Interestingly enough the house was called House of Transformation when it was a military academy and we are happy to keep that name. Our daily practice is to take every step in mindfulness and offer up the energy to heal the suffering that has happened here. The stairs are made of marble as is the main corridor of the ground floor. It seems strange for monks and nuns to be living in such luxurious surroundings but we know that the laying of these marble floors cost much sweat and hardship for many people and our steps respond with compassion to this.

They visited us again in November and wrote a letter to be read to those who suffered here. This letter is read aloud every day before the sitting meditation and during the offering ceremony to the wandering spirits. [See sidebar page 42.] This offering ceremony is performed daily by the monks and nuns in residence. Its purpose is to give rise to compassion that is able to heal the legacy of suffering in this building that has still not been wholly transformed. Please be assured that we are very happy to play a part in doing this work of transformation and are grateful to have this privilege.

One day when we were gathered to sing before walking meditation in the grounds of the Institute Thay told us that we do not need to avoid hardship and difficulties. These things can be causes and conditions for us to solidify our practice of mindfulness, understanding, and compassion. They give us the motivation to take refuge in each other and do what Martin Luther King most wanted, build the Beloved Community.

In the town of Waldbröl we have the support of the Mayor and his deputy. We also have the support of the Catholic priest and





Protestant pastor, who have invited the monks and nuns to their churches to speak to their congregations. The county construction committee has the duty to make sure that we bring the building up to date with the latest safety regulations. It seems that the military did not need to fulfill these requirements and so we have a great deal of expensive work to complete. Until this work is completed we are not allowed to receive overnight guests in the building. Fortunately right next to us is a

school for conscientious objectors who are training in voluntary service and this school has beds for rent on the weekends. This means that we can organise weekend retreats.

Traveling With a Bag Full of Moon

When Thay visited us in November, many monks and nuns also came. They drove from Plum Village, stopping overnight in the Paris meditation centre *La Maison de l'Inspir*. Once everyone was here Thay led us on a wonderful walk around the grounds of the Institute. This included the beautiful apple orchard on a hill with wide views and the local park just below the front of the Institute. Thay pointed out that the feng shui of the building is good, with the high mountains lying behind and the valley in front. We were delighted to find three bushes still in fragrant flower amidst the falling golden leaves.

The next morning the full moon was in the early-morning sky and a bell at 5:30 invited us to full moon meditation. There is a court at the top of the steps that is the perfect place to see the full moon. At first the sky was clear and we saw that bright reflection of the sun's light. Then clouds came and we saw the moon go into her room but the radiance still came through its walls. In freedom she came in and out of the clouds. After twenty minutes outside we came into the building and sat in the hall where Thay had given the press conference in September. We watched the moon through the large windows. Then Thay spoke about poems describing the moon. We heard an explanation of the Vietnamese expression, "traveling with a bag full

of moon." This refers to someone like Thay Giac Thanh who needed few material things because he had plenty of freedom to enjoy the wonderful and beautiful things in life.

On the weekend a public talk and Day of Mindfulness were given for the people of Waldbröl. For this the auditorium of the neighbouring hospital was rented. Over three hundred people attended, including Sangha friends from Holland.

Thay gave warm and inclusive teachings on mindfulness and the non-sectarian nature of Buddhist practice. The mindfulness day began at 5:30 with walking meditation to the auditorium while it was still dark. This was followed by sitting meditation, breakfast, and then a Dharma talk on the Four Mantras and how we can deal with our angry feelings. We had walking meditation in the park below the Institute and sat for a while together.

Future Retreats

We are now practicing the three-month winter retreat. Our doors are open for the local people to come and join us for walking and sitting meditation as well as two mindfulness days every week. We have an overnight retreat at the end of each month and go to the library to lead a two-hour session in basic mindfulness every week. Local people express their appreciation of the peace and joy they feel when they are with us.

*For the 700 people taken from
their home on 14 Nov. 1938*

Dear friends, dear children,

Seventy years ago, you were treated badly. They took you from your home and forced you into camps, they sterilized you so that you wouldn't have a continuation, and they killed many of you through euthanasia. The suffering was enormous. Not many people were aware of what was happening to you. You have suffered from that time on.

Now the Sangha has come, the Sangha has heard and understood your suffering and the injustice you endured. The Sangha has practiced mindful walking, sitting, breathing, and chanting. The Sangha has asked the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Patriarchs, and other great beings to transfer to you their merits and their freedom, so that you have a chance to be released from the injustice you suffered and re-manifest in beautiful new forms of life. The people who caused your suffering have also suffered a lot. They did not know what they were doing at that time. So please allow compassion and forgiveness to be born in your heart so that they also can have a chance to transform and to heal. Please support the Sangha and the next many generations of practitioners so that we can transform these places of suffering into places of transformation and healing, not only for Waldbröl but for the whole country of Germany and the world.

After the winter retreat we shall be organising more retreats. The Dutch Sanghas have already asked to organise a retreat for them on Buddhist psychology at the Institute.

Please let us know if you would like a retreat for your Sangha. Our e-mail address is eiabmcampus@gmail.com. And our temporary website is www.eiab-maincampus.org.

—Sister Annabel, True Virtue

A Report on the India Trip

The trip was divided into three parts: three nights each in Varanasi, Bodh Gaya, and Rajgir. We traveled in 11 buses with about 300 participants and 30 monastics. The trip was very well organized. Each bus was designated a number and color, and everyone got a cloth bag matching their bus color. Each group stuck together throughout the trip, staying in the same hotel, eating together, and meeting to exchange how the trip was going.

Varanasi

On October 20 we checked into our respective hotels in Varanasi, had lunch there, and went to the Tibetan Institute in Sarnath for a general introduction. The Tibetan Institute served as our home base for three days and is where the monastics stayed. On October 21 we visited the Sarnath Museum and had lunch at the Tibetan Institute. That afternoon Thich Nhat Hanh gave a public talk at Deer Park in Sarnath. Everyone sat in the shade of the Dhamekh Stupa, which commemorates where the Buddha gave his first teachings. Many monks from Sarnath were in attendance. Afterwards Thay led walking meditation around the ruins of the site, lasting long past sunset, so that we were walking much of the time in almost total darkness. The next morning, in 11 rented boats, we watched the sun rise over the Ganga while drifting slowly downstream. Even Thay came for the boat ride! That day we returned to the Tibetan Institute for lunch and for Thay's lecture to teachers who had been invited from the area.

Bodh Gaya

At 9:00 a.m. on the 23rd we boarded buses for the long ride to Bodh Gaya, where we arrived shortly before dinner. On the 24th we spent the day at the Mahabodhi tree temple for a public Day of Mindfulness, which was accompanied by some official fanfare (many children in uniforms, lots of lotus flowers). Thay gave a public speech attended by quite a number of people, including a large group of female teachers and a large group of monks. The Mahabodhi Society hosted everyone for lunch. Afterwards, Sister Chan Khong offered a session of Deep Relaxation and Touching the Earth. Shantum Seth (who organized the trip) led a tour of the temple grounds. The day ended with a candlelight procession, with the entire group doing walking meditation around the temple at three different levels successively. This was quite moving and beautiful.

On the 25th, we visited Sujata village across the Neranjara river, with a view of the Bodh Gaya temple. Sujata was the young

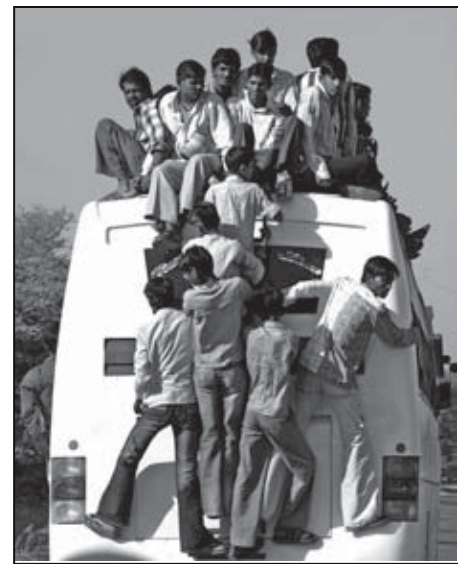
girl who found Siddhartha at the end of his most ascetic phase and offered him food daily. A podium had been prepared under a large bodhi tree, and Thay spoke about Siddhartha's experiences in the area. We were offered warm Kheer in bowls made of sal leaves. This is what Sujata had to offer Siddhartha on the first day she met him. The Ahimsa foundation (organizing the trip) has bought a plot of land here, where Thay planted four trees. Then we walked through the village, arousing quite a bit of curiosity. We spent time near the large stupa that commemorates Sujata, enjoying the view of mountains and rice fields — much like scenery in Vietnam! Lunch again at the Mahabodhi Society and an afternoon off. Some people visited the various Buddhist temples in Bodh Gaya.

Rajgir

On Sunday October 26 we departed Bodh Gaya at 8:00 a.m. headed for Rajgir in a caravan of 11 buses. The route we took was very rough and bumpy. Most of the way we traveled along one-lane dirt roads. The scenery was beautiful. Occasionally we wound through small enclaves of houses, not even villages, really. Children ran towards the buses waving their arms in great excitement, and women stopped their work to stare at the passing parade of buses filled with foreigners. I never figured out why we took this route. Were no larger roads available or convenient? Or did someone decide we should travel along the kind of path which the Buddha would have taken between Bodh Gaya and Rajgir? Probably neither the scenery nor the way of life has changed that much since then.

Late in the afternoon, we arrived in Rajgir and checked into our "hotels" in a rather strange complex housing a former (and future?) munitions factory. The whole scene was a bit unsettling — many modern buildings, all several stories high and empty, no people in sight anywhere, lots of power lines between us and the view of the mountains. But the three nights we spent there were good ones. Shortly after arriving at the hotel, we headed off to Gridhakuta Mountain. Vulture Peak there was one of the Buddha's favorite places. He and his main disciples are said to have had huts up there. King Bimbisara, the Buddha's first wealthy patron, built a path up to Vulture Peak and donated land nearby for the Buddha's first monastery, Bamboo Grove Monastery. We assembled at the start of this brick path and followed Thay up the mountain. There we watched the sun set, the monastics chanted quietly, and we walked back down in silence.

The next morning we all left at 5:00 for Bamboo Grove. This was a wonderful morning. The park was beautiful, the atmosphere very special. Thay led walking and sitting meditation. After breakfast, we headed to Nalanda University where Thay received an honorary doctorate and gave a speech — perfect speech. He



India photos by Bonnie Wiesner



described, among other things, how Buddhism can help restore communication in families and communities. He urged Buddhist scholars not to indulge excessively in intellectual debate. Instead they should make Buddhist teachings simple and applicable to daily life. Only in this way can interest in Buddhism be revived in India, the goal of the Nava Nalanda Mahavira. An elegant buffet lunch was served and then we visited the ruins of the ancient Buddhist site of learning. In the evening those who wished to could return to Bamboo Grove.

On the next day we departed before dawn for Gridhakuta Mountain. We walked up the brick path in complete darkness, carefully winding around cows lying or standing along the way, for sunrise meditation. Then Thay made some comments on a portable loudspeaker. We are lucky, he said, that we can enjoy the same sunset, the same vegetation, the same landscape as the Buddha did here. We can also look at this all with “Buddha eyes.” Later that morning Thay led the transmission ceremony for the Five Mindfulness Trainings. I had a view of the beautiful setting from above: to the left and right I could see green hills and trees; in the center was a kind of amphitheater formed by huge boulders where the monastics were seated, dressed in their yellow ceremonial robes. Afterwards we were free to spend the whole day up there together as we liked: in silence, in quiet mindful speech, meditating, or exploring about. I talked with friends, napped in the shade of a big rock, picked up some trash.



Thay receiving an honorary doctorate at Nalanda University

Late in the day we assembled again to watch the sunset. A small Japanese group carried out their own ceremony in front of the makeshift “altar” on Vulture peak. Our group just sat in silence. After they had finished taking pictures, we watched the sun set in

silence and then walked back down the mountain, also in silence. While descending, Thay turned around several times to look at the departing scenery. One time he turned around and bowed. Later we realized that this was his goodbye. That evening there was an elaborate buffet dinner for Diwali and a musical performance sponsored by the state of Bihar. The next morning buses left in several shifts to Patna, according to when people had flights and trains. After a day-long ride to Patna, we checked into a hotel for one night before our own flight to Frankfurt via Delhi.

Reflections

A few times before and during the trip, I became a bit uncomfortable with the whole idea of a pilgrimage. But repeatedly Thay returned to a theme which addressed exactly this matter: urging us to get in touch with the Buddha *inside* ourselves. Especially at Bodh Gaya, many people were performing loud and elaborate ceremonies, perhaps intended to get them in touch with *the* Buddha, the Buddha outside of them, the God Buddha. But Thay kept encouraging us to look inwards: to think, speak, breathe, walk, and act mindfully. This is what he always teaches regardless whether the location is southern France, the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, or Buddhist sites in Northern India!

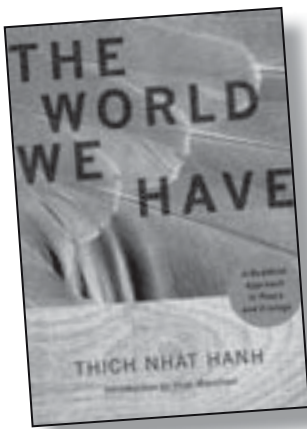
Sangha Mourns the Loss of Peter Kollock

Brother Phap De writes: “It is with deep sadness that I inform you of the death of Peter Kollock, UCLA professor, who was instrumental in developing the very successful College Student Retreats at Deer Park. Those of you who knew and worked with Peter found him to be our brother, friend, and teacher. He was an inspiration to his students and to professors from other universities, who followed his lead in taking the mindfulness practice into many universities.

“Peter was a very skillful and careful motorcycle rider. He had just said good-bye to his wife, Ellen, and, apparently, was on his way from Calabasas to UCLA. According to the police, Peter, was hit by a powerful cross wind, causing him to hit the curb. His body was catapulted into a tree, killing him instantly.

“Please keep Peter in your hearts, sending loving energy to him, Ellen, and family.”

Claire Venghiattis, Great Courage of the Heart, lives in Mannheim, Germany.



The World We Have

A Buddhist Approach to Peace and Ecology

By Thich Nhat Hanh

Parallax Press, 2008

Soft cover, 142 pages

*Reviewed by
Karen Hilsberg*

For many years, Thich Nhat Hanh has offered teachings about how we can make a future possible for ourselves and our descendants. Now people around the world have become acutely aware of the shaky ground on which we stand. Global warming, carbon emissions, soil depletion, extinction of species, deforestation, and dwindling of natural resources threaten our earth. The recent presidential election in America underscores that this is also a time of great hope and potential change. In this new book, Thich Nhat Hanh calls for a collective awakening. He offers clear instructions to help us give birth to that awakening and bring healing to ourselves, our human family, all species and Mother Earth.

Thay invokes the bodhisattva Dharanimdhara, or Earth Holder, who preserves and protects the earth — the energy that holds us together as an organism. She is a kind of engineer or architect who creates space for us to live in, builds bridges and constructs roads that lead to people we love. Her task is to promote interspecies communication and to protect the environment. We can empower engaged Buddhist practices in the twenty-first century, Thich Nhat Hanh tells us, with the tools that include the Five Mindfulness Trainings, the Four Noble Truths, the Four Nutriments, and the Five Remembrances.

Expanding on talks he has offered at retreats, our teacher tells us we can actually reverse the collision course on which we find ourselves. He writes, “When we begin this practice, we want things to be permanent and we think things have a separate self. Whenever things change, we suffer. To help us not to suffer, the Buddha gave us the truths of impermanence and non-self as keys. When we look at the impermanent and nonself nature of all things, we’re using those keys to open the door to reality, or nirvana. Then our fear and our suffering disappear ... that is why it is very important to deal with our fear and despair before we can deal with the issue of global warming or other environmental concerns. The Buddha is very clear about this: we have to heal ourselves first before we can heal the planet.”

The World We Have concludes with a section called “Practices for Mindful Living.” Here, we are offered Earth Gathas, Touching the Earth and Deep Relaxation

exercises, and an Earth Peace Treaty Commitment Sheet — this can be submitted to Deer Park Monastery along with the treaties of thousands of others who have made their commitment to heal the planet. We are given the hope to simplify our lives, conserve natural resources, eat lower on the food chain. This deep and meaningful text is published in a small pocket-sized edition, and is printed by Parallax on 100% post-consumer fiber.



What Book!?

Buddha Poems from Beat to Hip Hop

Edited by Gary Gach

Parallax Press, 2008

Softcover, 248 pages

Reviewed by Judith Toy

Reading Zen poetry is like turning yourself upside-down and letting all the change fall out of your pockets. Gary Gach, editor of *The Idiot’s Guide to Understanding Buddhism*, edited this anthology of Zen poems first issued in 1998, and now reissued by Parallax Press, *What Book!?: Buddha Poems from Beat to Hip Hop*.

Indeed, what poems? As I read these pages I smile, finding that the space around the words is the poem, or as integral as the words themselves. I feel a little like Mahakashyapa when he saw the Buddha holding a flower. From Lew Welch: “I saw myself/a ring of bone/in the clear stream/of all of it.” And from Arthur Sze: “We step outside, and the silence is as/water is, taking the shape of the container.” And from the celebrated Korean poet, Ko Un (pronounced Go Une), an answer to the classic koan, what was your face before you were born? “Before you were born/before your dad/before your mom//your burbling/was there.” A burbling of the preverbal word.

“A poet once located poetry as somewhere before or after words take place,” the editor writes. Thus one of the 84,000 Dharma doors is generously flung open to mindfulness, to liberation: verse — the root of which means turning.

With an introduction by Peter Coyote, who writes this collection helped him understand the scale of Buddhist influence on the “popular mind,” here is a Who’s Who of 143 poets of Buddhist renown and unknowns, alive and dead, beat and monastic and both. Offering verses that are keenly alive and well grouped under one cover, we hear the voices of Czeslaw Milosz, Maxine Hong Kingston, Philip Whalen, Bob Dylan, Allen Ginsberg, Chogyam Trungpa and Thich Nhat Hanh, almost as one voice. M.C. Richards

and Eve Merriam are among non-Buddhist westerners selected by Gach whose poems greet us with zen haiku and the reality of impermanence, respectively.

Allen Ginsberg says what this book means: "The whole body of the One Thus Come/falls in the raindrops and drips from the eaves." Thich Nhat Hanh's well-loved prose poem, "Interbeing," excerpted from *The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings*, says what this book means: "If you are a poet, you will see a cloud in this piece of paper." These are poems that allow us to transcend them. "As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe...."

Of special note is the "Visible Language" section, a short but sweet exhibit of calligraphy, altar (shape) poems and brush drawings, including work by Thich Nhat Hanh, Peter Bailey, Shunryu Suzuki, and my old favorite Paul Reps, among others. One of Reps' drawings shows a Buddha in brush strokes with a straight, ruled line down the center of his head and body. "Open Here," is the inscription below. I heartily recommend to students of the Buddha to *Open* this book *Here*.

And of note...

By Judith Toy


Worlds in Harmony: Compassionate Action for a Better World, by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Parallax Press,

2008, softbound, 108 pages, abridged from three days of dialogue between His Holiness and seven renowned helping professionals at the Harmonia Mundi conference in Newport Beach California, October, 1989. In his foreword, Daniel Goleman, Ph.D., author of *Emotional Intelligence*, reminds us that those of us alive now are the first generation in human history to glimpse the possibility of the end of our world. From the premise that this insight is of no use unless it results in action, His Holiness speaks with us person to person to teach us precisely how to save ourselves and the planet through compassion and loving kindness. He teaches us to be, think, and act as citizens of the world in ways that are based on equanimity and understanding. This book is also a guide to the practice of healing and compassionate action in daily life.

Hope Is An Open Heart, by Lauren Thompson, Scholastic Press, 2008, hardcover, 32 pages, illustrated by various photographers; a children's picture book. Lauren Thompson practices with Rock Blossom Sangha in Brooklyn, New York, part of the New York Metro Community of Mindful Living. She is a best-selling, award-winning children's author. This book is dedicated to her Rock Blossom sister Alison who died at age 42 of brain cancer. The author wrote to me, "Though she was not ready to die, and had little reason to hope for a future at all, she found the most peace by focusing on the joy of the present moment." This gorgeously illustrated book of few words invites its readers into the beauty and wonder of the present moment.

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Buddhism, Second Edition, by Gary Gach, Alpha, 2004, softbound, 390 pages. In a light-hearted voice, this chock-full compendium presents the life and teachings of the Buddha and explains how they spread and adapted to different cultures. It includes an introduction to meditation and explanations of the Three Jewels, the Four Noble Truths, and the Eightfold Path. Gach, a student of Thich Nhat Hanh, also includes insights into Buddhism's cross-religious influences and a chronology of Buddhist history. Most important is the Buddhist perspective on why we suffer and what we can do to be free. As Thich Nhat Hanh says about this book, "It will bring a smile to us all."

The Plum Village Cook Book, by monks and nuns of Plum Village, Thich Nhat Hanh's monastery in Southern France, published by Plum Village, 2008, softbound, 66 pages; illustrated with full-color photographs. In this little kitchen treasure, readers are invited to visit Plum Village to see firsthand how the brothers and sisters "cook vegetarian food mindfully, joyfully and calmly, which might be an inspiration for you." Most of the ingredients used in these all-veggie recipes can be found at your local [American] grocer; some items such as black and white fungus, veggie ham, and veggie fish can be found at an Asian market or online. Recipes use the European metric system, so some cooks may need a U.S.-to-metric conversion table. But it's well worth it to experiment with these tasty dishes that many of us have enjoyed at Thich Nhat Hanh's monasteries.



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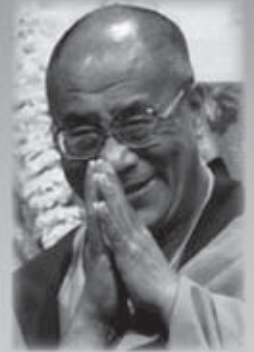
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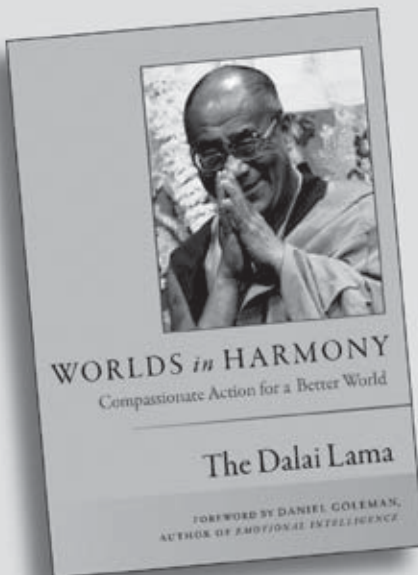
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The Dalai Lama

Foreword by Daniel Goleman, author of Emotional Intelligence

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