

EYES OF COMPASSION

*Learning from
Thich Nhat Hanh*

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THERE
ARE TWO
WAYS
TO WASH
THE DISHES:
ONE WAY IS
TO WASH THEM
TO GET THEM
CLEAN;
& THE OTHER
WAY
IS TO WASH
THEM
IN ORDER TO
WASH THE DISHES.

what.hank

Washing dishes _____

I was in a cramped apartment in the outskirts of Paris in the early 1970s crowded with Vietnamese refugees plus one or two English-speaking guests. At the heart of the community was the poet and Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, whose name at that time wasn't widely known. An animated discussion was going on in the main room just out of earshot, but I had been given the task that evening of doing the washing up. The pots, pans, and rice bowls seemed to reach half way to the ceiling in that closet-sized kitchen. I felt really annoyed. Stuck with an infinity of dirty dishes, I was missing the main event.

Somehow Nhat Hanh picked up on my irritation. Suddenly he was standing next to me. "Jim," he asked, "why are you washing the dishes?" I knew I was suddenly facing one of those very tricky Zen questions. Saying it was my turn wasn't adequate. I tried to think of a good Zen answer, but all I could come up with was, "You should wash the dishes to get them clean." "No," said Nhat Hanh. "You should wash the dishes to wash the dishes." I've been mulling over that answer ever since—more than four decades of mulling. I'm still in the dark. But what he said next was instantly helpful: "You should wash each dish

as if it were the baby Jesus.” That sentence was a flash of lightning.

While I still mostly wash the dishes to get them clean, every now and then I find I am, just for a passing moment, “washing the baby Jesus.” I have recovered the awareness that sacred space includes the kitchen sink. And when that happens, though I haven’t left the kitchen, it’s something like reaching the Mount of the Beatitudes after a very long walk, in part thanks to the guidance of a Buddhist monk from Vietnam.



One action _____

I first met Thich Nhat Hanh in May 1966.

At the time Lyndon Johnson was America’s president. The steadily rising level of U.S. troops in Vietnam reached 384,300 that year and within the next eighteen months would expand to half a million. But support for the war was shrinking. The nation had become deeply divided—never before had so many Americans opposed a war being fought by their own government. There were huge protest demonstrations in many cities. Conscientious objection was on the rise; thousands were refusing to serve in the military. Young men were burning their draft cards or crossing the border to Canada.

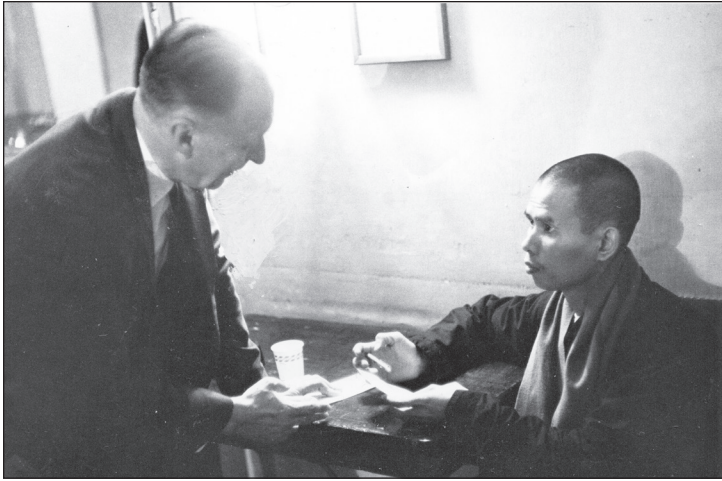
A significant part of the war’s opposition was religious. In America the ranks of protesters included many prominent Christians and Jews, while in Vietnam tens of



Vietnamese villagers hiding in a canal

thousands of Buddhists, many of them monks whose monasteries had been scarred by war, were engaged in antiwar activities. Display of the Buddhist flag had been banned. In 1963, one leading Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, had stunned the world when he burned himself alive in response to anti-Buddhist repression by the U.S.-backed Saigon government.

In July 1965, Al Hassler, executive secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation,¹ had led a fact-finding mission to Vietnam that included meetings in Saigon with Buddhist leaders who had organized demonstrations that had been brutally attacked by South Vietnamese police. The monk who most impressed Hassler was the Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. A friendship quickly took root between them that was to influence the rest of both men's lives. Hassler wanted Nhat Hanh's voice to be heard in America.



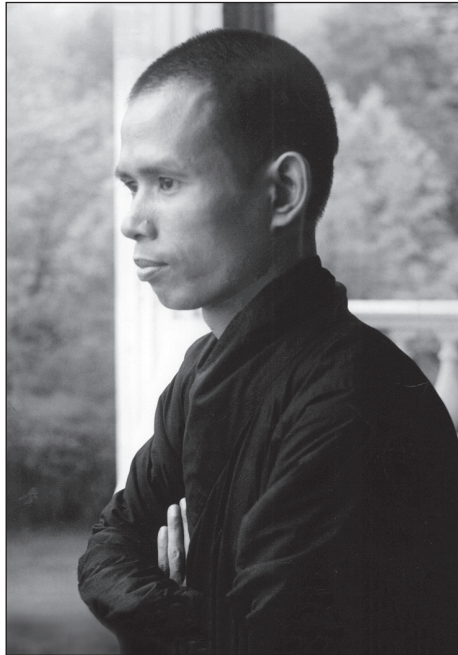
Alfred Hassler and Thich Nhat Hanh together in Saigon in 1965

When I met Thich Nhat Hanh at the Fellowship of Reconciliation headquarters in Nyack, New York, he was thirty-nine and I was twenty-four. I had just been appointed director of the Fellowship's Vietnam program while also serving as co-secretary of the Catholic Peace Fellowship.

In introducing him to the FOR staff, Al Hassler explained that Nhat Hanh was the leading figure in the development of "engaged Buddhism," a movement of religious renewal that linked insights gained from Buddhist teaching to hands-on engagement in situations of suffering. He was a founder of Van Hanh University in Saigon and had played a leading role in efforts to bring the several strands of Vietnamese Buddhism into greater harmony, resulting in the creation of the Unified Buddhist Church. He was also the initiator of the School of Youth for Social Service, which prepared hundreds of young Vietnamese

volunteers to serve in war-torn rural communities. In Vietnam he was a widely read author, though almost unknown outside his homeland. None of his twelve volumes of poetry or other writings had yet been published in English or other Western languages.

This was not Nhat Hanh's first visit to the United States, Hassler added. For nearly three years he had studied comparative religion at Princeton and lectured on Buddhism at Columbia University. His current U.S. visit had been made possible by an invitation to speak at Cornell University.



*Thich Nhat Hanh in 1966.
Publicity photo by Al Hassler used by the
Fellowship of Reconciliation*

Addressing the Fellowship staff, Nhat Hanh described the impact of the war on ordinary Vietnamese people, the obliteration of entire villages, and the actions of the Buddhist-led peace movement that allied itself with neither side. His stress was not on politics but on war-caused suffering. “The fact that the war kills far more innocent peasants than it does Vietcong is a tragic reality of life in the Vietnamese countryside,” Nhat Hanh said. “Those who escape death by bombings are forced to abandon their destroyed villages and seek shelter in refugee camps where life is even more miserable than it was in the villages. In general these people do not blame the Vietcong for their plight. It is the men in the planes who drop death and destruction from the skies who appear to them to be their enemies. How can they see it otherwise?”

I was impressed not only by what Nhat Hanh had to say about his homeland but by his entire manner. He was as modest as the dark brown monastic robe he was wearing. When questions were raised, he looked at whomever he was addressing with alert, unhurried, attentive eyes. He spoke slowly, carefully, sparingly in Vietnamese-flavored English. His quiet voice reminded me of wind bells. There were restful silences between words and phrases. Afterward I said to Al Hassler, “I could listen to this guy for hours even if he were reading aloud from a telephone book.” Al laughed. “Me too!”

I don’t recall Nhat Hanh speaking of “mindfulness” that day, a word with which his name, five decades later, would become firmly grafted, nor did it occur to me that his teaching would circle the world, important not only to his fellow Buddhists but to many Christians and Jews, plus people who attached no religious labels to themselves.

It certainly didn't cross my mind that he would become a widely read author whose books would sell in the millions of copies. At the time, I saw him not as a religious teacher but as a peace advocate. But I left the meeting deeply impressed, aware that this humble monk from Vietnam was the sort of person who changes lives.

At the end of his informal talk, Nhat Hanh recited one of his poems:

Listen to this:

*Yesterday the Vietcong came through my village.
Because of this my village was bombed—completely
destroyed.*

Every soul was killed.

*When I come back to the village now, the day after,
There is nothing to see but clouds of dust and the river,
still flowing.*

*The pagoda has neither roof nor altar,
Only the foundations of houses are left.
The bamboo thickets have been burned away.*

*Here in the presence of the undisturbed stars,
In the invisible presence of all the people still alive on
earth,*

*Let me raise my voice to denounce this filthy war,
The murder of brothers by brothers!
I have a question: Who pushed us into this killing of one
another?*

*Whoever is listening, be my witness!
I cannot accept this war,
I never could, I never shall.
I must say this a thousand times before I am killed.*

*I feel I am like that bird which dies for the sake of its mate
 Dripping blood from its broken beak, and crying out:
 Beware! Turn around to face your real enemies –
 Ambition, violence, hatred, greed.*

*Men cannot be our enemies—even men called “Vietcong”!
 If we kill men, what brothers will we have left?
 With whom shall we live then?*

In the question period, I asked Nhat Hanh if a monk's self-immolation is approved of in Buddhist tradition. “While the world press speaks of it as suicide,” he responded, “in essence it is not. What Thich Quang Duc was aiming at when he burned himself three years ago was to move the hearts of the oppressors and call the attention of the world to the suffering being endured by the Vietnamese people, most of whom are Buddhists. To burn oneself is to prove that what one is saying is of the utmost importance. By burning himself, the monk is saying with all his strength that he can endure the greatest suffering in order to protect his people. To express his will by self-immolation is not to commit an act of despair or destruction but to perform an act of construction—to suffer and to die for the sake of one's people. This is not suicide.”

I also asked him about his name. “I was born with a different name, Nguyen Xuan Bao,” he responded. “Your family name comes first. ‘Nguyen’ is my family name and ‘Xuan Bao’ the name I was given at birth, but when you are ordained as a monk you receive a new name. ‘Thich’ is the Vietnamese form of the Sanskrit family name of the Buddha. All Vietnamese monks are ‘Thich.’ My personal name, given to me when I was ordained, is ‘Nhat Hanh.’ It means ‘one action.’”



Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation

Afterward, he asked me about the Catholic Peace Fellowship, adding that “in Vietnam few Catholics are peace workers.” We were, I explained, a group affiliated with the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Our main work was assisting young Catholics who, refusing to take part in war, were seeking recognition as conscientious objectors. We were counseling hundreds of people every month. In addition we were also organizing what we called “Meals of Reconciliation.” These were simple dinners, often held in church basements, in which participants shared rice and tea plus a few examples of Vietnamese cookery while hearing readings from Vietnamese literature—in fact mainly translations of poems written by Nhat Hanh—and listening to speakers who has witnessed first hand the destruction the war was causing. We hoped participants might leave these meals in a state of deeper connection with Vietnam that would strengthen their antiwar commitment. The

Fellowship of Reconciliation was now greatly expanding the Meals of Reconciliation project, making it ecumenical and interreligious.

“We need a Catholic Peace Fellowship in the Catholic Church of Vietnam,” Nhat Hanh commented.



Brother against brother _____

Thanks to their conversations in Saigon in 1965, Al Hassler had realized that Thich Nhat Hanh had the potential to help pro-war Americans, including legislators, rethink their Cold-War perceptions about what was happening in Vietnam. Nhat Hanh's first public appearance was on the first of June 1966—a press conference in Washington at which he presented a Vietnamese Buddhist proposal for ending the war.

Nhat Hanh prefaced the plan with the reassurance that he was not anti-American. “It is precisely because I have a great respect and admiration for America that I have undertaken this long voyage to your country, a voyage that entails great personal risk for me upon my return to South Vietnam. Yet I assume this risk willingly because I have faith that if the American public can begin to understand something of what the Vietnamese people feel about what is happening in our country, much of the unnecessary tragedy and misery being endured by both our peoples might be eliminated. . . . If anti-Americanism seems to be emerging as a focus for some of the recent protests, it is because the Vietnamese people recognize that it is really only the awesome U.S. power that enables the Saigon government

to rule without a popular mandate and to follow policies contrary to the aspirations of the Vietnamese people. This is not the independence for which the Vietnamese people fought so valiantly [against France's colonial ambitions until the French defeat in 1954]. The war in Vietnam today pits brother against brother, the Vietcong against the supporters of the Saigon government. Both sides claim to represent the Vietnamese people, but in reality, neither side does."²

Thich Nhat Hanh's five-point peace proposal called for the United States to make a clear statement of its desire to help the Vietnamese people to have a government truly responsive to Vietnamese aspirations; end the bombing in both North and South Vietnam; limit all military operations by U.S. and South Vietnamese forces to defensive actions; make a convincing demonstration of its intention to withdraw its forces from Vietnam over a specified period of months; and begin a generous effort to help repair the destruction that has been wreaked upon Vietnam. Nhat Hanh described the plan as "a third way" that did not "pit brother against brother." Among the principle obstacles to peace, Nhat Hanh said, was America's support for "those elements which appear to be most devoted to U.S. wishes for Vietnam's future" rather than the wishes of the Vietnamese people themselves.³

Following up on the press conference, the FOR staff arranged a series of meetings for Nhat Hanh with influential figures—key religious leaders, senators and congressmen, editors of the *New York Times* and other major newspapers, and even Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. A cross-country lecture trip followed. By 1967, Nhat Hanh was becoming widely known as an independent Vietnamese



Press conference in Washington on June 1, 1966

voice representing not only Buddhists but all those who were victims of the war in Southeast Asia.

Wherever he went, Nhat Hanh impressed and disarmed those he met. His gentleness, intelligence, and sanity, plus his fluency in English, made it impossible for most who encountered him to hang on to their stereotypes of what the Vietnamese were like. Not only did his peace proposals make sense, but the vast treasury of Vietnamese culture and Buddhism spilled over through his stories, poetry, and explanations. His interest in Christianity, even his enthusiasm for it, often inspired Christians to shed their condescension toward Nhat Hanh's Buddhist tradition. In the course of his lecture trips, he was able to help thousands of Americans glimpse the war through the

eyes of Vietnamese peasants, neither Communist nor anti-Communist, who were laboring in rice paddies and raising their families in villages surrounded by ancient groves of bamboo. After an hour with Nhat Hanh, many who met him were filled with anguish at America's military intervention in the tribulations of the Vietnamese people. No ideology could justify the horror of the skies raked with bombers, houses and humans burned to ash, and children left to face life without the presence and love of their parents and grandparents.

Predictably, Nhat Hanh's peace activities were not appreciated by the U.S.-backed government of South Vietnam. He was denounced as a traitor by several generals, while the Hanoi regime accused him of being pro-American. Warned by friends in Vietnam that he would be in grave danger should he return home, he found himself in exile. What was to have been a three-month absence made him an expatriate for more than forty years.



Everything is destroyed _____

One of the persons Nhat Hanh had long hoped to meet while in the United States was Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and widely read author who was known for his opposition to war and also for his deep respect for Buddhism. In late May 1966, Merton welcomed Nhat Hanh, plus John Heidbrink of the Fellowship of Reconciliation staff, to the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky for a two-day visit.

The two monks stayed up late into the night in Merton's hermitage, sharing the chant of their respective traditions, discussing methods of prayer and meditation, comparing Christian and Buddhist aspects of monastic formation, and talking about the war.

Merton started their exchange by asking what the war was doing to Vietnam. "Everything is destroyed," Nhat Hanh replied. This was, Merton told the Trappist novices in a lecture a few days later, truly a monk's answer—no long-winded political bla-bla-bla, but the situation encapsulated in just three stark words: "Everything is destroyed. Bang. Period."

They discussed the different religious systems in which they were formed and the importance of building bridges connecting each other's tradition. Monastic formation, Nhat Hanh said, had much to do with discovering the significance of "insignificant" activities: cutting vegetables, gardening, pulling weeds, sweeping floors, washing dishes, waiting in line, walking from here to there, paying attention to day-shaping bells.

Merton was impressed by Nhat Hanh's comment that it doesn't help to rush from a "less sacred to a more sacred" part of the monastery where, once you arrive, you change gears and move more reverently. "Before you can meditate," Nhat Hanh told Merton and Merton told his young novices, "you must learn how to close the door." The novices laughed, aware of how often they ran to the church in order to be on time to chant the monastic offices, leaving behind them a trail of slammed doors.⁴

"Thich Nhat Hanh is a perfectly formed monk," Merton said to his fellow Trappists. He regarded his guest's arrival as an answer to a prayer. "In meeting Thich Nhat Hanh," Merton said, "I felt I had met Vietnam."