



Hidden Mountain Record

2025 | No. 2

The Annual Deer Park Monastery Newsletter

*Drip—erratic rhythm
of nature—announces
the threat of fire
has passed
for now.*

*The mountain breathes.
The circle of Solidity
is complete,
and the monks drink tea
to welcome the ravens
the coyotes and
the humans.*

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Review of the Year



The Rains Retreat started in October 2023 with sixty-six monastics and twenty-nine lay friends committing to stay for the entire three months.

On November 5, 2023, Deer Park hosted its second annual Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos) celebration, a day of honoring our ancestors and teachers in both Spanish and English. That was followed by a Dharma talk in the Oak Grove by Brother Pháp Dung and Offering to the Land Ancestors as we celebrated Day of Gratitude (Thanksgiving) on November 23.

On the day when most people plunge into a desperate search for deals online and in shops, Deer Park hosted the Make

Black Friday Brown alternative live event on Zoom, encouraging people to stay home and enjoy community together instead of buying things they don't need.

Sister Đăng Nghiêm delighted many with her Christmas Eve Dharma talk, "Zen and Harry Potter," followed by a joyful Christmas Day celebration with all the monastics in the Tea House of Solidity Hamlet. Sister Kính Nghiêm gave the New Year's Eve talk during the Holiday Retreat.

In the new year, a delegation consisting of Brothers Pháp Hội, Pháp Dung, Mãn Tuệ, Pháp Lưu, Pháp Nhĩ, and nine younger brothers traveled to Vietnam for the ceremony marking the second anniversary of

Thầy's passing, the Lễ Tiểu Tường. This was an insightful pilgrimage for our youngest brothers who were visiting Vietnam for the first time. Deer Park also held a celebration of the Lễ Tiểu Tường at home.

We published the first issue of Hidden Mountain Record, which recaps the year at Deer Park Monastery and featured Thầy's story of how Deer Park was born.

In February, we celebrated the Lunar New Year of the Dragon (Tết) with readings from the Kiêu Oracle and room visitations to Solidity and Clarity Hamlets.

In March, Deer Park hosted its first International online Retreat, At Home in the World, which was available in English, Spanish, Chinese, and Vietnamese, allowing for 355 friends in thirty different countries to attend.

"I love the accessibility of the online retreats. I'm sure an in-person retreat must be one thousand times more powerful, but the travel costs are often prohibitive. Getting to interact, even only online, with the monastics that we've heard and/or seen give Dharma talks on YouTube or on the App is a treat. They become 'real' to us; more relatable guides/mentors/teachers. And being able to see ALL the faces of the other retreatants and our Dharma Sharing group members, which we would not be able to see if we were attending in person, is very encouraging and enriching."

– Barbara, At Home in the World
online retreat participant

Deer Park happily hosted its annual Wake Up Retreat, April 7-13, for 124 young adults

between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five years old. Additionally in April, several Dharma Teachers traveled to New Hampshire to host a series of climate action focused events in collaboration with Dartmouth and our partners at the Thích Nhất Hạnh Center for Mindfulness in Public Health at Harvard. The half Day of Mindfulness at Dartmouth attracted 170 students and faculty members. The monastics who stayed back hosted a special Day of Mindfulness in Los Angeles in partnership with a local Vietnamese Sangha.

The construction permit for the new monks' residence was approved in April and a team of lay friends, volunteers, and monastics came together joyfully to begin laying foundations for the building.

Deer Park began its monthly Engaged Buddhism Online Speaker Series in May, starting with Dharma Teacher John Bell's workshop, "Transforming Powerlessness in Times of Crises." The Nourishing Our Roots BIPOC Retreat at Deer Park Monastery celebrated the twentieth anniversary of Thích Nhất Hạnh's first POC retreat, offering over two hundred Black, Indigenous, and other people of color a space for mindfulness, healing, and community through meditation, Dharma talks, and mindful living. Both of these May events served to support friends in managing the difficult emotions and experiences related to the many wars happening around the world, especially in the Middle East.

Deer Park celebrated Vesak with lay friends in mid-May 2024, mindfully pouring water over the baby Buddha statue while chanting.

On May 25, 2024, Deer Park Monastery hosted its second Annual Rhythm of the Earth Festival, where over 340 attendees

enjoyed music, walking meditation, and community, raising funds for a film honoring Sister Chân Không. The musical line-up brought lots of dancing, smiling, and joy all around. This included the Deer Park Monastic Band featuring Glenwood Crowe, Joe Reilly and the Community Gardeners, Born I, the Free Cloud Collective featuring twin brothers Alex Cline and Nels Cline, and Makeda and the World Cultural Center Drum and Dance Band. We successfully raised over \$200K for the distribution of the film, as well as \$25K to help fix Deer Park's road.

From May 29 - June 5, Deer Park happily welcomed staff and board members from the Thích Nhất Hạnh Foundation and Parallax Press for their annual gathering and retreat. Due to the pandemic, this was the first time since 2018 that this group could meet in person.

From May through June, several monastics participated in the Plum Village Viet Wake Up Tour, including Sister Đăng Nghiêm, Sister Áo Nghiêm, and Brother Đạt Nguyên, which made stops in Miami, Dallas, and Seattle to empower young adults, specifically of Vietnamese and Asian descent, to practice and live mindfully.

On June 23, 2024, Deer Park monastics led a peace walk in Los Angeles, mirroring a similar walk led by Thích Nhất Hạnh in 2005. Over two hundred lay Sangha members and forty monastics gathered at Grand Park, generating a powerful energy of peace through silent walking meditation, chanting, and community sharing, embodying Thích Nhất Hạnh's teaching that "The Path Is Peace."

In late June, the annual Family Retreat, Awakening Together, welcomed 261 guests. 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.

At Teen Camp, held July 10-14, 143 teens ages thirteen to eighteen practiced mindfulness in nature among peers, embracing the theme "Be Alive, Be a Miracle!—You Already Are What You Want to Become." Talks were given by Sister Bội Nghiêm, Sister Đăng Nghiêm, and Brother Pháp Lưu. Campers engaged in activities like guided meditations, hiking, games, and circle sharing, learning the art of self-care through mindful sitting, walking, and eating in noble silence. Teens camped in tents, started each day with quiet tea by the campfire, and participated in deep listening sessions, where they could share their deepest challenges and heal through compassionate listening. Without electronic devices, they built real human connections with the monastics, staff, and each other, creating memories that will last a lifetime.

Later in July, several monastics led twenty-eight lay friends on a Mindful Backpacking Retreat on Catalina Island. This one-week backpacking trip, just off the coast of Los Angeles, included walking along a portion of the Trans-Catalina Trail, hiking twenty-five miles from Avalon to Two Harbors. A few days into the hike, the monastics spontaneously organized an alms round, walking with their empty bowls and allowing the participants to put a tiny bit of their camping food in each monastics' bowl. Meanwhile at home, the Sangha hosted the Deer Park Road Repairs Hike-a-thon to raise funds for the road repairs project. By the end of 2024, we had raised around \$400K to fix the road.

In August, seven nuns traveled to Alaska to lead a mindfulness retreat along with

Alaska Dharma Teachers Diane Little Eagle and Joe Spaeder of the Floating Leaf Sangha. The sisters had the opportunity to be close to a glacier for the first time and watch the salmon spawning in the streams.

Fifty monastics traveled by bus to Estes Park, Colorado to host the Earth, Our True Nature Retreat, which took place from August 18-23 at the YMCA of the Rockies. During this retreat, 379 friends from across North America gathered to honor the Earth and practice the teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh, fostering a Beloved Community. Continuing Thầy's vision, this retreat marked the first gathering of monastics in the Rockies since 2011, following his request in 2007 for the monastic community to continue offering retreats at this sacred place, even in his absence.

September 18-22, Deer Park hosted the Vietnamese Retreat, “Hơi thở nuôi dưỡng và trị liệu” which means “The Breath Nourishes and Heals.”

On October 6, two aspirants of Deer Park Monastery became novice monks of the “Lilac Family Tree” in a beautiful and moving ordination ceremony in the Ocean of Peace Meditation Hall. Supported by hundreds of monastics, family, friends, and lay practitioners, the aspirants took vows to transform their afflictions and bring happiness to all beings.

On October 12, Deer Park held the Varṣavasana Ceremony to open the 2024-5 Rains Retreat, with sixteen monastics, thirty-three nuns, eleven novices, and thirty-five lay practitioners for a total of ninety-

five committing to stay until January 12, 2025. During that week, the Who is Thích Nhất Hạnh? course began, welcoming five hundred friends from around the world to learn about Thầy's life in an online learning environment. Brother Pháp Lưu gave the main talks for the course, which included many interviews with monastics and lay friends who worked closely with Thầy at different points in his life. We plan to offer this course again in the spring of 2025 for those who could not take part in it in 2024.

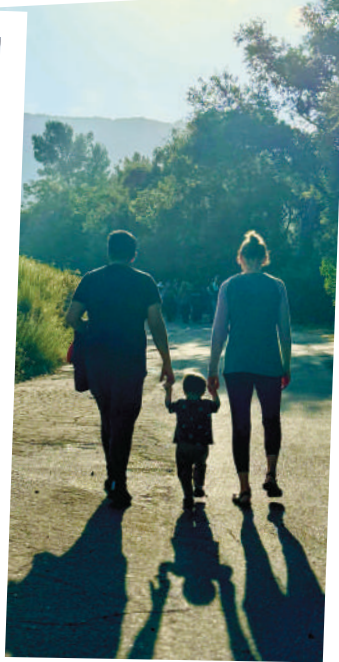
On November 3, 2024, Deer Park hosted its third annual Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos) celebration. The day included singing, guided meditation, vegan potluck lunch, and a Dharma Talk titled “Sea Libre Donde Este” in Spanish by Brother Pháp Lưu based on Thầy's book.

The following weekend, Sister Đăng Nghiêm held a book signing and reading of her new poetry book, *The River in Me*, during a Day of Mindfulness.

A Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings Transmission Ceremony was held in the Ocean of Peace Meditation Hall on November 17, 2024, with over forty new members—both lay and monastic—receiving their Order of Interbeing jackets and “True” names.

Sister Thần Nghiêm (Sister True Spirit) gave a talk on connecting to our ancestors and gratitude for Thanksgiving, followed by a ceremony honoring our Luiseño and Kumeyaay land ancestors. Friends brought up vegan and vegetarian food for a potluck lunch.

2024





Talking to Twenty-Year-Olds: On Love

THÍCH NHẤT HẠNH



Editor's Note: We print here a translation of one section of *Nói với tuổi 20*, a book written to young people in 1965. As an Introduction, we include an excerpt from "Encountering the Spring":

On April 23, 1965, Lá Bối published "Modernizing Buddhism," and Thầy gave a talk on this book at Van Hanh University's lecture hall. The audience mainly consisted of young monastic and university students. Midway through the talk, reflecting on the difficulties and humiliations faced by the youth in pursuing their ideals, and on the power of conservatism, jealousy, and slander, Thầy wept. The talk concluded in silence and deep emotion. Afterwards, Thầy went back to his room, closed the door and refused to see anyone.

At the University, Thầy led a weekly seminar discussing youth issues for students from various departments of Saigon University. In these seminars, Thầy deeply listened to students speak on topics such as ideals, education, parents, religion, love, loneliness, etc., and Thầy gained many insights into the mindset of modern youth. Thầy only asked questions and listened, then used the last fifteen minutes to shine light on the young people with Buddhist teachings. The seminars were dynamic and lively, because everyone felt comfortable and knew they could speak their minds and feelings freely. In one session, Thầy and the students listened to the song *Để Lại Cho Em* (We Have Left For You) composed by musician Phạm Duy from poems by Nguyen Dac Xuan, and used it as the topic for the seminar. The song was a touching confession and repentance:

We have left you a divided country.
We have left you a divided race.
But still, love us.
Do love us.

...

So that the guns pause and breathe deeply.
Do love us, do love us.
So that the airplanes can weep with us.
Do love us, do love us
So that the mortars can be silenced.

This seminar inspired Thầy to write the book *Talking to Twenty-Year-Olds*, in which he provided specific guidelines to help young people overcome the problems they faced at that time. Although there are no Buddhist terms in this book, the spirit of Buddhism is made evident in a simple and profound way. In mid-1965, Lá Bối published this work in a designed the book beautifully as a gift box. The book sold well and was reprinted many times.

Excerpted from Chapter 7.7 of *Đi Gặp Mùa Xuân: Hành Trạng Thiền Sư Thích Nhất Hạnh, Niên Trưởng, Trú Trì Tổ đình Từ Hiếu, Khai Sơn Đạo Tràng Mai Thôn Quốc Tế*. In lần thứ 2. Nhà xuất bản Thế giới: Thaihabooks, 2022.

When frustrations, worries, and the busyness of life have obscured memories of joy and sorrow, the gratitude that lies deep within us may feel distant. The one we love may appear as a stranger to us. However, this is not truly betrayal, but rather a symptom of our own ignorance and obscurity. What is required is simply stillness—a moment of pausing and returning. Then love will overflow again, and we will rediscover happiness.

You have been too busy, too troubled. I know this. But what is the purpose of your busyness and distress, if not to lose the most precious things in your life? You complain that parents today do not understand you, and you feel there is no bridge of communication between you. But is there any bridge of communication that can exist without

the material of love? If your attitude is cold, indifferent, distant, and unengaged, how can you expect understanding to arise?

Parents may think they understand us when they do not. Similarly, we may think we understand our parents while being far from understanding them. I am sure parents make efforts, with patience, on their part. We, too, must make efforts on our own. Why be impatient, frustrated, or upset? Let us calm ourselves, seek quietude, and reflect on the gratitude and memories we hold. Love will return, and we will make efforts on our part. Do not despair. Do not struggle desperately.

Parents, too, have endured much suffering, many questions, and anxieties of their own. Sometimes, these are because of us, even if their suffering, questions, or anxieties were misplaced or ineffective. Reflect on this—on the lines of worry etched on their foreheads, the days and years ahead of them, the inevitability of their absence in the future, and the love, memories, and gratitude from a lifetime of care and struggle. This reflection will awaken a sense of remorse and help us to set aside some of our busyness and distress, allowing us to return to loving those who have nurtured us.

I know that in your heart, there is love. Yet outwardly, you appear indifferent, detached, and at times even cruel. I also know that this outward behavior is merely an expression of anxiety, pain, resentment, and loneliness that modern times have deeply engraved into your soul. These emotions prevent you from finding peace and seeing the truth, much like a stormy lake cannot reflect the full, serene image of the moon on a clear night. Love is a miraculous elixir that can heal the wounds

of your soul.

I remember the first time I finished reading the book *Lý Thường Kiệt*—a historical work on the diplomacy of the Lý dynasty by Hoàng Xuân Hãn. My heart was suddenly moved, brimming with compassion. Our ancestors carved mountains, cleared forests, and shed blood and tears to protect every inch of land, striving with countless strategies to reclaim even the smallest, most treacherous stretches of land from the North. They preserved these lands, even at the cost of their own lives in the wild jungles and dangerous waters. Our forebears united, self-reliant and determined, to defend the North while expanding to the South. Later, when I read folk songs from the South or stories by Sơn Nam, I felt the same compassion as I imagined the people who struggled against swamps, mosquitoes, malaria, and countless other hardships to expand the land where we now live. The lush, beautiful land we call home today is the fruit of generations of toil and sacrifice.

We are born on this land, eating, playing, singing, sleeping, resting, and working on every inch of soil enriched by the sweat, tears, and bones of those who came before us. To forget the past, to forget history, to forget the sacrifices, sufferings, joys, and gratitude of our ancestors and our race, is to be like a tree that cannot send roots deep into the earth—becoming increasingly withered, lonely, and devoid of the emotional nourishment essential to a meaningful life.

There are lands that, though poor, no one wishes to leave because their ancestors, parents, and grandparents have lived there for generations. These lands hold countless memories and bonds of suffering and grat-

itude. Conversely, there are places where people from all over come to prosper for a time, trading, meeting, and then moving on, such as Đà Lạt or Vũng Tàu. On such lands, people meet only on the surface. No deep roots connect them to these places, no enduring bonds of suffering and gratitude tie them to the land. Just as cherry blossoms bloom and fall, human connections in such places are often fleeting and unstable. No cultural scholar would choose such locations as the cultural capital of a people with a deep historical identity, would they?

Surely, love for one's country and people lies deep within you—in your bones, your marrow, your bloodstream. But the images of suffering, sacrifice, memories, and gratitude are crucial to awakening what lies latent and making it real. Books like *Lý Thường Kiệt* were not written to showcase the author's knowledge. The writer was driven by love and emotion, and the reader, through this, is inspired to awaken love for their country and their people.

National culture is undoubtedly a culture of love: love for one's country, homeland, ancestors, and the love that has nurtured us and will continue to nurture us. At this time, our nation is in the throes of war, and none of you can remain untouched. The pain is like standing on burning coals, so intense that it makes one want to scream, to go mad.

War destroys mountains and rivers, lives, and, most tragically, human values. In many places, life has been reduced to mere survival instincts: living, and living at any cost. Honor is sold, tradition is sold, purity is sold—all for survival. We cannot teach ethics to someone on the brink of death, to someone struggling to escape it. Half a loaf

of bread can be exchanged for a young girl's chastity. A pimp can support an entire family that has been utterly exhausted. In such circumstances, what use is talk of duty?

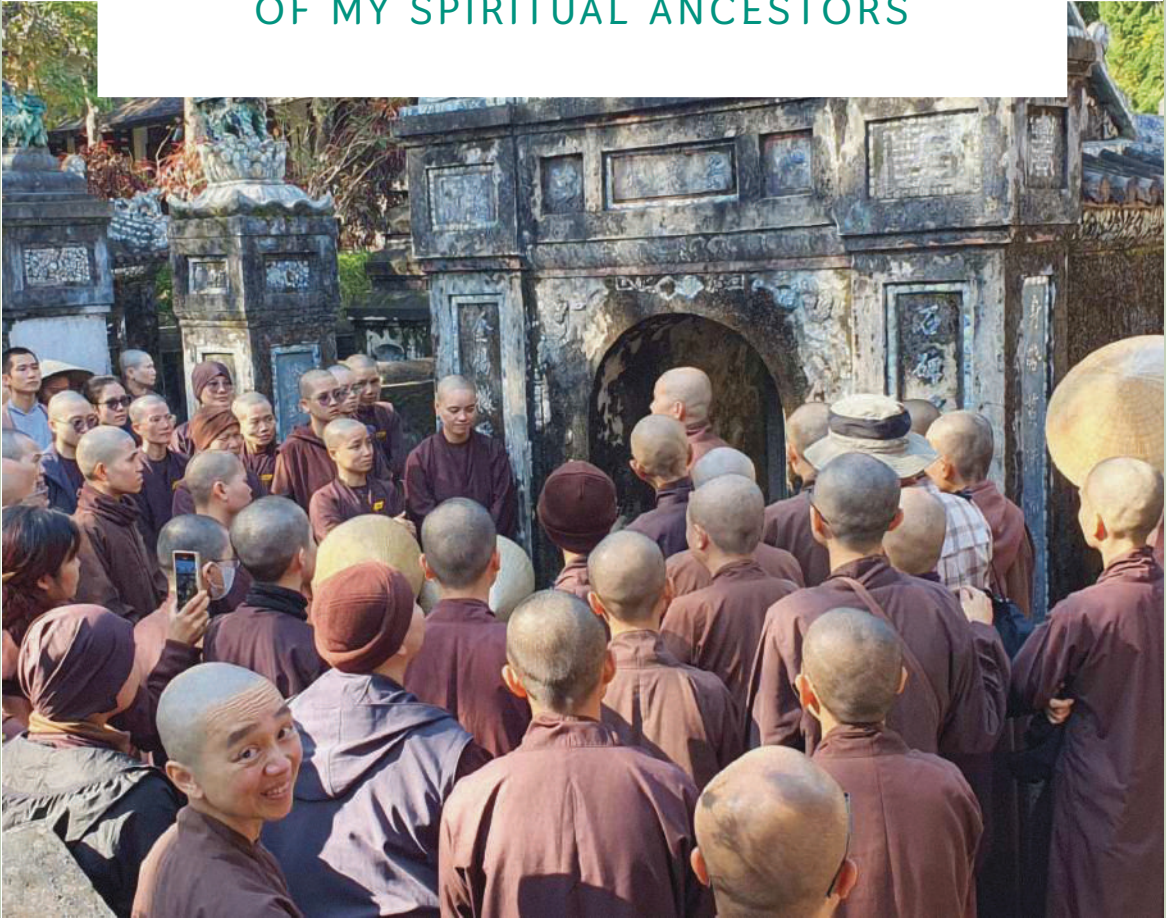
Seeing and hearing such things, you have already been moved by compassion. And compassion leads to action. Seek each other out, join hands, and find solutions together. You cannot sit still. You cannot resist love, even when you see before you difficulties and suffering. Love, as I have said, is not merely sweetness. Love also requires effort, patience, courage, and sacrifice. And because such love is a fundamental need of your being, you cannot help but love; you cannot avoid the necessary engagement that comes with it.



Photo by David Nelson

Vietnam

FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF MY SPIRITUAL ANCESTORS



Going on this trip to Vietnam, I didn't have many expectations about what the country would be like. I had heard my monastic siblings tell tales of its beauty, but I wasn't sure what that meant. Isn't every country beautiful? At any rate, I tried to have an open mind that allowed me to take in everything I needed. Initially, I thought they were talking about Vietnam's physical beauty, the jagged mountains, abundant lush greenery, and the rows of intricate bonsai on every street corner. However, as the journey progressed, I realized my siblings were referring to the spiritual beauty of the country, which soaked into me like ink into paper.

Most of our time was centered in Huế at the Root Temple. We had a monastic retreat with four hundred monastics from around the world. The brilliant energy of practice, laughter, enjoyment, and togetherness felt substantial. When would we ever have an opportunity like that again, many monastics from different centers gathering as one?

One of the most significant moments was getting in touch with my spiritual ancestors. During the monastic retreat, the English-speaking brothers and sisters from the different centers came together for lunch, while simultaneously being feasted upon by mosquitoes. We shared memorable moments of our trip so far, and I found myself sharing how deeply I touched my spiritual ancestors at the Root Temple. One sister then asked, “Wait, are you Vietnamese?”, visibly perplexed at my non-Vietnamese appearance. I replied, “No!” Her confusion led me to explain that I felt connected to not only the Vietnamese patriarchs, but also the Indian monastics who preceded them. India, where Buddhism flourished long before it did in Vietnam, is the land of my blood ancestry. Seeing the faces of the Vietnamese monks on the altars filled me with gratitude for those who came before them. I felt indebted to the monastics who paved the way, making it possible for me, an Indian monk, to encounter the practice and to be in these Dharma halls.

Vietnam has a strong culture of generosity expressed through both material support and spiritual goodwill. On our travels, we were eagerly met with people offering snacks, tea, and simple smiles. Wherever we went, there was immense kindness—from the monastics, host temples, and lay practitioners. Their faith was abundant, and through their giving, I often felt like a vessel receiving their goodness and hope. In many ways, I felt I was following in the footsteps of the Indian monks who traveled to Vietnam centuries ago for the Buddhadharma.

I offer my deepest gratitude to Thầy and the Buddha for this opportunity. I also feel deeply indebted to many other spiritual ancestors—those whose names may have been forgotten or remained largely unknown, but who nonetheless played a role in spreading the Dharma and ensuring the practice touched people’s hearts.

At Deer Park, we rarely venture outside the monastery, but in Vietnam, we didn’t live in the Root Temple. Instead, we lived thirty minutes away at a homestay, giving us the chance to walk through the neighborhood each day. As we made our way to the Root Temple, many people approached me, calling, “Thầy Ấn Độ! Indian monk! Indian monk! Please come, come!” They would offer me tea or biscuits. Most of the time, I had no idea what they were saying—Google Translate only goes so far and my broken Vietnamese didn’t help. Yet, generosity, smiles, and love have their own universal language.

On this trip, some people might have seen me and perhaps associated me with Bodhidharma or another ancient monk, but it is not my own merit that draws this connection. It is the merit of my ancestors who have instilled in people the belief in the beauty of monasticism. This strong faith in monastics was markedly different from what I experience day-to-day in the West, where the attention is less pronounced.

Another memorable moment occurred at the homestay. An older woman

who worked there noticed my feet and remarked, “You have bunions, just like me!” I guess she had seen the feet of many Western travelers my age who typically don’t have bunions. Her comment surprised me, because sometimes I have felt self-conscious about my feet. Growing up, I didn’t always have properly sized shoes, which led to my bunions. At one point, I even thought about getting my bunions corrected; they didn’t seem “normal.”



That moment of connection over something so simple touched me deeply. I realized that seeking to change or “correct” myself might have distanced me from the very conditions that allow others to connect with me. I saw the value in accepting myself as I am in a world where people are encouraged to conform to certain ideals—like having straight white teeth, which I also resisted by not getting braces. I see young people now are especially affected by this; growing up, they long to be someone they aren’t. That moment reminded me that while not everyone can become a monastic, a monastic can come from anywhere. Later on the trip, I said to myself, “Oh, my bunions are my Dharma.” That was a great realization. It was the same with being Indian, which sometimes was a struggle for me. I don’t need to change who I am or try to be someone different. People are always looking for their own traits reflected in a monastic or a role model,

thinking, “I can be like that person, because they’re like me.” They see shared traits and feel hopeful. Our uniqueness, so-called imperfections, and authenticity can help others relate to us, especially on the path of practice.

Many times in Vietnam, I felt deeply connected to my spiritual roots. Visiting different temples and meeting Thầy’s Dharma uncles, aunts, and cousins, I felt a deep sense of interconnectedness among those who had helped Thầy on his journey to practice and help him come back to Vietnam, through all its difficulties—a small but profound circle. Witnessing the dedication and resilience of the monastics and lay practitioners in Vietnam was inspiring. Despite challenges, they continued their practice with strength, sometimes even holding undercover retreats.

Seeing that the heart of the people was so strong, that their practice energy was sincere and their bodhicitta was fervent gave me profound faith in the practice and my role as a monastic. I saw the many ways I could support my fellow brothers and sisters, our lay friends who come for refuge, and those who we meet on the path of practice.

As I reflect on the path of monastic life after this journey, I see it is woven together across space and time, intertwined with many lives across past, present, and future. It transcends languages, borders, and our notions of imperfection and conformity. I arrived in Vietnam uncertain, not knowing what to expect but left with a heart full of determination and a profound sense of appreciation for the benevolence, kindness, and wisdom I encountered. My deepest gratitude goes to Thầy, to Deer Park, and to all my brothers and sisters.

BY BROTHER NHẤT ẨN

Yên Tử

I stood on top of the slick stone steps with my hands on my hips, gasping for air as I looked up into the thick morning mist. I wondered if it would start raining soon. The mist was so dense that it fell to the ground in sheets like winter snow. It collected on leaves and branches. Thick drops plopped down onto our heads and the path before us. It was about as close to raining as I'd like it to get. We had been climbing in the dark for a couple hours. Now with the emerging light of morning, we could see each others' faces, but, still enveloped in the mist, we couldn't see the mountain. After climbing one flight of stone steps after another, we burst out of the wet jungle onto a large landing. The wind picked up. Was this the summit?

"There's still a ways to go," declared Thầy Pháp Lưu, guessing what we were

all thinking, "but the path is easier from here on out." I flashed a smile to Brother Minh Nhân. The worst of the climb was behind us and it was still early. We had left at 4 a.m. that morning to climb this sacred mountain: Yên Tử. This was the home of our spiritual ancestor, Zen Master Trần Nhân Tông, who at the age of thirty-six abdicated his throne as the king of Vietnam to become a simple monk on this misty mountain. That was over seven hundred years ago.

A low, wide building sat perched over the hillside up ahead. We recognized that it must be a food-serving business based on the tiny stools and low tables arranged outside, so we decided to duck inside for a reprieve from the wind and mist. A hot pot of tea soon appeared at our table. We sat on the low stools, very characteristic



of cafes and restaurants in Vietnam. The women inside were very interested and happy to see us, these foreign monks on pilgrimage to their holy mountain. We were ten monks from Deer Park and Plum Village monasteries, plus our Vietnamese guide, a local scholar. Although we all wore the brown robes of Vietnamese monks, none of us were Vietnamese. At one point, they asked us what country we were from but mostly just stood there watching us with curious eyes and quietly talking to each other. When we finished and got up to pay, they smiled warmly and told us the tea was free, their gift to us.

When we started that morning, we climbed each step slowly and mindfully. We did not talk. The mountain, also, was quiet. I had the feeling that we weren't just visitors to this land. Rather, we were

vessels carrying the spiritual energy of our teacher and our community to reunite with the holy energy of the mountain and Master Nhân Tông. The way those women in the restaurant looked at us reminded me of that feeling. That look said they knew why we had come here. I think they were proud of the lineage of meditation practice that flowed through this land and proud of us for continuing this path, despite our foreign background. I left feeling inspired and ready to go forward, not just up the mountain, but forward on the path of practice, bringing the benefit of the Buddha's teachings to everyone we might see along the way.

The climb up Yên Tử is marked by temples that sit at various points along the path, each higher than the last. When we arrived at the first one it was still dark. We

prepared to offer incense, the standard custom in Vietnam when visiting temples. Our guide lit a few sticks. The flame of his lighter cut through the gloom and cast a warm light on his bespectacled face. Thầy Pháp Lưu took the incense and turned to our group and suggested that we chant the opening verse for offering incense. I was surprised because up to that point we had not chanted at the temples we visited. I felt nervous about disturbing the silence of the early morning.

The old temple and the dark, misty mountain waited for us. Thầy Pháp Lưu began the chant: *"In gratitude we offer this incense..."* And the rest of us joined in, our voices ringing out and cutting through the silence. *"Throughout space and time, to all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. May it be fragrant as Earth herself, reflecting careful effort, wholehearted awareness, and the fruit of understanding slowly ripening. May we and all beings be companions of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. May we awaken from forgetfulness and realize our true home."*

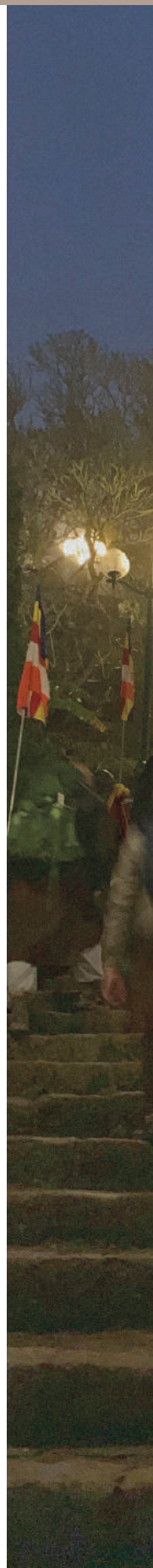
We bowed our heads in respect and Thầy Pháp Lưu placed the incense in the incense bowl. The mountain would later be bustling with crowds of eager tourists, but at that moment it was quiet and intimate. It was just us and the still, dripping trees. I savored it.

As we climbed, we gained more of an audience at each temple. At first it was a solitary monk, the temple caretaker, standing off to the side as we did our foreign (English) chant. Then it was a few scattered groups of tourists, some of them with their smartphones filming us. Then at the very top of the mountain, at around 8 o'clock in the morning, there was

a group of maybe forty or fifty people. By this time, the silence of the early morning was long gone, replaced by the mundane chatter of tourists at another stop on their itinerary.

Thầy Pháp Hội had rejoined our group after falling behind early on among the steep stone steps which comprised much of the path up the mountain. He turned to me, his eyebrows raised, his eyes sharp and discerning. He asked, "Shall we chant the Heart Sutra?" I didn't respond. Was this really the right time for that? What are all these people going to think of us? But Thầy was determined to do it and he asked everyone standing around the small temple to make space as the western monks were now going to offer a chant. I let go of my personal trepidation and put my trust in my elder brother and in our group. We gathered together in the central location directly opposite the altar, joined our palms, and began. *"A...va...lokitesvara while practicing deeply with the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore suddenly discovered that all of the five skandhas are equally empty and with this realization she overcame all ill-being..."*

As we stood there chanting, I appreciated where we were, standing on top of this holy mountain in the homeland of our spiritual ancestors, on the very place that Zen masters of old had practiced. We were in the spacious, immense home of these great practitioners. It wasn't in a book or a movie. It was really here under our feet—the proverbial mountain of song, poetry, and legend. The fog was dense and we couldn't see anything, but the wind that whipped past our heads and hands reminded us that we were standing on top





of the world. A great spring of gratitude welled up in me. I chanted with a special fervor, vowing that it was an offering to those great beings and all the people of Vietnam that supported them and the Sangha over so many generations.

When we were done, Thầy Pháp Hội turned to us with a big smile on his face and said “That was perfect. ‘May the Day Be Well’?” He wanted to do another chant. Of course we said yes. After we finished, he said, “Good. Now we have breakfast and after that we go back and do ‘From the Depths.’”

I wondered to myself why Thầy was asking us to do so many chants. I had never seen him like this before. He was very happy. He must have been proud of us, these western monks wearing the brown robes of the Vietnamese, yet chanting with the musical proficiency of students in their school choir (a past life a few of us share). It was more than that, though. Thầy was returning to his homeland, and he had this beautiful Sangha standing before the ancestral altar. When I reflect back on that moment, I realize that the main offering to the ancestors wasn’t the incense on the altar, or even the chanting. It was us: the Sangha. We had been gone for so long and now had finally come home, back to the embrace of our spiritual teachers, and we were very happy. And we knew they were very happy, too.

BY BROTHER MINH LƯỢNG

Tết at Deer Park Monastery

This year, as I looked around the two hamlets at Deer Park Monastery, I felt there was a small ‘empty’ space. This was because over half the population of Solidity Hamlet traveled to Vietnam to attend Thầy’s Memorial ceremony and celebrate Tết at the Root Temple. This presented a wonderful opportunity for the Western monastics—those who had never had the chance to visit the Root Temple—to connect more deeply with their spiritual roots and gain a greater understanding of Vietnamese culture. Though there were fewer people remaining at the monastery, this did not diminish the joy and warmth of the Tết celebration here at Deer Park Monastery.

The responsibility for wrapping and cooking the Tết cakes was passed to the sisters’ hamlet. Early in the morning, the Vietnamese lay friends and young people from the Tiểu Dao Sangha arrived to lend a hand to our monastic siblings. One group prepared the molds, leaves, and strings for wrapping the bánh chưng and bánh tét. Another group prepared the cooking pots, while others gathered firewood or arranged tea, snacks, and fruits for the community. The chanting choir was ready with spring songs to bring joy to everyone. Faces were radiant with happiness.

A lay friend from the brothers’ hamlet brought an entire set of musical instruments to play and add to the festive atmosphere. For some of the Western lay friends, this was their first Tết celebration in the monastery. They were excited to sit by the fire with the monastic siblings, keeping an eye on the bánh chưng and bánh tét, and learning about Vietnamese traditions. While Vietnamese people call this activity “watching the pot,” the real joy comes from gathering around the fire together—cooking, chatting, singing, or simply sitting quietly, listening to the gentle crackling of the fire, and observing everyone around us. It felt as if our hearts were calmed and warmed, like children returning to the embrace of their family.

On New Year’s Eve, the atmosphere was reverent with the sound of the bell and drum of Bát Nhã and the New Year’s prayers read in both Vietnamese and English. The night concluded with the powerful reverberation of the great bell echoing throughout the mountains. On the morning of the first day of Tết, the monastic community gathered in the main meditation hall for the practice of bowing to one another. This is a beautiful practice in the Plum Village tradition, allowing the monastics to express respect, support, and protection for one another on the path, in the spirit of the two great Bodhisattvas—Samantabhadra and Avalokiteshvara.

The first day of Tết also opened up the opportunity for lay friends to visit the rooms of the monastic siblings, to offer New Year’s greetings. Besides the Vietnamese lay friends, there were many Westerners participating for the first time this year and they were delighted to experience the Vietnamese customs of Tết.

Another essential aspect of Tết is the Kiều divination. This year, in addition



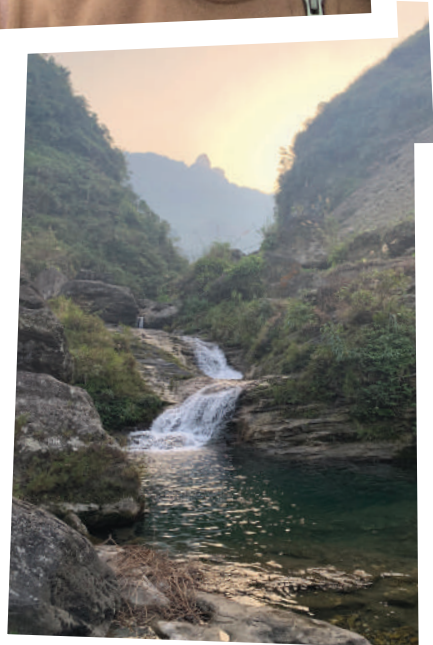
to the general Kiêu divination session on the morning of the first day, the sisters' hamlet offered an additional session on the morning of the second day. As many still requested more divinations. Some of the verses from Kiêu divination, as soon as they were read, elicited gasps of amazement for how well they answered the seekers' questions.

In the afternoon of the second and third days of Tết, time was set aside for monastics to visit each other's rooms. Though the monastery had fewer people, it allowed everyone to spend more time being present for one another. Every room was simple yet beautifully decorated, filled with the spirit of mindfulness. In small spaces, just a vase of flowers, a few stones, or perhaps some dried branches and candles were enough to bring a sense of beauty to the room. Visiting one another's rooms during Tết provided the monastics with an opportunity to understand more deeply the lives of their siblings, fostering greater connection and insight.

BY SISTER HỌC CHIẾU









MEET THE MONASTIC



Answering the Unanswerable

INTRODUCING *MEET THE MONASTICS*, DEER PARK'S NEW PODCAST

“Why did you become a monastic?”

The question feels almost too intrusive to ask, but it's impossible to resist. The asker thinks maybe our family was Buddhist and we were raised in a temple. Maybe we were unsuccessful in business or in love. Maybe we were afraid of life and sought escape. If the asker feels confident that their own path is not monastic and never could be, they listen to the answer and wonder what it would have taken for them to have made the same choice. If they are open to the idea of monastic life, they compare their own story with the storyteller's, waiting for a sign.

It is, in fact, the most common question asked of us, and sometimes one of the most difficult. It can feel almost impossible to answer, but unfair to ignore. In a matter of seconds, we, the storyteller, ask ourselves questions that may guide our response: What do I know about the person asking the question? How much time do I have? Which version of the story will be most helpful in this particular situation?

To alleviate pressure, we sometimes preface our response by admitting that whatever we say, it's just a story. Sometimes we admit that we're not sure why we became a monastic, that our understanding is changing all the time, and anyway, the reasons we *became* a monastic may or may not be the same reasons that we *remain* a monastic.

Then, we dive in. We take a deep breath, relax our shoulders, and tell a version of the story that feels authentic to offer the person asking, given the intentions we perceive and the constraints of time and place.

The truth is, for some of us, the journey to monastic life is a lonely one. It was for me. I did not feel understood by my family or my friends. For years, lack of certainty about my path prevented me

from spending any significant amount of time at the monastery. When I first started considering monastic life in 2014, I went where most lonely people in the twenty-first century go for understanding: the internet. Unfortunately for me, the internet's dearth of stories about monastics at that time was discouraging. They were there, sparingly, when I looked, but for various reasons I didn't feel much resonance with them. Nevertheless, I consumed the stories ravenously, dissecting every sentence.

You might think because we're asked the question so often, monastics would try to avoid asking it ourselves. I, for one, remain unable to resist. Understanding our siblings' journeys to monastic life, understanding their deep aspiration, can set a foundation for our relationship with them. Our assumptions about the person we ask may differ from the average lay friend's because we're more intimate with monastic life, but we often bring the same mind of comparison. However, the more stories I hear of my siblings coming to monastic life, the more the comparing mind seems to dissolve in wonder at the storyteller and gratitude to be alongside them on the spiritual path.

When I arrived at the monastery, I was asking the question very often, though I did my best to avoid asking it so baldly (no pun intended). The need for a repository for these stories began to present itself in my mind—to save people time, to save the storyteller's breath, and to give people a chance to feel connected to monastics before they may be able to come to the monastery. Unfortunately, there are those who can spend a week or

two at the monastery and have very little interaction with the monastics. Sometimes they're too nervous, shy, or overconscientious to approach us. An interview series, I thought, might help to alleviate some of that stress.

Most meaningfully to me, hearing monastics talk about their lives may also inspire listeners to reflect on their own path, and maybe even make the same choice. And if they're not ready to make a commitment for life, Plum Village monasteries offer a five-year monastic training program for people under the age of thirty-five. Having happily finished the five-year program a year ago, I remain surprised that there aren't more young people who want to give monastic life a try.

So I sincerely hope you enjoy Deer Park's new podcast, *Meet the Monastics*, my conversations with monks and nuns about their journey to monastic life and what inspires them now. Making it has been a great joy and an invaluable opportunity to learn more about our monastic siblings and to understand them better. We hope it inspires you to live a happier, kinder, and more meaningful life, whether or not you choose to one day answer the question yourself.

BY BROTHER MINH AN

Northern Vietnam is Enduring



Countless
Hardships

Typhoon Yagi's devastation has caused countless pains and losses in the northern region of Vietnam these days. Flash floods and landslides have swept away the majority of people's belongings, but the most heartbreaking sight is the sorrow of those who have lost their loved ones or are still searching for them. The fierce flash floods and landslides completely destroyed a peaceful village, nestled in a serene green valley in a northern mountainous province, in just a few minutes, while many villagers were still sleeping. The sudden nature of the events left the people unable to react, resulting in the permanent loss of nearly half of the village's population.

As I watched the sorrowful images, the faces filled with shock, and heard the heart-wrenching cries of those who lost their loved ones or are still waiting in despair, with families of six now having only one survivor, my heart tightened as if someone had squeezed it. I do not know when my eyes became blurry with tears. If someone says I am a poor practitioner, I can accept that. I do not know if, in the past, when the Shakya clan was massacred by King Viḍḍabha, the Buddha wept or not, but I believe that someone with great compassion like the Buddha could not help but feel deep sorrow in the face of such tragic events.

In Vietnamese, there is a word I particularly love: “đồng bào” (compatriot/fellow countrymen). “Bào” means “womb,” and “đồng bào” implies being born from the same womb. Vietnamese people use this term to refer to each other as descendants of a common ancestor. According to Vietnamese legend, all Vietnamese people are the offspring of one mother, Âu Cơ. Âu

Cơ was a celestial fairy who, during a visit to Earth, tasted the fragrance of earthly soil, and as a result, she lost her ability to return to the heavens. She later met and married Lạc Long Quân, the son of the Dragon King. Over time, she became pregnant and gave birth to a pouch of eggs. From these eggs, one hundred babies were born. Fifty children followed their mother to the mountains and highlands, while the other fifty followed their father to settle in the rivers and lowlands. They became the ancestors of all the peoples of Vietnam. Thus, regardless of ethnicity, Vietnamese people always consider each other as brothers and sisters, as “đồng bào.”

This is why, when we hear of a place where our “đồng bào” are suffering, every Vietnamese person feels the pain as if a piece of their own heart has been cut away.

These days, millions of Vietnamese people, both within and outside the country, are coming together to help those affected by the storms and floods. I learned that at Từ Hiếu Root Temple, the venerable monks and nuns have organized trips to bring relief to those affected. In times of hardship, their actions have kindled warm flames of humanity. Here, far from home, apart from offering a little financial support and prayers, I ask myself, “What can I do for my fellow countrymen?”

In 2021, storms severely affected the central region of Vietnam. At that time, I was a cook attending to Sister Chân Không. One night, after a long day of work, Sister Chân Không went to bed but got up shortly after and sat silently on her bed. When I asked, she said: “I cannot sleep, but you go ahead and rest.” I understood that she wanted to meditate

and send peaceful energy to those affected by the floods. She sat in meditation for a long time, and that image has stayed with me ever since.

In times of hardship, people may cry or feel overwhelmed by anxiety. The severe loss can drown our hearts. In Vietnamese, we have the phrase “lo lắng” (worry), and embedded in this phrase is the answer to the question: “What should we do when we feel worried?” The answer lies in the word “lắng” (to still). When we “lo” (worry), our hearts need to “lắng” (become still). When we see our loved ones suffering, it is only natural to wish for their peace and freedom from suffering. But we can only offer what we have. If we ourselves are anxious and fearful, what can we offer them? No one wants more fear and pain—they already have enough. When we wish to send peaceful energy to others, our hearts must first be at peace. Therefore, if you are walking, walk in peace. If you are sitting, sit in peace. If you are breathing, breathe in peace. As our hearts calm, we will see what we need, what we can do, and how to do it.

During the floods in 2021, Sister Chân Không called for many kind-hearted people to help. She personally placed money into each relief envelope, but she did not simply put it in and seal it. With each envelope she held, she breathed mindfully, contemplated the person who would receive it, and sent with it the loving, peaceful, and healing energy of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Quan Thế Âm), who has the great vow to alleviate suffering. I witnessed how Sister Chân Không was present at every prayer session for the people, despite her many

responsibilities. Each step she took, each prayer she made, and each action she performed carried her boundless love to those in need. She is a living example for me to understand how, as a monastic, I can help my fellow countrymen who are in difficulty.

Tonight, I wish to sit in stillness for my “đồng bào,” and I invite you to sit with me. Let us sit quietly and breathe peacefully for our brothers and sisters who are enduring hardship and suffering. They may be someone you know, a friend or family member fighting a severe illness. They could be children, slowly starving in impoverished lands, or those who, in an instant, have lost everything—spouses, children, parents. However, they could also represent the agony within your own body or heart. Let us sit for the suffering within ourselves and those around us. For all of us are siblings, born from the same womb of Mother Earth.

We can do many things for our fellow human beings, but first, let us allow the chaos within our hearts to settle and let the compassionate energy of Avalokiteśvara flow from our hearts. This energy will spread to the places of sorrow, healing the pain and washing away suffering both within others and ourselves.

Namo Avalokiteśvara, Bodhisattva of Great Compassion.

BY A SISTER

Hiking Zen

BUILDING TRAILS, BUILDING COMMUNITY

As a monk, I've built numerous trails at Deer Park Monastery in Escondido, California, and each one has been a revelation. Each one teaches me something new about the difficulties and joys of the spiritual path. In many ways, the spiritual path is not a metaphor. It can be the physical path we walk—whether a new path we clear in the chaparral, a trail we traverse in the forest, or the mindful steps we take on concrete. The path is liberative because of the nature of our steps.

Trail building can be a mindful art. The Buddha himself was a trailblazer, opening an ancient path he called the Dharma. As a young boy, I distinctly remember building my first trail, something I could do on the largely wild, forested hillside our house perched upon. When I was about twelve, my father dedicated the whole week of my spring break to the project of building a tree house at the bottom of the hill in our Connecticut backyard together. We recycled wood from our old dock to use for siding and bolted two beams across the cleared surface of two pine trunks. An old window from our house's construction decades before provided a view of the lake below—a lake created by a dam on the Housatonic River in the aftermath of the 1955 flood I mentioned above. My father designed an ingenious ladder that could be lowered via a pulley and rope going through the floor to become a staircase as part of the uphill wall of the tree house. When we finished, I spent one cold night out there—scary, but unforgettable.

To get straight down to the tree house from our house up the hill, I cleared a secret path that started right below a series of jagged rocks where my sister, cousin, and I used to pretend to crew the *Battlestar Galactica*. The path was steep, and I didn't add any switchbacks, yet the skills I learned building it—clearing brush, eyeing the lay of the land for good footing, noticing which spaces (maybe where deer or coyote had travelled) invited passage—still inform my path building.

A core principle of path building is to do minimal harm. You don't fight with the terrain; instead, you enter a profound flow state in which the path suggests itself. I do cut branches, move rocks, and sometimes extirpate a bush. This is painful for the plant and the living beings who depend on it. But I learn to minimize the harm, to back up frequently and rethink the trajectory of the path. Trail building, I've learned, is an intimate art of observation and implementation. At every moment, you must stop, reassess, adapt a new plan, and then act. Can I leave that bush intact? Are there many other plants of that type, and will it sprout

up again easily in this ecosystem? Some places speak to you, saying: Don't touch. I can't explain this process entirely. You see a large, green scorpion, or notice that a rattlesnake makes an area its lair, and you know to leave it alone. Poison oak? You can pull it out at the root, but beware. It may come back to haunt you. At Deer Park Monastery, poison oak is a native plant. Who am I to wage war against it?

When you become skilled in the art of path building, most of what you clear away will be dead matter. You learn to observe the landscape in your mind to know where the best footing is. You know when to go around, when to find another way, and when to continue straight ahead. Walking established paths, as we did most of the time during our seven weeks on the Appalachian Trail, connects you with those who have come before and created the path. There is love in a trail.

All this holds true for the spiritual path. I've certainly made mistakes and done harm without realizing it. But trail building taught me: stop before you inflict a wound carelessly—by word or deed—and back up. Look around, see if there's another way. Remember the path is the destination—the experience is the walking, and by walking you build the path. Walk mindfully, and others will enjoy their own steps on the path you contribute to. Focus on the experience of building the path. When the building and the walking become one, you integrate the spiritual path, the path of the mind, and the path you walk on: mind and body unite. There's only the path and the walking—no path maker, no walker. We already are what we want to become. The path reveals itself with each step.

HIKING ZEN



Train Your
Mind in
Nature

ZEN MONKS
PHAP XA &
PHAP LUU

BY BROTHER PHÁP LƯU

This is an excerpt from *Hiking Zen: Train Your Mind in Nature* by Brother Pháp Xà and Brother Pháp Lưu, to be released in summer 2025 and published by Parallax Press. It is available for preorder with this QR code:



BEHIND YOUR SMILE

BY SISTER HUỆ TRI


I still see the sadness in your eyes,
behind the silent smile.
Through days of rain and sun
The laughter is clearer now,
though at times your lashes still hold drops
of water, shimmering.
Dear one, life is like this—
joy and sorrow are indivisible.
That pain, this happiness,
they are eternal companions,
walking side by side.

I still see the sadness in your eyes,
gentle and distant.
Amidst the words and laughter
you remain silent, serene.
Oh, those gentle eyes,
carrying a sweet, pure, divine light,
A lotus bud in my hands
I silently send my prayers,
with all my love,
so that your innocent smile may continue to bloom.
Amidst this life of black and white,
you are like an angel, radiating joy.

I still see the sadness in your eyes,
behind your every laugh.
I ask the stars above,
to shine their light
on each road you take,
and may you not hesitate
when you encounter pain,
knowing that the road ahead still holds joy.

I still see the sadness in your eyes,
innocent, untouched.
The wounds of the past have passed
through many lifetimes,
and today, they rest on your youthful brow.
This stirs a pain in me.





I kneel,
I kiss that brow,
and I pray for all the pain and sorrow,
to be returned to Mother Earth,
to be embraced and soothed.
Oh, childhood!
May you find your way to that world of peace.
Oh silence, speak no more,
let peace cradle the life you love.

I still see the sadness in your eyes,
behind the silent smile.
Even though this morning the sky is blue,
the fields are bathed in sunlight,
the whispers of ancient suffering soften,
and your face is flushed with life,
I still see that old sadness.
May it be the last time,
and then you can rest in the mind's depths.
The fields of flowers are blooming brightly,
together, we walk
toward a place of peace.

I still see the sadness in your eyes,
behind the silent smile,
With all your efforts,
you stand up, struggling,
unmoved and quiet as always,
yet the sadness remains through the years,
etched deeply in you.

One day, the dew on your lashes
will form into tears that roll gently down.
I watch you, silently sharing your sorrow,
but I find myself standing there,
silent in my own sadness!

I feel as though I've failed—
despite all my struggles, I reach out,
but before your sadness,
I become an empty, wild garden,
vast and barren.
Oh, hands, please join together in prayer,
that your next step into the new day
will be broad and free.





Too Much Tea

Dear Thay, dear Sangha and Deer Park Monastery,

I recently attended the BIPOC Retreat, my first in-person retreat in the Plum Village tradition. I've always wanted to visit Deer Park. When the BIPOC Retreat was being offered I knew it was time.

I'm grateful to have seen the energy of mindfulness, to have experienced it 360 degrees. From waking 'til slumber, to breathing and eating, in solitude, and in companionship—I practiced coming home to myself. I practiced mindful walking. I practiced mindful running (to the bathroom—*too much tea*).

Today, I received a follow-up email from the monastery. It contained a post-retreat survey. It was not an email addressed only to me, yet my heart felt deeply touched. I felt as if Deer Park was writing to me to say, “I remember you, I love you. And now don't forget to put into practice the capacity to love yourself.” I left with such wisdom, so many teachings to put into practice. My heart is incredibly nourished.

Post retreat, I felt a deep sense of sadness. I missed the beautiful monastery, my Dharma sharing family, my beloved BIPOC siblings, and the kindness of the monastics. I was especially thankful to a monastic sister who took time out of her day from enjoying the beautiful flowers to sit and listen to my pain. Her acknowledgement of my pain helped me commit to a better path in life. She taught me to look inwards. To be my own soulmate. It brought such joy to my heart. I know that to be my own soulmate I need to let go of attachments. I have been watering my seeds of attachment, flocking to any kind soul who will listen to me.

Even at Deer Park I looked outwards for help, forgetting to look inwards. My inner child wanted to keep watering the seeds of attachment: “This person listened to me when I was hurt. I want to be close to them, so they can heal me.” So I would tell my inner child, “Darling, I am here for you. That other person may not be physically here, but I am. And I will hold you.” At first, the inner child didn't believe it because the roots of abandonment and attachment run very deep. But I've started watering the seeds to be my own soulmate. I'm not sure if I'm doing the “Be your own soulmate” thing right, but I know that first and foremost, I don't blame myself. And that is such a wonderful start.

So with deep gratitude I thank all the monastics, the Sangha, the Dharma, the Buddha, and everyone who came together to teach me to water the seeds of happiness in my own soul.

Kindly,

LILY HWANG

DEEPENING COURAGE OF THE SOURCE



DISCOURSE ON TRUE CONTENTMENT

*This poem was written together with my teacher, Thay
(Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh), who graciously added to the poem and edited it.*

I heard these words from Thay when he was staying at Deer Park Monastery.
Late at night, a group of coyotes appeared.
Their passionate howls made the whole Oak Grove tremble joyfully.
After paying respects to Thay with the right front paw pointing in the direction
of the moon,
The elder coyote asked a question in the form of a verse:

People, animals, plants, and minerals are eager to know
What conditions lead to true contentment.
Please, Thay, will you teach us?

This is Thay's answer:

To live in a Sangha,
To have brothers and sisters working in harmony,
To serve peoples of all nations—
This is the true contentment.

To have a chance to practice and transform,
To see yourself becoming more accepting and more solid,
To recognize that others also blossom—
This is the true contentment.

To be able to reconcile and forgive,
To nurture gratitude to your blood family and spiritual family,
To express love through loving speech and deep listening—
This is the true contentment.

To have time to sit peacefully for your ancestors,
To touch the Earth tenderly with each step,
To eat mindfully in union with the whole cosmos—
This is the true contentment.

To create practice centers and hold regular retreats,
To turn gymnasiums and theaters into Dharma halls,
To bring the Dharma rain into ghettos and prisons—
This is the true contentment.

To witness police officers, business people, legislators,
Scientists, and war veterans enjoying the Pure Land
With their mindful breath and mindful steps—
This is the true contentment.

To provide a joyful environment for young people,
To help them reconnect with their families and society,
To show them that there is a beautiful path—
This is the true contentment.

To practice, work, study, and play together,
To be aware of the beauties and hardships of your brothers and sisters,
To cherish and protect them as your own marrow—
This is the true contentment.

To live a life simple and uncompetitive,
To come back to your breath as your soul food,
To rejoice in the music of the bell, wind songs, and laughter—
This is the true contentment.

To avoid speaking and reacting in anger,
Not caught by your ideas and judgments,
And to be diligent in beginning anew—
This is the true contentment.

To savor the freedom in non-waiting,
To transform the grasping mind into that of true love,
To be a kind continuation of your spiritual ancestors—
This is the true contentment.

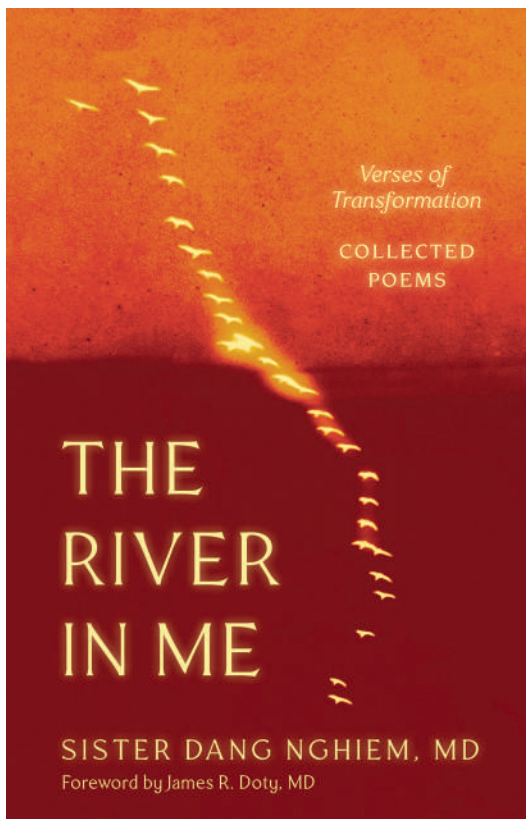
To see all life forms as your brothers and sisters,
To enjoy simply be-in together,
To actively build a beautiful past with your true presence—
This is the true contentment.

To rise in the morning with a smile,
To retire each night with peace, content to let go of all,

To know that you have loved and been loved deeply—
This is the true contentment.

To live in the world
With your heart open to impermanence and change,
To progress stably on your true path, free of fear and worry—
This is the true contentment.

For he or she who accomplishes this,
Arriving and at home wherever she goes,
Always he is peaceful and happy—
True contentment is in the moment one lives.



BY SISTER
ĐẰNG NGHIỆM

This is an excerpt from
The River in Me: Verses of Transformation
by Sister Đặng Nghiêm,
published by Parallax
Press.

Pebbles in the Rockies





This August, many of the sisters and brothers from Deer Park Monastery traveled to Estes Park, Colorado to lead a retreat at the YMCA of the Rockies. While there, four of us—Sister Thần Nghiêm, Sister Thanh Đoàn, Brother Nhất Sơn, and myself—offered a children’s program. It was a wonderful group of children, with a mixture of program veterans who have participated in retreats in Blue Cliff, Deer Park, Magnolia Grove, and Plum Village. For other children, it was their first experience of a retreat. From the very first night, we monastics were impressed with the kindness and openness of the children. They had many beautiful insights and

sharings, a couple of which I would like to pass on to you.

During our first full day of the retreat, we were excited to explore the beautiful nature of the YMCA with its pine forests and the cool rushing waters of Glacier Creek. We decided that for our initial activity we would walk towards the fresh mountain stream to teach the children pebble meditation, a practice created for children by our teacher, Zen Master Thích Nhất Hạnh. The practice helps children to come back and establish themselves in their breath and bodies by using four pebbles, with each pebble representing a wonderful capacity that all of us have

within ourselves. The first exercise invites children to visualize themselves as a flower, practicing to give rise to the feeling of freshness: “Breathing in, I see myself as a flower. Breathing out, I feel fresh” (Flower/Fresh). The remaining three exercises are Mountain/Solid, Still Water/Calm, and Space/Free.

As we started our journey towards the stream, there was a lot of excitement from both participants and facilitators. While walking, I acknowledged within myself that perhaps a twenty-minute walk for our first activity was a little ambitious, especially since we did not yet know the children very well, but my small amount of trepidation vanished as we continued our way, chatting happily like the magpies in the pine trees we walked under. Just when we got close enough to hear the rushing water, we found a circle formed with pine logs, the perfect amount for our entire group to sit and enjoy nature and learn about pebble meditation.

Sister Thân Nghiêm (True Spirit) beautifully introduced the practice to our group, engaging the children with questions and conversation about what it looks like to embody these characteristics of freshness, solidity, calmness, and freedom. With every child happily engaged, she led us through each exercise. When we were invited to open our eyes after completing the third of the four exercises (“Breathing in, I see myself as still water. Breathing out, I feel calm”), we saw a group of about ten adults on a guided horseback tour of the pine forest and mountain. I noticed myself experiencing the moment in slow motion, with my thoughts coming and going quite quickly. I was simultaneously interested

to see how the children would react while also experiencing myself as, well, “calm as still water.” Would the children become excited and shout at the nearby riders? Jump up and down and wave their arms? Begin to indulge in the cute and innocent habit of children when they freely associate and share random life stories about other times they have seen horses? Was our meditation about to be interrupted by some interesting horse facts?

My questions were answered. Not only did all of us remain completely still, but not one person said a word. No child pointed, jumped up and down, or reacted in any other way than simply appreciating the moment. This was when I realized that the atmosphere we had co-created was very special. The adults trotting along on horseback looked at our group as if they had stumbled upon a rare animal in its natural habitat. Between our two groups there seemed to be a connection, a mutual appreciation of the beauty of the moment.

As the retreat continued, we kept coming back to pebble meditation, teaching and inviting each child to learn how to be a bell master, to touch within themselves the beautiful qualities they possess. One evening, I was sitting on the floor with all of the children sitting around me and I felt that the time was right to explore together what it means when we practice the fourth exercise: “Breathing in, I see myself as space. Breathing out, I feel free.” I started by having all of the children do the fourth exercise with me. Then I asked the question, “What does it mean to be free?” Here were some of the responses:

Child One (eight years old): “It means that you can do whatever you want.”

Child Two (seven years old): “It means that no one takes any of your rights away or tells you that you can’t do something. For example, if you want to go roller skating, nobody tells you that you aren’t allowed.”

“Oh, that is very interesting,” I replied. “Is there anyone who feels free right now?” I asked.

Child Three (six years old): “I feel free from my cousin coming over to my house.”

Child Two again: “Right now, I do not feel free. Because I want to get up and go run outside, but instead I am sitting here and listening,” they said with an ornery smile.

“Ahhh, I see. They say that they feel like they are not free because while they want to go run around outside, instead they are sitting here,” I repeated for the group with my own smile. Then I continued, “You know, I would actually say that right now they are free. They are free from being controlled by their feelings. They recognize that they have a lot of energy and want to run around, but they are not letting that control their behavior. Instead, they are free from that impulse and they are sitting here nicely with the group. Child Two, I think that right now you are quite free.”

Child Two’s ornery smile became even brighter as they understood what I meant.

The next night, I was walking with Child Two to the restroom, which was in the large administration building quite close to our children’s program location. On the way there, they said to me, “You know, this is my third children’s program and I think I am enjoying this one the most because I do not miss my mom and dad so much. I feel free.”

“Oh, yeah?” I said. “Free from what?”

Then, looking up at me and smiling, they answered, “Free from clinging to my parents.” At this point, we each had huge smiles on our faces, sharing in silence the beautiful insight they had just shared.

After our retreat ended and the monastics had another six days to enjoy siblinghood and the beautiful Rocky Mountains, we went to Compassionate Dharma Cloud Monastery in Morrison, Colorado to lead a Day of Mindfulness. We found out the night before the Day of Mindfulness that there would be children attending. And the first activity we did with our ten children that day? Pebble meditation. I would like to end my sharing with a brief story about the insights shared by a nine-year-old child who had also attended the retreat at the YMCA.

When we had gotten to the fourth step in the meditation, I asked, “What does it mean to be free?”

Our friend from the YMCA retreat raised her hand and replied, “It means that when you have a feeling, you do not let that feeling control you. It doesn’t mean that you don’t feel the feeling. It just means that you don’t have to do whatever it tells you to. And I want to share that a couple of days after the retreat, I was at home and I got upset. So I went to my breathing corner in my house and I did pebble meditation. And I have to say, it really works.”

And at this, I saw clearly that our teacher is continuing beautifully in the practice and insights of his smallest disciples.

BY BROTHER NHẤT LÂM
(BROTHER FOREST)

ALASKA

I have come, bowing my head in reverence
Before the miraculous flower of earth and sky
Alaska, your beauty is exquisite—
Snow and clouds, waters and soil of a distant world.

I have come, each footstep exploring
With a heart rejoicing like a triumphal song
Eyes wide open to this vast universe
Touching the presence of an ink-wash painting.

I have come, each smile present
Seeing homeland in the drifting icebergs
Ten thousand years of frozen sky
Melting into rivers flowing to the great sea.

Oh, the essence of life, so hard to find
Countless forms arise from water, from clouds
The gentle sun has just set beyond the western sky
Light returns, and flowers bloom in the soul.

Alaska, August 2024





RETURN TO THE ANCIENT MOUNTAINS AND FORESTS

There are quiet footsteps. Why do they feel so familiar?
As if someone's silhouette is returning to this place
The mountains and forests rejoice, waving to the sky and clouds
In this gathering, someone's smile radiates like sunshine.

In the simple brown robe, peaceful steps pass
Meeting the Old One in the form of the present
The green pines cradle memories in their hands
Who remembers the Teacher, an old dream of reunion.

Whose tears seek the old scene, the ancient one?
Silently falling when they catch a glimpse of the Teacher's smile
The sound of prayer revives a fresh heart
The river flows, far and wide, returning to the vast sea.

People pause their hurried lives
Seeking peace in the vitality of the great wilderness
Listening to the stream's song, hearts open wide
Breathing with the wind, finding deep and quiet peace.

YMCA Retreat, August 2024

BY SISTER TUYẾT NGHIÊM

NOVICE ORDINATION



The Novice Ordination Ceremony can be viewed on the Deer Park Monastery YouTube channel.

WELCOME TO THE LILAC FAMILY

On October 6, 2024, two aspirants of Deer Park Monastery became novice monks of the “Lilac Family Tree” in a deeply meaningful and moving ordination ceremony in the Ocean of Peace Meditation Hall. Supported by hundreds of monastics, family, friends, and lay practitioners, the aspirants took life-changing vows to leave behind their worldly possessions, transform their afflictions, and bring happiness to all beings.

After training at the monastery for a year, the aspirants were ready to dedicate their lives to the Dharma and become novice monks. Now they enter a three-year novitiate training period after which they can be fully ordained as bhikkhus.

The ceremony, led by Hòa Thượng Thích Phước Tịnh, began with an incense offering to pay homage to the Three Jewels, bodhisattvas, and spiritual ancestors, followed by the Heart Sutra chant. The aspirants then received the Ten Novice Precepts, which are similar to but more stringent than The Five or Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, most notably committing to celibacy and letting go of the pursuit of wealth, power, and sensual pleasures for their lifetimes.

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

After the ceremony, the novice monastics had their heads fully shaved by their new siblings while the remaining Sangha chanted beautifully to invoke Avalokiteshvara. The special day ended with a formal lunch in the meditation hall and a deep sharing by the novices and their families.

Help us extend a warm welcome to the newest members of our monastic Sangha:

Maxwell Richie: Brother Nhất Quang (One Light) 真一光

Daniel Paymar: Brother Nhất Trì (One Protection) 真恩行

BY SUE MAZINGO

UNFINISHED POEM

BY SISTER XƯƠNG NGHIÊM

You said, "I promise to practice for a lifetime,"
With diligence in meditation, never lax.
Both personal and communal duties well-fulfilled,
In mindful conduct and dignified manner, shining bright.

You thought, "I will practice for a lifetime,"
With a heart and mind fully dedicated, never waning.
Day and night, mindfully restraining body, mind, and will,
With composure and grace in speech and laughter.

You believed, "I have already practiced a lifetime,"
Looking around, you felt at ease and free.
Coming and going with steps so leisurely,
Thinking to yourself, "I practice truly, deeply."

But unexpectedly, one day, the things you least wanted
Suddenly crashed into your peaceful life.
Your mind churned like a raging river,
Thoughts of blame, frustration, and unease
Swirling uncontrollably, sweeping away the calm.
Your chest tightened, anger burning,
Your face flushed, your hands trembled,
You could not regain your peace.
Your eyes held unspoken words,
And your chest heaved with anger,
Breathing heavily, as if you could not contain it.

You realized, "I have practiced so poorly."
And then, feelings of guilt, disappointment, and sorrow.
You withdrew from the Sangha,
Isolated yourself, blaming your own failings.
You withdrew into yourself,
Blaming those who made you suffer,
And even those who tried to comfort you.

Then one day, you asked yourself:
"What is the ideal you always held?
What is the ultimate goal of the practitioner?"
And the poem you wrote remains unfinished...

2025 DEER PARK CALENDAR OF EVENTS

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|--------------------|---|
| Jan 12 | Pravāraṇā Ceremony to end the 2024 Rains Retreat |
| Jan 19 | Memorial Ceremony on the Third Year of Thầy's Passing |
| Jan 28 | Lunar New Year's Eve (Tết) Ceremony and Celebration |
| Jan 29 | Offering Respects to Elders, Oracle Readings |
| Jan 30 | Oracle Readings |
| Feb 9-22 | Deer Park India Pilgrimage |
| Mar 25 | TNH Center for Mindfulness in Public Health Symposium at Harvard |
| Apr 1-7 | Mindful Week at Dartmouth College with the Buddha the Scientist Symposium |
| Apr 27-May 3 | Wake Up Retreat |
| May 11 | Vesak Celebration (Buddha's Birthday) |
| Jun 17-21 | Family Retreat |
| Jul 8-12 | Teen Camp |
| Aug 6-10 | Vietnamese Retreat |
| Oct 26-Jan 25, '26 | 90-Day Rains Retreat |
| Nov 2 | Day of the Dead Celebration |
| Nov 27 | Thanksgiving / Day of Gratitude Celebration |
| Dec 24 | Christmas Eve Celebration |
| Jan 25, '26 | Pravāraṇā Ceremony to end the 2025 Rains Retreat |

Schedule is subject to change.



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