



Advisor and Editor Managing Editor Design and Typesetting

Copy Editors/Proofreaders

Photographers

Front cover

Back cover

Inside front cover

Brother Pháp Lưu Heather Weightman

Katie Eberle

Leslie Rawls, Miranda

Jess Brown, Sarah Lane

Brother Nhất Ấn, Wouter Verhoeven (Evermind Media), and the Deer Park Monastics

Perrone,

Video still of flowering agave with

bees and moon by Kenley Neufeld Title calligraphy by Brother Pháp Dung

Photo by Sister Hướng Nghiêm

On the banks of the Smith River, Pastel,

Brother Minh Niệm

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#### HIDDEN MOUNTAIN RECORD

## The Annual Deer Park Monastery Newsletter ISSUE 1 - 2023

The Great Hidden Mountain above the rising tide of the Ocean of Peace sheds its cloak of fog—and piercing sun rays illuminate oak, boulder, snake, sage, and coyote.

Find here its record.

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### Review of the Year

The Rains Retreat started in September 2022, immediately following the ordination of novice monks Nhất Hướng, of Montana, and Nhất Ấn, of Montreal, Canada. We hosted visiting monks from Plum Village Đạo Phương, Đức Trí, and Bảo Tạng. Every Wednesday night lay friends and monastics joined a class in person and online on Public Health and Collective Awakening, looking into Thay's teachings on public health; the course was taught by Brother Pháp Lưu. Monastics went up the mountain every other Thursday for sitting meditation and breakfast. English classes were offered for the new sisters in Clarity by Sister Đẳng Nghiêm, Brother Pháp Lưu, and Kenley. In total the Rains Retreat included around fifty monastics and fifty lay friends who stayed for the entire three months.

On October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022, Deer Park hosted its first Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos) celebration, with a Dharma talk on our ancestors and teachers by Brothers Pháp Lưu and Đức Trí, followed by a Day of Gratitude on Thanksgiving Day in the Oak Grove to honor our land ancestors, with an outdoor Dharma talk by Brother Pháp Dung.

On the day when most people plunge into a desperate search for deals online and in shops, Black Friday, we hosted the Make Black Friday Brown alternative live event on Zoom, encouraging people to stay home and enjoy community together with us instead of buying things they don't need.

Our first fundraiser to support the new monks' building was a Mindful Hiking Fundraiser, which attracted over four hundred people to the monastery at the beginning of





December 2022.

There was a Christmas Eve Dharma talk with Brother Pháp Lưu and a joyful Christmas Day celebration with all the monastics in the Tea House of Solidity Hamlet. Brother Pháp Dung gave the New Year's Eve talk, followed by a ceremony with a new text to honor Thầy's passing in 2022 and practice to begin anew in the Solar New Year.

A delegation traveled to Vietnam for the ceremony marking the first anniversary of Thầy's passing, the Lễ Tiểu Tường, including Brothers Pháp Dung, Mãn Tuệ, and Pháp Lưu, and Sisters Đẳng Nghiêm, Thần Nghiêm, Huyền Hậu, and Thanh Đoan. Deer Park also held a celebration of the Lễ Tiểu Tường at home.

The Lunar New Year of the Cat was celebrated at Deer Park with readings from the Kiều Oracle and room visitations to Solidity and Clarity Hamlets.

In February, Brothers Minh Niệm and Minh Địa, along with Sister Thanh Đoan, traveled to Plum Village Thailand with the support of Brothers Pháp Dung and Pháp Lưu for the Great Ordination Ceremony to receive the bhikshu and bhikshuni precepts.

In March, a Mindful Backpacking Retreat was offered in adjacent Daley Ranch and Dixon Lake, with forty people including five nuns and four monks camping beside the lake and on the mountain overlooking the hidden valley of Deer Park.

The Wake Up Earth Retreat welcomed around two hundred young people in the beginning of April 2023, with Dharma talks by Brother Pháp Dung, Sister Đẳng Nghiêm, and Brother Ngộ Không.

Deer Park hosted the first Rhythm of the Earth Mindful Music Festival, following a four-day retreat for musicians, to raise funds for the new monks' residence. The festival began outside of the Ocean of Peace Meditation Hall with monastics and lay friends in the Triple Jam Band, after which we walked to the Oak Grove for Trio of Strings and Nigel Armstrong, concertmaster of the Santa Cruz Symphony. The monastic choir offered chanting in the Ocean of Peace Meditation Hall before a dedication ceremony on the land of the new building. The main performances included Joe Reilly and Alex Cline, both lay Dharma teachers, and Makeda Cheatom and the WorldBeat Cultural Center ensemble featuring Dramane Kone. Over seven hundred people attended.

In April, ten monastics traveled to Dartmouth College for a week of activities including a public talk, daily morning sitting meditations with more than one hundred students and staff, visitations in classes in Buddhist meditation theory, women in Buddhism, and mindful physiology. They also hosted a Wake Up event on Friday afternoon with about eighty stu-

dents, and a weekend retreat with one hundred students, staff, and local practitioners.

The following week Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health held a symposium to inaugurate the Thích Nhất Hạnh Center for Mindfulness in Public Health. The Deer Park delegation traveled from Dartmouth to Harvard to lead the mindfulness activities during the symposium along with delegations from Plum Village, Magnolia Grove Monastery, and Blue Cliff Monastery. Brother Pháp Ân, Brother Pháp Lưu, and Sister Hiến Nghiêm were invited to speak along with the distinguished scientists from around the world, including Jon Kabat-Zinn, Willem Kuyken, David Vago, Alia Crum, and Elli Weisbaum. The new center has received a twenty-five-million-dollar anonymous endowment to be a world leader in mindfulness research, teaching, and practice, with the support of monastics in the Plum Village Tradition. Denise Nguyen of the Thích



Nhất Hạnh Foundation helped to organize the inclusion of the monastic delegations from around the world in the event.

Deer Park celebrated Vesak with lay friends in early May 2023, mindfully pouring water over the baby Buddha statue while chanting.

Sister Chân Không, who led the Plum Village delegation in Boston, came to Deer Park following visits to Blue Cliff and Magnolia Grove in May on her tour through the United States. She led the Learning True Love Retreat in May, with over 150 people, and also had an intimate session with forty young Wake Uppers to discuss starting the School of Youth for Social Service in Vietnam, and how such a program could be started at Deer Park.

In the end of May, the Sanghas in Orange County and Los Angeles helped organize a Dāna Day of Mindfulness with the Beloved Community in Mile Square Park to build bridges between the generations of Vietnamese as well as between non-Vietnamese and Vietnamese Sanghas. The event was a successful fundraiser for the new monks' residence.

The monastics drove to Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park for the yearly Sangha outing, enjoying one week of camping, walking mindfully as a Sangha through the Redwoods, and sitting in meditation on the quiet northern California beaches with coves and rock cliffs.

The annual Family Retreat in June, titled Peace in Every Step, Freedom in Every Smile this year, welcomed more than three hundred guests, with talks by Sisters Thần Nghiêm and Đẳng Nghiêm, and Brother Pháp Dung. Families joyfully performed songs, skits, and poetry at the "be-in" under the moon in our campground amphitheater. The children and teens played games, enjoyed walks up the mountain, and learned basic practices of mindfulness to

take care of difficult emotions.

The Teen Camp in July, titled Be a Real Human, welcomed over 150 teens-record numbers for the retreat—who camped with the monastics in large tents. They woke up early each morning to enjoy quiet tea by the campfire before walking mindfully to sitting meditation in the Ocean of Peace Meditation Hall. One night was dedicated to deep listening sessions for male, female, and rainbow groups of teens; here they could open their hearts to share about their most profound difficulties and be able to heal, thanks to the energy of compassionate listening generated by the monastics and other teens. The teens gave up their electronic devices for the entire week of the retreat, allowing them to establish real human connections with the monastics, staff, and each other.

The US Tour across the three monasteries in North America began in August at Blue Cliff Monastery. A delegation of 130 monastics from all three US centers traveled to New York to support the Family Retreat, which included activities for educators, and the Vietnamese-speaking retreat there. The monastics enjoyed drinking tea on the Shawangunk Ridge cliffs overlooking the monastery, went canoeing on the Delaware River together, and spent a day mindfully visiting New York City.

Magnolia Grove Monastery was next on the tour, and the united American monastic community hosted a combined English and Vietnamese-speaking family retreat, with talks by Brother Pháp Khôi, Sister Hỷ Nghiêm, and Brother Pháp Lưu, and a retreat for healthcare professionals. The monastics had an opportunity to build siblinghood with a day on the shores of Sardis Lake and deepened their understanding of the suffering of this land with a day of visiting the National Civil Rights Muse-

um in Memphis, Tennessee, at the site of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination.

The last stop on the US Tour was Deer Park Monastery in September, where the American delegation of monastics ordained six new North American monastics. The Toyon Family of newly ordained novices includes two Canadian novices, and four from the US: Nhất Lâm, Ân Hạnh, Thuần Hạnh, Nhất Thiên, Nhất Điền, and Nhất Sơn.

They then hosted the annual science retreat, The Buddha the Scientist, with the theme Public Health and Collective Awakening, with a number of scientists invited from Harvard, Dartmouth, and Brown Universities. The retreat finished with a symposium where the scientists spoke about their experience in the retreat in the light of their area of research. Scientists attending included Dr. Lilian Cheung of Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health (Thầy's co-author on Savor), Dr. Eric Loucks of Brown University, Dr. Vish Viswanath of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Dr. Diane Gilbert-Diamond of Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth College, Dr. Juliet Hwang (a pediatrician and lay Dharma teacher

in Los Angeles), Dr. Ryan Niemiec of the VIA Institute on Character, Dr. Solomon Diamond of the Thayer Engineering School at Dartmouth College, and Dr. Michelle Williams (former Dean of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health). Brother Pháp Dung, Sister Đẳng Nghiêm, and Brother Pháp Lưu gave talks to introduce the scientists to Buddhist psychology and how to experiment in our own practice of mindfulness. This was followed by a retreat for Vietnamese speakers, with talks by H.T. Phuoc Tinh, Sister Hy Nghiêm, and Thầy Pháp Lạc.

The US Tour finished with a monastic retreat at Deer Park, with the monks and nuns playing on Escondido Rock in the early morning, sitting in meditation together in the Ocean of Peace Meditation Hall, and sessions of looking deeply into how to root the Plum Village tradition in America.

On October 22<sup>nd</sup>, Deer Park held the Varṣavasana Ceremony to open the 2023-4 Rains Retreat, with ninety-eight monastics and lay practitioners committing to stay until January 14, 2024.



I calligraphed this deep aspiration of this particular Bodhisattva Sadāparibhūta, aware that 2024 will be an election year, as well as being mindful of the mental health crisis of our young generation in America and throughout the world. Please use this text as a reminder of what to practice during the year. Place it somewhere visible in your home to remind us to not lose hope even in the most trying times, and to be steadfast in our practice of patience and inclusiveness to offer freedom, joy, and peace to ourselves and others throughout 2024.

BY BROTHER PHÁP DUNG

# Sadaparibhuta Never Disparaging Bodhisattva

We invoke your name, Sadaparibhuta.
We aspire to learn your way of never doubting or underestimating any fiving being.

With great respect, you say to all you meet, "You are someone of great value, you have Buddha nature, i see this potential in you."

Libre you, we will fook with a wise, compassionate gaze, so we are able to hold up a mirror where others can see their uffimate nature reflected.

We will remind people who feel worthless that they too are a precious wonder of life.

We vow to water only the positive seeds in ourselves and in others, so that our thoughts, words, and actions can encourage confidence and self-acceptance in ourselves, our children, our foved ones, and in everyone we meet.

Inspired by the great faith and insight that everyone is Buddha, we will practice your way of patience and inclusiveness so we can liberate ourselves from ignorance and misunderstanding, and offer freedom, peace, and joy to ourselves, to others and to our society.













THE FIRST DHARMA TALK OF ZEN MASTER THÍCH NHẤT HẠNH WITH THE SANGHA AT DEER PARK MONASTERY, AUGUST 24, 2000

If Plum Village Monastery in France is a gift from Vietnamese Buddhism to Europe, then Maple Forest Monastery in Vermont and Deer Park Monastery in California are two gifts from Vietnamese Buddhism to the United States. We come here not empty-handed; we have brought to this land great and valuable gifts.

You should know that Buddhism in the Americas is one of the fastest-growing religions of this century. Numerous meditation centers and monastic communities have been established around the world. Close to five hundred practitioners in the United States follow the Plum Village tradition, and many have set up well-organized centers for practice. However, these are primarily for lay friends. If Buddhism is to take root in the West, what is needed is a monastic community. Without the presence of a stable, committed, monastic community practicing mindfully twenty-four hours a day, from day to day, month to month, and year to year, Buddhism will not be able to establish deep roots. Therefore, the appearance of Maple Forest Monastery in Vermont and Deer Park Monastery in California must function as the foundational stones for the future of Buddhism in the United States.

Both monasteries will open their doors to young people from the United States and Vietnam who wish to ordain. Recently, during a Dharma talk at Huệ Quang Temple in Santa Ana, I had the opportunity to introduce some young American monastics who are keen to contribute. We deeply need your helping hands, not just financially—for finance is not the primary issue—but primarily for spiritual contributions. We and our families must practice with diligence to establish a very disciplined monastery, where the monastics live in harmony, happiness, and freshness, and where the lay practitioners also practice with diligence, happiness, and harmony. This is the most impactful way that one can support Deer Park Monastery. When young people from Vietnam and the United States come to us, they will see that the monastic path is a beautiful one, and American Buddhism can only take root and flourish if we have an American monastic Sangha. The role of Vietnamese monastics is initial here, just as the Indian monks played an initial role in the formation of Buddhism in China. After that, it was the Chinese monks who established a firm foundation for Buddhism in China. We need an American monastic Sangha to take on the destiny of Buddhism in their country, and that is the mission of Deer Park Monastery.

I want to clarify for everyone that we did not establish Deer Park Monastery solely for Vietnamese people and their descendants. We established Deer Park Monastery to offer the United States a future in Buddhism. Therefore, we must invest in this spiritual endeavor with a diligent practice to open a great door for Buddhism in the United States.

Thus, the formation and development of Deer Park Monastery are not due to the talents or arrangements of a few individuals. On the contrary, in my view, it is a collective manifestation, partly from our Vietnamese ancestors and partly from the ancestors of the United States. They have orchestrated it so that the Deer Park Monastery project comes into being.

Indeed, this belief becomes clearer to me each day, especially after my missionary trip to China some time ago. Back then, the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia was bombed, and the Chinese government had stopped all visits from foreign delegations to China, including cultural, artistic, and diplomatic exchanges. However, they did not stop the program of our Plum Village delegation from spreading the Dharma in China because they had realized that Chinese Buddhism was in need of special rescue. From this enlightenment, the Chinese government recognized that Buddhism has a more national character compared to other cultural and religious trends brought by the West. They realized the need to ease their restrictions on Buddhism and provide favorable conditions so that it could restore China's long-standing culture. Thanks to this spirit of enlightenment, they allowed our Plum Village delegation to go to China and organize meditation retreats and Dharma talks at some of China's famous and ancient temples. The delegation, which included two hundred representatives from Western countries and the Plum Village in France, was considered the representative of Western Buddhism. After this current trip to the United States, we have to return to France by early October 2000 to welcome a Chinese religious delegation visiting Plum Village. This delegation includes dignitaries from the Buddhist hierarchy in China as well as officials from the government's Religious Affairs Committee. An en-



tire delegation of two hundred people from sixteen countries in Europe went to spread the Dharma in a communist country and succeeded. This is truly a rare occurrence. Without the arrangement of our ancestors, how could we have received such a great blessing?

The situation of Deer Park Monastery today is no different. Our ancestors guide us; what they tell us to do, we simply do. It's not our talent but the work of our ancestors. We must build Deer Park Monastery with the humility and gratitude of children and grandchildren, without considering ourselves talented or excellent organizers. In this way, both monastics and laypeople rightfully become the Dharma instruments of our ancestors, deserving of the responsibilities entrusted to us by them. We must succeed with Maple Forest Monastery, and we must succeed with Deer Park Monastery.

At Maple Forest Monastery, there is currently an abbess, Sister Chân Đức, who is British. At Deer Park Monastery, we will have Teacher Giác Thanh and Sister Trung Chính, and we must fully support these venerable ones. Today and tomorrow, more will be sent to contribute to the leadership

of the monastery, and we know that this is a collective effort, not just the work of the monastics.

Teachers, sisters, and Dharma friends, remember how dire the situation was when we first arrived here. The houses and forests were in disarray, a sorry state. Thanks to the collective efforts and heart energies of so many, we now have a meditation hall to sit in. We have clean, beautiful, and cool houses to share. The transformation process itself is a significant endeavor. When we build a meditation hall or a bell tower, we see it. But when we build brotherhood and sisterhood, that might be a hundred times more important than any bell tower or meditation hall, yet it's invisible without mindfulness.

Throughout these months we've worked together, old and young have come to each other with all their love and all their hopes to build Deer Park Monastery. To my eyes, it's a monumental, significant memorial. While we do this, filled with all our love and hope, although it cannot be captured in a photograph, it's a truth that we see if we are mindful. We don't do it for fame or gain. We are driven entirely by the energy of love, and it's this energy of love that has created a significant memorial.



In June, the Deer Park monastic Sangha visited the Jedediah Smith Redwoods State Park. Here I share some of my experiences walking through this ancient forest.

#### TALL TREES

The redwoods are so tall. They sway and give oxygen every day for us below. I feel strength and joy in my lungs.

I focus on a single redwood, four to five hundred years old and imagine twenty people embracing it. Looking up at other trees I say hello to them. They are tall, strong, large, and they sway as I stand on my two feet, my two eyes taking them in. I feel so much younger than the trees. They are my ancestors and have been alive for many centuries. Now they stand before me. With love in my heart, I say hello and embrace them. The trees really save people who visit. They are our country.

I walk through the forest early in the morning, silently but without fear. I am not alone. There is no discrimination. My heart is open. I am one with nature. I smile, breathe, and treasure every step.

The trees make a sound, very soft, light, and calm, but strong.

I lay down to relax and listen to the music of the trees. I smile as Mother Earth welcomes and embraces me, and the tree sings to me. My eyes close like a baby. I lay down hand-in-hand with my mother, the Earth.

#### SANGHA BODY, SANGHA TREE

On the trail, I realize that the forest has a Sangha nature. The trees sway high up. They are present, and my monastic brothers and sisters are also present. I look at a tree and see that it reflects myself in the Sangha.

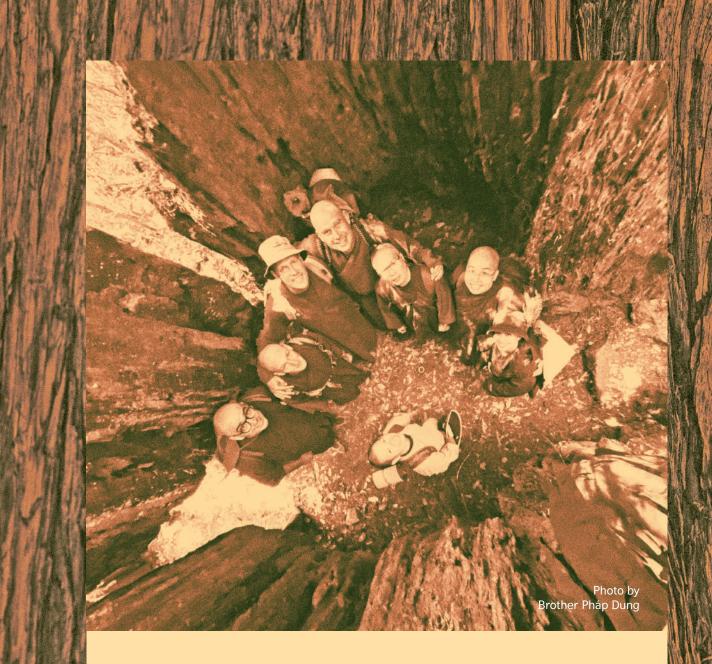
The forest is large. Each tree is big but has its own space to grow up to the sky. The trees have hands and they blanket their trunks with thousands of leaves.

The Sangha takes refuge under a tree. We take a picture together—we on our two feet—laughing and going as a river along the trail. The roots of the trees are there to protect us in the forest.

Every small tree and leaf we see in the forest smiles to us with humility. I kneel down to say hello to them, and the light opens more windows for me to create a picture.

I touch the earth to be one with the Sangha body and Sangha tree. It is a joyous moment, and I am filled with awareness that the tree is just a manifestation. There is only this moment, in a redwood forest.

BY SISTER HƯỚNG NGHIỆM



# The Redwood Sutra

Thus have I heard one time when the Venerable Mṛgāvataṃsakā was residing in the redwoods by the banks of the Smith River, California. After eating a breakfast of grilled corn together with the Sangha, the Venerable Mṛgāvataṃsakā spoke to the assembled monks and nuns, surrounded by firs and redwoods, with nomads, campers, squirrels, jays, elk, and a bear nearby.

"O friends of the forest! There are eight qualities of a redwood tree that make it an exceptional tree, worthy of respect and admiration. What are the eight?

- 1. The redwood knows how to grow its wood in such a way that it protects itself from infection and rot.
- 2. The roots of the redwood know how to grow laterally on the forest floor and interlock with each others' roots into a mat to support its enormous weight.
- The redwood can tolerate shade well for many years until it has access to sunlight, when it grows up straight rapidly to reach the top of the forest canopy.
- 4. The seed of the redwood is small like a tomato seed, but it grows higher than any other tree.
- The trunk of a fallen redwood provides a surface and sustenance for the younger generations, which put down their roots in and over it.
- 6. The burls and crotches of the redwood create soil, access to sunlight, and water for many other plants—huckleberries, ferns, and other trees—and animals that grow and live on it.
- 7. The redwood harvests the fog and rain, providing water for itself and the forest floor below.
- Redwoods know that they can grow most beautifully, tall, and stably in a grove, supporting and protecting one another in harmony."

#### The Venerable continued:

"In the same way, O friends of the forest, when a monastic in our Sangha knows how to put into practice these eight qualities of a redwood, they also become an exceptional monk or nun, worthy of respect and admiration. What are these eight qualities?

- Monastics know how to protect themselves by their practice of the precepts and fine manners from sense impressions that give rise to craving or hatred—impressions arising from the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, or the mind. They see that these sense impressions are as fleeting as a bubble, a flash of lightning, or a magic trick, and their mind is not attached to or carried away by them. That is how monastics protect themselves from infection and rot.
- 2. Monastics put down good roots like a mat throughout the Sangha, knowing how to connect with others and find joy in the whole Sangha, without discrimination. They always see the good qualities in everyone in the Sangha and are able to help others to do the same. That is how monastics know how to use their roots to connect into a mat, interlocking their roots with the roots of others throughout the Sangha.
- 3. Monastics know well their great aspiration to wake up and help all beings to be free, and they also know how to be patient in the practice. Thanks to the strength of their aspiration, they walk straight on the path of liberation, whether they encounter many difficulties or few obstacles, growing strong and straight in the Sangha. That is how monastics can tolerate shade well for many years until they have access to sunlight, when they grow up straight rapidly to reach the forest canopy.
- 4. Monastics know that learning the Dharma and progressively putting it into practice gives them a predisposition for rapid vertical growth, and so they do not become dispirited by the time it takes to transform their afflictions. Though they may come to the Sangha with just the tiny seed of a spiritual life, monas-

tics who take refuge in the Dharma and spread out roots in all directions in the Sangha soon establish a stable practice and use this imperturbable stability to grow ever higher, ever stronger. That is how monastics practice to grow higher than any other tree, even though they start out small as a tomato seed.

- ha and practice the Dharma in such a way that their actions continue to nourish their younger brothers and sisters for many generations into the future. The actions of body, speech, and mind of those monks and nuns become nourishment for future generations, even long after the dissolution of their physical body. In this way, their younger siblings establish stability in the Dharma. That is how monastics provide sustenance for future generations, which put down their roots around them.
- 6. Monastics know how to build a Sangha wherever they go, making good use of the conditions that manifest wherever they find themselves. They know how to transform suffering in such a way that it becomes a platform for others to grow closer to the sunlight. They know that happiness is not an individual matter, and that the transformation of their own suffering can help many living beings suffer less. That is how monks or nuns practice to allow the burls and crevices to create soil and access to sunlight and water so that many other plants and animals can grow on it.
- 7. Monastics see that everything can be a Dharma teaching and nourishment for their happiness and insight. The more established they become in the Dharma, the more others can take refuge in them and benefit from their presence. That is how monastics harvest the fog, provid-

- ing water for themselves and the forest floor below.
- 8. Monastics see that it is rare to have a chance to live in the Sangha and don't waste this precious opportunity to be nourished and supported by the Sangha. Seeing that their own progress is inextricably intertwined with the progress of their siblings and that they already have more than enough conditions to be happy, they grow up strong and stable, and never leave their Sangha. That is how monastics grow beautiful, tall, and stable among the other redwoods, supporting and protecting one another in harmony.

This is how, O friends of the forest, monastics, by practicing these eight qualities of a redwood, become exceptional, worthy of respect and admiration."

Thus taught the Venerable Mṛgā-vataṃsakā. The monks and nuns, along-side the nomads and campers, with the bear, squirrels, and elk nearby, rejoiced and straightaway put her teachings into practice.

JEDEDIAH SMITH REDWOOD FOREST, JUNE 2023 BY BROTHER PHÁP LƯU AND SISTER LỘC NGHIỆM



















On September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2023, six aspirants of Deer Park Monastery became novice monastics of the Toyon Family in a beautiful and moving ordination ceremony in the Ocean of Peace Meditation Hall. Supported by over 130 monastics, family, friends, and the broader Sangha, the aspirants, who practiced and trained at the monastery throughout the year, took vows to live a celibate life, transform their afflictions, and bring happiness to all beings.

After the aspirants received the Ten Novice Precepts, Hòa Thượng Thích Phước Tịnh and Sư cô Thích Trung Chính clipped their hair as a symbolic gesture of shedding their burdens. The aspirants were then presented with ceremonial robes, certificates of ordination, and Dharma names.

After the ceremony, the novice monastics had their heads fully shaved by their new siblings, and in some cases, family members. The special day ended with informal lunch in the meditation hall and a joyful sharing by the novices and their families.

Help us extend a warm welcome to our new siblings:

- Nathan Gordon Hansen: Chân Nhất Lâm (True One Forest) 真一林
- Jahnavi Jeanne Newsom: Chân Ân Hạnh (True Gratitude Action) 真恩行
- Thảo Ngọc Đặng: Chân Thuần Hạnh (True Adaptable Action) 真淳行
- Andrew Michael Gerges: Chân Nhất Thiên (True One Sky) 真一天
- Joseph Walter Flumerfelt: Chân Nhất Điền (True One Field) 真一 田
- Colin David Ambrose: Chân Nhất Sơn (True One Mountain) 真一山



BY SUE MAZINGO

### Letters to My Younger Sisters

#### WRITING FROM THE TRANQUIL YÊN TRAM FOREST

My dear younger sisters,

Thank you for the heartfelt and fulfilling time we shared. I am genuinely happy that we made the effort to spend that time together. I've realized that passivity often leads to missed opportunities. It's liberating to take control and do what I wish, as it helps overcome the unnecessary barriers of pride and ego. My understanding and compassion are growing, and they are helping me let go of petty concerns like vanity and arrogance. Thank you for cherishing me. Your questions and your attentive listening have rekindled my love and aspirations. I'm happy to realize that my simple presence nourishes you, and that my letters are watering the good seeds within your consciousness, inspiring you in your spiritual journey.

I remember the days when I was preparing to leave Plum Village in France. Thây gave me many opportunities to be close to him and bestowed immense love upon me. His eyes conveyed his trust and expectations. His words guided my life: "Take care of your younger siblings in my stead." At twenty-six, I still felt too young, and wondered what I could actually achieve. Before leaving France, I wrote a letter to Thây about many things, and two points were particularly emphatic:

"Thầy, the time I've spent in the Village, close to you, is a great blessing in my life. I have lived very happily, been nurtured, and gained maturity on this spiritual path. Plum Village has been my homeland, my childhood heaven, yet I think I won't wish to return, as I hope my younger siblings get the opportunities I had. My future career will be to look after them, standing in for you. Though young, I will strive hard toward this ideal."

Indeed, it's been ten years since I left the Village—the cradle of my childhood. My promise to Thây then is still my mission now; it feeds and fuels me, pushing me toward self-improvement to realize my dreams, to complete the picture that Thây guided me to paint.

#### THE CAREER OF PLANTING TREES

Dear siblings, do you know?

Taking care of oneself is challenging, and taking care of others is even more so. The path has had its share of hardships and emotional turmoil. Yet that promise has lifted me through all the difficulties, making me clearly feel my growth. Thây's presence in my dreams is palpable. We have been fortunate to experience the sacred teacher-student relationship, and I wish to share that beautiful love with you.

My days at Trạm Tịch have been incredibly meaningful. Witnessing your initial years of practice and watching you grow has been my joy. If I have the merit to contribute even a little to your nurturing, it makes me even happier. When I see you happy, it's my happiness. On your difficult days, I deeply understand and watch you go through your own challenges, echoing the verse:

"The thoughts suddenly grow, You begin where I pass through."

I feel I understand the struggles in your heart because I've walked similar paths. Sometimes, by fate, if I can be your friend during difficult times, it's also my joy. This is the natural life energy present in the heart, perhaps also the energy of love and aspiration that Thây has given me.

#### THE JOY OF OUR WORK

My dear sisters,

I am grateful for all the memories we've built on the land of Tram Tich. The joy nurtured from our work periods, from the intmate retreats, the joy in the groups of elder and younger brothers and sisters, sharing tea, sharing stories, the joy of spending hours chatting from one swing to another, the joy in playful tricks... I am grateful for the opportunity to guide and care for you, which has given me clear motivation for my own practice and learning. I often say that because I have had to teach, to look after your practice, I have invested more in my own practice and learning. Thus, you have nourished me a lot over time. I am grateful for your love and trust in me, which continually inspires me to improve myself, to nurture happiness and freedom more deeply within myself.

Six years connected with Tram Tich, witnessing countless changes, both in scenery and people, I've deeply practiced and found much satisfaction. Now each of you is experiencing different environments; some are in Thailand, some in different monasteries, and others continue to be present to build our beloved Tram Tich. Wherever you are, may you be a true practitioner, nurturing happiness. Remember to engage with your spiritual siblings, with nature, and cherish the opportunity to nourish your path of practice and service more firmly. If you're still in Tram Tich, always remember it as a tender cradle and value your time there. Build a beautiful childhood paradise, so that if you ever have to leave, you can smile happily knowing you've had a beautiful past.

#### THE FIRE OF DEER PARK FLOWERS

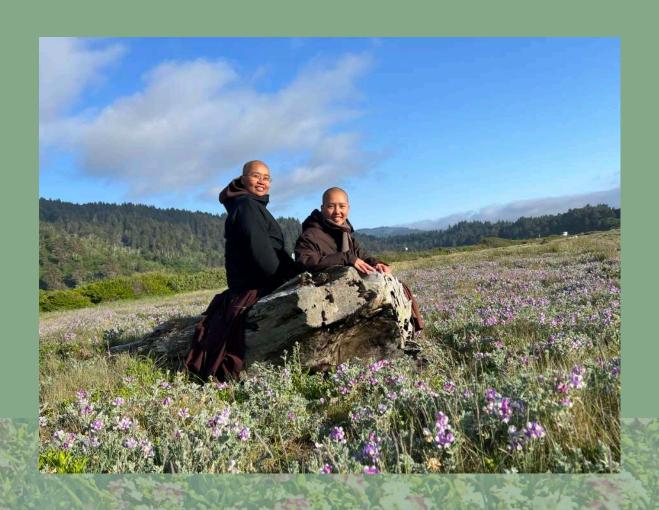
My dear sisters,

So, I have made it to Deer Park, and have woken up on this desert land for the fourth day. The mountains here are truly magnificent. I feel an intense vitality in this place. Because it's a desert, there are very few green trees, but that makes the flowers and grass here quite special. Along the path up the hill, both sides are lined with robust grass blooming in white. Then there are patches of flowers that have turned pinkish white, then orangish white, and I am particularly impressed with the fiery colors, even brown. Though they've changed colors, they still look so fresh. I find the vitality of this grass incredibly strong, given that there are very few rain showers in this desert land. I've heard sometimes there's only one or two showers a year, and sometimes droughts extend so long that any rain is a true miracle. Despite the lack of rain, can you believe the flowers still bloom so vibrantly? In these wild grasses, I see life that is both strong and humble. Life truly is frugal; the harsher the conditions, the more these plants seem to absorb the essence of the Earth and sky, each having a very special scent. Walking in the morning, the fragrance of the grass fills the air, making everything feel so pure.

Today, both in the morning and the afternoon, I went up the hill to play, climbing high rocks to sit and admire the clouds and mountains—it feels wonderful. Just yesterday morning, while sitting peacefully on a

rock, a few raindrops suddenly floated by gently. Perhaps I have experienced many showers in my life, but none has made me so happy. The raindrops fell softly, like snowflakes in the West. The rain was not enough to soak the ground, nor to wet the clothes, just enough to paint a magical picture on this desert land. The rain came as a blessing, full of a cherished mindfulness. In just a few moments as the rain passed by, I felt like I was experiencing snowflakes for the first time. That moment was so beautiful. I think it would be hard to paint such a vivid picture. "The arid land awaits a shower." I quietly pray that more showers will come to nourish this land. Back in Trạm Tịch, enjoy the heavy showers and occasionally send some over to this desert, okay?

I am savoring the happy conditions here. As I am still in the days of quarantine, I am cared for with each meal and receive loving visits. Wherever I go, it feels like home, not alien at all. Thus, I am present in this moment to continue a beautiful past. Tram Tịch is still here, you see, and the future will surely be happy because the present is written with each moment of dwelling in peace, tranquility, and happiness. In whatever country we may be, let's build happiness and peace together to send to each other. I wish for you to have solid feet and a soft heart so that we will always have each other and meet again in the warm embrace of the Sangha.



With all my love, Sister Cổ Nâu (Sister "Brown Grass")

BY SISTER TUYẾT NGHIÊM

# Simple Joys, Great Happinesses

Recently i've been appreciating a lot more the simple conditions all around me and within me that bring me joy. Even though these conditions may sound like small things, the joy and happiness they bring to my heart is immensely full and warm.

#### TOUCHING THE EARTH

i've just added a new morning practice to my day: Touching the Earth before sitting meditation with the Sangha. i enjoy arriving earlier, lighting the altar oil lamps while reciting the *gatha* "lighting the candle," and doing the Three Touchings of the Earth text in the sutra. This practice has been very nourishing and feels very sacred as i get to connect with my blood and spiritual ancestors, my nonself elements, and all the amazing conditions that allow me to be here in this life. Every time i perform this practice, my heart is filled with loving kindness and i start the day with the mind of gratitude.

#### STUDYING GATHAS

Part of our aspirant training is to memorize all ninety-nine of the Gathas for Mindful Living found in the book *Stepping into Freedom*. So far i've memorized about 60 percent. I'm not sure if i'll get to memorize all of them before ordination, but i know that this is a lifelong practice, so i don't feel too worried about having deadlines. i used to really not enjoy memorization—i am not good at it, and learning this way i felt like i was being tested on how much i can memorize and regurgitate versus how much i can understand. My mind had kept that negative impression of memorization learning for many years, until now; i recognize its benefits, as i am finally able to appreciate this way of learning as the content is all very wholesome and nourishing. It also brings me a lot of joy to come up with creative ways of learning the gathas by heart that work for my mind. i recognize that i'm more of a visual and practical person, so one method i really enjoy is creating colorful cue cards small enough to fit inside my aspirant robe pocket that i can bring it with me throughout the day. i pull them out to recite whenever i'm doing the activity referred to in the gatha (eating meditation, walking meditation,

going to the bathroom, etc.). i know it may sound boring, but there's something about the *doing* part of this practice that is quite fun and joyful. i think a big part of this joy comes from the gathas watering the seeds of gratitude and helping me to stay present and mindful of what i am doing in this moment so there is no space in my mind for anything else, no space for the more negative thoughts that often surface when my mind is idle.

#### STARGAZING

Looking up into the beautiful night sky every night as i walk back to my room always feels like a new experience, as i get to see a new configuration of the night sky each time. Some days i like to combine qigong and stargazing. And often, i catch a shooting star in my field of vision. It feels like receiving a surprise gift from the Universe every time; they shoot by so fast, and it is so rare to witness one. Looking into the vast night sky and twinkling stars always makes me feel at home and at ease, as does the tranquil nighttime energy, the sounds of the night animals coming out, and the wonderful, unique quality of the night air. i feel that my own struggles and difficulties are so much smaller compared to the vastness of the cosmos. How little i am in this world, like a tiny speck of dust among the billions of galactic stars out there, whose sizes are beyond the human capacity of measurement and invisible to the human eye! i remember that my perception and experiences are limited and narrow ways of seeing and experiencing, and that there are only so many things that my six senses can take in. There are billions of other ways to experience life on this Earth in this very same moment. The possibilities are truly limitless. So why be so caught up in my own struggles and sufferings? Why hold so strongly to my own ways of thinking and understanding? When i ask myself these questions while staring into the stars, i feel like all the answers are there, readily available for me to receive anytime. All i need to do is silence my mind, look up, open my heart, and breathe.

> BY SISTER THUẨN HẠNH (SISTER ADAPTATION)

# From a Purple Bus to the House of the Tathāgata

The day I realized I wanted to become a monastic, I was sitting in a king-sized bed reading *Old Path White Clouds*. My world had recently caved in on itself, and I was floating through an ocean of grief on this cruise liner of a bed.

It was the year 2017. My partner and I were living in Austin, Texas, preparing for our soon-to-be-born child. But on November 16<sup>th</sup>, as I went into labor after nine months of healthy pregnancy, she died before she was born.

At thirty-one years old, this was the most earth-shattering experience I'd ever had. I thought a tragedy like this could only happen to "someone else," not to me. Upon realizing my fragile human existence and the reality of suffering, I woke up. Through reading about the Buddha's life, I learned that not only is there suffering, but there is a way to end suffering.

During my time of grieving and for years after, I read every book I could find written by or about Buddhist nuns. Some of these women had also lost children or partners, and following those losses, they let go of everything, shaved their heads, and committed to spiritual life. I felt I could relate to them and the changes they underwent internally. Six months after our daughter passed away, instead of becoming a nun, I married my partner. My reasoning went something like this: "If I can't make it work with him, then at least I know I tried

everything, and then I'll become a nun after the marriage fails."

In the aftermath of our daughter's passing, my husband and I had begun to look deeply into the way we were living and to contemplate how to live more freely, especially if we were to have another child. We had been a band ever since we met and played shows around the US, touring in our Subaru hatchback with our dog perched on top of our pile of instruments and amps. After many discussions and "bus house" internet searches, in 2018 we purchased a thirty-five-foot prison transport bus and started to convert it into our home. In 2019, we drove the bus to Idaho and continued to work on the build with the support of my dad, his partner, and friends.

During this time my sister had her first child, and I felt something in me shift. Somehow, after the birth of my nephew, the need to have my own child disappeared almost completely. I had a sense that she had taken up what I had been unable to fulfill, and now I was free to do something else with my life.

After the bus conversion was finished and we had officially moved in (with our king-sized bed), I began booking our band a music tour across the country. Even so, I felt a sense of dread at the prospect of leaving my family and continuing on with my husband. I proposed to my husband that we consider divorce, rather than setting out

as planned. But he wasn't ready to let go, and I didn't have the strength or clarity to end the relationship. So in July 2021, we embarked on our tour.

Three shows in, things reached a boiling point and we decided to part ways and cancel the remaining tour. My brother, a monk in the Vaishnava tradition of India, happened to be in Idaho visiting my father at the time, and he flew out to support me as I drove the bus back.

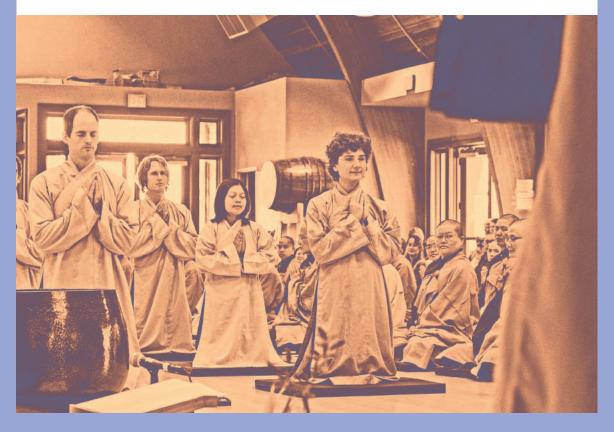
For a couple of months, I was overcome by grief and anger. At the same time, I felt a deep sense of relief and physical well-being. I found that living in the bus alone (with Shiva the cat) was actually quite wonderful. I enjoyed spending time with myself, and also felt a deeper connection with my brother and my father. We took the bus to the nearby national parks and had many happy moments together.

As the months passed, I knew I needed to go to one of Thây's monasteries to stop,

heal, and look deeply before making more life decisions. I recalled my aspiration to become a nun, and my brother reminded me of the great freedom of monastic life.

Six months after the separation, I performed a great act of self-love and drove my bus down to Deer Park Monastery to join the last half of their 2021 Rains Retreat. During the first week, I could feel my dysregulated system begin to calm after what seemed like years. I offered my handy services to the sisters and soon found myself walking around the hamlet with my tools, feeling joy while changing outlets and helping to fix and build things as I was able. I also offered my music, which made me realize the deep undertones of sadness most of my songs have. But the sisters welcomed me. I felt seen and accepted.

One day, after eating lunch with the sisters, I was walking back to the parking lot where my bus was parked when one of the senior nuns began a conversation with



me. She asked me about my husband and shared how free she had felt after the end of her own marriage when she was my age. All of a sudden I blurted out, "I want to be a nun!"

The sister smiled and said, "Give it time. Right now you need to heal. Just because you become a nun doesn't mean all your problems will go away."

"I've had many experiences in my life, and I feel disillusioned about relationships and finding happiness outside of ourselves," I said. "I've thought about being a nun for a long time." I looked into her eyes, my own filling with tears. "I've seen some shit, sister."

She threw back her head, laughing, and invited me to have tea. During our time sitting together, she helped me cut through the tangled web of emotions and stories I was telling myself to try and feel better in the wake of my separation. After our conversation, I felt something had released and I touched peace.

Before the end of the Rains Retreat, I expressed to the sisters of Clarity Hamlet that I wanted to become a nun. They invited me to live at the monastery and continue to practice and get familiar with their way of life, which meant letting go of the bus.

In the bus, I could go anywhere. It gave me the sense I could do whatever I wanted with my life. But because of my suffering and inability to be fully present, I wasn't truly free. Drawn to living in community, I could see that the Plum Village tradition really practices living in harmony. I knew there would still be difficulty and conflict, but this was the only communal living situation I had witnessed that seemed to really work. I had tried to practice the teachings of the Buddha out in the world on my own

and with lay Sanghas, but I could see clearly that I needed the strong container of the monastic Sangha to really transform.

In April 2022, I moved a few (though still too many) belongings and tools into one of the huts in Clarity, and then drove my bus to my sister's place in Washington.

I spent two weeks sorting through all of my things, filing divorce papers, and letting go of bags and bags of colorful clothes, hats, jewelry, and shoes. My sister sat with me, watching with disbelief as I stuffed clothes into bags. When I saw something I thought she would like, I handed it to her to try on. "It's like my sister died," she said, "and we're going through your belongings. Except you're still alive!" She encouraged me to hold on to a few things and store them with her in case I changed my mind or something prevented me from ordaining. I knew my mind wasn't going to change, but I felt grateful for her care.

Two weeks later, I returned to Deer Park Monastery. I was now free to fully pursue monastic life and to focus completely on healing and transformation as well as cultivating understanding and compassion. My mom is also a monastic in the Vaishnava tradition and lives in India with my brother most of the time. I talked to her on the phone regularly and shared my journey with her. At times she felt sad at the thought of me ordaining, which I teased her about since she herself is a monastic (although in the Vaishnava tradition it is common to become a monastic during the later years of your life after your children have grown up, which is what she did). But mostly she was encouraging and understanding of my aspiration.

"If you become a nun," she asked one

day, "do you have to shave off all of your hair?"

"Yes," I said. "No more hair!"

"Oh! Your beautiful hair!" she moaned.

I laughed. "I'm looking forward to not having to take care of so much thick, curly hair anymore! I wish I could give my hair to you so you could enjoy it for me."

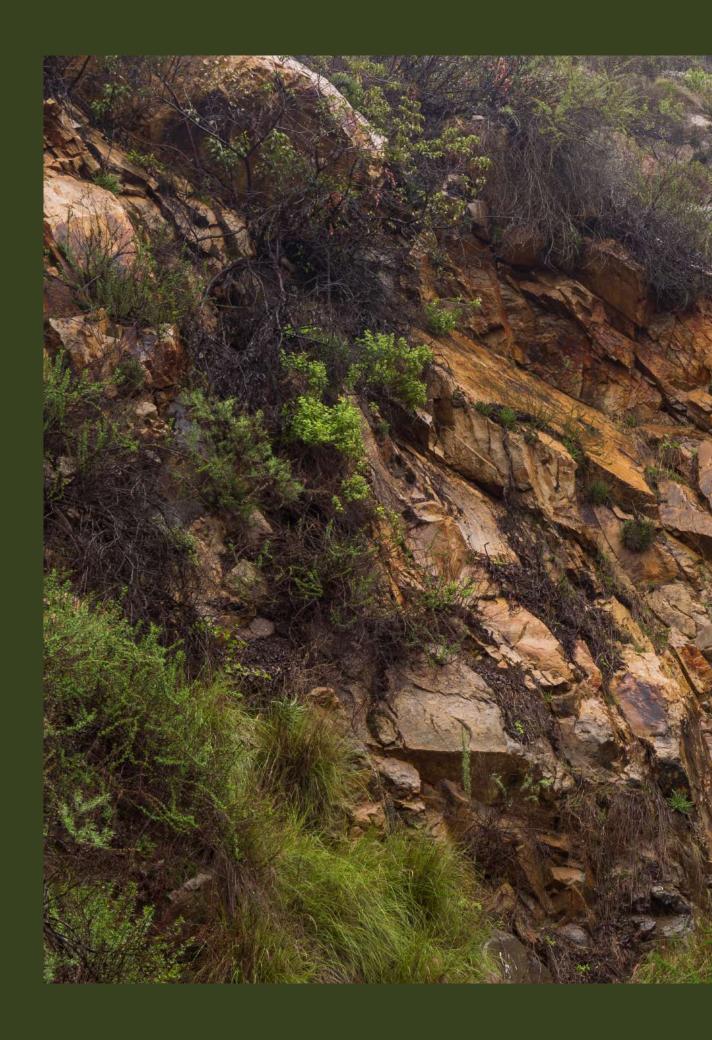
I continue to see how much there is to learn and how much I need to practice to build the foundation of mindfulness within me. For many years I focused on building my bus house, hoping it would offer me the freedom, simplicity, and nonfear I longed for. But I can see that there is nothing I can create in the physical realm, nothing I can buy or find outside of myself, that can give me nonfear. Practicing mindfulness in the footsteps of the Buddha is the only way out of suffering. And with this nonfear and knowing how to take refuge in myself, I may actually have something to offer to others.

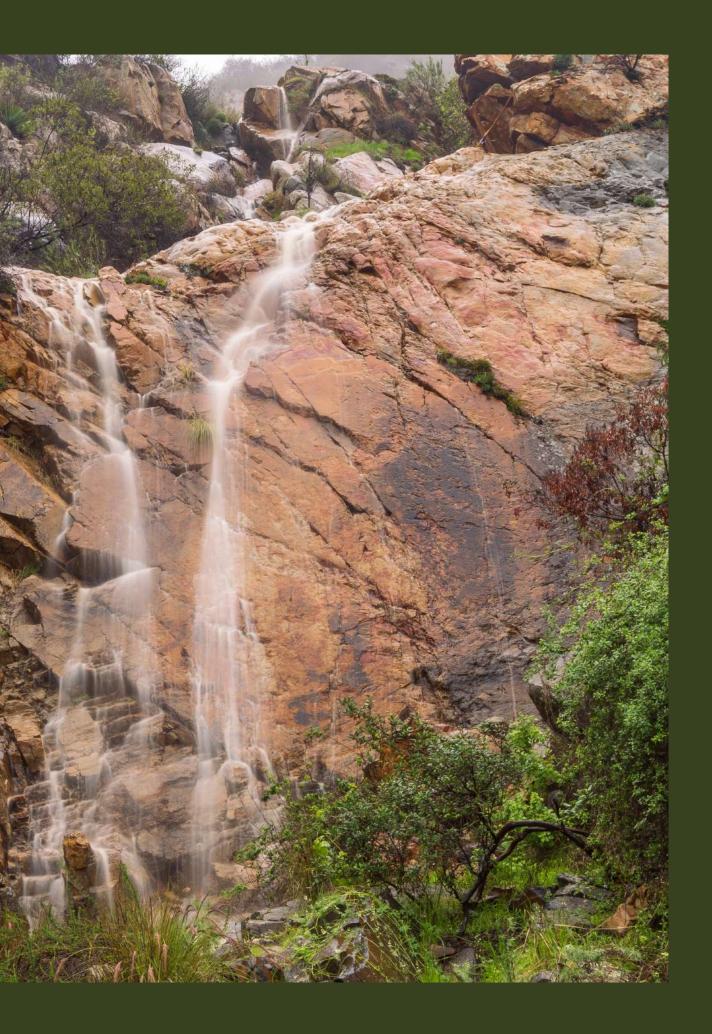
Recently, I was in my cozy little aspirant room, setting up the box bed where I keep my belongings. I had ordered a foam camping mat to use as my "mattress" and just received the delivery. I unpacked the box and rolled the mat out on the plywood surface, and then laid down to test out my new bed. It felt amazing. I never realized how comfortable a foam mat on a slat of plywood could feel. I laughed, remembering the four-thousand-dollar mattress I used to sleep on. Stretching and rolling around, I touched the freedom this simple life offers.

I'm surprised to find that I don't miss my bus that much. It was a wonderful home, but now I am living and practicing in the house of the Tathāgata, and I find it is more than enough to be happy.

> BY SISTER ÂN HẠNH (TRUE GRATITUDE ACTION)







# Understanding Our Impulses

#### EMBRACING OUR FEAR

One day I was having lunch in Solidity Hamlet, the brother's hamlet. After serving my food and entering the dining hall, I stood still, feeling hesitant. I realized that I was looking for something instead of finding an empty place to sit down and enjoy my lunch. I looked around and found siblings I know and often hang out with, so I could sit and eat with them. At that moment, I recognized a seed of fear in my heart. Sometimes we seek others, but not always to build a connection or do something beneficial. And, other times, we seek others because we want to connect... we may be afraid of being alone and lost. We fear being judged and evaluated by others. Silently, we look for approval from someone, or a group of people, one way or another. We want others to recognize our talents, to be impressed by our fame or fortune. We even want others to be aware of our whole-hearted generosity, because these things help us feel worthy and valuable.

While I hesitated about where to sit, the dining hall clock chimed. I returned to my breathing and relaxed my whole body. I smiled and embraced my fear and insecurity. At that moment, I no longer felt afraid and lost. To me, coming into the present moment was the miracle that allowed me

to recognize my fear and call it by its true name. After the clock stopped chiming, I walked to the table where my friends were sitting. I sat down and ate lunch with them without fear of being lost among strangers.

I realized that if I cultivate more moments to stop, listen to, and understand my whispers and impulses, I will become more stable and in control. These whispers and impulses may not be my true needs; they may come from a place of loneliness, fear, anger, or sadness, or hurt.

Sometimes we buy a shirt but not because we need it. We eat fast food but not because we are hungry. Or we watch a movie or some kind of entertainment online but not because it makes sense. Or we try to force a connection but not because it's necessary and nourishing. So, why do we do these things? Perhaps we have fear or emptiness within, so we seek something outside to fill the void inside. Unfortunately, the more we grasp the more we consume. The more the void and the gap expands. And our loneliness, fear, anger, and sadness become stronger and more unbearable.

I know a healthy body needs healthy food. Similarly, a healthy mind needs healthy input. We cannot become healthy if we continually bring things into our body and mind that stir and trigger seeds of sadness, discrimination, or fear in us.

At the monastery, brothers and sisters often share the practice of mindful breathing. For example, please come back to yourself and follow your breathing; be aware of your in-breath and out-breath; and when you hear the bell, return to your breath and smile. Or when you walk, pay attention to the first steps touching the ground; when you eat, pay attention to the taste of the food

in your mouth and so on. These practices seem very simple, but we practice them diligently in the monastery every day, because they help us see our habits of thinking about the past or about the future all the time.

#### WITH EACH STEP...

When I was a novice, I persistently thought that I must practice taking care of the seeds in my mind. Once I asked my mentor, how can I know how many seeds are in me and what types of seeds are there for me to take care of? At the time, I didn't really know. My mentor just smiled and said, "Just look at the manifestation of your body, speech, and mind every day. You know what kind of seeds are present in you that need to be nurtured and taken care of." And in my practice, I gradually realized how important that teaching is. I try my best to apply it to nurture happiness and transform suffering.

I really like the image that Thây, our teacher, often taught us: our mind is like fertile ground, and we don't really know all the seeds that lay dormant in the ground. But we can totally see and recognize them once they sprout and manifest on the surface. If you have been to Deer Park Monastery in spring, you will clearly see what I am trying to say. In the hot season, the trees dry up and there are no flowers. But in the spring, from the meditation hall to the gate, every few days we see a different kind of flower blooming. Hundreds of thousands of different flowers manifest. My first spring here surprised and excited me.

Mother Earth is a miracle. Mother Earth preserves and nurtures all life, which waits until conditions are right to manifest. And

the same goes for our store consciousness, which is called manas. There, many seeds are stored and maintained: seeds of joy, peace, love, or seeds of pain, anger, fear, or jealousy. They are present in all of us. When these seeds sprout into plants, a flower may sometimes manifest in this area of consciousness. Maybe a flower of joy, peace, or forgiveness. This consciousness, where the seeds sprout and bloom, is called mind consciousness.

Sometimes pain, anger, or fear can manifest in our mind consciousness. By our breathing, walking, sitting, or listening to the bell, we as practitioners invite the seed of mindfulness to grow and be present in this level of mind consciousness. When mindfulness is lit up on this level, it helps us recognize all that is happening. With the energy of mindfulness, we embrace these manifested objects. The energy of mindfulness, cultivated by the true presence of our body and mind, helps us see these objects more clearly. Joy and peace become deeper, and we become calmer to see our pain, anger, or fear more clearly. As we become calmer and more aware, we can look deeply into that object and understand the true nature of our problems much more easily and thoroughly. Then, if we bring our insight, understanding, love, transformation is possible. So, our transformation with pain and suffering should be based on understanding and compassion. It should not be based on analytical reasoning, fighting, or elimination.

I would like to share one of my experiences from the practice. I love to buy shoes. Sometimes, I had many pairs of shoes. I would buy them, but I wouldn't wear them. I would think I need a pair of shoes for work, another pair for Sangha classes, another pair for hiking, and yet another pair



for going outside on retreats. So those were all justifiable excuses. Do you agree with my reasoning? Yeah? Gradually, I could see why my life was not as simple as I wanted it to be. During one walking meditation with the Sangha, I could feel the softness and comfort in the pair of shoes I wore. Suddenly, I had a feeling of self-pity. I continued to walk and recognize that mental state in me. I was not having any problems with any of my monastic brothers and sisters at that time, and I was in a safe and peaceful environment. But then why do I feel self-pity?

After walking for a while, I realized that the comfort of my shoes made me recall my difficult childhood and what my family had gone through in the past. Back then, my family was very poor and I only had one pair of shoes for my gymnastics school for four or five years. I grew and my feet could not fit in my shoes anymore. But because my parents didn't have money to buy me new shoes, I still had to wear them. I remember one day I came back from gymnastics class and my feet were very sore and swollen. My gym-

nastic teacher told the whole class to jog around the school that day, and my shoes were too tight, pressing on my feet and causing me a lot of pain. When I got home, I sat by the well, took off my shoes, and washed my feet; the tips of my toes were bloody and so painful. I still see this image of myself sitting alone by the well, looking at my shoes and feeling extreme self-pity. And that feeling of self-pity made me angry and hateful towards my shoes. I was so angry with my mom too, because I thought that she didn't take care of me like my friend's mother. I took my shoes and threw them in the bushes, and I cried. But after I finished crying, I had to get up and retrieve the shoes and wash them for my next class.

So, during walking meditation, while I was breathing and walking mindfully, I had an insight about why I felt self-pity and why I had a strong desire to buy new shoes. At that moment, a line in one of Thây's poems came to me: "With each step, a gentle wind blows. With each step, a flower blooms." I realized that my peaceful footsteps today

are made of many different conditions. At that moment, I was no longer a child who acted foolishly and harbored many resentments. I realized that the difficulties in the past are also present, contributing to my peaceful footsteps today as I am embraced in the heart of the Sangha. I feel I can love and accept my parents' hardships, as well as the foolishness and sadness of the child in me. The shoes I'm wearing, along with my peaceful footsteps in the present moment, is like medicine that heals the painful and cramped shoes in my childhood. I realized that if I am fully here in the present moment, I will have a chance to recognize, look deeply, understand, and liberate past hurts and constraints.

In daily life, we tend to more easily accept joy, peace, happiness, or a good thing. But we want to run away or get rid of the negative mental formations such as pain, anger, or fear. We can learn to be fully present and equanimous with whatever it is with mindfulness. When we stop criticizing and judging our own clumsiness and mistakes and those of others around us, we realize that these negative attitudes and behaviors can be the roots of misperceptions. So, instead of cutting off or getting rid of the roots, we can stop and recognize our impulses as signals that are underground. Because the roots of misperception or painful memories may be behind our angry words. If we listen deeply, we will gain sympathy for ourselves and others, as we recognize that growing up was very difficult. If we look deeply, we will see a child full of regret and wounds, who is in need of our love, sympathy and support.

We need to make time to invest in our spiritual life for this kind of understanding, compassion, and peace to flourish. If we rush to shut down and adorn our life with external things, then our spiritual life will be shallow and impoverished. Even when we eat delicious food we cannot look deeply to see and feel grateful for all the conditions that come together in the wonderful meal manifest in front of us: the rain, the sun, the hardships of the worker, or even the sacrifices of others so that we can live. Or we may drive a luxurious car, but we cannot listen and understand the pain or aspiration of our loved ones sitting next to us.

#### CHOOSING OUR ACTIONS

Some things that are supposed to be progress and development may come back to harm our body and mind as individuals and as a society. The values we have will guide our ways of living. If we emphasize money, money will guide our life. If we emphasize consumption, material things will guide us. If we emphasize human love, human love will guide us. And if we place great importance on peace and happiness for ourselves and our loved ones, peace and happiness will be our choice in everything we do. We have many choices, and how we choose is important—how we breathe, how we interact with people, and everything around, so that we can cultivate a clear and steady awareness in order for understanding, love, and peace to grow deeper and deeper, day by day.

BY SISTER ÁO NGHIÊM

This is an excerpt from a Dharma talk given in English in the Ocean of Peace Meditation Hall on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023.



# Deer Park in the Rains Retreat Season

Dear friend, the moonlit nights over the desert mountains of Deer Park Monastery are indescribably beautiful. This is my first rain retreat season in Clarity Hamlet. Early every morning, I have the whole sky filled with moonlight and millions of twinkling stars, lighting the fragrant path from the nuns' residence to the Ocean of Peace Meditation Hall. The sound of the great bell reverberates; the earth and sky are filled with the scent of orange flowers, sage leaves, lavender, and many kinds of wild grass.

For over a decade, this land has been afflicted by drought, turning summer brown and winter verdant. When summer arrives, the ground and leaves gradually turn brown, branches darken and wither, as if all water has evaporated. For newcomers, it might appear the plants are dead. But in reality, they are retreating to nourish their roots; their life essence is concentrated within. Life becomes humble and supple. Perhaps because of such harsh conditions, each plant emits a special fragrance. The more intense the sun, the richer the scent of the flowers and leaves. Their colors are also unique.

When winter comes, the earth and sky cool, bringing nightly dew that seems to beckon life to return. Sprouts slowly emerge when morning dew moistens the soil. The meadows gradually turn green again. The branches sprout new leaves. The plants seem revived.

Observing this blooming forest, I see the abbess and all the venerable nuns here like great, resilient trees, persevering and gentle, exuding a fragrant aroma of Zen meditation despite difficulties.

Did you know deer have returned to Deer Park? The nuns' residence in Clarity Hamlet sits between rocky valleys and oak forests, so from any window, you can see the high mountains and blue sky. A first-time visitor wouldn't know that hidden among these peaks is a residence housing nearly forty nuns.

Before Deer Park Monastery was established, this place was a shooting range for law enforcement SWAT teams. The sound of gunfire sent the frightened deer fleeing up the mountains. Those who have lived here for decades had not seen the deer return. But the other day, the nuns' quarters suddenly buzzed with laughter—four deer had returned. Newly arrived, young nuns were delighted to watch the deer leisurely wander through the oak forests below Clarity and Solidity Hamlets. These four deer are counted among those who fully participated in the ninety-day Rains Retreat,

along with one hundred monks and lay practitioners this year.

You see, the deer are much like the eleven young nuns who recently came from other centers to join the Deer Park community for spiritual practice. They bring purity, joy, vitality, and breathe a fresh, joyful hue into the majestic mountain forest.

#### THE MOST ANTICIPATED FEAST

Sharing the journey of spiritual life of the monastic brothers and sisters every Thursday during the Rains Retreat this year has become the most anticipated "feast." The doors of the heart are opened wide in the heart of each elder monastic, younger monastic, and fellow monastic.

For the first time, the lay community had the opportunity to listen to the abbess, who after many years of ordination shared why she decided to leave her individual temple to live and practice with the monastic community. Living and practicing in the Sangha, she felt the spirit of siblinghood. She had enough space and time to experience and practice the teachings received from Thây. These conditions helped her come in contact with the essence of a monastic life that she didn't have much chance to feel when living in her individual temple. At the same time, her aspiration to continue Thây's lineage in caring for, loving, and being present for younger monastics has been nourished and grown. Early each morning, even before the wake-up bell, she is already lighting candles and offering incense in the stupa of the Great Master and the Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva shrine in the nunnery garden. Her offerings radiated spiritual warmth in the midst of a freezing winter.

The lay community also heard the story of the oldest nun in the nunnery, nicknamed "the leaf-sweeping angel." When she entered the monastery, she had just learned to read and write in the Vietnamese alphabet. At ninety-four, although she uses a cane each time she moves, she still regularly participates in the community schedule and chants the verses for offering a meal to the Buddha every day without fail.

Then there are nurturing and inspiring stories in casual sitting sessions between newly ordained younger monastics and elder monastics. Interesting questions are raised from the ideal of monastic practice and service to practical issues a young monastic might face on the path with the Sangha. The monastic family seems to come closer together and is fueled with inspiration to walk together on the path of practice.

### THE RIVER IS FLOWING

This Rains Retreat, Deer Park Monastery welcomed the monastic family of Little Apple Tree—Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos*), represented by two novice monks: Brothers Nhất Hướng and Nhất Ấn. Manzanita is a rare species of this land. The

Rains Retreat is also the flowering season; the mountains and forests sparkle with clusters of white and pink flowers, like little earrings or tiny lampshades everywhere.

Joy follows joy. The community welcomed two nuns as new Dharma teachers: Sister Nhất Nghiêm and Sister Trăng Thủy Tiên, directly transmitted the lamp by Sister Chân Không. At the same time, three younger monastics are preparing to go to Thailand for higher ordination early next year. After the ninety-day Rains Retreat, among more than forty lay practitioners, six young people requested to train for monastic ordination. Moreover, the lay community will together build a long-term practice program for those who aspire to practice and serve as lay practitioners in the monastery.



When you come to Deer Park Monastery, we can go mountain climbing to watch the sunrise and the sunset, or simply enjoy the expansive sky. Deer Park is vast, mostly mountainous, and every nook and cranny is truly beautiful. Every other Wednesday, the community shoulders backpacks to climb Escondido Mountain while the morning fog still lingers. Hundreds of people meditate together to greet the rising sun. On one side is the city bustling with car lights; on the other, the bell tower, meditation hall, and monastic quarters, serenely nestled in the green mountain forest. What more is there to contemplate about activity and stillness, right? On lazy days, the monastic family climbs the mountain together. Brown robes sit peacefully side by side amid the sacred mountain forest, enjoying the scent of sage leaves, aromatic tea, bird songs, and singing.

The Rains Retreat always offers interesting classes. The nuns who have come to America for the first time are invited to attend a class on American culture led by Brother Kenley, an American lay practitioner. English classes of different levels are directed by Brother Pháp Dung, Brother Pháp Lưu, Sister Kính Nghiêm, and Sister Đẳng Nghiêm. Vietnamese language classes are handled by Sister Lễ Nghiêm. Ritual classes are taught by Sister Khuê Nghiêm and Sister Thần Nghiêm. Ethical guidelines and rules of conduct are offered by enthusiastic teachers who wholeheartedly guide their younger siblings in the practice.

Every other Saturday, the community holds a collective work period, with enthusiastic participation from lay friends in the town below. The image of Brother Pháp Nhỉ, the work coordinator of Solidity Hamlet, guiding the community's work in English, always nourishes the monastic community. A new mountain path has been formed with the contributions of Brother Pháp Lưu and the monastic brothers and sisters, bringing delight to many. Soon, six new monks' rooms will be built to accommodate more people. A group of revered nuns has volunteered to write calligraphy on stones, cups, and more, for distribution and fundraising following each Mindfulness Day on Sunday. The ninety days of Rainy Season Retreat have come to a satisfying close. The community is taking a leisurely three-day break before the upcoming Holiday, Christmas, New Year, and Lunar New Year retreats.

Dear friend, whenever the conditions are ripe, please come to Deer Park. The atmosphere of practice and service is elevating, permeated with brotherly and sisterly love and joy. The sun has risen, looking forward to meeting you in each mindful step.

## BY SISTER TRĂNG CHÙA XƯA

Written towards the end of the Rains Retreat 2022, Clarity Hamlet, Deer Park Monastery



At the back of Deer Park Monastery's dusty soccer field, next to the trailhead that leads down into the valley, sits a big pile of straw, fenced into a square shape by walls of wooden pallets. Nikolay, Deer Park's facility manager of three years, wears an apron over his flannel shirt as he busily arranges rows of empty white buckets beside the pile. A friend approaches him.

"I noticed these buckets over here," he says, pointing to the rows. "They say 'HU-MANURE.' What's that all about?"

Nikolay replies with a smile, "That's the recycling of human refuse!"

"Yeah? How does that work?"

"Well, just like composting," he explains, "You collect it, put it in a pile, and the pile heats up. You can see right now, even though I've just added new material,

steam is still coming out. Before I opened it, the pile was at 145 degrees Fahrenheit."

When Nikolay first started working at Deer Park, he had no experience or particular interest in compost. Asked about his relationship to climate change, he reflects, "Climate change was always a concern of mine, but I couldn't deal with the depth of it. It resulted in an ignorant approach, you know, sometimes it's just better not to think about [it]." For many years, Nikolay chose not to pay much attention to climate change and environmental concerns. But when his Deer Park workshop started producing excess sawdust, an excellent layering material for compost, he saw a new opportunity for action.

Initially, Nikolay's composting efforts didn't work so well. He took a trip to the li-

brary, looking for guidance, and found *The Humanure Handbook* by Joseph Jenkins. Nikolay was taken by the book's down-to-Earth language and the impressive scientific evidence backing up the humanure system. "Twenty-five percent of my way into the book, I said to myself, 'I am going to do this. I just need to get the details of how to do it,'" he explains.

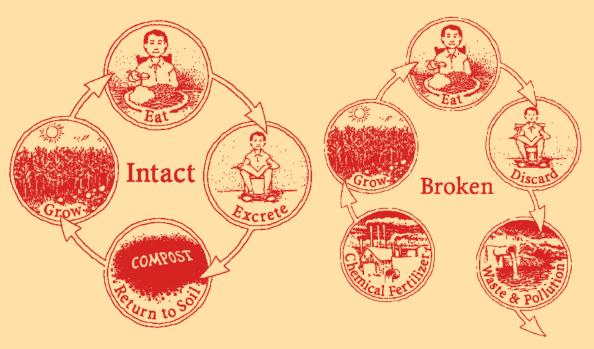
How to compost human waste, it turns out, is rather simple. First, Nikolay built a handful of composting toilets at Deer Park. These toilets consist of two receptacles: one for deposits and one containing sawdust to scoop out and layer on top of each deposit. Sawdust is an excellent biofilter, removing odors from the deposits beneath it while providing carbon needed for the compost to "cook" later on. Humanure relies on four main ingredients to break down organic matter: carbon, water, air, and nitrogen (found in urine). Without enough air, the composting toilet sits waiting for the final condition to begin its transformation.<sup>1</sup>

Once a week, Nikolay collects the buckets (or "receptacles," as he likes to call them) and empties them into his pile behind the soccer field. He uses a pitchfork to pull the straw to the edges and make space in the middle to dump the new material. Afterwards, he cleans the receptacles with a toilet brush and soapy water, which in turn gets emptied into the pile. Finally, he covers it all again with a new layer of straw. Blanketed by straw above, below, and around, the pile is penetrated by air from outside, and begins to heat up. Once the temperature reaches 115 degrees Fahrenheit, a special kind of bacteria, called "thermophilic bacteria," are activated. These powerful bacteria are the main driver of the organic matter's transformation.

As he implemented the humanure system, Nikolay enjoyed learning about its benefits. The composting process eliminates the greenhouse gasses emitted by standard sewage systems that use energy-intensive treatment techniques. The thermophilic bacteria in the pile break down toxic chemicals, pathogens, and even pharmaceutical drugs, all of which would otherwise create pollution, as they are not broken down by the traditional septic system.

There are also benefits on the local level at Deer Park. Transforming excrement through humanuring diverts it from the monastery's existing septic system, which expels excess liquid via underground leach fields and can thereby pollute the groundwater. Humanure, on the other hand, produces organic fertilizer, which adds nutrients to the soil and improves water retention, protecting and nourishing plants and, by extension, the whole web of natural life at Deer Park. Recognizing composting as a means to protect life, Nikolay sees in it a concrete expression of the First Mindfulness Training. "At the beginning of The Five Mindfulness Trainings, we are invited to look for ways to protect the lives of animals, plants, and minerals, and that invitation was always very serious to me," he explains. Thanks to the practice of humanure, Nikolay has a concrete way to act on that invitation.

Humanure is a new development at Deer Park, but the monastery is no stranger to green initiatives. In the late 2000s, there was a wave of enthusiasm among the monks for new projects to support the environment. Thây had long wished for the brothers to install solar panels, and at that



Closing the human nutrient cycle.1

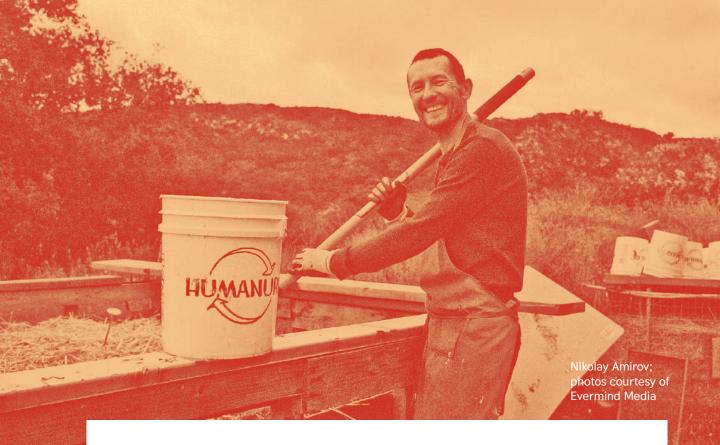
time the conditions came together to do so. "Thầy was very happy," remembers Thầy Pháp Dung. "Afterwards, he kept mentioning it. He would say how the brothers in Solidity Hamlet are on 100 percent solar energy, even though we were not completely off-grid."

Aware of droughts afflicting the state of California, the monastics also looked for ways to conserve water. Waterless urinals were installed, native plants began to replace thirsty, tropical varieties, and the cooking teams tried reusing the water for rinsing vegetables to do the dishes afterwards. Thây Pháp Dung points out that a lot of water goes into our clothes and other possessions as well. He tries to use things as long as he can. "Everything has water in it. So when you throw something away, you're not just making trash, but you're throwing away a lot of water."

Nikolay sees another reason to save water: "Did you know," he asks me, "30 percent of the electricity California consumes is used to move water for us? Thirty percent of our electricity, just to pump water from one place to another; we're pumping a lot over very long distances. So our Californian water is very carbon heavy."

Humanure composting fits well into Deer Park's long-standing effort to conserve water. The practice saves water that would otherwise be used to flush the toilet. Nikolay calculated that the humanure pile processed 547 gallons of matter in a recent three-month period—an approximate water savings of 15,300 gallons! That's equivalent to an average American's water use for six months.<sup>2</sup> And this is only the beginning. So far, humanure has been adopted to a limited extent at the monastery. Only residents curious and eager to try the new system are using it. With greater adoption in the future, water savings could multiply.

Recently, Nikolay started learning more about climate change. He recounts, "About a month ago, all of a sudden my curiosity awakened, and I felt I have the



capacity now to really fill my consciousness with information." It's no coincidence that Nikolay's new enthusiasm to learn and engage with climate change coincided with his new project. When we start to learn about a problem, it's easy to fall into despair if we don't see a solution. But when we find a solution and put it into practice, we have hope. We are no longer afraid of despair, and our mind opens up to receive the problem in all its ugly detail. As Nikolay learns about climate change, he remembers how humanuring contributes to its solution, and rather than falling into despair, he feels encouraged and inspired.

There are so many ways to act, but for Nikolay, humanure composting is about doing something small and simple. He describes his joy at seeing that, although so much energy, time, and money are spent building and maintaining the world's septic systems. "We can do something so humble—just a receptacle, sawdust, a couple steps to the pile, and then in a year and a

half this pile is wonderful nutriment for soil. I am very happy I discovered it," he beams. Compost nourishes the soil, but it also nourishes the one who makes it.

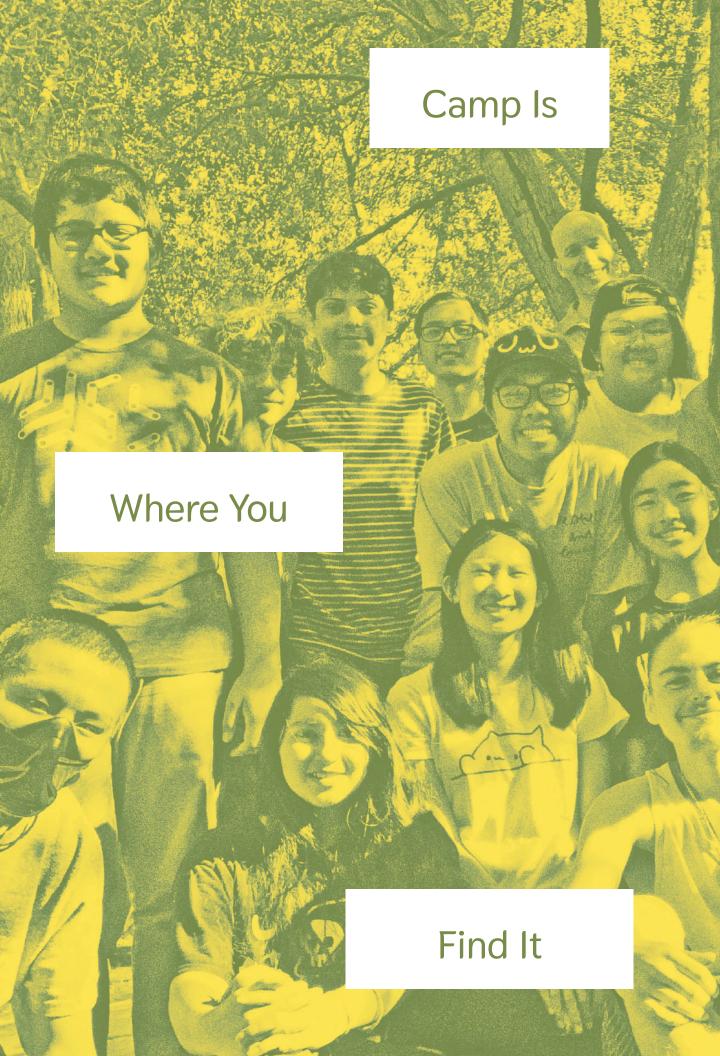
# BY BROTHER MINH LƯỢNG

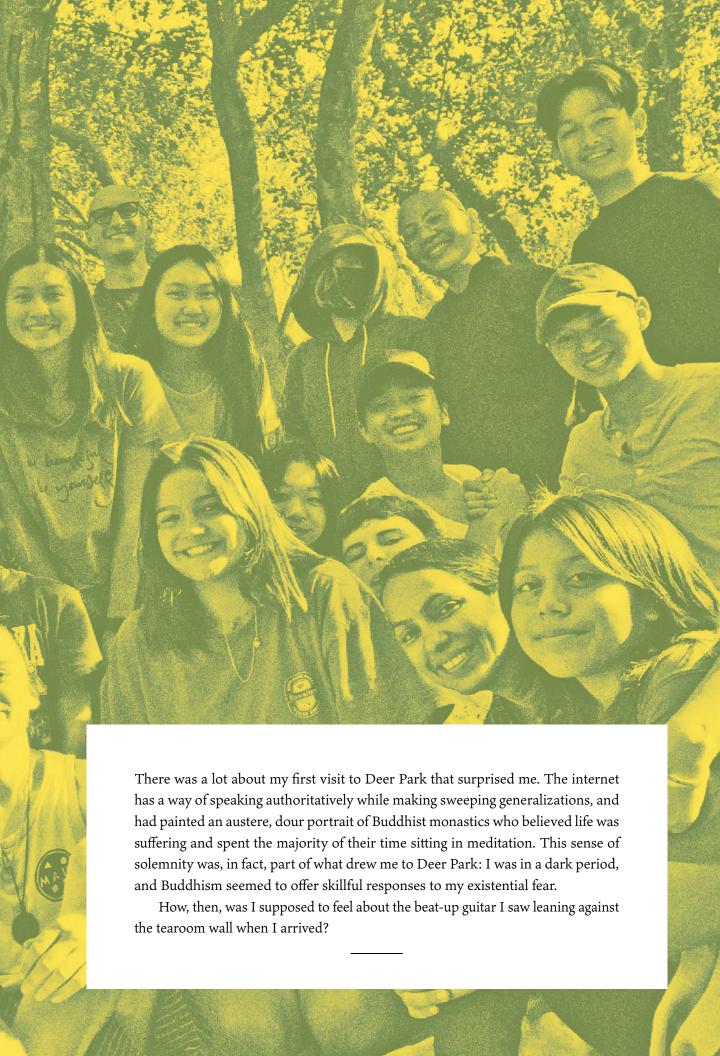
<sup>1</sup> Joseph Jenkins, The Humanure Handbook: A Guide to Composting Human Manure, (White River Junction: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2005)

<sup>2</sup>United States Environmental Protection Agency, 2023, "Statistics and Facts," Accessed July 11. https://www.epa.gov/watersense/statistics-and-facts

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After my senior year of high school I got my first job, as a counselor at St. Matthew's Day Camp (SMDC) in the coastal mountains of Pacific Palisades, California, on Tongva land, a short walk from the house where I grew up. There is a kind of magic about SMDC. It is a rare place that fosters true friendship while cultivating the talents of everyone who plays a role in it. SMDC's schedule, activities, size, and location have remained constant since it began in 1954, and some directors have worked there over forty years. Even though SMDC isn't a sleepaway camp, campers keep coming back and can spend up to six consecutive summers, from the ages of six to eleven, with the same group. Then, when they age out, many campers simply wait a few summers until they can return as staff, which is composed largely of teenagers and young adults they will likely remember from their camper days. Staff members often work more than one session, and as consecutive summers accrue, relationships and community deepen.

Though I was an SDMC camper for only one summer, I worked there for seven, most as music director, which meant sitting with the groups for half an hour twice a week to sing songs and play guitar. In time and with trust from my elders, I was allowed to adapt these song circles to include my burgeoning interests, especially yoga and meditation. I worked several jobs before becoming a monk, but none was more fulfilling than this one. If I could have worked at camp year-round, I probably would have.

Driving past Deer Park's gate house and into the valley for the first time, I noticed a calligraphy posted on an oak: "Breathe, you are alive!" Deer Park felt familiar to me right away, and while I didn't really believe I would become a monk, I thought it distinctly possible that I could spend a significant amount of time here.

As I made my way up to Solidity Hamlet, my notions of a rigid, morose, and insular monastery repeatedly shattered. I saw an eleven-year-old boy who looked completely at home. Even more surprising, a ping pong table. Were monastics allowed to play ping pong? Most surprising of all, the guitar: a black sunburst Ovation with a water-damaged body and dilapidated strings, clearly in regular use. The internet had told me monastics didn't play music. A few hours later, I was learning songs from a senior monk.

It probably wouldn't be fair to equate Deer Park with a year-round Buddhist summer camp, but it wouldn't be a gross exaggeration either. Our most popular annual event is the Family Retreat. Many people, without even noticing, call it "Family Camp," and why not? We build community, spend time in nature, sing songs, and perform skits together. We even have popsicles.

Since 2006, we have also hosted Teen Camp: five days at the monastery to learn the practice and make friends without parents and without phones. This year we had our biggest Teen Camp in memory, with over 160 campers. Like every year, it was hot, loud, fun, and sometimes intense.

I have been co-organizing Teen Camp the past two summers after previously resolving I would never get involved with it. Honestly, I was surprised and fairly daunted by the ambition of Teen Camp when I first participated as an aspirant in 2018. In many respects, it isn't dissimilar from our other offerings, but in terms of logistics as well as emotional support, Teen Camp asks more of the monastics and staff than just about any other retreat.

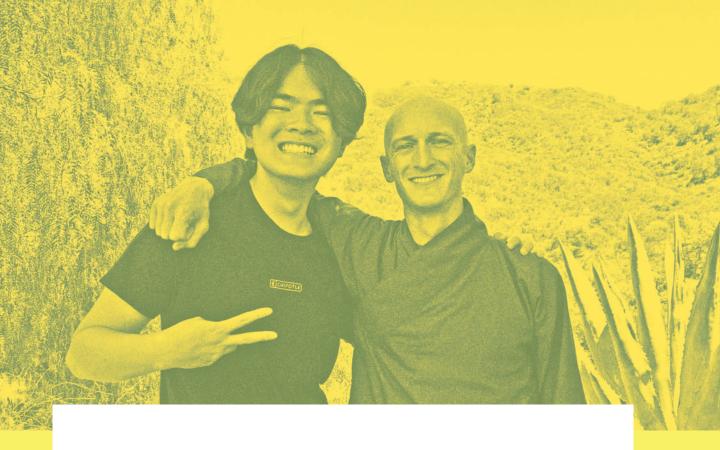
While I still approach Teen Camp with some trepidation, I have come to feel that it is perhaps the most important retreat we offer. Much has been said about the mental health crisis facing today's teens, with higher than ever reported rates of loneliness, anxiety, depression, and suicidal thinking. In a world where nearly everything seems to tell them they aren't popular, strong, funny, or pretty enough, Teen Camp accepts them as they are. It lovingly guides young people toward a meaningful path at a difficult juncture. It changes lives. It saves lives.

Many monastics are initially reluctant to offer skills they've cultivated in worldly life in service of the Sangha. They expect that in their monastic life, they will be free from the habit energies that manifested while investing time and energy in the obsessive perfection of those skills, habit energies with sometimes intimidating momentum passed down through generations of ancestors.

But the point, as I understand it, is usually not to become free from habit energies by cutting them off reflexively. Rather, we practice to transform these patterns into beneficial, compassionate action with mindfulness. In this light, I don't see playing music or organizing a summer camp at Deer Park as obstacles to my freedom, but as opportunities for transformation.

My parents also worked at summer camp. In fact, they met when my mom was a counselor and my dad a program director at a YMCA camp. They later went into business and built successful careers, but in retrospect I can see camp was never absent from their love of nature, music, and young people.

Their lives ended tragically in 2020 and 2021 as each of them underwent significant mental health difficulties and ultimately died by suicide. My practice since then has largely involved identifying their presence within me, cultivating and continuing what is beneficial, and healing and transforming what isn't. Organizing Teen Camp has given me the opportunity to invite my parents to live on in me; I manifest their love of camp, my father's friendliness and confidence, my mother's compassion and



encouragement. It has also given me a chance to practice smiling with acceptance to the pernicious fear that finally proved too heavy for them to hold.

My younger sister Jennie, inspired in part by our parents' illness, became interested in a career in psychotherapy shortly before our parents' deaths, and will soon earn her Master's degree in social work. Not long after our parents' deaths, I understood she and I would inevitably collaborate on projects that would help others to lead happier and more meaningful lives as we approach the issue of mental health from different perspectives and roles. This past year, Jennie was a staff member at Teen Camp, extending her stability to the campers, fellow staff, and monastics alike. After the teens were dismissed, she and I hiked up the mountain, watched the sunset, and cried. Her involvement in my spiritual family's summer camp makes for a poignant chapter in the story of our blood family's healing and transformation.

Teen Camp—like life, like a teenager—is a miracle, but it can be messy, uncomfortable, and unpredictable. Like that old guitar, Teen Camp is a delight, however rough around the edges, and it'll probably stay that way despite our best efforts to clean it up and straighten it out. Part of me wants to just toss it, and I would, but I can't shake the feeling that the ancestors are calling to me, inviting me, enticing me to play.

BY BROTHER MINH AN

