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## Thich Nhat Hanh

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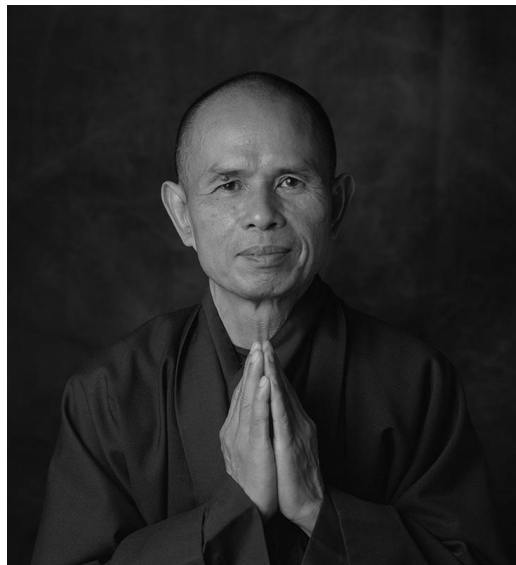
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## Thich Nhat Hanh

By Erin Herklotz



*Figure 1. Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022). Courtesy of Lindsay Kyte and the Lion's Roar Staff.<sup>1</sup>*

Throughout Thich Nhat Hanh's (1926-2022) life, he practiced "Engaged Buddhism," and this made his teachings personable and highly sought after throughout the Western world. He was a legendary Zen master who came to be known as "the father of mindfulness."<sup>2</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh was born with the name Nguyen

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<sup>1</sup> Lindsay Kyte and Lion's Roar Staff. "The Life of Thich Nhat Hanh." Lions Roar, January 21, 2022. <https://www.lionsroar.com/the-life-of-thich-nhat-hanh/>.

<sup>2</sup> Miranda Bryant, "From MLK to Silicon Valley, How the World Fell for 'Father of Mindfulness,'" The Guardian, January 22, 2022,

Xuan Baoon on October 11, 1926, in Hue, Vietnam, and made his transition from this earth on January 22, 2022.<sup>3</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh left behind a powerful legacy when he passed, and his teachings are something to be remembered and studied for years to come. Thich Nhat Hanh was born into a large family with five siblings; he was the second youngest. His father, Nguyen Dinh Phuc, was an official for land reform in the Imperial Administration, and his mother was named Tran Thi Di.<sup>4</sup> One of the main principles Thich Nhat Hanh created was “Engaged Buddhism,” which is used to instill traditional Buddhist beliefs and to engage in social and political issues worldwide.<sup>5</sup> Engaged Buddhism uses the teachings of the Buddha to improve society through meditation and awareness of the world. It is meant to serve as guidelines for how to live daily life, focusing on creating solid social awareness. His teachings made him popular in Western culture because his focus had real-world applications to improve the human experience and help relieve suffering. In Buddhism, suffering is at the forefront of their teachings; practitioners learn to gain the perspective of turning suffering into a path of enlightenment.

One of Thich Nhat Hanh’s earliest childhood memories involves seeing a picture of a smiling Buddha.<sup>6</sup> This would jumpstart his passion for wanting to be a Buddhist monk. In Thich Nhat Hanh’s 2016 book, *At Home in the World*, he shares a fond story of his mother and being given a cookie to eat when he was a little boy. Thich Nhat Hanh remembers eating that cookie slowly

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<https://web.archive.org/web/20220122200253/https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/22/from-mlk-to-silicon-valley-how-the-world-fell-for-father-of-minfulness>

<sup>3</sup> Sister True Dedication and Su Co Dinh Nghiem, eds., “Thich Nhat Hanh: Extended Biography,” Plum Village, accessed May 25, 2023, <https://plumvillage.org/thich-nhat-hanh/biography/thich-nhat-hanh-full-biography/#earlylife>

<sup>4</sup> Dedication and Nghiem, “Thich Nhat Hanh: Extended Biography.”

<sup>5</sup> Ann Gleig, “Engaged Buddhism,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, June 28, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.755>

<sup>6</sup> Lindsay Kyte, “The Life of Thich Nhat Hanh,” *Lions Roar*, October 11, 2019, <https://www.lionsroar.com/the-life-of-thich-nhat-hanh/>

and savoring every bite. He uses this story in his book to demonstrate how people should practice mindfulness. Thich Nhat Hanh states, “It is possible to eat our meals as slowly and joyfully as I ate the cookie of my childhood. Maybe you have the impression that you have lost the cookie of your childhood, but I am sure it is still there, somewhere in your heart. Everything is still there, and if you really want it, you can find it.”<sup>7</sup> Taking time to enjoy the littlest things in life can make all the difference; sometimes, people forget to take that time and enjoy the little things in life.

Thich Nhat Hanh, when he was just twelve years old, wanted to walk the path toward becoming a Buddhist monk and follow in the footsteps of his older brother. Thich Nhat Hanh’s parents were hesitant about him being so young and joining the monastery on the road to becoming a monk. At the age of just sixteen, that dream became a reality. He became a novice monk, and in 1951, he took on his full vows.<sup>8</sup>

During the Vietnam War in 1968, Thich Nhat Hanh shared his story of the bombing of Saigon near the School of Youth for Social Services campus, where he was the school’s director. Thich Nhat Hanh remembers helping the injured get to safety:

In this desperate situation, we had to evacuate the seriously wounded from our campus. But to do so, we had to cross the battlefield to bring them to the hospital. We decided to use the five-colored Buddhist flag to replace the Red Cross Flag. The monks and nuns put on their *sanghati*, their monastic ceremonial robes, and carried out the wounded. The Buddhist flag and the *sanghati* robes signaled we were a peaceful group.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World: Stories and Essential Teachings from a Monk’s Life* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2019). 12.

<sup>8</sup> Kyte, “The Life of Thich Nhat Hanh,”

<sup>9</sup> Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World*. 69.

Being that close to danger and risking one's life for the lives of others is extremely brave and compassionate. Thich Nhat Hanh's selflessness is one of the great inspirations to live up to. After this event, Thich Nhat Hanh replied, "In a situation like that, you have to be extremely mindful. Sometimes you have to react quickly while remaining calm. If you are angry or suspicious, you cannot do it. You have to be clear-minded."<sup>10</sup> Not many people could handle the bloodshed of war and remain calm, but Thich Nhat Hanh understood that if he showed fear, that would elevate panic, and chaos would ensue.

Unfortunately, due to Thich Nhat Hanh's public dismay against the war in Vietnam, he was exiled for over forty years and was only allowed to return in 2005 to visit. He was, however, given political asylum in France, which is where he started his first western monastery, Plum Village, in 1982.<sup>11</sup> The French government granted him asylum and an *apatride* (stateless) travel document, which means he did not belong to any country.<sup>12</sup> Exile was extremely difficult for the first few years for Thich Nhat Hanh. He shares, "Although I was already a forty-year-old monk with many disciples, I had still not yet found my true home."<sup>13</sup> One can only imagine how hard it would be to leave behind family, friends, and birthplace. However, Thich Nhat Hanh did not think of exile as suffering. He states,

People think I was suffering because I wasn't allowed to go back to my home in Vietnam. But that's not the case. When I was finally allowed to return, after almost forty years of exile, it was a joy to be able to offer the teachings and practices of mindfulness and Engaged Buddhism to the monks, nuns, and laypeople there; and it was a joy to have time to talk to artists, writers, and scholars.

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<sup>10</sup> Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World*, 69.

<sup>11</sup> Dedication and Nghiem, "Thich Nhat Hanh: Extended Biography."

<sup>12</sup> Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World*, 11.

Nevertheless, when it was time to leave my native country again, I did not suffer.<sup>14</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh would say suffering is a part of life: one cannot have darkness without light, and one can create a home anywhere. It is all about perspective; a person can choose to suffer or turn bad thoughts into positive ones.

During the Vietnam War in 1965, Thich Nhat Hanh wrote to Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) about the importance of nonviolence and peaceful protests in Vietnam, arguing that this was an act of love. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is best known for his “I Have a Dream” speech and his Civil Rights activism. Dr. King believed in non-violent resistance when it came to fighting racism. Dr. King and Thich Nhat Hanh both agreed that non-violence was the way to positive change. Thich Nhat Hanh enlightened Dr. King on self-immolation: “To burn ourselves like that was not an act of violence. It was an act of compassion, an act of peace. The suffering of the monk who burns himself to convey a message of love and compassion—is of the same nature as the act of Jesus Christ dying on the cross, dying with no hate, no anger, only with compassion, leaving behind a passionate call for peace, for brotherhood.”<sup>15</sup> This was a good comparison between Buddhist monks and Jesus to say we are all humans and that we need to band together to stop the destruction of the war for the betterment of all men. Thich Nhat Hanh, in his book *Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, explains why Buddhist monks burn themselves: “In particular, he wanted to correct two likely misunderstandings: first, the misunderstanding that it was a form of suicide and second, the misunderstanding that it was an act of protest.”<sup>16</sup> Burning oneself was supposed to be looked at as almost an awakening. In the

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<sup>14</sup> Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World*, 123.

<sup>15</sup> Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World*, 72.

<sup>16</sup> Chris Goto-Jones, “Understanding Self-Immolation in Buddhism after Wynn Bruce’s Earth Day Action,” *The Conversation*, November 3, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/understanding-self-immolation-in-buddhism-after-wynn-bruces-earth-day-action-182007>

Buddhist religion, fire plays a significant role: it can be considered rebirth and even used in ceremonies. When a person's flame burns out, another one can ignite.

In 1966, a year after Thich Nhat Hanh wrote Dr. King, the two met in Chicago.<sup>17</sup> They believed many things in common; they worked in organizations to help people in conflict find non-violent solutions to those problems. Thich Nhat Hanh believed in Engaged Buddhism and used it to engage in social and political issues throughout the world, whereas Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. practiced non-violence during the civil rights movement and gave a speech on the Vietnam War. Both men became good friends and worked together to create true peace on earth: "We agreed that the true enemy of man is not man. Our enemy is not outside of us. Our true enemy is the anger, hatred, and discrimination that is found in the hearts and minds of men."<sup>18</sup> At this time, Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings began to expand rapidly in the Western world, and both men knew that non-violence was the only way to end suffering.

Six months after their first meeting, in 1967, Dr. King nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for a Nobel Peace Prize, stating, "His ideas for peace, if applied would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity."<sup>19</sup> Dr. King meant a lot to Thich Nhat Hanh, which was evident in a compliment given to Dr. King at a Geneva conference later in 1967: "Martin, do you know something? In Vietnam they call you a bodhisattva, an enlightened being trying to awaken other living beings and help them move towards more compassion and understanding."<sup>20</sup> This was the last time the two talked because a few months later, Dr. King was murdered. Thich Nhat Hanh was devastated by the loss of a dear friend, and he wanted to continue Dr. King's legacy by vowing to continue building up the community.

In the 2022 issue of *History in the Making*, Cecelia Smith wrote an excellent memorial piece on bell hooks, who passed away

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<sup>17</sup> Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World*, 72.

<sup>18</sup> Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World*, 72.

<sup>19</sup> Dedication and Nghiem, "Thich Nhat Hanh: Extended Biography."

<sup>20</sup> Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World*, 72.

on December 15, 2021.<sup>21</sup> hooks' birth name was Gloria Jean Watkins, but she chose to go by bell hooks to honor her late grandmother, Bell Blair Hooks.<sup>22</sup> The reason why hooks chose not to capitalize any of her names was simple: she wanted people to focus on her message rather than her name.<sup>23</sup> hooks was born in 1952 in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and, like both Thich Nhat Hanh and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was one of six children in her family.<sup>24</sup> hooks was a writer known for her books on feminism, class, and race. hooks looked at feminism beyond just being white and middle class; she wanted it to include all working-class women.<sup>25</sup> hooks' best-selling book published in 1981, titled, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women on Feminism*, was about the history of slavery and black women's struggles and the dehumanization they faced.<sup>26</sup> hooks was also a huge admirer of Thich Nhat Hanh and saw him as a great teacher. She remembers the first thing she ever said to Thich Nhat Hanh when she had the opportunity to meet him. "I'm so angry," hooks shared, to which Thich Nhat Hanh replied without skipping a beat, "Oh, hold on to your anger and use it as compost for your garden."<sup>27</sup> hooks' past was filled with suffering during the Civil Rights Movement. Old anger would be transformed into love, which led her to Buddhism and the teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh. hooks shares,

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<sup>21</sup> Cecelia Smith, "In Memoriam: Bell Hooks (1952-2021)," *History in the Making: A Journal of History* 15 (2022): 205–27.

<sup>22</sup> Victor Puente, "Good Question: Why Isn't bell hooks' Name Capitalized in Our Coverage?," <https://www.wkyt.com>, February 7, 2023, <https://www.wkyt.com/2023/02/07/good-question-why-isnt-bell-hooks-name-capitalized-our-coverage/>

<sup>23</sup> Puente, "Good Question."

<sup>24</sup> Hua Hsu, "The Revolutionary Writing of bell hooks," *The New Yorker*, December 15, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/postscript/the-revolutionary-writing-of-bell-hooks>

<sup>25</sup> Clay Risen, "bell hooks, Pathbreaking Black Feminist, Dies at 69," *The New York Times*, December 15, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/books/bell-hooks-dead.html>

<sup>26</sup> Hsu, "The Revolutionary Writing of bell hooks."

<sup>27</sup> "bell hooks Tells the Story of the First Time She Met Thich Nhat Hanh," YouTube, December 21, 2017, <https://youtu.be/PEIkPDuBGU0>



At last I had found a world where spirituality and politics could meet, where there was no separation. Indeed, in this world all efforts to end domination, to bring peace and justice, were spiritual practice. I was no longer torn between political struggle and spiritual practice. And here was the radical teacher—a Vietnamese monk living in exile—courageously declaring that “if you have to choose between Buddhism and peace, then you must choose peace.”<sup>28</sup>

It is interesting that the teacher and student passed within a month of each other. Both of their legacies live on as we remember all the contributions, they both offered the world. hooks and King, in their appreciation for Thich Nhat Hanh’s teachings, served to magnify his message to a broader audience interested in practicing Buddhist teachings, creating a better world, and establishing social justice.

In 1982, Thich Nhat Hanh created the Plum Village monastery in the Dordogne Valley of southwest France. Plum Village was named because of the 1,250 plum trees planted on the property. This became Thich Nhat Hanh’s center for mindfulness and the largest Buddhist center in the West.<sup>29</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh believed that with everyday mindfulness and meditation, healing could be distributed around the world, and he aimed at providing people with a place to heal and grow. Thich Nhat Hanh knew how to connect with his students, coining the term “Interbeing” “to describe the way in which everything ‘inter-is’ with everything else.”<sup>30</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh taught his students to look with “the eyes of interbeing” to see that there cannot be a sheet of paper

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<sup>28</sup> bell hooks and Thich Nhat Hanh, “Building a Community of Love,” Lions Roar, March 17, 2017, <https://www.lionsroar.com/bell-hooks-and-thich-nhat-hanh-on-building-a-community-of-love/>

<sup>29</sup> Dedication and Nghiem, “Thich Nhat Hanh: Extended Biography.”

<sup>30</sup> Dedication and Nghiem, “Thich Nhat Hanh: Extended Biography.”

without clouds, forest, and rain; there cannot be a mother or father without a daughter or son. “Everything coexists,” he explained, “to be is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone; you have to inter-be with every other thing.”<sup>31</sup> It is the circle of life concept, where everything relies on one another to stay balanced. Thich Nhat Hanh’s greatest legacy was Plum Village and the people’s lives he touched throughout his lifetime.

On January 22, 2022, at Tu Hieu Temple in Hieu, Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh passed away at age ninety-five from complications from a serious brain hemorrhage he suffered in 2014. After his major stroke in 2014, he was non-verbal and lived in silence, only able to use hand signals to communicate with those around him. Thich Nhat Hanh lived every day with mindfulness, stating, “The Buddha taught that there is no birth; there is no death; there is no coming; there is no going; there is no same; there is no different; there is no permanent self; there is no annihilation. We only think there is.”<sup>32</sup> He didn’t fear death; he greeted it as if it was an old friend and wanted people to know that he would always be around. Thich Nhat Hanh’s legacy will always be remembered by the books, poems, art, and people he touched. Thich Nhat Hanh, in an expression of “Engaged Buddhism,” which so appealed to a global audience, he would say, “Teaching is not done by talking alone. It is done by how you live your life. My life is my teaching. My life is my message.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Dedication and Nghiem, “Thich Nhat Hanh: Extended Biography.”

<sup>32</sup> Seth Mydans, “Thich Nhat Hanh, Monk, Zen Master and Activist, Dies at 95,” The New York Times, January 21, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/world/asia/thich-nhat-hanh-dead.html>

<sup>33</sup> Nhat Hanh, *At Home in the World*, 5.

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Erin Herklotz is currently in the final year of her Bachelor' of Arts degree at California State University, San Bernardino. Her love of history comes from her late father and his passion for their family genealogy. Erin will always remember when her dad took her to Ireland and Wales to visit family landmarks and learn about her history. After completing her bachelor's degree, Erin plans on continuing her education and pursuing a Master of Arts degree, hopefully at CSUSB, with the hopes of becoming an educator. Erin is currently very intrigued when it comes to Scottish, Irish, and Welsh history because it relates to her family's history. She would like to thank her husband, Patrick, for all his love and support throughout her academic career. She would also like to take the time to thank Dr. Murray for believing in her and pushing her to succeed and become the best historian she can be. From the words of her favorite musical, Hamilton, "There's a million things I haven't done but just you wait."

