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“Please Call Me By My True Names”

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Abstract: A short biography (courtesy of Parallax Press) of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, poet, Zen master, and human rights activist, followed by his poem “Please Call Me by My True Names,” written in 1978 and reprinted here by kind permission from *Call Me By My True Names*, by Thich Nhat Hanh, Parallax Press (Berkeley, CA, 1999). The poem was written following Thich Nhat Hanh’s long meditation after reading a letter received from Vietnamese refugees telling the story of a fleeing twelve year old girl who drowned herself after being raped by a Thai pirate on a small boat.

ABOUT THICH NHAT HANH¹

One of the best known and most respected Zen masters in the world today, poet, and peace and human rights activist, Thich Nhat Hanh (called Thay by his students) has led an extraordinary life. Born in central Vietnam in 1926 he joined the monkhood at the age of sixteen. The Vietnam War confronted the monasteries with the question of whether to adhere to the contemplative life and remain meditating in the monasteries, or to help the villagers suffering under bombings and other devastation of the war. Nhat Hanh was one of those who chose to do both, helping to found the “engaged Buddhism” movement. His life has since been dedicated to

the work of inner transformation for the benefit of individuals and society.

In Saigon in the early ‘60s, Thich Nhat Hanh founded the School of Youth Social Service, a grass-roots relief organization that rebuilt bombed villages, set up schools and medical centers, resettled homeless families, and organized agricultural cooperatives. Rallying some 10,000 student volunteers, the SYSS based its work on the Buddhist principles of non-violence and compassionate action. Despite government denunciation of his activity, Nhat Hanh also founded a Buddhist University, a publishing house, and an influential peace activist magazine in Vietnam.

After visiting the U.S. and Europe in 1966 on a peace mission, he was banned from returning to Vietnam in 1966. On subsequent travels to the U.S., he made the case for peace to federal and Pentagon officials including Robert McNamara. He may have changed the course of U.S. history when he persuaded Martin Luther King, Jr.

¹ Reprint Courtesy of Parallax Press, <http://www.plumvillage.org/HTML/ourteacher.html>. Many thanks to Sister Pine, of the Plum Village in France, for suggesting the reprinting of Thich Nhat Hanh poem, “Please Call me by My True Names” in this issue of *Human Architecture*.

to oppose the Vietnam War publicly, and so helped to galvanize the peace movement. The following year, King nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize. Subsequently, Nhat Hanh led the Buddhist delegation to the Paris Peace Talks.

In 1982 he founded Plum Village, a Buddhist community in exile in France, where he continues his work to alleviate suffering of refugees, boat people, political prisoners, and hungry families in Vietnam and throughout the Third World. He has also received recognition for his work with Vietnam veterans, meditation retreats, and his prolific writings on meditation, mindfulness, and peace. He has published some 85 titles of accessible poems, prose, and prayers, with more than 40 in English, including the best selling *Call Me by My True Names*, *Peace Is Every Step*, *Being Peace*, *Touching Peace*, *Living Buddha Living Christ*, *Teachings on Love*, *The Path of Emancipation*, and *Anger*.

In September 2001, just a few days after the suicide terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, he addressed the issues of non-violence and forgiveness in a memorable speech at Riverside Church in New York City. In September of 2003 he addressed members of the US Congress, leading them through a two-day retreat.

Thich Nhat Hanh continues to live in Plum Village in the meditation community he founded, where he teaches, writes, and gardens; and he leads retreats worldwide on “the art of mindful living.”

Thich Nhat Hanh's key teaching is that, through mindfulness, we can learn to live in the present moment instead of in the past and in the future. Dwelling in the present moment is, according to Nhat Hanh, the only way to truly develop peace, both in one's self and in the world.

How to pronounce Thich Nhat Hanh? The English pronunciation is: Tik · N'yat · Hawn. However since Vietnamese is a tonal language, this is only a close approximation for how one would pronounce it in

Vietnamese. By his students he is affectionately known as Thay (pronounced “Tay” or “Tie”), which is Vietnamese for “teacher.”

EDITOR'S NOTE

The rendering of the poem “Please Call Me By My True Names” as reproduced on the next page, was published in *Call Me By My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* by The Parallax Press (Berkeley, CA) in 1999. In an introduction to a different edition of the same poem—published in *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* by Thich Nhat Hanh (Foreword by H. H. Dalai Lama, Bantam Books, New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland, 1992) Thich Nhat Hanh writes,

In Plum Village, where I live in France, we receive many letters from the refugee camps in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, hundreds each week. It is very painful to read them, but we have to do it, we have to be in contact. We try our best to help, but the suffering is enormous, and sometimes we are discouraged. ... 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. ... After a long meditation, I wrote this poem” (121-122).

PLEASE CALL ME BY MY TRUE NAMES

Don't say that I will depart tomorrow—
even today I am still arriving.

Look deeply: every second I am arriving
to be a bud on a Spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
to fear and to hope.
The rhythm of my heart is the birth and
death
of all that are alive.

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

I am the frog swimming happily
in the clear water of pond.
And I am also the grass-snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and
bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.
And I am the arms merchant
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl,
refugee on a small boat.
who throws herself into the ocean
after being raped by a sea pirate.
And I am the pirate,
my heart not yet capable
of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the politburo,
with plenty of power in my hands,
And I am the man who has to pay
his "debt of blood" to my people
dying slowly in a forced-labor camp.

My joy is like Spring, so warm
it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
My pain is like a river of tears,
so vast it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughs at
once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

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

—Thich Nhat Hanh

This poem was written in 1978, during the time of helping the boat people. It was first read at a retreat in Kosmos Center in Amsterdam, Holland, organized by Niko Tideman. Daniel Berrigan was there.

(Reprint courtesy of the Parallax Press.)